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Encouragement for Coaches*

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Types and Sources of Encouragement for Coaches

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The skills of encouragement are essential to being an effective coach. The authors begin with an overview to encouragement theory. In addition to defining and illustrating encouragement, confrontation is identified as a paradoxical form of encouragement. The importance of self-encouragement and specific methods of encouragement are also noted.

ENCOURAGEMENT THEORY

Encouragement is a process whereby one focuses on an individual's resources in order to build that person's self-esteem, self-confidence, and feelings of worth. Encouragement involves focusing on any resource which can be turned into an asset or strength. Adlerian psychiatrist Rudolf Dreikurs (1981) said that humans need encouragement like a plant needs water. He believed every person with whom one comes in contact feels better or worse to how others behave toward him or her.

In *Carl Rogers on Personal Power* (1977), the founder of non-directive therapy writes that as a child he loved stories of Native Americans who could guide noiselessly and undetected through the forest. He then described his own optimistic, "person-centered" philosophy as "quiet power." Encouragement is a subtle example of such quiet power. The value of encouragement is often taken for granted or missed completely because it tends to be private, not public. Although there are identifiable words and behaviors which are correlated with encouragement, in many ways it is best manifested by an *attitude* that non-verbally communicates caring and compassion.

To encourage requires a shift. People are too often focused on perceived shortcomings and deficiencies of their birth, their parents, their culture, their organization, and, of course, themselves. Individuals who encourage have the ability to perceive a spark of divinity in others and then to act as a mirror that reflects that goodness to them. Encouragers are the ones who truly inspire others to seek the "more" of life, the ones who help them to remember their dreams, the ones who touch others' hearts with a phenomenal ability to see beauty in all things. They inspire others to new heights because of their ability to assist them in seeking, and ultimately believing, that each person in an organization will indeed discover ultimately their own personal "dreams".

Successful encouragement is a felt emotional experience that translates to cognitive decisions. The paradoxical "profound simplicity" of encouragement is that it is an attitude that inspires and empowers. To encourage others is to realize that although there truly is a "dark" side and a "light" side to each person, ultimately it is one's own perception of a glass "half-full" vs. "half-empty" that makes a profound difference in one's approach to life's challenges. To be in the presence of what

has indeed been the “darkness” while nonetheless seeing the potential goodness - lightness - within all things is a characteristic of encouraging individuals. Carl Rogers (1995) described it as an “actualizing tendency,” the desire within human beings to be *more*. Too often coaches and mentors are guilty of what values clarification expert Sid Simon (1974) called “red-pencil mentality.” By that he meant that these “helpers” often think that identifying the mistakes made by learners is the primary purpose of interventions.

Positive Psychology

The contemporary “positive psychology” movement is based on the classic work of Alfred Adler who stressed the need to build on strengths and not on weaknesses.

“Catch someone doing something right” has been noted by “one-minute manager guru” Ken Blanchard. Dinkmeyer and Eckstein (1996, p. 7) define encouragement as:

a process that focuses on the individual’s resources and potential in order to enhance self-esteem and self-acceptance. Discouragement is based on lack of belief in one’s abilities to find solutions and to make positive movement. Encouragement is strongly correlated with an optimistic philosophy of life, whereas discouragement is too often synonymous with pessimism.

Dinkmeyer and Eckstein summarize their *Leadership by Encouragement* philosophy as follows:

Successful encouragement is an emotional experience that translates into cognitive decisions. To encourage is to realize that although there are negative and positive emotions, ultimately it is one’s own perception that makes a profound difference in one’s view of, response to, and approach to life. Encouragement is one of the practical building blocks that can help bridge the gap between our potential and our self-imposed limitations. (p. 216)

Here are some other observations made by Dinkmeyer and Eckstein about encouragement:

To encourage is to unite such dualities as labor/management, male/female, Democrat/Republican, black/white. Encouraging persons are a ‘cue ball’ personality who makes things happen, as contrasted with an ‘eight ball’ personality that sits passively on the table waiting to be knocked around. Encouragers are trendsetters who help translate dreams into reality.

Some of our most powerful encouraging role models have been such notable spiritual teachers as Jesus Christ in the West and the Buddha in the East. The greatest leaders are the ones who truly inspire us to seek the “more” of life, the ones who help us to remember our dreams, the ones who touch our hearts with a phenomenal ability to see beauty in all things. They inspire us to new heights because of their ability to assist us in seeking, and ultimately believing, that we will indeed find our own personal “heaven” (Eckstein and Cooke, 2005, p. 342).

Confrontation

Confrontation is paradoxically an essential aspect of encouragement. To confront is to focus on and point out a *discrepancy*. Representative examples include discrepancies between:

Encouragers are the ones who truly inspire others to seek the “more” of life, the ones who help them to remember their dreams, the ones who touch others’ hearts with a phenomenal ability to see beauty in all things.

- what a learner says he will do and what he actually does;
- assessments of quality, including work done to a satisfactory level compared to an overly inflated opinion of one's own work quality;
- posted standards and how much a learner is unwilling and/or unable to follow such standards.

Many people confront in a destructive manner. Too often it is more like a 'battering ram knocking down a door'. Confrontation can also be a very positive experience when coaches point out underutilized and/or denied strengths they observe--ones that their client does not acknowledge--and/or underutilize personal strengths. The style of the mentor and the learning environment (what Fritz Perls (1979) called "failure-free experiments") strongly influences a learner's willingness to accept confrontative feedback.

