

**6. Richard Boyatzis Pre-Summit Session, May 28, 2019 (extract)**

**The Science of Effective Coaching**

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Let me start with this basic, empathic notion that change is stressful. Whether it's learning or change or adaptation. The degree of stress, acute stress that we are exposed to these days is over the limit that our bodies were designed for.

Whether as a formal coach or as a teacher, or a parent or a manager, or a therapist, we're in this role where we have, on top of the ordinary stress, we've got what's called the power stress, because of the responsibility of helping others. That means that on the whole, our bodies are not in good shape. Our hearts and minds are challenged, to put it mildly.

The reason that this ends up being so important is that **emotions are contagiou**s. We now understand, neurologically, there's a particular network in the brain called the **empathic network** or the default mode network that allows you to pick up on the emotions of others. People claim it's the mirror neuron network, but those are people who are living with neuroscience from the '90s, not today. What we know today is that it is this empathic network, also technically called the default mode,that enables you to pick up emotions. Now, this is happening in eight to 40 milliseconds, thousandths of a second. That means that people's emotions around you are infecting you positively or negatively.

That means that your client's degree of stress is coming at you very fast. And it means that your degree of stress, whether it's about something happening in your life, or the mere sense of responsibility you might have in the current conversation is infecting them. While we can focus on the negative because it happens a lot, it could also be on the positive. Part of the meta message of the last 35 years of my research in this area is really to focus on how do we flip that around? How do we flip that around so that we're having an effect on somebody else and help them be open to new ideas?

I’m going to through a bunch of research to try to help you understand the difference between what we know from research, versus the folklore that very often permeates our practises or organisations.

About 65 years of research and social psychology has told us that people don't get convinced of things by rational arguments. We get convinced of things by emotional arguments. And then we use rational arguments to make ourselves feel better.

A powerful way to check this out is for you to spend some time **reflecting on how you’ve changed.**

Here's the exercise. Think about the people in your life who have helped you the most. Now, think about your whole life, not just work. Think about the people who have helped you the most become who you are, or get to where you are. Write down the first three, five names that come to mind, of people who have helped you become who you are, or get to where you are. Take the first person that came to your mind on your list, and think of a moment in which you learned something from them, learned something important, think of a moment and what they did or said.

Now, if the person happened to be your mother, or your father, and you had thousands of those moments, let your mind filter and one of those things will pop into your memory. What did they say or do when that was happening? Then upon reflection later, what did you learn or take away from it?

People say things such as empowered, confident, encouraged, supported, enlightened, loved. They felt blessed and grateful, expansive. Calm and loved and safe. Joyful, listened to, accepted, a sense of peace, safe and encouraged, love, seen, understood, inspired, connected.

If you had any of those feelings, then you just had about four or five minutes in the **parasympathetic nervous system.** Which to put it succinctly, is really our body's renewal process, the reason this becomes important is we know what it feels like to be stressful. Most of us do not know the biomarkers, or the somatic sensations that are a part of being in renewal, we confuse it with other states. I will share some of what the research tells us.

**The stress syndrome** is a simple one. This is the fight or flight response. In the amygdala, you immediately start to secrete certain hormones that are also neurotransmitters, they're endocrines. Epinephrine, norepinephrine that moves blood from your capillaries that are not perceived to be needed, like those in your nose, ears, fingertips, to large muscle groups in your arms or legs so you can fight or flight. It also does it in your brain. At the same time, it activates cortisol that enters your bloodstream. And **cortisol i**s important for a number of things. One of them it's your body's natural anti-inflammatory. The problem is that cortisol has two nasty effects on the human body. First, it turns off your immune system. So all of a sudden, you're vulnerable to all of these pathogens that are bombarding us daily. Which is why people in power positions, whether its leaders or helpers, have higher incidence of bacterial infection, viral infection, influenza, type two diabetes. Because epinephrine, norepinephrine, more strokes and heart attacks. And then in general sleep disorders, gastrointestinal difficulties, cardiovascular, and sexual dysfunctions. **Welcome to the helping professions.**

But to me, the second nasty thing that cortisol does is it stops neurogenesis. Neurogenesis is what we now know, thanks to Erickson and his colleagues at the University of Sweden in 1998 in a fantastic set of studies showing that parts of the adult brain in particular the hippocampus and olfactory lobe, have stem cells that can become new neurons. Well, that process of growing new neurons is called neurogenesis. Cortisol stops neurogenesis. So, what happens under this barrage of annoying stress, your cell phone drops a call, your computer doesn't boot up very fast, is that you are cognitively, emotionally and perceptually impaired.

