

Looking at Coaching and Supervision through the Lens of Love

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“It is time to recall ourselves from the fear-filled lives we inhabit and begin to explore once again what it would be like if we approached one another through love, with delight and pleasure”. Wheatley (1998)

In our work as coaches and supervisors unless we have established a good rapport with our clients the work we do will lack vitality and ultimately disappoint both parties. Since we first came into the world we have all been learning about others and ourselves through resonant relationships. The importance of rapport and resonance in relationship as the basis for learning and change is the theme I wish to explore here.

A secure base

Much of what we do in this work is about setting up the best climate for learning and changing, and paying attention when anything might be blocking or interrupting the process. In fact unless the base is secure it will be very difficult to repair and restore any breakdown in the process.

One educationist, Fleming (2008) uses the term ‘a secure base’ for learning. This term comes from Bowlby’s work on early attachment (1907-1991). The kind of attachment experience that creates a secure base is one in which the mother is tuned in empathically to the infant. Via accurate attunement the adult is saying to the child: ‘I see you for who you are and how you are feeling in this moment.’ The saying, a mutual exchange between infant and mother, at this preverbal stage of development of the infant, is mainly conveyed through gaze and bodily contact. The child is held by the mother’s love, both psychologically and physically. The mother is present; they are present together, in a shared space of mutual influence and learning.

It is important that we remember that our first experience of being in a relationship in which we learn and begin the dance of reciprocity, or turn taking, is preverbal. In other words we should never underestimate the power of our presence and our capacity to convey non-verbally that we wish to be a partner in the learning journey with our clients.

True presence sets up a resonant relationship in which the limbic centre, containing the amygdala, in the mother’s brain, resonates with the limbic centre of the infant’s brain. Because we are biologically made for resonance, we are enabled to begin to learn about what it means to be human, to learn to regulate our emotions and to develop the capacity for relationship making and sustaining during the attachment phase of our early development.

The templates we all have for relationship building and sustaining are shaped by our early attachments with our mothers and give particular shape to future relationships. Many researchers from interdisciplinary fields have followed Bowlby’s work (e.g. Ainsworth &

Co.1978; Schore, 2003; Meins et al., 2001; Siegel, 2007), linking styles of attachment to early brain development, and to the development of internal working models of relationships.

Echoes of early learning

Because this early learning becomes part of our procedural memory and therefore outside our conscious awareness, we are guided by it until we are ready to explore our relationship patterns with someone, a coach or supervisor in this instance. There will inevitably be echoes or patterns of our early learning experiences that appear in our adult relationships. Some of these echoes will hold us back from full participation in all our relationships, some will affect how we work with others, and some will affect our health.

The supervisee or coaching client who comes across to us as hesitant, fearful, seemingly unable to use the learning opportunity available to them, is likely to be held unconsciously by a mental model that brings fear into new encounters. Perhaps there is an expectation that they will be judged and found wanting. Or, the relationship style is one that can be very hard to tolerate. It may be one in which we ourselves are judged as not good enough. We may have doubts such as, what can we possibly have to offer this client? Hence we may be triggered into withdrawing, referring on or deciding that this person cannot use what we have to offer.

Here the concept of a 'good enough' attachment experience is a valuable reminder, Winnicott (1975). There is no such thing as a perfect attachment experience. What we may come to learn about our own attachment experience and the subsequent effect on the ways we relate to others, will serve us well. Some of us are uncomfortable around highly intellectual clients, others amongst us around highly emotionally expressive clients. Whatever our unique take on relationships, as we develop self-awareness, we can open ourselves out towards new ways of relating to ourselves and to others.

Aware and open

Much of the time many of us are not at all aware of the energy that flows within us and between ourselves and others. At times this may mean we act impulsively, react rather than respond thoughtfully. We can find ourselves behaving blindly, perhaps destructively, and with little or no regard for others. We can all learn a way that will support us, and our clients to stay open to ebbs and flows of relationships. We can learn to be present with our clients despite sometimes hearing the echoes of our own attachment experience.

In whatever ways we choose to support our continuing personal and professional development, with a supervisor, an action learning set, peer group and so on, we can learn to explore our own patterns of relating in a safe and supportive situation. Knowing our patterns, we are then much more likely to be able to step back enough from them, to stay present and to create a secure base for learning in all our professional work.

