

“What Would It Mean If...”

Extending the effectiveness of a common coaching intervention

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For an introduction to the concept of emotional coherence, please see:

[Introduction to the Emotional Coherence Framework.](#)

In Coherence Coaching, very often a seemingly subtle but significant difference in stance and/or choice of wording on the part of the coach affects what path the intervention nudges the client to explore.

Let's look at the frequently used and very powerful coaching question "What would it mean to you if you could achieve your goal / resolve this problem / reach a decision / etc.?"

For what purpose is this intervention being used?

Most often in coaching settings, "meaning" questions are used to help the client form a more concrete and motivating vision, in order to have more energy to move forward. And that can be useful, indeed.

Example 1:

Janine knows that she loves learning about art and art history, and she also loves playing the cello. She is currently thinking about which university to choose based on her interests and passions. She is unsure of the right direction and wants support from her coach in developing a vision for her life and career after university. A powerful vision of the future will aid her in making the right decision at this crossroads in her life. Her coach may well ask her about the deeper *meanings* that might emanate from this choice.

In Coherence Coaching, a question about meaning is also often used to further the process of discovering what is standing in the way of the client reaching a chosen goal.

Example 2:

Frederick wants to go to journalism school. He has picked out three schools that offer interesting programs. He is trying to get himself to fill out the applications and write the required essays, but he feels blocked and is currently not making any progress on these tasks. He seeks out a coach in order to figure out how to get unblocked. One effective and direct way of discovering what is at the root of Frederick's resistance to carrying out the tasks is to inquire about what achieving his goal (being in journalism school) might *mean* about him and his life.

As we develop these two seemingly similar examples further, they turn out to be very different under the surface and make clear, firstly, that every client is coming from a unique set of needs and experiences that can't be assumed or hypothesized by the coach, but rather need to be elicited from the client. And secondly, a given intervention is never a one-size-fits-all tool and can be used for various purposes in the coaching process, depending on the needs of the individual client.

Make it experiential

Right at the start of our discussion, let's look at a way to turn this intervention into something even more powerful, an experience that can reach the client on deeper emotional levels than heretofore.

You may have observed that "meaning" questions are most frequently posed using the conditional language: "What **would** it mean **if**..." The effect of using conditional language is often that the client remains a step removed from whatever images or feelings are triggered by the question. This usually results in both coach and client talking *about* the client's material on a cognitive, rational level, which is not likely to make contact with the deepest emotional knowledge the client has on that topic.

Using an intervention in a coherence-based way means helping clients to find their deep, as yet unconscious, emotional knowings (adaptive learnings that occurred in the presence of strong emotion) in an experiential way. One great opportunity to do that is for a coach to talk with clients in the *present tense* about their material. Clients need to feel (rather than reason about) their emotions and the meanings of their material. Emotional truths and knowings that guide or trigger our behavior and responses in the world are related to the meanings we have stored through life *experience*, so connecting with those knowings by using experiential exercises is most likely to help us make contact with those meanings.

In the case of Frederick, for example, who is grappling with behavior that he doesn't yet understand (avoiding writing his applications to journalism school), we could ask him to imagine himself in journalism school already and guide him to conjure up all the sensory details he can about that scene. Then we might ask him such questions as, "What does that *mean* about you, that you are a student of journalism? ...that you go to your classes every day? ...that you sit at lunch with other journalism students? What does that *mean* about your life? What does that *mean* about the decision you've made?"

Frederick: "That means that I'll finally have the dumb paperwork behind me. That will be a big relief!" (laughs) "And that'll be great when I finally get there and meet other people who think the way I do. It's what I really, really want!"

Coach: "Yeah, I can really feel how much you want that." (pause) "And there you are at journalism school, enjoying having fulfilling conversations with people who think the way you do. What else comes up for you? What else does this decision mean about your life?"

Frederick: "Well, it means that I'm ignoring my parents' advice. They want me to take over the family business."

Coach: "Mm, you're ignoring your parents' advice and going against their wishes.... Well, that sounds pretty important.... I'm interested in hearing more about that... if you feel like it...."

Frederick: “You know, if I were a good and respectful son, I wouldn’t ignore what my parents want, after all the years they’ve invested in me! And they’re getting older and need me more as the years go by.”

Aha, the coach has helped Frederick discover some of the deeper meanings of his resistance to filling out his applications for journalism school. This is, of course, essential information for the further coaching process, which could not move toward sustainable solutions (whatever they may turn out to be) without this deep knowledge of what was motivating—or blocking—Frederick.

We see here how important it can be to use a popular coaching intervention in an experiential way, rather than in a more emotionally distanced, cognitive way. Many coaches complain about clients that are “up in their heads” or “stuck in their logical approach” to their issues. Working experientially is a great way to move beyond that, and the simple change from conditional to present tense in the wording of the intervention is a big help.

