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Inner Wisdom

Strategies for reflective decisions

Executive coaches are well aware of the two chronic themes found in today's corporations: too little time and too much work. In these stressful environments, executives, managers and front line supervisors are prone to unconsciously *react* in habitual ways – often leaving them with the attitude that they had no choice.

Coaches can assist their clients to develop the ability to slow down, be mindful and reflect, and empower

conflicts with his position. JW inevitably makes decisions without the benefit of potentially crucial information and input.

Reaction to a stimulus is normal. This does not mean we have to take action in relation to the stimulus. The body's signals can alert us to pay attention to our surroundings, reacting with symptoms like increased per-



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them to make better decisions and respond more effectively. Combined with mindful reflection, assisting the client to notice the signals sent by the body contributes to dynamic and lasting changes in attitudes and behavior. Clients can be taught to bring additional inner resources to any situation by adopting these four powerful steps: react, notice, reflect, and respond.

React

The Situation: *JW, an executive, wants to deal with his anger when challenged at work. The habit is affecting his leadership. Colleagues and those who report to him are reluctant to provide information or raise questions, particularly when it*

spirations, such as sweaty palms. It may constrict respiration with less blood flow to our brains, potentially impairing our ability to make meaningful choices. Our reactions teach us about triggers and habit patterns. Corporate clients may develop defensive behaviors and lash out in knee-jerk reactions such as anger and frustration, or conversely, close down and withdraw. Either way, these reactions create a negative impact in the body, with thoughts and emotions, in turn resulting in less motivation, decreased productivity, difficulty with making decisions and an inability to concentrate. Consequently the client experiences less joy, creativity and fulfillment.

Notice

JW’s reaction to challenges or criticism is to become angry and yell. He doesn’t feel like he’s in control of his reactions, which are often inappropriate. Others feel judged and disrespected. The coach asks him to recall the most recent experience and notice what happens prior to his verbal reaction.

The first step toward cultivating greater self-awareness is to notice. To become mindful, people must notice their behavior and cultivate the part of the mind that can *impartially* observe what they are experiencing. This entails noticing body sensations, emotions, impulses, thoughts or memories without attempting to control or direct what is being noticed. It is a way of cognitively stepping back from any habitual patterns. This step is used to notice and stabilize the bodily expe-

periences in service of greater clarity and insight.

Corporate clients may not have learned the necessary strategies to pause, take a breath, slow down and be with a situation, even for a few moments. Often they are required to make decisions quickly, efficiently and effectively. A coach may encourage clients to notice, be curious, be open to emergent possibilities and to use all their resources to be more fully present and available in the moment.

Reflect

Being mindful, JW reports that his face flushes, his shoulders and stomach tense, his heart beats faster and he pulls his right ear lobe. Then he moves in for the 'kill' and literally moves his body closer to the other person.

Once clients notice their pattern, they can put themselves 'on pause' long enough to begin to reflect on what their body is telling them. They can pause, take a deep breath and cognitively stand back from their initial reaction. Inviting the body's information to be present and accessible, they can reflect and choose to respond in a different way.

Clients in leadership positions demonstrate critical thinking skills daily. By adding mindful reflection and discernment to their repertoire, they create opportunities to expand the range of resources.

They can reflect on what triggers their reaction and create ways to offset any negative impact. This enables the client to choose responses that engage both internal and external resources.

Respond

The coach is curious about the ear pull and invites JW to slow the process down in order to study it mindfully – as a moment-to-moment experience. Upon reflection of the significance of the ear pull, JW says, "My mom used to do that to me when she wanted me to pay attention to what I was doing."

When asked, "What happens when you pull on your right ear?" JW responds with, "I know something needs my immediate attention, and a feeling of anxiety rushes up and it all happens too quickly." The coach speaks with JW about the idea of using his body signal, his ear pull, as a resource to alert him to the fact that he is too close to the edge; an important reminder to pause and consider how to respond.

To be responsive is based on the word 'integrity.' It involves integrating our internal experience with our

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external behaviours and choices. Our confidence grows by knowing how to respond. Learning what the body tells us helps to understand the pattern that contributes to being able to respond rather than react.

The reality is that corporate executives, managers and front line supervisors are always making choices. Often they rely on what their 'gut' tells them is a right choice among alternatives. This is the body speaking, not the mind. To respond appropriately, they need to collaborate with the body, to understand the language and integrate it into their decision making.

Result

The coach and JW explore the idea of using his ear pull to diffuse his reaction; to slow down and create a few

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moments of distance before engaging with others. With practice, the ear pull becomes a positive signal to remain curious about the new information or questions and to take time before responding.

In summary, we encourage you to use this four-step model of strategies for reflective decisions: react, notice, reflect, and respond. The goal of coaching is to enhance the person's capacities and skills. Adding the resource of the body's inner wisdom provides strategies for executives,

managers and supervisors to move from reacting to responding and therefore make their lives more skilful and rewarding. •

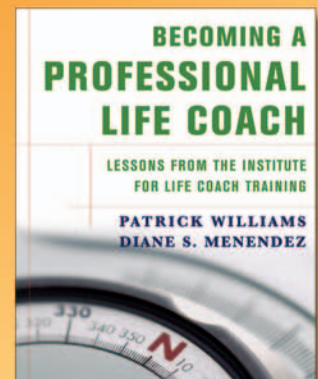
Marlena Field, PCC, CPCC is author of Body-Centered Coaching: using the body as a resource for change and co-author with Donna Martin, MA, of Simply Being: a reflective practice guide for helping professionals. Joyce Rankin, MBA, provides coaching and facilitation to individuals seeking to optimize personal and professional performance.



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