

EMBODIED COACHING TOOLS

Obtaining and using physical responses, for “embodied” leadership outcomes.

By Peter Zoeflig

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I've been working with executives on improving their performance, communicative competence and self-composure for over 25 years, and – since in my case a large element of this has been language coaching – and since all coaching implies the use of language and I believe that a cross-disciplinary approach is very revealing - I have discovered that there has always been an assumption in training that words have the power in themselves to create powerful change; in NLP coaching a lot of emphasis is put on the notion of “changing the words that people use”. When one observes motivational speakers from Tony Robbins to those at TED and checks the reaction of the audience, this is more often than not a combination of amusement, awe, rhapsodic applause, humour or skepticism. These emotional responses are revealing in that they imply that the audience wants to DO something, they are being moved. It is well-known that getting people to do something more physically engaging is sometimes a barrier that - once breached - is likely to bring home the realisations that otherwise make sense one minute but can be forgotten the next. This “anchoring” experience is crucial with leaders and managers and anyone who has to be seen actively engaged in their work on a performance stage of some sort. As Paul Linden (1) has said, “Our body is not just a cart that carries our head around”.

How do we involve the body in processing a task rather than just skipping direct from the idea to the execution of it? Children love to be given tasks to do that involve them creatively and often these allow them through their free movement to make important steps in their learning; but how do we do such exercises with adults without them seeming like a children's game or something out of the Vince Vaughn/Owen Wilson comedy “The Internship”?

Jorge Rubio, the marketing veteran of Pepsi, used a “brain spa”, intended be similar to Google’s corporate creativity centre, as a place where flexibility and discontinuity were engendered in order to carry out to creative processes and to find productive ideas.

As national director of CSI (Consumer Strategic Insights) for PFM, Rubio's intention with the CSI support centre, was to align the insights team which designs and executes, with qualitative and quantitative research methodologies, in-house customer studies to support marketing and sales strategies; this area was to “become a change agent for PFM’s commercial area, leading faster reactions to meet their consumers’ requirements, preferences and likes” (2)

The usual steps were followed: “(i) establish the vision; (ii) define core strategies; (iii) build a team; (iv) assign positions and responsibilities (structure); (v) execution” (ibid)

In this, Rubio's dynamic approach was radical in the sense that the Brain spa had a creative feel to it. Nothing in the office was uniform; there were different kinds of chairs, pillows, futons and all in different colours and forms. There was no furniture or tables. On one side of the room there was bookcase with creative books and table games to promote creative thinking processes; all in all, something that resembled an activity room in a typical summer school!

As an “invitation” to get physical and involved in creative exercises, this seems fine. However, next to the bookcase, there was a poster which explained the “rules” of the brain spa: (a) strictly business—consumer’s creativity and innovation; (b) keep it cool and keep it clean; (c) be a stranger, leave your I/D at the door; (d) thank you for not smoking; (e) spread the word, talk to someone about it; (f) practice curiosity; (g) take risks, make mistakes; (h) be polite, don’t be loud.

The creative mind was brought screaming back to normality and TOLD what to do, given instructions as *how* and *how not* to behave and act.

I found it interesting to compare this to Pepsi's own marketing campaign for the 2014 World Cup that, with the Jesse Terredo film “Pura Vida” (3) where

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young boys and girls are picked up from defeat to become victorious through the combination of empathetic listening (the actor Wilmer Valderama) and inspired, directed nurturing (the model and dancer Alessa Bravo) contrasted with a more aggressive, top-down and reactive “old-style” approach (embodied by Beau Casper Smart). In so doing they overcome their setbacks and rise above disappointment to show what they are truly capable of achieving when flexibility and creativity are combined with smiles and a winning attitude to life. The coach displays a visionary, exploratory approach and not one where he is no more than a distributor of information and collector of accolades, but is a proactive and creative producer of ideas. In this way the advert was displaying something quite different to the rules laid down by the “brain spa”; an acceptance of the pure physicality of failure and of the difficult emotions that we cannot just “leave at the door”.

