**The Science of the Art of Coaching**

A coaching practitioner’s journey  
by Jill Savage

I attended module one and two of the first ever year long **‘Science of the Art of Coaching’** with Professor Paul Brown and wondered how I might apply neuroscience to my own coaching practice.  My practice has run effectively using an eclectic mix of mindfulness, Transactional Analysis and Neuro- Linguistic Programming (NLP) as underpinning theories and practices. I was therefore intrigued to see how I might integrate this new approach.

Paul started the programme by highlighting the underlying assumptions that apply when using a ‘brain based’ approach:-

* *'the emotional patterning developed by the brain is a system which creates meaning by attaching feelings to experience and provides the source of energy for motivation’*
* *‘As a coach you can’t get ‘ there’ with your client until you know where ‘here’ is, so it is the history of the client that will enable you to understand ‘here.’*
* *‘the brain hates change’*

With these in mind I reflected on the words that have sometimes so easily spilled out of my mouth when talking to clients. Phrases such as ‘transformational change‘ I now realise  are not brain friendly. What we are aiming for, according to Paul, are ‘adaptions’ in the brain of our client as a way of supporting new possibilities and a higher level of performance. So, if my client wants to do something different, then the most energetic and efficient way to encourage this is to pull on the neural pathways they already have in their brain. This therefore leads me to ask what does this mean for me as coaching practitioner?

Our role as brain based practitioners is to understand the emotional system of our client which starts with attachment patterns to parents/caretakers as espoused by John Bowlby and which Paul stresses. Our brain is shaped by experiences and results in how it gets organised emotionally and makes us all unique.  The limbic system of the brain opens up in a secure and trusting relationship and this has huge implications for coaching. We need to bring to the surface those influences that have led our client’s brain to be wired in a particular way. The neuroscience approach to coaching supplies a bridge between  the fields of therapy, that works with exploring personal history and coaching, which is promoted as being future focused. Paul believes that having a science based approach to our practice means that we can all work from a level playing field of understanding.  As he states, if you are buying a house you need to understand the structural survey. Similarly  as coaches we need to understand the emotional structure and patterning of our clients in order to provide  a fundamental base to operate from.

If I am doing my job properly as a ‘brain based’ coach I need to gently explore the emotional landscape of my client’s life, but only if they are willing to take me there.

I need to look at the world through my client’s eyes and collect biographical data about their parents and even their grand-parents in order to build a picture of them.

I will use questions such as ‘How did your parents meet?’ and ‘How was it at home?’ I will then be looking below my client’s narrative to notice their emotional data.  When my ‘client’ shared that ‘I can never live up to my father’s expectations’ as he told his story I was able to notice ‘sadness’, ‘fear’ and ‘shame’ sitting beneath the words that he used. These are survival emotions in my client’s brain system. This could explain why he is constantly trying to live up to the organisations expectations and feeling the same survival emotions as he did from childhood.

Paul suggests that, from the Transactional Analysis psychotherapeutic viewpoint, that the plot remains the same even though the characters and the stage change. We only make meaning through our emotions and in this example my client seems to  mainly display a survival emotion. He therefore uses a lot of energy and this reduces his capacity for effectiveness.  He recognises this as a pattern.

During the course Paul shared the 8 emotions that start with creating ‘wonder’ in our clients through the potentiators of ‘surprise’/ ‘startle’, moving through the five survival emotions of sadness, shame, disgust, anger and fear and finally the two attachment emotions of trust/love and excitement/joy.

Thinking back to my Client I remembered my client’s energy in the session as low and their body language collapsed inwards as they spoke.  So, now, when I have completed his personal history I will be able to say ‘I can tell you how your emotional system works – would that help?’  I will be able to share these eight basic universal emotions with my client and be able to explore with him how he can move from survival emotions, where the energy is pulled inside and his performance suffers to an attachment emotion such as trust/love that have more vibrancy. The outcome that that we are working towards is that energy is externalized and healthy performance is possible.

I am really looking forward to module 3 of this year long course, where we are going to explore more fully the neuro-behavioural modelling approach, in order that  I can see more of what is possible for my clients, by applying this brain based approach.

I shall certainly be in touch with my client in-between sessions as ours needs to be a relationship of secure attachment that holds trust and dare I say it – love.  With attachment emotions we can explore unchartered territories together and strive to create systemic change in the brain of my client that will be sustainable, if not transformational!

******

***Jill Savage****is an executive coach and supervisor. She delivers accredited coaching qualification programmes with The Beech Consultancy and runs her own coaching and supervision practice, Osmosis Development. She has a diploma in coaching supervision with CSA and she runs coach supervisor awareness programmes through the consultancy ‘Reflective Advantage’.*