

Let's Get PHYSICAL

Coaching By Doing
Nick Wright

Let's Get Physical

If you picture coaching as all about talking and thinking, I want to bring a physical dimension into the frame that may help you to re-imagine and do coaching differently. I'll share a brief case example and explain the principles behind it.

Amanda asked for coaching because she was struggling at work. She had been promoted recently to a post of team leader but, unfortunately, Sandra, one of her peers, had also applied for the post and was bitterly resentful that she hadn't been successful. As Amanda began to talk about what happens and how she feels when she meets with Sandra, I noticed her right hand moving as if in a writing motion. I commented on this and Amanda looked surprised. 'Really? I wasn't aware of it.'

We explored this. 'OK, I'm Sandra. What do you do when you meet with me?' 'I carry a notebook and write notes', Amanda replied. 'What happens when you write notes? Show me.' Amanda opened up her notebook and started writing. I reflected back: 'I notice you are looking down. You are not looking at me.' Amanda paused and looked emotional. 'I'm taking notes so that I don't have to look at you. It feels too difficult. I'm nervous of you will react. I'm scared of you, how attacking you are towards me.'




I asked Amanda, 'What would the opposite of nervous, scared, look like for you? Show me?' She sat up straight in her chair, shoulders back, direct eye contact, assertive. I mirrored her posture. 'How do you feel now?' 'More confident, more relaxed, less intimidated. I can breathe.' 'What image comes to mind when you are in that posture?' 'I feel like a butterfly that has emerged from the darkness of a chrysalis, wings outstretched, free.' 'OK – be the butterfly – now.' She stretched out her arms and smiled. She looked happier, more energetic.

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'Now imagine approaching your next meeting with Sandra as that butterfly. Notepad closed, pen down. Allow yourself to really be there - now. How does that feel?' Amanda looked reflective, still smiling. 'I feel like the leader I want to be.' We closed the session, agreeing to review after her next meeting with Sandra. Amanda fed back 2 weeks later: 'Our quick coaching session achieved more than all the previous conversations I'd had with people added together – and the situation with Sandra has been transformed.'

This type of coaching (based on Gestalt principles) focuses less on talking and thinking and more on doing. Its use of physicality ('Do this' rather than 'Imagine how it might be if you were to do this') can bring a person into direct contact with their own experience, often raising awareness that wouldn't emerge through conversation alone. The coach offers observations ('I notice...') rather than interpretations and may sometimes reflect back the person's posture, gesture, movements etc. to act as a mirror.

Some words of caution:

-  Always ask permission before using this type of physical experimentation, for example: 'I have an idea about how we could approach this...is that something you would feel comfortable with?'
-  Beware of analysing and superimposing your own interpretations onto what a person may or may not express physically. Allow the actions to speak for themselves.
-  Don't attempt to force-fit a physical method onto every person, issue or situation. Offer the client a flexible range of options, then contract accordingly.

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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:

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