If we are to allow ideas to surface, they cannot be straightjacketed from before they have even begun; only a physical and emotional response to a problem will enable this – as the dancer in the Pepsi advert showed. Using “embodied” coaching techniques can be used to lead and pace clients, advocating a “natural approach” and conversational style that accelerates acquisition of new habits and leads to better attentive listening, developing good processing and later, better performance in real life situations. As mentioned in my previous article in iCN (Issue 4) I make reference to language techniques as an understanding of how language operates in affecting change – in conversational therapy and NLP and also general life coaching – is crucial to getting good outcomes, be it for health, relationships, work or other reasons, when we can allow people to DO things they enjoy.

If we want the fluidity of which Geog Schreyøgg (4) has written, and the transformational aspects of the transaction that meets “the emotional needs of each employee” that Bernard Bass (5) first mentioned; and - as Caldwell (6) pointed out - a way of differentiating between change leaders and managers, between “competent” and “inspiring” attributes; or the “neuro-plasticity” of N Dodge (7) we need to see how ideas are translated into real physical action.

The thing is, you don't go from reading a book about the rules and techniques for improving your tennis serve or golf swing, to just “doing it” - there is an interim stage. The behaviourist approach was to teach the new behaviour and train salivating dogs to run at the sound of the bell. In a company, how do we know what has happened to the idea-in-a-box that has so expensively been conveyed in memos and training sessions and conferences, unless we open the box to see? How do we stop getting bogged down in theory and just get active with good approaches? And how do we avoid the confusing paralysis that results from complexity?

Yesterday, I asked the librarian for a book about Pavlov's dog & Schroedinger's cat. She said it rang a bell, but wasn't sure if it was there or not....”

Having worked using language coaching methods for so long, I have an understanding of how context, tonality, attentive listening, self-listening and inner dialogue and inner rehearsal are necessary stages before performance. These “practice stages” that serve to anchor the reality of the new idea, are often missing from conventional executive coaching. Going on a team-building exercise to the top of a mountain or “Going Ape” for a day may bring benefits but do they open the box and reveal real changes? Reading dozens of books may pose questions but when do they get answered? Teachers can teach but do learners “really” learn, do they *acquire what they need*?

In training – for example a language - we want a person to speak using a common syntax and lexis. We *supply* the tools for this and instruct the trainee in what to do. Coaching takes a somewhat different route. To reach the goal, the “learner” works through levels of understanding, processing, composition (internal dialogue and visualisation) and performance. One interesting technique, called Total Physical Response, developed by James Asher, (later popularised in EFL teaching by Mario Rinvoluchri and others) expressed the view that the first goal of a trainer, using TPR, is to help the learners develop *listening fluency* (8). The other skills are supposed to be learned in a later stage. There are practical ways in which many of these perceptions can be used as a real cornerstone for acquisition, in a way that allows the learner to quickly identify and internalise a helpful syntax and begin to master this quickly. It all has to do with how we listen and how we

then visualise and construct meaning internally through our inner dialogue (rehearsal).

The foundations of TPR (in language training) are essentially neurological and have to do with our scientific understanding of the hemispheres of the brain. Most learning methods are directed at the left brain hemisphere, however both hemispheres need to play a role, and, in parallel to how a child learns its mother tongue, a learner needs motor movements (which are controlled by the right brain hemisphere). In this way, the movements made when following commands given by the coach help prepare them for processing the language. These ideas of TPR are, needless to say, also based on behaviourism, the theory developed by *B.F. Skinner*, which sees learning as being a result of imitation, practice, reinforcement and habit formation. According to this theory, with positive feedback, a person will continue to exhibit new behaviour and eventually this action will develop into a habit. (So, for example, in order to learn a foreign language, a language student only needs to imitate the language he/she hears from the coach and react to feedback; language development is seen as a result of this *habit formation*.) The connection to 'trace theory' in psychology - which claims that the more often and intensively a memory connection is traced, the stronger the personal association will be and therefore the more likely that it will be recalled - is clear here.