A study was done in England a few years back that showed that most of us have peripheral vision of about 180 to 210 degrees. If you don't know your peripheral vision, stare straight ahead, move your hands back until you can't see them anymore. When you're under the effect of this epinephrine and norepinephrine, your peripheral vision goes down to 30 degrees. That's an example of what happens with a cognitive impairment.

Now, if all this is going on and you don't feel good, what ends up happening is you start to perceive things as threatening that may or may not be. Now we know that the more people use social media, texting, email, Instagram, Facebook, all of these things, the more nervous, sad, depressed, they become. That is because when anything like social media forces us to always be on the alert, that always activates the defence system in our body. Our body is going to defend us from threats.

Unfortunately, our body doesn't really differentiate between somebody who says something offensive in a tweet versus a lion coming near our village. The net result of all that as we begin to see threats in places that they may not be. Now, if all this was going on, we'd all be dead, but we're not. So, what happens? What happens is, **cortisol begins the body's process also of calling in what's called the parasympathetic nervous system.** This is the opposite of the sympathetic. It's another one of the three parts of our autonomic nervous system. In this, our body ... It's the experience you have when you see a little baby laugh, and when you see a golden retriever puppy roll in the grass or a kitten play with a toy. This genuine smile you get, makes you feel lifted. That comes from primarily the release of **oxytocin** for women and **vasopressin** for men. At this dosage level, these are vasodilators, they open up your blood vessels so you feel warmer. Your blood pressure drops, your pulse rate drops, your breathing gets deeper. What happens in this state? Well, I'll call it renewal for shorthand, is your immune system clicks into high gear, and you are cognitively at your best in this state. You're the most creative, you can handle the most complex concepts, you can multitask, these are all proven, with many, many studies, published studies. You feel joyful, not necessarily happy. In the process, you somehow feel revived.

That really is a part of the dilemma that we have, which is, when people are under annoying stress levels that are all too often typical in today's world, they're cognitively, emotionally and perceptually impaired. We start to lose our ability to form resident relationships. **You need resident relationships to be effective as a coach or a helper**. If people don't feel you're in tune with each other, it doesn't work.

Now, we know from published studies that **meditation** helps stimulate parasympathetic or renewal. We know that **yoga** does, we know **Tai Chi** does. We know that exercise does if it's modest.

We know that feeling hopeful about the future does. We know that being in a long term loving relationship is really helpful, and helping people who are less fortunate activates renewal processes. We know that having a dog or cat really helps because of the stroking, the animal goes into parasympathetic activation. Then because of contagion, you feel it, the animal feels it and you go back and forth. We now know that laughter, joy and playfulness does, and a walk in nature.

What I've come to appreciate over the decades of working on this is that sustained desired change in people and in our system really happens through understanding complexity theory. Because you have to understand that change is not continuous or linear, it happens in fits and starts. But there always seemed to be experiences of emergence. Things that pop into your consciousness have to be present for the change to occur and be sustainable, meaning lasting three weeks to three months.

A person needs **some sense of purpose**, **some sense of vision**, some **depiction of their ideal self,** some **literal visual image of the life they would love to have**.

What about your REAL self, which I define as the person who you are, as others react and experience you. There's an instantaneous comparison to your vision, you end up with a statement of a personal balance sheet of your strengths and gaps or weaknesses. Then there's the learning agenda. This is not a performance improvement plan, this is something that you are joyfully excited about doing. And then if you have that path to get to your vision, using your strengths, maybe working on a weakness, then you have the practise and experimentation with these new thoughts, feelings and behaviour. They're all is enabled by these **resonant, trusting relationships**.

