

TRUTH

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Coach, supervisor and trainer [Marie Faire](#) invites us to learn from current crises and speak truth to power if we are to be part of the solution in creating a more compassionate and equitable world.

As many of my friends and clients would tell you freely, I am outspoken – as well as, like everyone else, opinionated. I like to think this is mitigated by the fact I am also a good listener, have a well-developed sense of humour and, in my defence, am (mostly) self-aware. Most importantly, I seek to understand how others have come to different opinions than mine.

In the last six months, I have had many conversations that, sooner or later, have arrived at some aspect of the current crises we are facing: climate change; gross inequalities in access to water, food, education and healthcare in many parts of the world; pollution; disappearing biodiversity; environmental degradation; poverty; Covid-19; white supremacists and the frightening move further and further to the political right.

In 2009, following the last financial crash, John Blakey and Ian Day published their paper/article about the sub-prime mortgage crisis: *Where were all the coaches when the banks went down?* (later to become their book *Challenging Coaching*). But more than ten years on, I wonder what have we learned since then about the role of coaches in crises?

Gregory Bateson said that if we are to understand anything fully, it is a necessity to gain multiple perspectives. So, I contacted several coaches, supervisors and contractors of coaching for their views on the role of a coach in a prejudiced, racist, coronavirus-ridden, economically failing, climate-changing world?

All life forms, including human beings, are self-corrective systems, programmed to return to the status quo; 'disturbances' are ignored, reframed or side-tracked. We are wired to be risk averse and to be cautious of change, which has made us a remarkably successful species. There are times, however, when change is required. If we don't take risks then we may, like other previously successful species, become extinct.

Are we at that moment as a species? As a profession?

Is the required 'new normal' really just the same as it was, but wearing a mask? Or do we need to radically rethink the path we are on? Is our role as coaches to help people adjust to wearing the mask or to change the direction and the way we travel?

I think that we cannot go back to 'normal'. We need to learn from the horrors and opportunities that are staring us in the face.

I've often thought that part of my role as a coach is to be a court jester. In medieval times, the court jester was just a fool and, therefore, despite the mocking or satirical messages they could deliver, was unlikely to lose their head. As a coach we are, I think, in a privileged position where we may see and comment on things that others cannot and often dare not. We can offer an alternative perspective that may lead to a shift in direction or even a shift in paradigm. We can be a role model for speaking truth to power.

Before lockdown, one of my clients asked if I would attend a team day of theirs. I was happy to and enquired whether he wanted me to facilitate the day. To my surprise he replied that they'd got the event sorted. 'That sounds like a good day, so tell me, what do you need me for?' I asked. His reply (to my delight) was: 'You will tell us if we are being really stupid!' So I earned my fee that day with just one word – 'Really?!?' – delivered as they were agreeing a course of action focused on task and profit, which cut right across some of the core values that they espoused and truly believed in. They were forced to stop, reflect and reconsider.

My client knew I would hold up the mirror, risk speaking truth to power and be his Jiminy Cricket. The success of this role is evidenced by the team now asking each other 'what would Marie say if she were here?'

In an interview, film director Alek Keshishian was asked what it was like to work with the popstar on the film *In Bed with Madonna*, given her notorious reputation for being difficult. He replied: 'It was easy. I went in every day prepared to be sacked. That is the only way to

do your best work.' Are we as coaches willing to risk that? No matter how carefully we do so, there is always an inherent risk to speaking truth to power.

In 2017, long before Covid-19 or the recent resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, Hetty Einzig wrote that 'coaching is at a fork in the road'. She described the difference between coaches whose journey is to become master craftsmen and those who engage in 'New Generation Coaching'. These are the coaches that work systemically, take an integrative approach and 'challenge the orthodoxy... of impartiality... who see themselves as citizens with an active part to play in society and feel able to encourage their clients to explore their own contribution in the world.'ⁱ

There is, of course, always a role for empathy: for holding the space and for exquisite listening to those who are suffering distress, grief or hardship. People need to be able to tell their story and have it heard without a rush to fix or solve it. Many will also require the skilled questioning that can result in more options and hope. Master craftsmen (and women) are much needed.

I would argue that we desperately need coaches to take their craft with them and take that other path at the fork in the road.

One thing that I am still opinionated about is that we all need to speak out and challenge. Gone are the days where we can hide behind the excuse that coaches (or indeed business leaders, journalists and public figures) must not make political comments or question morality for fear of upsetting their clients (customers, fans and stakeholders). While it is not our role to proselytise, it is our role as coaches to question, and make transparent and examine the values and morality of what we are observing and therefore party to. Silence is complicity.

As Martin Luther King Jr. said: 'Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.'

I hope that coaches will, in addition to their pastoral role, choose the path less travelled and be part of creating a more compassionate, equitable and sustainable world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Marie is co-founder of the Beyond Partnership Ltd and is an AC accredited master executive coach and AC accredited coaching supervisor. She runs coach and coaching supervisor programmes; is the AC Supervision Accreditation Assessment Lead; and is one of the ACGSE hosts. In addition to being opinionated(!), she has a reputation for being both supportive and challenging, passionate, relational, and bringing humour and compassion to all her work. Marie has two events coming up: a virtual coaching supervision training programme in November, and a virtual workshop, 'Speaking Truth to Power', in Spring 2021.

IN A TIME OF CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY, WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE COACH?

Answers from around the world



'The most precious role is to support the development of empathy. One of the most powerful ways to do this is by asking questions and listening to stories. As I observed in my online group sessions, leading these conversations creates empathic dialogues, ending with people talking about creative solutions in new

situations. Perhaps now, coaching will become even more important as a way to support individuals and organisation given these challenging times. There is never been a time when people needed to experience more care, candor, and constructiveness.'

Günay Özarin, developmental coach and supervisor, Göz Consulting and Coaching

Istanbul, Turkey



'Despite these difficult times, we are currently looking to increase the size of our workforce significantly by the end of the year; I put this success down to the ways the company has embraced its values, which are focused on a 'one team' mentality. Coaching has played a major part from the top down. As a

company we have embraced the value of coaching and invested in increasing and strengthening our people team, so that our development of people touches the whole business. We need to give our employees the tools to get the best out of everybody. An external coach allows our team to rethink some of their behaviours, as well as pick up and learn from others what "great" looks like.'

James Neil, managing director, Dalcour Maclaren

England, UK



'I believe coaches are in a wonderful position to help their clients to navigate their way in times of crisis and opportunity. The nature of the relationship allows coaches to provide a safe container for clients to express their hopes, fears and feelings, and to have conversations that they might not have elsewhere. Coaches can help their clients to be more grounded, centred and resourceful in ambiguous and uncertain situations. This helps them to gain fresh perspectives and insights that can stimulate their creativity and problem-solving skills.'

Joan van den Brink, executive and team coach, Araba Consulting

Amsterdam, Netherlands

i. Einzig, H. *The Future of Coaching: Vision, Leadership and Responsibility in a Transforming World*. Routledge, 2017.