I feel however that getting to a deeper level means going through the stages mentioned above of understanding, processing, composition (internal dialogue and visualisation) and performance, to connect with the values of the individual or group - Otto Scharmer's U-theory (9) focuses heavily on collective experience for example in breaking down old attitudes and allowing the new collective vision to emerge.

We cannot jump from “understanding” something to doing it perfectly – or even slightly well, as any sports person will tell you. In embodied leadership and coaching techniques, we are seeing other aspects of the person becoming involved, and I personally do not favour “group values” experiences that cause the participant to conform to the collective “rules” when that individual has not aligned with their own sense of uniqueness. Like the football team in the Pepsi ad, the players are all unique but often unsure of their unique skills.

The emphasis in “embodied” techniques is the authenticity of the individual. Mark Walsh's Integration training (10) develops the notions of height, depth, width, and base. He stresses moving from the heart with grace, alignment, relaxation, responsiveness. The practice of coordination, better fitness, recognising the importance of immunity, sleep, digestion, and managing emotions - our gut instinct – that our ideas are part of our body, from inside out and not outside in, are strongly emphasised, the aim being to make us fit for the goals and values *we want* to meet.

In order to attain this, rhythms like breathing and movement, the feeling of our relationships (beginnings, middles and endings all but not clinging to one) - using both tact and tactics - restfulness and aloneness (learning in a cultural way) are all experienced. Vulnerability, curiosity and other embodied states, whatever they are, are recognised and the use of time to have get that sense, is maximised. WHO are you in your body and where does that lead you?

These are important questions.

What role does the coach have? Facilitator? Master? Model? Challenger? Critical observer?

One of the problems with TPR (and with much training) was that it is very *coach-centred*, placing clients in a very passive role in which they are unlikely to make their own choices or develop much ability to construct new styles or utterances for themselves. It might be a fun and relatively stress-free type of exercise, but where does the intellectual challenge lie, and how does the “client” start to access the formatting of visualised or heard ideas into real action? How does the coach go beyond the “Simon Says” type of game?

For a coach wanting to produce deeper-level change using language and physical movement also, it will be important to connect the two parts /hemispheres and to anchor new understanding and

processing in the real.

To answer these objections, and show the workings of the use of attentive listening, self-listening, and the real embodiment of new inner dialogue and take the client beyond mere mimicry and behaviourist repetition in the hope that the habits formed will magically turn into real understanding and deep processing of syntax, we need to see how the precept can work practically. What does the coach have to *do* in using a “conversational leading method” like this? A well-known strategy is to work with questions and other pacing and leading techniques. The use of questions is universal, as *Noam Chomsky* argued, and that these are *universals* in grammar, leads us towards a clear method. From this we can build on the other “aspects” when the client is ready to try.

Time is of the essence

As Susan Scott (11) has said, we should *take time* to really listen to the fierceness of the conversation.

The mind *needs time* to listen and integrate, digest and clearly visualise the transformations that are being made. The goal is to unravel knotty questions, at the client's own pace, bringing them to a healthier state or one of better performance. A physical response can be elicited using situational and functional language, and whole sessions can be built on whatever has emerged from the last one, since it is possible to extend the scope of the physical responses and use more aspects at the same time. Taking an NLP analogy here, however, it is actually crucial to “*disassociate*” the client momentarily from the experience, by letting their minds wander, before bringing them back to it. This is in order to allow for the so-called “kineasthetic anchor” to fix itself.

Any situation that has been experienced or could be experienced by the client, can be used, where their story involves exploring what they did or would do, using images, timelines and whatever language they have already expressed in order to access their “map”. Moving forwards, when we have developed this into a variety of contexts – separated by moments of reflection and processing the experience, we may be ready to begin a *performance* and thus engage the physical. This can at first take the form of mimicry to anchor the experience in a physical way. In the same way we can put emphasis on body language, positioning relative to themselves and others and the situational context of the problem (proxemics) and how they gesture, etc. At certain points this can be given a cultural/environmental aspect.