Then there is the negative emotional attractor. The differences between these two psycho-physiological states are that one is in the parasympathetic, the renewal zone, that's the **PEA (positive emotional attractor.)** The negative emotional attractor is in the stress or sympathetic system, in the **NEA (negative emotional attractor)** Seeing possibilities versus problems, dreams versus expectations, feeling optimistic versus pessimistic.

Sustained desired change almost always starts in the positive emotional attractor. because if you start in the negative, emotional attract you start to close down. You aren't opened up to new ideas or people, you're closing and defending. We need to survive the NEA. You wouldn't have been able to wake up this morning if you didn't have the NEA. You wouldn't be able to analyse something, you wouldn't be able to make a decision without it. But the problem is that we really need to survive. Thriving and flourishing is great, but it's a mood issue. But once you're surviving, what's going to move you forward, what's going to help you feel like you're fulfilling your purpose in life, like you're contributing, like you're caring and loving to the people around you, is being able to move into the positive emotional attractor on a regular basis. The challenge in our lives is how do we create a balance and because the negative emotional tractor is so powerful, we have to sample or be in the positive emotional attractor state more often than the negative.

In a study that we haven't published yet, we have the data to show that the number of different renewal activities you do to bring yourself back into or stay in the PEA. **What we're saying about coaching quite literally is that coaching with compassion is our label for coaching to the positive emotional attractor, v**ersus coaching for compliance, which, unfortunately is what most of the time we do as coaches. Anytime you start a coaching process or a training process by giving people feedback, you force them into compliance.

The use of goals and metrics is around compliance. Our research, the FMRI studies, hormonal studies and the 39 behavioural studies we've done over the past 33 years, are saying to us, we should make the context of coaching the person's vision, their dream of the future. **No one has yet published any study anywhere showing this kind of impact from coaching.** Tony Jack has shown in his research that these two networks suppress each other. Every time you go analytic, you're closing out the person's openness to new ideas in other people.

The enemy of the ideal self is not the real self, it's the art self. It's the ideal that everybody puts on you. This is one of the reasons why we think coaching for compliance often happens because people have good intentions, and they don't realise that constructive criticism is still criticism. If you're laying it on somebody, it feels oppressive to them.

Very often when we are talking to somebody, we don't really know why they want to engage in some development activity. We know in relationships, this issue of a shared sense of purpose and a resonant relationship helps in family businesses, in product innovation and physician executives and bank executives over and over again. **Now, one of the dilemmas we have is there is no published study showing the competencies of coaches**.

I've been doing competency studies since 1970. People say that I'm one of the four people who started the competency movement in human resources. The problem is sitting around and saying what do we think is important? Isn't very good because it's not empirically tested. When we empirically test it, you really want to know what are the characteristics or competencies in coaches that really yield client not satisfactorily, but actual client change. If you do it incorrectly, you end up chasing a lot of the wrong behaviours.

We started a new coaching study about a year ago trying to figure out the question of what are the things we should be training people to and asking them about? Being more careful about not realising that specific goals puts people into a defensive encounter, staying focused on problems for more than a few minutes makes people feel defensive and they close down. There are all sorts of things that we often fall into unintentionally. The antidote is, think back to the exercise. Think back to these people and these moments, and how it made you feel, except for the rare situation here and there. Most of the time, it made you feel lifted. That's what we're trying to do with our clients, help them to feel more open and excited about the future.

We have a new book out in September 2019 “Helping People Change.” The way to help someone learn and change cannot be focused primarily on fixing problems, but instead must connect to that person's positive vision of themselves or an inspiring dream or goal they've long held. This is what great coaches do--they know that people draw energy from their visions and dreams, and that same energy sustains their efforts to change, even through difficult times. In contrast, problem-centered approaches trigger physiological responses that make a person defensive and less open to new ideas.

The authors draw on stories together with decades of original research, to show how this distinctively positive mode of coaching―what they call "coaching with compassion"--opens people up to thinking creatively and helps them to learn and grow in meaningful and sustainable ways.

The book is filled with probing questions and exercises that encourage self-reflection, *Helping People Change* will forever alter the way all of us think about and practice what we do when we try to help.