

THE ART AND CRAFT OF COACHING

How seductive it is to rely on proven tools when working with coaching clients. We employ active listening, insightful feedback and other skills, working with the client to open new perspectives and practices that can lead to the changes they seek. Sometimes this works fine. Other times, not so much. It's not that the tools are not useful and important, they are, but sometimes they are insufficient. Sometimes the craft of coaching does not meet the moment and we need to open to the art of coaching.

I once had a teacher tell me that the difference between a craftsman and an artist is: the artist doesn't know the outcome, the craftsman does. A good craftsman needs the skills to know exactly how to achieve the desired outcome. A good cabinet maker measures and builds to plan with precision and quality. An artist must know their medium, their tools and materials, and must go beyond excellent craftsmanship into the unknown. They stand atop their skill, experience and knowledge, and reach beyond it. They cannot cling to what has worked in the past. They have to let go and move out into the dark. An artist coach stays connected with the client and the goals, but can move with the moment into the unknown with the client and then see what emerges, what is available and what might be newly possible.

Developmental psychologists, philosophers and spiritual teachers all tell us that in the course of a lifetime, we acquire a worldview, a set of beliefs and assumptions, through which we interpret reality. Most importantly, assumptions are only more or less inaccurate; they are never fully accurate. Possibly the most essential skill of a coach is knowing this about their own worldview. It's always knowing that their assumptions, their projections and expectations color whatever they see. Without this self-knowledge, they mostly coach their own unconscious projections. Some times these accidentally overlap what is happening with the client and their situation. Mostly they just get in the way.

Carl Jung told us that the biggest impact on the psychology of a child is the un-lived lives of the parents and Frederic Hudson of the Hudson Institute of coaching taught us that the coach could be seen as the good parent that the client does not have. If that is the case, the best next move a coach could make would be to live life fully so he or she could help others do the same. This is our charge, to deeply embrace our own experience and unfolding with openness and honesty. The more full our self-knowledge (beyond intellectual understanding, an intimate body/heart self-knowing), the better we can serve others.

“You've got to know yourself before you can be a leader.” — Professor Nancy Sampson,
Denver University Daniels College of Business

Practicing coaching as an art requires an ongoing personal practice wherein we continue the journey of honestly looking deeply into our experience.

— Dan Petersen