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clients need *time* to prepare, so the performance should not at first be one they are thrown into without any consideration being given to *how* they want to “come over”, and the way in which they see themselves needing to look and sound and feel, for a given context. I feel this is so important. So often coaching is done by throwing clients into performance right from the moment they arrive, as if following a script or rule-book. “Right, we are going to do (such and such)”, now, I want you to find some questions and then you are going to tell the group what the problem is.” (Followed by massive stress, mistakes galore, embarrassment which can jeopardise the entire programme, even deeper entrenching of mistakes and of bad listening, and “forced” speaking, which is horrible and embarrassing.)

Richard Strozzi-Heckler (12)'s training organization in embodied leadership, uses “somatic” coaching, and cultivation of the self to further the human capacity for vision, empathy. He uses conflict as a generative force, growing the “ability to hold contradictions and stay in life-affirming action.”

George Leonard (13) a co-founder of the Aikido of Tamalpais dojo in Corte Madera, California, developed the Leonard Energy Training (LET) practice for centring the mind, body, and spirit. Paul Linden (14) has developed this idea also with an emphasis on movement. And “co-active” coaches, Laura Whitworth and Carl Rogers (15) have made similar points about the need to listen to the “deep structure” of thought and to then frame this in meaningful ways, ever since the 1970s with their reminder that *the story being told belongs to the speaker, and not the listener.*

Listening

The *time spent* on attentive listening is so vital. Coaching takes account of the clients' ongoing processing of new information in choice of vocabulary, structure, sound and context. These processes are translated in their heads into an 'inner dialogue', which the coach can access by means of acute observation of gestures, eye movements, vocal pacing and breathing patterns, thus gaining an awareness of the learners' emotional state, stage of comprehension or preference for certain forms of language and their changing physical state, eg if they are searching for meaning, sweating or stressed.

How we - as coaches - listen, and also, how we can help our clients to listen to themselves and others - I believe, is central. All too often, coaches talk far too much, imparting information and skills simply by *telling* the clients what to do and how to do it.

From process to performance

Getting to the actual performance is not a matter of rearranging the room and telling managers to "get creative". Leaders of today are expected to cultivate excellence for themselves and within their organisation. Wendy Palmer (16) **mentions** the tools and practices to be a skilful listener, a powerful advocator and an inspirational leader. As a sixth degree black belt in Aikido she uses principles from the non-violent Japanese martial art of Aikido to offer "simple tools and practices to increase leadership presence and respond to stress and pressure with greater confidence and integrity." This approach may not be for everyone, so Nancy Kline's notion (17) that listening is an *authentic act* that interrupting, advising and adding rules, destabilises and damages, may suit others more.

Dylan Newcomb (18) advocates "a new kind of language"—one that speaks to and engages your whole mind and body as one dynamic, integrated process. "It's an embodied practice for self and life mastery"; Dr Peter Lovatt (19) argues that "dancing can change how you think" and Amy Cuddy (20) in her TED talk explains how our body language shapes who we are.

The famous thinker, Alan Watts (21), said (talking of modern Man's insecurity over the future) *If we are to continue to live for the future, and to make the chief work of the mind prediction and calculation, man must eventually become a parasitic appendage to a mass of clockwork. Working rightly, the brain is the highest form of 'instinctual wisdom' Thus it should work like the homing instinct of pigeons and the formation of the fetus in the womb — without verbalizing the process or knowing "how" it does it. The self-conscious brain, like the self-conscious heart, is a disorder, and manifests itself in the acute feeling of separation between "I" and my experience. The brain can only assume its proper behaviour when consciousness is doing what it is designed for: not writhing and whirling to get out of present experience, but being effortlessly aware of it.*

In our context, we are referring to states of mind that do not necessarily reach the heights of meditative inspiration (Gamma waves) – which could lead to hypertension and mental and physical overload if experienced for too long - or the zoned-out state of deep relaxation (Theta waves) that comes from total burn out, but a balanced and impactive state between Alpha and Beta waves.

