

Dr Henry Champion's diary as a Student on the AEC Advanced Diploma Programme

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Module 1

Strengthening my own coaching model

The group holds a compassionate silence as a man struggles to hold back tears. "It's the first time I've ever cried in front of people," he says, "a taboo broken."

In that moment, I saw that this course offered each of us an opportunity to confront our 'taboos' and to learn from them. If we can't do that ourselves, how can we expect to help our clients to do it?

I was at the first residential module of the Academy of Executive Coaching's diploma in advanced executive coaching, with the aim of developing and practising using my own coaching model – a distillation of how I use the knowledge and experience gained in working with clients. I've been coaching at the BBC for over three years, and counselling for several years before that, so I feel ready for the course's 'learn by doing' approach.

To get accepted for the course I had to fill in an extensive competency questionnaire about my practice, which was distilled down to my personal Learning Plan for the programme. It was very helpful in making me think in a systematic way about the different aspects of my coaching, what my strengths are and the areas I would need to work on.

To get the most out of the course, I felt I'd better work out what my current model was. I came up with ARC: expanded Awareness of the issues faced, within a Relationship of trust, leading to clear Choices for the client.

Well, it's a start, and it also reflects the 'arc' of the coaching intervention as it moves from initial meeting and diagnosis to delivering the end result, something I try to hold through each individual session.

In elaborating on the model, I want to root it in evidence of what actually works, and to build in my 'signature presence'. I'm hoping that my ARC will end up being a pretty robust structure!

Back to the course, though. Eighteen of us were to live together for three days in the first of four 'learn-ins'. I'm a Myers Briggs introvert, so a part of me didn't want to be there. However, my curiosity to find out more about the range of talent and experience in the group (a trait which I'm sure must feature close to the top of any coach job specification) and my fascination with coaching soon had me engaged.

Over the three days, we had participative sessions on subjects ranging from our hopes and expectations of the course, to the difference between foundation and advanced levels skills. We formed coach/client/observer 'triads' which stayed together throughout the course for intensive coaching practice and observation.

Coaching in front of other coaches is a great way to learn, and also nerve-racking. For me, I know that once I feel I'm onto something, I tend to move into a series of focused questions. My feedback was that they were closed questions.

I also noticed that, when being coached, I became quite defensive. I was suddenly aware of what

my clients might be feeling when I probe their issues. It was a reminder that for clients, each conversation is uniquely theirs.

The group was also given an hour's 'community time' each morning to reflect on its experiences and feelings. I was struck by how quickly a sense of trust began to emerge. Some risked revealing how the work was affecting them, and took that step towards confronting their taboo.

I suspect mine will be something about staying truly open to my clients – the sort of conversation where I listen more, instead of worrying about what the next question will be.

Tackling my assumptions

Module 2

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The challenge has grown. Last time, it was just (!) the indignity of regressing in my coaching to a state of conscious incompetence.

This time, the reality of having to rebuild my coaching model begins to sink in. My existing beach-house version, extended over time with bits and pieces, is to be converted into a more substantial residence, altogether more appropriate to an executive coach.

I'm back in Kent, at the second of four, three day modules. We've had group supervision, and coaching triads to put learning into practice. For me, the theme has been: beware assumptions!

One way to view coaching is as an exploration of the client's assumptions in relation to the issues at hand. We work with clients to make their assumptions explicit, test their validity, and challenge and transform false ones. To do this effectively, we must be careful not to muddy the waters by introducing our own.

This is more easily said than done. As human beings, we rely on assumptions about how the world works in order to survive. The majority operate at a subconscious level. They allow us to tackle complex activities such as driving a car, or doing our job, helping us to react to change even before we are aware of it. In the wrong context, however, they can become a barrier to understanding. To be fully present with my clients, I need to be aware of and manage them. A good place to start was our session on contracting. What does my client think coaching is about, and how does that match my approach?

How will we organise our meetings? When I agree to maintaining confidentiality, what are the caveats? What will I say to the sponsor? What if I'm working with other members of the same organisation? The initial conversation with the client can dispel assumptions. We discussed re-contracting at each meeting, and even during the meeting if, for example, sensitive material emerges.

Another key 'assumption buster' is an explicit coaching goal. A clear goal, once established, provides direction and drive to the session. Without one, it's easy to slip into assuming from the conversation what the focus of the work is – and then wondering at the end what, beyond the feel good factor, has been achieved.

Then there are the questions. My preoccupation with assumptions was triggered by the issue of closed questions – effectively assumptions dressed up as questions. Now I had a chance to practise asking open questions. The feedback was that when I got it right, it made a difference, allowing me to move with my client and helping her deepen her thinking.

So what stops me getting it right all the time?

In our tutorial on Kolb's learning cycle, I was reminded I am a theorist. And one risk for theorists is that they generate assumptions, or hypotheses, and then test them out in their

questions. This was highlighted when my triad client had a burst of energy as she shifted from thinking about her own issues to the idea of serving the wider community.

