

Intense Identity Expansion

by Dr. Mark Goulston

One of the greatest problems in coaching, counseling, conflict resolution, and problem solving in business is the extreme grip of personal and group identity that keeps people from being real and present to their experience of others. Recently, I learned a simple and rapid way to move a conversation from “me” to “we,” to a new level of profound emotional connection and appreciation.

For some time, my friend and colleague, Charlie Smith and I had been discussing the long tradition of “Talking Sticks” from indigenous peoples throughout North and South America and Hawaii. History tells us that the “Talking Stick” was used in tribal council circles where whoever was holding it, spontaneously spoke whatever he/she was aware of in the moment. I’m not sure how they consciously knew it at the time, but such a practice allows one to be fully present and real and in doing so, have the speaker and the listeners be transformed in the moment. (I wonder if AA borrowed their “non-crosstalk” traditions from it).

In my own experience, the Glass Talking Stick enables someone to fully come from their true present awareness. By sharing without interruption or unsolicited advice and in a psychologically non-judgmental space, it’s as if one gets to give an “oral report” on their “true” self without mental or past based constraints. If you’re like most people, you will remember that whenever you have been called upon to speak - all the way back to an oral report on something in grade school - such an experience really helps you to be aware when you are being real, candid, honest and authentic versus when you are being inauthentic and faking the audience *and* yourself. The Talking stick is a vehicle for helping amplify that experience of true self-expression and self-experience.

When Charlie told me and showed me some samples of these museum quality sculptures, I immediately bought one and without knowing why, felt it would be helpful to me in some way.

My first usage of it happened when I met with a man named John in his mid forties, I'd been mentoring for five years – along with his girlfriend, Jessica - who had both been through many personal and professional ups and downs and both had finally arrived in the beginning of sound, solid and successful future that promises to be bright from them both.

On this occasion, I told John about the talking stick and how to use it and that I would go first.

I pulled the stick out of its sheath, grabbed the cool and smooth glass with both hands and rested it on top of my seated thighs. I then took a couple breaths and began to tear up and become emotional and looked John squarely in the eye and said, "What I'm aware of is how much I love both you and Jessica and how many ups and downs and very difficult times you have both been through and how that you've now landed in the beginning of a very good place and how filled with joy that makes me. I'm also aware of my commitment to helping you both in any way I can for the rest of my life."

I then handed the stick to John and said, "Your turn."

John is not as in touch with his feelings and emotions as I am, in that his analytic and problem-solving skills far eclipse his emotions. That's not to say that he didn't feel things deeply, which is why I love mentoring him, but that like most left brain men, he was not very skilled or comfortable in expressing them.

He took the Glass Talking Stick, and like me before him, took a couple deep breaths, became emotional and said: "What I'm aware of is how you, Mark, have been consistently, unflinching and steadfast in your support of both Jessica and me for five years without asking for anything and our never paying you. I don't think I or Jessica have ever known anyone like that our lives who has ever done that for each and both of. And what I'm aware of is that for years I've wanted to thank you and tell you how much that has meant to her and me, but I never did and I never thought I would get the chance to do it, because I'm emotionally kind of shy. But I'm

getting to do it now and it feels so good.” Then John began to cry with a wide appreciative grin on his face.

That was the beginning of my talking stick journey. And then along the way, something happened. The Glass Talking stick has become fully a “listening stick” as well such that when I am holding it and someone is talking to me, I listen to and hear what they are saying between and under their words that cries out to me to be heard.

Not too long after I saw John, I saw a type A, alpha+, driven, high energy man named Alex. We started into his session and told him that I was going to be holding this stick as a tool that helps me listen better. He looked at me puzzled, but then flippantly said, “If it works for you, Mark.”

As he began to speak, I held on to my listening stick to listen to what I was hearing. I listened to Alex vent nonstop for 15 minutes about all the things he had to do and deadlines facing him and on and on.

Finally, I interjected firmly, “Shh! Listen!”

He was startled, “Listen to what?”

“Listen to the quiet,” I replied.

“The what?” he responded.

“To the quiet,” I continued. “It’s located between the noise in your head and the noise in your life, and right now it’s screaming out to me and you to be heard.”

“Huh?” he said, still confused.

“Close your eyes,” I instructed, “and breathe slowly through your nose and in a little while you’ll begin to hear it.”

After several moments Alex began to tear up, collapsed to his side on my couch and then began to cry. This went on for five minutes, after which he slowly opened his bloodshot eyes and sat up. He had a smile on his face.

“What was *that* about?” I asked.

Alex chuckled wryly, “*That* is what I’ve been looking for all my life. And everything...and I mean everything...I do to get me there, takes me further away. That’s a lot to think about.”

And I replied, “Yes it is.”

In both those instances, the talking stick and listening stick enabled John and Alex *and* me to come from beyond our typical identity.

I have since used the “talking/listening stick” in presentations to small and large groups to talk authentically and listen *into* the audience. As I have done that I have had further insights into the power of this tool especially when being seated in front of anyone and holding it with two hands on my lap.

What I have become aware of is that when I am speaking in front of an audience or even one person, I am using my hands and arms to amplify what I am saying. What I have realized is that when I am using my body in that way, I am embellishing what I am saying and not being present, receptive or real. I’m not expressing as much as I am selling. Entertaining maybe and because of that possibly getting away with it.

However, when I am seated, holding the smooth and cool glass stick in my lap and not using my hands or arms, whether I am talking or listening, I am fully present, and coming fully from my identity... and coming from the best part of who I am.

Imagine how that might help in your coaching practice and life.