Time to express ourselves

So, as mentioned, the key is to provide *time* for important self-expression, and in different contexts, rather than moving on to new and unconnected ones and piling on masses of new tasks. The more time given to one point, promoting a widening awareness of that point through the careful selection of associated models, the better: just as a laptop works better when it has had all the extraneous programs running in parallel temporarily switched off, allowing energy and space to be given to the one program that needs this. Conscious "planning" or rapid shifts may not leave time and space to the processing needs of the client.

"I'll do it My Way"

By spending more time listening to our clients (and not rushing them through the next hoop), we will lead them better to where *they* need to be. Clients in turn should be encouraged, using this attentive and appreciative approach, to listen to themselves and to pay attention to their personal

inner dialogue to learn how the processing of new inner dialogue is being integrated into active use, in letting them do it *their way* first. My way as a *coach* is to develop this kind of impactful sensitivity, and I do that by managing my language and skills of reading the other person's inner dialogue.

What we do, makes ALL the difference.

I use these techniques with success in leadership and management skills where the degree of use of different processing channels is very different according to the person. Managers tend to focus down and inwardly onto a constructed problem; leaders tend to focus up and externally onto a visualised solution. Listening to how this is done in each case and experimenting with switching channels can lead to interesting new perspectives for both.

People with different kinds of phobias, such as fear of speaking to assembled groups in closed spaces, for example, can show the same physical symptoms (sweating, broken voice, short-term memory loss, allergic response etc.) simply by thinking about the situation or talking about it, as when they are actually in it. I work successfully with people in overcoming this. One way is to elicit (typical Ericksonian method!) what other situations they enjoy and feel resourceful in and then anchor these images, sounds and feelings in indirect ways. I did this with an otherwise highly successful business leader, who I discovered was very happy when fishing at weekends with his friends, and had very powerful associations to the images of the fish being barbecued and the gentle swaying of the boat on the lake. By obtaining a reaction of gentle swaying, the smell of the barbecue on the camp fire, and the idea that his listeners were fish-headed, he completely forgot his problem; it was the time taken to access this deeply and listen to him telling me about it, that was the key.

By attentive listening, we may uncover that a lack of meaningfulness in our dealings with others - and associated feelings of fear or reactive behaviour - is associated with an inner dialogue and anchored feelings.. Reflecting what Robert Dilts (22) has done in treating allergies and employing the NLP protocols of Reimprinting, Reframing, Belief-framing, Change Personal History, and the Allergy Process, may produce good results. A client may often discover that their sabotaging ailment or pattern of behaviour has been a protective force and a psychological reversal, that, once freed, can change his/her feelings and reactions in terms of real physical improvements.

Re-framing

Making a real difference as coaches, not just for the day of the conference but for life, has to do with changing our experience. Companies can continue the same bad practice over and over or act once to change it and use language itself differently, in conversations that lead to better outcomes. This, too, is a *physical* experience.

Working with managers and leaders who need to overcome linguistic problems of miscommunication – frequent where English is the lingua franca for business dealings between people of many different language backgrounds but also with *the native speaker who has no grounding in the insights of language correction by which to judge his/her performance objectively* – enables the skilled language coach to exploit correction techniques and teach strategies that are anchoring real behavioural change. We also have the tools to combine bookwork with real physical and performance-based practice.

Whatever the trainee executive may learn on a good theoretical course – no matter how uplifting – can be lost the following day if it is not anchored in a deep and physical way. Good coaches engage the digital auditory channel to make this happen.

