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## Helping our Clients Reframe Their Circumstances

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When I lived in New York City, I did a lot of work with an organization called Friends in Deed. Friends in Deed was formed in the 1990s to help people live and die with HIV and AIDS. The Tuesday night Big Groups were facilitated by the founder of the center, Cy O'Neal. Cy had no formal training of any kind in psychology or coaching; she was a former actress, model, and wife of a famous actor. But she had an uncanny ability to cut through the story and uncover the kernel of truth that was happening for the person in that moment. Each Tuesday at 7PM about 50-60 men (it was mostly men then) would gather in the room and slowly begin to share. When they were about halfway through their story, Cy would interrupt and say, "We don't need much story...the quality of life is not determined by the circumstances." How are you right now, in this moment?"

Sometimes the answer was simply, "sad," or "angry," or often, "scared!" Those responses were much more helpful than the story itself, in helping clients moving toward action in realizing their immediate quality of life. Cy was bringing those in the room into presence.

As a coach, I rely on my experience in the Tuesday Big Group to streamline the way I thought partner with my clients. Coaches, too, need only enough story to understand how to help the client identify what's critical to focus on in the session.

The quality of life is not determined by the circumstances. How are you, right now, in relation to your circumstances? That is a more helpful inquiry.

During the pandemic, disruption and uncertainty are the basis of day to day work for both leaders and teams; the priorities are constantly shifting as employees attempt to contribute successfully to the company mission in a meaningful way, while navigating remote work and personal life.

Even before the pandemic, companies were responding quickly to marketplace shifts, new business models and changing goals, demanding an intense level of agility and resilience. This impacts team members to an exponential degree and leaders need help responding. How can we help most effectively?

Earlier in my coaching career I was working with a healthcare client who was experiencing an unusual amount of change and disruption, both at work and at home. At the beginning of our session, he itemized the list of demands and changes that were impacting him and his team. The list for that week went something like this:

- “The care models keep changing on us and the team can’t keep up.”
- “They are moving us under another department leader that we continuously have conflict with, and now they will be our boss.”
- “I have two key employees who had to go out on leave, and I am not allowed to backfill them.”
- “My wedding is next month and I don’t know how I can be out for two weeks on a honeymoon.”
- “I don’t know why this is all happening to me right now!”

I would not in any way want to put labels on this type of thinking, like victim mentality or victimism, because I am not a therapist, and labels are not helpful. These events were real, and exceedingly difficult to lead to and respond to at the same time. He and his team were suffering.

My natural response as an executive leader was to problem-solve and wrestle each of those issues with him to resolution. Most leaders do this automatically. Even today as a coach I need to resist the temptation to chase the issue, stop and focus on the person instead.

The quality of life is not determined by the circumstances. How can we help leaders move focus away from the circumstances and reframe their perspective on their relation to the circumstances? I needed to remember that it was not about what I know, and what has made me successful in the past. I was not there to advise him, and he did not ask me to. Giving people the answers or offering advice can shut down the client’s innate curiosity and resourcefulness.

It was about my coaching presence and how I needed to show up for the client and hold the space for them. I needed to acknowledge and then resist my natural impulses to fix the issue or “help” him and remember that he has the answers he needs within. My job is to make space for his own wisdom.

In an unusual moment of clarity as a new coach, I realized that using his own language to reflect the circumstances back to him would open the door to reframe the perspective; the quality of life is not determined by the circumstances. I stopped for a moment, took a breath, and asked:

“So all these things are happening to you and your team at the same time?”

“Yes,” he responded.

“What would be different for you if all of these things are happening for you and your team instead?”

There were a few minutes of silence, and I could tell there was a shift.

“What’s happening for you right now,” I asked.

He responded, “Wow, I guess I have to look at this from a larger perspective and figure out how to help my team navigate these changes more easily. None of these issues are stopping or going away.”

Once we were able to move away from the list, and explore his relation to the list, he was able to identify ways to help himself and his team gain skills to better prioritize and respond to their changing environment. It was less about the weight of the problems in front of them and more about the opportunities those problems were presenting. He also realized that he did not need to sacrifice his honeymoon to solve these issues himself, rather he could ask helpful questions of his team to lift them to their best thinking.

There are many ways for us to help clients reframe their circumstances, but it is reliant on our coaching presence and how we are showing up in the moment. Here are some questions we can ask ourselves to understand our own presence:

What do I really believe about the capabilities of the person in front of me? Do I honestly believe that they are whole resourceful and creative, or is my impetus to help them fix issues?

What am I aware of in myself that might add to or interfere with the coaching process? Do I have a history of success in a specific area that I rely on in my coaching, rather than just being present to the client’s needs?

What are my own ego impulses and character structures, and how might they interfere with coaching presence? For example, I am an Enneagram 2, The Helper. How are my impulses to be liked for helping people getting in the way of the client’s own wisdom?

Am I truly present with the client, or am I listening simply to figure out the best next question?

Sometimes what is needed is a simple reframing of our circumstances. The same goes for us as coaches. The quality of life is not determined by the circumstances...it is determined by our presence!