

The Coach as Human

Alison Whitmire

It was the end of a one hour coaching session. I was getting the sense that the work was going nowhere. I asked my client how much progress he felt like we were making. And he said “I think I’m stuck”. Ah, there it was.

Caught Feeling

My immediate, involuntary reaction was to feel sad, to feel like I wasn’t helping him. My client took in the look on my face and said, “You look glum.” Uh oh, I thought. He caught me. Caught me silently wrestling my own gremlin. And instead of acknowledging my feelings, I dodged the comment. I feigned a smile and said “Oh, I’m sorry” and moved on like it didn’t happen. I stepped over my own feelings and by doing so I was giving my client tacit permission to do the same. Is it any wonder our work wasn’t moving forward? (*cringe*)

When the Coach’s Stuff Comes Up

I was conflicted. I didn’t want to distract from my client’s agenda to give space to my own stuff. I’ve been taught and have learned to bracket my feelings about myself when I’m coaching and to focus solely on the client and his agenda. The sadness I felt was my stuff, not his. I was feeling responsible for my client’s progress. I know, I know. *The coach is not responsible for the client’s progress.* I get it. And my client caught the involuntary flash of emotion that came up for me in the moment. Old patterns die hard.

I had a choice in that moment. I could say what I was feeling and share my stuff or I could side-step my feelings and deflect. I chose that latter because I didn’t want my stuff to detract from the client’s agenda. And how convenient for me. The choice I made meant that I didn’t have to own my feelings or express my vulnerability. (Maybe a little too convenient.)

Coach as Human

Sometimes I think of my role as coach as being a bit like a backboard to a tennis player. He hits the ball to me and I return the ball, reflecting the speed, energy, trajectory. I help him play out his own thinking until he ultimately accesses his own best answer. And I intuitively know that playing the wall gets boring and exhausting and eventually, we all want to play with a human.

Turns out, I’m human. I have feelings. I’m imperfect. Just like my clients. And I believe that by acknowledging my feelings, my humanity, my imperfections, when appropriate, with my clients that I’ll be a better coach. That my being present and open and vulnerable, will allow my clients to do the same. When I connect with myself in a deep and

meaningful way, I will invite my clients to connect with themselves. I've come to believe that is only by connecting with ourselves, with our inner knowing, that we are able to get ourselves unstuck.

Next time, I'll make a different choice. I will risk more. I will be more vulnerable. I will say what is so for me and invite my client to do the same. Human to human. Namaste.



Alison Whitmire is a Principal with C-lever Biz. She is a coach to CEOs and entrepreneurs, an organizer and curator of TEDxRockCreekPark and has a passion for helping people discover their “Why” and how to align their companies to it. She provides thoughtful content to CEO roundtables each month to help them become better members for each other and better leaders for themselves.