Listening is physical

Listening to what the other person's "sacred ground" is, without judgment, finding ground for exploration and working up from stable common ground agreements, is a practicable skill that – however – can be lost in the emotional "heat of the moment". Being able not only to step back from a problem in one's mind, but having the firmly-anchored physical resources for doing so, are actually very different indeed.

In all cases, I advocate attentive listening and the transferring of positive emerging feelings and thoughts into a physical response. Getting up, moving round, going for walks, lying down, shifting energies that are stuck. EFT (Tapping) can in some cases be appropriate with the trained therapist. From this, a “bridging” technique that allows a re-framing of the situation through different perspectives and to re-evaluate the options from having a multi-awareness of the meaning of the potential outcomes, leads to questioning techniques that allow the new understanding and reality to emerge. NLP uses “perceptual positioning” to do this – which is a physical act as well as visual.

Our disrupted and destabilised world.

Any kind of disruption – destabilisation – causes difficulty. As Paul Linden has remarked, today, leaders are expected to “cultivate excellence *for themselves*”. So much today is premised on the idea of “positive change” and this conceals a number of secret agendas, some within the mind or body of the client, manifesting as “inner terrorists” and others in the outside world as camouflaged attempts to gain the upper hand or derail another person, either consciously or unconsciously in the at times rather sociopathic organisations that are set up to create our current “reality”. Understanding – by attentive listening – what this has created mentally and physically for the client, allows us to look for physical *answers*.

Here, I am reminded of Ilya Prigogine's ideas on Chaos theory, Dissipative structures, and the flow of energy though what he called the “arrow of time”, on the foundations of which J Defrenne built an interesting theory of how to *manage uncertainty* in a constantly destabilised and chaotic world where the other person is seen nearly always as an agent of potential antagonism and disruption. (23)

As has been said, dancing, painting, walking, playing music, other physical skills - or growing African Violets to give to others (famously illustrated by M Erickson) - can resolve the lack of meaning and fearfulness of so many experience. Which activity is “right” will depend on how closely you have been listening. *What* we do (not only what we say or think), makes ALL the difference.

Neurological levels

To return to answer the question that we asked at the beginning: namely, the methodology for how to make a total physical response method apply to complex situation, whilst retaining the elements of good fun, veracity, and intellectual challenge, ensuring that good usage is anchored within the client's deep process. How do we do this and overcome some of his/her conscious and unconscious objections? Since the ability to ask questions enables communication, and, since this is in itself satisfying, and also, given that there are different levels of questioning, it's important to know what these levels are so that we can approach each client by listening attentively to where they are going in their own processing of the new language and experience then connect in in a deeper physical response that engages sight, sound, smell, and movement. The benefit and sense of wellbeing comes from *doing* it.

As Robert Dilts has explained (24) people begin by accessing the questions of time and space relating to when we do things and where we do them. Most people have a common perception of this, although it is coloured by cultural distinctions and expectations. At a higher neurological level, we talk and think about what we're doing, and explain how we're doing that. In all these cases, we have the use of basic syntax, involving, verbs, subjects, predicates, objects and complements. However, the key area where people and peoples differ is in *how* they do something, according to their own belief system, and this refers to language in particular, since how we *use* language depends entirely on *which language* we are using! The question of “how?” is therefore a more complex question; and, by extension, the question of *why* we do that is more complex still and depends entirely on *who* we are, our identity, our sense of self, our cultural persona.

In my work and in this article I have laid out the answers to the twin pitfalls that accompany too

much theory and disconnected physical actions and reactions. Understanding this in a sensitive way and listening to the gradually changing processes of language in each of our clients (as they access the experience), we get to know *who* we are dealing with, and why they make the mistakes that they do. If we wish to anchor a new belief - with all its personal feelings and cultural overtones, and specific notions - it's important that every client get the chance to experience that in a physical way and get a real feel for it on every level. We do this by combining all the channels of experience, including the emotional, and walking alongside one another towards mutually-beneficial goals. The more enjoyable and deep this experience, the better the outcome.

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