



COACHING DURING COVID-19

NICK WRIGHT

CRISIS

In times of perceived crisis, the lines between coaching and therapy can sometimes feel more blurred than usual. This is because the kinds of issues that people may bring to a leader, manager HR or coach may touch on more personal dimensions, and at a deeper level, than they would do normally.

Covid-19 and the current, intense drama that surrounds it is a case in point. People, teams and groups may find themselves not only, say, dealing with the impacts of lockdown on their business and work, but also with anxieties they hold for the health, safety and well-being of their family, friends and colleagues. Some might have lost people close to them, or know personally of people who have.

In this short paper, I will offer some brief insights and ideas from 4 psychological fields that may help you, as a leader, manager, HR or coach, to navigate such times and experiences successfully.

GESTALT - NOTICING NOT-NOTICING

A useful insight from Gestalt psychology is to notice what people are noticing - and not noticing. You could do this, for instance, during informal check-in moments online. Pay careful attention to what a person, team or group is talking about or sharing via social media. Be aware if they become fixated on one specific dimension of the Covid-19 situation, as if that is the only dimension.

A vivid illustration is the mass media's preoccupation with the number of people contracting or dying from Covid-19 – to the exclusion of attention to a far greater number of people who haven't contracted the virus, or haven't died from it, or have contracted it without symptoms, or have contracted it and recovered from it. The news could create an impression that almost everyone is contracting the virus and that almost everyone is dying from it.

If, therefore, you notice a person, team or group becoming overly-preoccupied by one dimension of Covid-19 or issues related to it:

- 🗨 Invite them to share how they are feeling.
- 🗨 Affirm that the feeling is natural given the Covid-19 situation
- 🗨 Help them to notice what they are telling themselves and being told.
- 🗨 Invite them to notice what they are not-noticing too.

EXISTENTIAL - EXPLORING DEEPER MEANINGS

The Covid-19 crisis has certainly evoked deep fears, particularly in wealthier countries where people are no longer used to facing these levels of perceived vulnerability and threat. Dramatic soundbites in social media, claiming this is the worst crisis the world has ever faced, add to the sense of fear and alarm – that death and destruction of people, loved ones, communities, organisations and social systems are imminent.

Whilst such apocalyptic visions ignore previous and arguably far-worse crises (e.g. Bubonic plague; Spanish flu; 2 World Wars), the leader, manager, HR or coach can use this opportunity to enable people, teams and groups to explore afresh their beliefs, values and stance in the world.

You could do this by, for example, inviting people to talk about:

- 🗨 Who and what matters most to them in life.
- 🗨 What difference they want to make through their work and for whom.
- 🗨 What sense of vision or calling they hold for the future.
- 🗨 What steps they could take to make their work more meaningful.

PSYCHODYNAMIC - INFLUENCES FROM THE PAST

People, teams and groups experience the present through the emotional, psychological and cultural filters of the past. They are very likely to have been through crises of one sort or another before that, from their point of view and experience, ended badly or, conversely, worked out well in the end.

Such experiences may have an influence on what they perceive, how they feel about it and how they respond to the Covid-19 situation. Those who have barely survived a painful crisis in the past may face Covid-19 with fear and foreboding. Those who have thrived through a crisis may face this same situation with optimism and hope.

If you notice a person, team or group reacting strongly, especially if it seems disproportionate or out of character:

- 🗨️ Acknowledge the feeling, with empathy.
- 🗨️ Invite them, if they want to, to explore how the Covid-19 situation may be reverberating with experiences from their personal or shared past.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS - CREATING FRESH NARRATIVES

People, teams and groups create personal and cultural narratives that give focus and shape to their lives and work. This enables them, and other people, teams and groups too, to make personal and collective sense of their experience. It's like joining dots so that a picture appears.

Such stories are always selective, focusing on specific people and events and drawing real or imagined links between them. Often, this is a subconscious process, making the stories appear obvious or self-evident to those who hold them. Sometimes, however, it's conscious.

Take, for instance, politicians, health professionals and the media who are presenting very specific information about the Covid-19 situation. They construe facts and images selectively to convey a particular narrative; often in order to evoke (they hope) a particular, desired response: for example, to influence public behaviour, engender public confidence...or sell more newspapers.

When, therefore, working with people, teams and groups:

- 🗨 Listen carefully to the language, stories, images and metaphors they are using in relation to Covid-19.
- 🗨 If needed, invite and enable them to construct a healthier, more useful and more hopeful narrative.

NICK WRIGHT

Nick Wright is a psychological coach, trainer and organisation development (OD) consultant with 25+ years' experience of working with beyond-profit leaders and organisations in the UK and internationally.

Nick has a Postgraduate Diploma in Coaching Psychology, a Masters' Degree in Human Resource Development, a Degree in Theology, a Diploma in Pastoral Studies and a Certificate in Supervision and Consultation.

Nick is a Fellow of the UK's Institute of Training and Occupational Learning. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work, or would be interested to work with a coach or to enhance your own coaching practice, see:

www.nick-wright.com

info@nick-wright.com

Get in touch!