My assumption that the significance lay in the contrast between the two positions prevented me from running with the sense of purpose that had emerged. I felt this feedback sharply because, for me, purpose and meaning are at the heart of coaching. In a session about powerful interventions, we explored questions such as What do you want? What gives you a sense of fulfilment in your work? Such questions shift the focus from doing to being, tapping into the client's moods, and the energy which drives them.

After tackling my assumptions, the next stage is to focus on how to evoke and work with that energy.

What is my model of psychological health?

Module 3

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Two people sit in a room trying to resolve a problem - a common enough situation. Yet for more than 100 years, psychologists and psychotherapists have been debating the most effective ways to do it. The result has been an array of complex, continually evolving and sometimes contradictory approaches. In developing an effective coaching model, it is essential to know which are relevant to coaching, how they work, and how we can apply them in our practice. That was the objective of this penultimate module of my course. The question we were asked to hold in mind was: What is my model of psychological health?

After a quick sprint through the development of psychology since Freud, we focused on: cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), gestalt and transactional analysis (TA). In my last report, I looked at the assumptions that I as a coach need to manage. CBT is about challenging the client's assumptions, particularly when they lead to a vicious circle of self-defeating thoughts, feelings and behaviours. By helping clients to question and reframe those assumptions, they can shift to a virtuous circle driven by positive self-beliefs.

Gestalt emphasises the psychological drive for completion or closure of a given sequence of events, and how we become distracted or preoccupied by incomplete closure. Working with the client's immediate experience, the coach helps them see what they are doing to prevent closure. This allows the client to examine the blockage, allowing them to move on.

TA is based on a deceptively simple parent-adult-child model of the personality. When one person interacts with another, one of several transactions may occur. Some may be positive; others can lead to the development of destructive assumptions, particularly if repeated over time (eg, "You're OK; I'm not OK"). By using the TA model, the coach can help the client to understand how those assumptions have built up, and begin to change their behaviour.

What struck me about this all-too-brief analysis is that raising the client's awareness of their thinking, feeling and behaviour, and challenging their underlying assumptions directly or experientially, are key components of effective coaching. In one session I asked: "What's the assumption you're making here?" The answer was: "I'm reluctant to ask probing questions because I don't want to sound like my mother!"

However, in my experience insight alone is unlikely to be enough. Changing how clients think and feel takes persistence, so it must be backed up with a committed action plan.

Equally important for me is our relationship. Unless we can respect and trust one another, my client is unlikely to talk openly and honestly about sensitive issues. Carl Rogers' conditions for a 'therapeutic alliance' provide valuable guidance on how to develop and maintain the relationship. These include being non-judgemental, and fully accepting the client as a whole person ('unconditional positive regard').

As part of that stance, it's essential that we, as coaches, are equipped to support clients who are struggling with issues of meaning and purpose. Transpersonal psychology sees spiritual growth (possibly involving religious practice) as being as much a part of development as personal growth. It acknowledges the need many feel to search for and experience something beyond ourselves.

We must understand what matters to the client in their life and work, where their passions lie, and how they most want to contribute. These insights can be used to help them align their day-to-day reality more closely with their true purposes. That, and the energy and clarity which come with it, is a key aspect of psychological health.

The completion of my training programme

Module 4

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The marathon is almost over. After completing the fourth and final residential module of my course, in a few weeks I'll be presenting my coaching model and being assessed on how well I put it into practice. At the same time, I'm building my new business. The final module was about leadership and organisations. What is leadership, and how can coaches support its emergence in their clients? One thing seems clear: with the shift away from hierarchy and formal authority to networks and interdependence, leaders need self-insight more than ever.

This module was also a time for review. My first objective for the course was to scrutinise my current approach against best practice and to develop a personal coaching model.

Well, my coaching has been scrutinised all right. I understand better the value of being able to explain what coaching is about and ensuring good contracting at the outset. The strong emphasis on practice in our triad work helped me transform over-long, often closed questions into short, open ones. And I've learnt to resist the urge to present my clients with a conceptual framework for each of their issues!

I'm also managing my sessions better. To many clients, the end seems to be deciding how to fix the problem. Yet there are several more steps needed to turn that decision into action. Considering obstacles, timescales, stakeholders, delegation... this is the nitty-gritty that delivers results, and it takes time that needs planning in.

On the positive side, I've been reminded about how well I can build rapport. Clients have commented on how my focused attention and straightforward, relaxed manner quickly win their respect and trust.

Throughout my career - as a doctor, television programme maker, senior manager, counsellor and coach - building effective relationships has been an essential part of the job, and is why the client-coach relationship lies at the heart of my coaching practice. My experience is that if people feel confident and safe they will talk openly, often for the first time, about issues that may profoundly influence their behaviour. Only then can they begin to change. The rewards can be substantial, not only for their business objectives but in their life and work generally.

My second objective was to manage the switch from internal coaching to being an independent. It's a big change, it takes time and energy, and it's vital to be clear about my model and the niche I want to work in.

Most of my clients at the BBC were senior managers on the BBC leadership programme; I realised during this last module that leadership is an area where I have something to offer. The range of the BBC's activities meant I was able to work not only with media executives but with clients across the professional services: legal, finance, HR and marketing. And having spent a career in public service, my conclusion is that my target should be senior executives in the public sector. Wish me luck!

