

## Coaching in the Appreciative Zone

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I came to coaching via the path of being an Episcopal priest and a clinical psychologist. Metaphorically you could say it was the path of sin and sickness. Most interventions in both fields were focussed on discovering what was wrong and then applying some corrective strategy. Many sessions for example would occur with the unspoken agreement that something was wrong. Such sessions might even begin with the words: "What's wrong?" Sometimes people were helped and sometimes things just got worse. The fact that things sometimes got worse caused me to continue searching to find ways of interacting with church members or clients that affirmed their dignity as human beings and enabled them to be liberated rather than continually oppressed. That search has taken me to the path of contemplative spirituality and writers like Thomas Merton, and positive psychology as demonstrated by people like Milton Erickson and the appreciative inquiry of people like David Cooperrider and his associates. Metaphorically I would call my synthesis of these approaches when working with clients or groups as Coaching in the Appreciative Zone.

I think of coaching as enabling a client to access the resources they need to respond creatively to their current or future life demands. The vast majority of these resources being located within the client. Even external resources are dependent on a client's internal resource of being able to effectively ask for assistance. Most clinicians have had the experience of an entire treatment session coming unhinged because at one critical moment they said something or did something that took the client down a path of no apparent positive return. Conversely most clinicians have also had the experience of saying something at a critical junction that resulted in a release within the client of a liberating creativity that was beyond either of their wildest imaginations. When I reflect on my own experiences of these critical moments I can see that what was most important in facilitating a creative experience was that I managed stay in the appreciative zone rather than become frightened and retreating to a problem focussed approach. In the appreciative zone both client and coach can compassionately behold the client and value his or her skills, abilities, and experiences that result in the manifestation of the unique resources that can be brought to bear on the client's challenges.

Staying in the appreciative zone is not always easy. The big enemy is always fear, for example, fear that the session is not working well or that the client's situation is overwhelming. The other enemy is our past training and focus on sin or sickness and living in a culture that is saturated with notions of blame and judgment. Fortunately the positive fruit of the appreciative zone are inspiring and serve as an enlightening teacher as the following example shows.

I was working with a client to balance a myriad of family, work, and school demands. She had identified several personal experiences that could serve as resources to be applied to her challenge. As part of the coaching process she was going through an imaginative process

whereby she could imagine facing her many challenges and envision herself maintaining both the attitudes and emotions that she desired as she responded to the demands. This example also illustrates the benefit of using appreciative assessment inventories such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) when coaching rather than using assessment devices that focus on evaluating pathology.

Client: *Has eyes closed and is rehearsing seeing herself in a non-demand situation, and recalls times when she has felt balanced and confident.*

*Client "sees and hears" herself interacting with five year old daughter and remains feeling peaceful and confident.*

*Client "sees and hears" herself interacting with daughter, husband and engaging in employment and remains feeling peaceful and confident.*

*Clients is invited to add additional challenge of completing a course at school, while maintaining these feelings of confidence and balanced interaction with daughter, husband, and work.*

*Clients countenance changes dramatically, her brow furrows, her smile disappears, and her head hangs down.*

Coach: *Stifles instinctual "What's wrong? response to dramatic change in affect. pause as Coach regains Appreciative Zone.*

Coach: What other resource would you need to regain your confidence and balance?

Client doesn't open eyes but continues to focus on her rehearsal and says.

Client: Discipline.

Coach: *Is aware from previous assessment that she is high on the "P" scale of the MBTI, and has hunch that some of the internal conflict is arising from self-critical thoughts that she is not disciplined like other students and professors and is unable to keep the types of schedules the "J" people write about in time management books. ("Ps" in the MBTI scheme are open ended, flexible, compared to "Js" who have a high need for order and detail. "P" students are renowned for all-nighters and work most effectively in "big chunks" rather than disciplined 2 hour allotments of time to a variety of different tasks as many student study manuals recommend.)*

Coach: I know that you have a unique way of organizing your life that allows you to accomplish many tasks at once. Take a few moments to recall a time when you in your own unique way, perhaps in contrast to what the experts suggest you should have done.

Client: *Client remains focussed on her inner recollection and her face begins to relax and a smile appears on her face.*

Coach: You are recalling a time

Client: *Nods head.*

Coach: Now put yourself back in the situation with your daughter, husband, work and school and hold this feeling of unique accomplishment as you do this your own way. *pause,*

*as client imagines several scenarios and maintains sense of peace and balance.*

Coach: You can even imagine in the midst of writing a paper to spontaneously take time out to play with your daughter, knowing that in your unique way you will accomplish the task in its time.

Client: *Client smiles and continues to rehearse a variety of school work and family obligations of increasing complexity. At the end of the session she was able to contemplate balancing all these tasks with a confidence that she was not aware of at the beginning of the session.*

Resisting the urge to ask “what’s wrong?” and engage in problem solving allowed both the client and coach to remain in the appreciative mode of valuing the client’s unique ability and experience. By doing so she had been enabled to identify a novel way in which she had dealt with a parallel situation and how she could use it in dealing with her current demands, despite the fact that it was contrary to the typical advice of experts in her field. Her internal conflict had resulted from trying to manage her demands in a manner that was contrary to her own basic nature and her personally experienced and proven strategies. As she reclaimed this resource she quickly regained her composure and was able to rehearse several scenarios of increasing complexity while maintaining her sense of balance, confidence, and joy.

Such experiences, while in themselves they may appear minor, actually water the small seeds of the positive approach and enable it to grow. The Appreciative Inquiry 5D model of Define, Discover, Dream, Design, and Deliver, provides a systematic and iterative process by which a coaching client can be enabled to access these internal resources by creatively recalling times of peak performance and experience. Such experiences are prototypic of the deep motivations and processes by which the client responds creatively to their environment. As prototypes for resourcefulness and creativity they are powerful tools that inform the coaching process as the client envisions a preferred future and implements plans to make the vision a reality. These experiences inspire confidence in the enormous potential within each client to creatively meet the demands of their life. We do not need to waste time figuring out what is wrong, or why something cannot be done, or who is to blame for the problem. Rather, we can entrust our clients to their own life giving resources and mutually enjoy the creative possibilities of the appreciative zone.