Clients differ greatly in how easily they can open themselves to experiential exercises in a coaching setting (and in life), and that is a topic for a separate article.

How clients may react to “meaning” questions

Let’s talk about the different effects such “meaning” questions might have on a client, depending on where the client is in his or her process.

Often the client’s first response—as we saw above with Frederick—will be something along the lines of “It’s great! That means my problem would be solved already” or “It means I’ll finally have the freedom/wealth/etc. to live the life I’ve dreamed of for so long.”

As lovely as an ebullient, positive first response from the client can feel, there is, in most cases, some issue (fear, concern, etc.) causing resistance or reluctance to implementing change, as evidenced by the fact that the client has sought coaching as support. This blockage or hesitation needs to be acknowledged and pursued with coherence-based discovery steps.

A coaching client like Janine, who wants support in reaching a clear decision about her future studies, may find a great deal of clarity in her positive first responses to experiential questions about the meaning of her various potential paths. The coach can guide her to recognize where her greater excitement and fulfillment lie. But even in Janine’s case, coach and client may end up diving into her concerns about making a choice for one path that means she’ll be neglecting another that she holds dear.

So even in the seemingly simplest of coaching challenges, it is important in the coaching process to move beyond the first, positive responses to an experiential exercise with questions like, “So you’re sitting there in rehearsal with your quartet... You’re playing that gorgeous Beethoven piece... What does that *mean* about the choice you’ve made?”

Janine's first answer is, "It means I've found that feeling of being at home... being in perfect harmony with other people." Sounds great, right? It must be the right decision for her to study music, rather than art history.

As the coach pursues the deeper meanings for Janine, at some point she says, "But playing music all day means I won't have time for those delightful long strolls through the museums of this world, or for browsing through big, colorful art books. I feel as if I'll be under time pressure and have to give up some quality of life." Now the coach has some interesting leads to pursue with Janine about her deeper emotional knowledge of what constitutes quality of life for her.

We can see that it is important in the coach's guidance of the coaching process, when using "meaning" questions, to persist beyond the first dreamily positive responses that clients typically give. In fact, it is usually the more troubling responses that provide rich material for further discovery of the underlying emotional knowings that are leading to the client's reluctance to change.

That is why we encourage coherence-based coaches to persist with "meaning" questions, always in an imaginal and experiential context, and ask not just once, but several times. There is no shame (on the contrary!) in saying to your client, "Mm-hm, good. And what else does that mean to you? What else does that mean about this situation?" Often it's the third or fourth inquiry that elicits the most interesting, useful, and sometimes surprising information.

How to respond to the clients' responses

This is where your empathy and skills as a coach come in.

Sometimes all signs are go, and the client truly needs only your believing in him and your regular follow-ups in order to move ahead in what feels like the optimal direction. In this case, the "meaning" question can function precisely as it is traditionally intended, and as it is taught in most coaching trainings. It's possible that Janine, when asked what it means about her that she is (imaginally) sitting in a music rehearsal playing Beethoven, will respond with, "I'm in my right place. Everything else is secondary!"

Even here, though, we recommend that the coach ask her explicitly whether there are any far-off rumblings of uncertainty whatsoever that she would like to examine, whether there is any *part* of her that is not 100% convinced. It's important for the client to know that it's OK to express doubts, if there are any, and to look at those together with her coach. If there are no doubts, great! You as empathetic coach will sense when the client has reached that state.

In Frederick's case, the client has a clear sense of his desired direction, but he has just started to understand the roots of the stumbling blocks that are associated with his parents and their expectations. These concerns need to be given ample time and attention. They also need to be taken completely seriously by the coach and not minimized or counteracted (as in "If you allow yourself to be sidelined by such concerns, what would the costs be...?").

Deep emotional material that leads to stumbling blocks or reluctance is actually what has the greatest power over the client. Frederick's emotional knowings and meanings about his relationship to his parents, their needs and expectations, what it means to be a good son, etc., were originally developed as protective, adaptive strategies for avoiding pain and maximizing well-being, and they must be acknowledged empathetically by the coach as such.

Only by fully exploring the deeper meaning of each and every potential stumbling block will Frederick find his right path forward. And this path may, as a result of the exploration, turn out to be quite different from his originally stated goal. Any pushing away, overriding, criticizing, or minimizing the importance of those stumbling blocks can deprive him of the opportunity to explore alternative solutions to the original problem.

Summary

When using coaching interventions in which you ask about the meaning of a choice or behavior, use the present tense and work in an experiential setting, in order to help the client reach all the way down to her unconscious emotional knowings.

Encourage the client to bring doubts, concerns, and fears to consciousness and to shine a light on them, by persisting with your "meaning" questions and by pursuing (without criticizing or pathologizing) any signs of discomfort you may observe on the client's part.