The capacity for such relationships can be developed by a variety of means. Much attention is currently being paid to mindfulness-based practices that offer a route based on a combination of ancient spiritual practices and 21st century knowledge about resonant

relationships. Minds can be changed within relationships that attend to the flow of information and energy between people, (Seigel 2010).

When we sit with somebody who really listens to us, accepts us without judgment and sees us for who we really are, we become open to whatever this relationship may offer us. Here we could not do better than to learn about adding the 'Time to Think' approach to our contract with clients, (Kline, 1999).

Seigel's (2010) concept of Mindsight is also useful here. He has coined this term to highlight the Meta skill we can learn to help us develop relationships that flow and are open to generative learning. At the heart of this idea is that we can learn to monitor and to modify our behaviour, and to attune open-heartedly to the person we are in the relationship with. His research, and that of Schore, (2009), shows that while our early attachment experiences are developmentally powerful in shaping our mental models, our brains have the capacity to go on changing. We can grow new neural pathways that support our new learning, and we can do this when we are in relationships that provide a secure base.

An example

Margot is a very senior manager who has been earmarked for promotion, to head up a new department and to manage a much larger team than she does at present. She is showing signs of anxiety and distress at meetings to brief her for this new role. The company has high hopes for her but is recognizing that she may need individual coaching to help her get the best out of this opportunity. She is willing to meet with a coach.

At our first meeting she tells me that she has been shocked by how hard she is finding aspects of this proposed change. As we talk together I notice that she becomes calmer than she was at first, her shoulders drop a bit and her voice loses the tight quality it had to start with. I am conscious of tuning in to her to get a sense of what it is like to be her, and to feel concern for her, to open my heart to her. I am using my Mindsight skills to become aware of myself, choosing to offer her my full attention, and to attune to her. I sense that we are resonating by the small but subtle changes I see and hear, as she is calming down. Her body softens as she is breathing more fully, her voice is richer, and she holds her head up and sits back in her chair.

Margot is able to step back from her fear to connect to her grounded self, so that she can draw from her thinking self and reflect on the relationship that so troubles her. As we track back through her career we see that this is the first time that she has felt she might not cope with what she has always striven for, promotion and more responsibility.

We explore what she feels has triggered her anxiety and discover that the person she will report directly to is seen by many in the company as a man who does not suffer fools gladly. She imagines that she will fail to live up to his expectations and be shamed by him. It turns out that for her it is a combination of fear of this man, and fear that she is not good enough. Margot recognises that he has some qualities that are similar to her father. She smiles and remarks, 'oh that old chestnut again, I thought I had got over that one!' I comment that it

sounds like an echo from the past, and ask if she feels ready to let the association go to concentrate on the current reality. After a brief inner dialogue Margot agrees she is ready.

She is becoming mindful of herself and her situation, and I comment on how she is now able to think clearly about her situation, something she could not do while being so anxious. We also reflect on the culture of her company. In her experience there is a high value placed on performance, and the emotional life of colleagues is rarely attended to. She was very surprised that they had suggested coaching for her having noticed her distress. We agreed that although love in the sense of caring for each other's wellbeing seemed largely absent at work, yet they were concerned for her.

Margot resolves to build in time for reflection, to notice when she feels anxious, recall how much difference it makes when she breathes more fully and moves her awareness into her body. She will explore a mindfulness course she has seen advertised in her locality.

She accepts that this transition time is bound to evoke some anxiety, and has identified two colleagues at work she knows she can trust to share her feelings with. She is also aware that revealing her vulnerability to me and in future to her colleagues has enabled her to feel better paradoxically. We complete the series of coaching meetings with Margot saying that she now feels able to head out into her new role with greater confidence than before.

In conclusion

A combination of many things can help us all to learn, to change, and to be as effective as we are able. What is key is to know that the kind of learning that is going to transform us, and our clients is generative learning. This kind of learning enables us to see ourselves, as we truly are, how we work and use our potential. Generative learning is best done within a safe and secure relationship. We all carry echoes of the first learning we did in the attachment phase of our development as infants. With Mindsight we can all develop awareness of these echoes, bring them into consciousness and work to release the energy that has been shut away and unavailable to use. To know ourselves, to love ourselves and to be ourselves becomes possible through an attuned relationship with someone who can see us as we truly are through the lens of love, Harrison (2008).



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