

Coaching to the Bonds that can Bind and Blind Us

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We human beings are very much into bonding with other people (and even other animals). We have some of the strongest proclivities toward bonding among all species. This is quite understandable, given that the human infant is much more vulnerable than most newly-borns and need considerable protection and nurturance for many years while maturing. A prominent psychologist, Shelley Tayer, has even suggested that the pull toward bonding (she calls it “tend and befriend”) may be as strong as the pull toward fight/flight among human (especially females) when faced with environmental challenges.

Oxytocin and Three Forms of Bonding

At the heart of the bonding proclivity is the hormone called “oxytocin”. It is usually associated with the tendency of humans to spend time together, to nurture one another and to protect the young. I would propose that the drive toward bonding, accelerated by oxytocin, comes in three forms: (1) operational (helping others), (2) relational (emotional connection) and (3) protective (“Don’t fool with my loved ones!”).

In his exceptional new book, *Behave*, Robert Sapolsky notes that oxytocin not only leads us toward bonding with those who are close to us, it also leads us toward defining the “Other” and acting frequently against this “Other” – even in a violent manner. This might be closely linked to the third form of bonding I mentioned: protective.

Implications for Coaching

Are there ways in which these findings about human behavior can be of value when engaged in professional coaching? I would suggest three ways in which coaching might be engaged—each way related to one of the three forms of bonding I have identified.

Protective Bonding

As a coach I can challenge (or at least encourage) my client to reflect on the perceptions she holds about the “other” against which she is protecting someone in her family or organization. Do we distort our image of the threatening “other”? Do we lump them into a bigger category of “other” (an expanding enemy)? Object relations psychologists describe the “splitting” function that can occur when we identify and protect against the “bad.” This splitting and the resulting distortions is dramatically illustrated in the movie “Alien.” We should remember that the monster (“alien”) was actually spending most of her time defending her own off-springs (eggs), just as our heroine (played by Sigourney Weaver) was protecting her own crew. Both images are distorted in this movie (and in real life).

As a personal coach do we encourage our client to more deeply explore their image of the “intimate enemies” in their own life. As an executive coach, do we help our client trace out the beliefs they hold about their “enemies” within their organization as well as “enemies” outside their organization? What are the implications of potential distortions in the images and untested assumptions about the “other.” Do we justify inequitable or escalating counter-action against our “enemy” by relying on our protective, oxytocin-driven perceptions? Are we all muscle and no heart when serving as a “mother bear” (or “father bear”)? As a coach, can we help our client move beyond these distorted lens, while supporting them in their appropriate, protective response to a threatening “other”?

Relational Bonding

In our powerful bonding with another person or with a team in our organization, we can become too dependent on the admiration of this person or team. Rosabeth Moss Kanter wrote many years ago (in *Men and Women of the Corporation*) about the addiction to praise that she commonly observed in the American workplace. She noted that secretaries, administrative assistants and other supporting staff often were rewarded not with salary increases or career advancement, but instead with a bouquet of flowers or lunch out on “secretary day.” We might (or might not) have overcome this form of sexism when treating female employees, but we might still be vulnerable to praise addiction that is fueled by oxytocin-based relational bonding.

As coaches, we can gently but firmly encourage our clients to explore their own addiction to admirable feedback that is often not very specific and praise (in place of reward). At what times and in what settings are the women (and men) we are coaching all hugs and heart, but no backbone (to paraphrase my colleague, Mary Beth O’Neill)? While we are encouraging our client to find their own backbone, we might want to examine our own addiction to the praise offered by our clients. Do we look for praise by always being “nice” and “supportive” in our work with clients? Are we cheerleaders, even when our client might need a dose of reality?

Operational Bonding

It is often very appealing to take on the work that should be done by our clients. We all know that this is inappropriate – yet allowing the “monkey to land on our shoulders” (taking on ownership of our client’s problem) is often very seductive. We even know now that taking on the monkey or at least providing heavy advice to our coaching client tends to be rewarded by a squirt of happy-juice (in our brain and body). We receive positive chemical rewards as the advice-giver – not the advice-receiver. And we get the same kind of squirt when we are doing “things” for other people. At times this operational bonding might become a substitute for

relational bonding (a very common tendency among men who often express love through action rather than direct affection).

As a coach, we should be aware of this dynamic operating in ourselves as well as our clients. We should encourage our client to explore their own operational bonding—when they are doing work and assuming responsibilities that should be in the hands (and on the shoulders) of other members of their family and/or their friends (personal coaching) or should be done by people with whom they work in their organization (executive coaching). It is fine for us (and our clients) to be concerned about the workloads and welfare of people about whom we care; but we can't take on their burdens or we ourselves will be in need of care (and other people around us will be enticed to relieve us of the monkey that has moved onto our shoulder – the monkey can become viral!!).

Bonding and Masterful Coaching

None of these three bonding issues are easily addressed nor are the challenges they pose easily confronted. It is critical that we bond with other people in our personal lives and in our organizations. It is also critical, however, that our bonding doesn't lead (with the help of our oxytocin) to inappropriate actions against the "other", to self-defeating reliance on the admiration of those we serve, or to a shoulder (and psyche) that is weighted down with monkeys that belong on other shoulders. Our task as a coach is to help our clients make critical distinctions (the process of discernment) between beneficial and destructive bonding.