

Breast Cancer and Coaching. An experience of great value.

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Context.

In October 2007, I was working as a leadership coach for three multinationals, as well as doing the first course of ontological coaching at Newfield (Boulder, Colorado) when an interesting conversation arose between the President of the International Lions Foundation Spain and the breast surgery coordinator of one of Spain's most important hospitals.

In the conversation, the surgeon commented that, in her hospital, interesting practices in the treatment of breast cancer were being developed. She shared the indicators of excellence that she was tracking, with respect to surgery as well as chemotherapy and radiation. She said that the therapeutic results showed very high technical levels. She also noted the excellence of the patient's breast reconstruction and stated that "in this aspect of the treatment the best techniques worldwide were being used."

However, the surgeon also noted that once the patients interrupted their regular relationship with the hospital, something happened which often had negative influence on continuing patient outcomes. She observed that the discharged patients felt alone and hypothesized that these feelings could affect the patient's post-hospital recovery. She realized that something different had to be done to help the patients make a complete recovery, once they had been discharged from hospital.

Inspired by this conversation, the President of the Lions Club announced that he was setting up a breast cancer association called the Bruno Salvadori Lions Foundation, whose mission was to offer support to breast cancer patients. He invited my firm (RhoConsulting) to consider how they could offer this support through coaching.

In the course of the conversation, both the surgeon and the President posed questions which were charged both with a certain scepticism and a degree of disbelief..... *"Those things you do with company leaders and teams, you know...coaching... Do you think it would serve as a tool to accompany our patients? Would it help to improve them after their treatment? Would it help them emotionally? And ...therapeutically? Could it help to bring forward their discharge?"*

Our response was clear from the beginning. Although our coaching services had been and are generally oriented towards leadership, team and organization development, after hearing what these professionals had to say, we deeply believed that coaching could help these people to work through a very difficult situation.

And even though we had no experience in applying coaching methods, either individually or in group sessions, to breast cancer sufferers, we explained that, in coaching, we were constantly working with people who were going through complicated situations both in their working and personal lives--which even included health issues. In particular, our firm's coaches have a wide knowledge of psychology and are experienced in dealing with complex issues. For example, we teach English courses for the visually challenged (we are based in Spain where the language is Spanish) and we support clients with their emotional rebuilding after serious work accidents, etc.

We held that the basis of coaching is that people develop a greater awareness of their situation, possibilities, destiny, actions and resources in order to begin the "great march" towards better goals. And from our experience, we can confirm that "coachees accept their present and future in a more positive way and take more responsibility for them." In other words, they partly give up being a "*patient*," which seemed to be the issue at hand.

When we actually started the program, we realized that was precisely the crux of the question: the breast cancer survivors who had been well treated from the medical-surgery point of view benefited considerably from being aware of their situation. Now they need to give up being a patient and instead accept responsibility and start to be the leader of their therapeutic processes.

As we discovered during our sessions, from the second or third group session onward, the participants would choose to be unconditionally responsible for their therapeutic and recovery project. This cleared a certain co-dependence which traditional health systems tended to create.

Getting the ball rolling.

Our first program was called *Coaching for breast cancer sufferers during the recovery process*. 28 brave explorers participated in the program. In this group of 28, there were 22 outpatients and the other 6 belonged to the National Health Service (various surgeons, a psychologist and a nurse).

The program started the first week of October 2007 and consisted of 9 sessions of 5 hours each, lasting from October to June. At the same time, and depending on the personal circumstances of each participant, individuals participated in 1:1 coaching sessions.

Our mission was clear and measurable: "To improve in a visible way the emotional, physical and mental health of the participants by applying coaching distinctions, methodology and practices".

Moreover, the program had a series of objectives which facilitated the achievement of the mission:

- ✚ Each participant should be aware of her situation and what she was doing to improve it; further, each participant would commit to being “the leader of her recovery” and consider the health system “a resource at her disposal.” In consequence, the most frequent questions were: What can we do to improve our situation? or What practices can we introduce to....? which helped us see this generative mindset in action in our cohort.
- ✚ Participants would change the views that existed about their illness and about their future to more positive, generative perspectives. This was taken into account throughout all the conversations and actions carried out by the participants, including the naming of the program: *Coaching for breast cancer sufferers during the recovery process*.
- ✚ Participants would be able to use somatic and sensorial practices which help them to change their emotional, physical, and psychological perceptions of their condition, as well as to encourage and foster emotional and somatic improvement in the participants.
- ✚ The program would create a collaborative environment of mutual support and progressively transform the group into an experiential learning group with the clear goal of offering support among 22 participants.
- ✚ The program would create a means to sustainability. Participants were encouraged to become trainee coaches. In this way, in the future, the Foundation could welcome new patients and start the on-boarding process of new members efficiently through the support of women who had already been through the program. Many hours and a great deal of effort were invested to this end. What resulted was unexpected and astonishing: we observed that those participants who applied the coaching distinctions to other participants without getting emotionally involved, improved their own outcomes considerably.

During the first sessions, we taught many of the distinctions imparted by Newfield regarding ontological coaching, language, emotions, results management, centering, etc., . We will be eternally grateful to Julio Ollala for the courses.

We also used all the somatic coaching contributions which we were practicing in the Richard Strozzi-Heckler school of coaching. Additionally, we included other distinctions and practices based on tai chi, yoga and zen techniques. We leveraged practices which affected the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system as well as the vagus nerve. Here, we followed the interesting work that Stephen W Porges had published in 1994 on the reframing of reactions in the face of traumatic events.

Overall results.

The results of the program were immediate. In the second session, the participants began to use group conversations. This got the ball rolling about their self-censured conversations; once their fear turned into energy through public declarations; once their non-disclosure, anxieties and resignations turned into acceptance, the improvement in the participants was awesome.

Afterwards, the results were successfully reported at the 27 National Congress of the Spanish Society of Sinology and Mammary Pathology held in Gijon (Asturias) from 15 to 17 October 2008.

Continuation.

For the following 3 years the coaching courses successfully continued to treat the sufferers individually. Later, given that the Bruno Salvadori Lions Foundation had developed the competences necessary for autonomy, this coach and his team at RhoConsulting followed other coaching paths.

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