Confrontation does not have to be a harsh attack. Confrontation can be done in such a way that learners cooperate, especially when they are *invited respectfully* to examine their behaviors, attitudes, and thoughts. An essential ingredient in effective confrontation is basic respect for the learner. Coaches who care enough to make demands on their clients are communicating in effect that their client can be fully in contact with their own potentials. Effective coaches identify beauty in all things. They inspire us to new heights because of their ability to assist us in seeking, and ultimately believing, that we will indeed find our own personal heaven (Eckstein and Cooke, 2005).

Confrontation is paradoxically an essential aspect of encouragement.

Ultimately, coaches are most effective in confrontation when appreciating that as adult learners, their client ultimately is responsible for deciding what to do with the information (Corey, 2005). *Informed consent* (or permission) is an essential ethical consideration for coaches and other helpers (Tyson, Perusee, and Whitley, 2004). Giving or receiving facilitative feedback needs to be discussed at the beginning of an engagement and aligned on as an expected conversational move by both the coach and client.

According to Donigian and Hulse-Killacky (1999), confrontation and feedback help participants learn about themselves and their self-concept, by communicating the way a person's behaviors are experienced. The focus clearly must be on behavior that can be changed and not an attack upon a client's personhood or character. Feedback can also provide information about how a client's behavior presents a self-image to other people in interactive exchanges. The coach can anticipate that feedback will facilitate the coaching process. It may induce interaction. It may also precipitate distress in the person receiving the feedback. If the person receiving feedback appears to be overwhelmed by the process, a coach should allow his client to break emotional contact by acknowledging the fact that she may need to withdraw temporarily from the encounter (p.14).

SELF ENCOURAGEMENT

Anthony (1987) explored children of schizophrenic parents and found three different types of responses among them. One childhood decision was to incorporate the mental dysfunction and later to become hospitalized. These children were defined as being made of glass, as they, too, emotionally shattered and became schizophrenic. A second childhood decision was to be functional on a normal basis, but under stress, these children became neurotic. This was defined as a plastic child, one who dented under stress.

But the final type of child of schizophrenic parents was described as being made of steel. These children used their parents as an example of what they would not be. Such children all had a private place somewhere in their environment. For example, it might be a basement where they built model plans or an attic where they could read or keep a journal, or some similar place to which they could retreat when their parents “went crazy.” A second characteristic of such children was that they actively sought out other adult role models such as teachers, neighbors, and priests or ministers. Thus, the last type of child succeeded despite a horrible parental atmosphere. They found encouragement within themselves and by reaching out to other adults.

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THE SEVEN TYPES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Eckstein and Cooke (2005) have interviewed more than 1,000 individuals about encouragement in their life. The interview sample consisted of 65% women and 35% men. Ages ranged from 18 to 80; the mean age was 33 years. The geographic distribution of participants in the study was 40% from the United States, 30% Canada, 20% Turkey and Turkish Cypriots, and 10% from Iran, Australia, or Saudi Arabia. Here is a content analysis of the seven most reoccurring themes to emerge from their qualitative research. The seven themes are listed from most frequently occurring to least frequently occurring:

1. **Role Modeling** – fear of consequences seems to be as influential as the anticipation of rewards in adopting a role model.

“I learned how to be a lady.”

“I learned how to be a man.”

“I was constantly praised and encouraged for small achievements and I learned the importance of token rewards; smiles, hugs, kind words.”

2. **Seeing Strengths and Abilities** – a wide range of talents, skills, and personal qualities mentioned.

“My tennis skills...”

“I had a high IQ and could accomplish whatever goals I set...”

“I had writing talent...”

“My first grade teacher gave me better marks than I earned to stimulate me ... I now try always to do my best as a result.”

3. **Supporting Over the Long Haul (Consistency)** – mottos to live by and attributing the encouragement from birth or earliest recollections as themes.

“Courage is not the absence of fear but the ability to carry a task through (to completion).” “Numerous positive statements through my formative years are the basis of my self confidence.”

“From an early age my mother stressed to me that it’s OK to make mistakes – it’s only through mistakes that we learn. That was at a time when I was tearing up my entire page of homework when I made a mistake. Through her advice, I relaxed and rewrote my homework. When I made a mistake, I simply corrected it on the paper itself without ripping out the paper.”

“My math teacher said, ‘You have a bright mind’... My friends said, ‘You can do an incredible amount of things at the same time and still be friends’... My daughter says, ‘You’re my best friend and I can trust you’ ... I feel it’s my responsibility to fit their expectations.”

“My mother would tell me, ‘If you put forth your best effort, you can make it happen.’”

4. **Seeing People as Special** – one person who saw them as special, despite many others who didn’t, seem to be what had the most impact.

“My older sister said she was proud just to be seen with me.”

“I was always scolded at home but my teacher paid attention to me and complimented and encouraged me.”

5. **How to Inspire Self and Others (Inspiring Others)** – passionate encouragement themes in this category, usually during difficult times in the person’s life.

“I’m in your corner, and I always will be!”

“I was unfairly accused and he stood by me.”

“My piano teacher in grade school said I was an inspiration to her. Two decades later we have become friends despite our 30 year age difference.”

“Although I learned English as a child in China, I was feeling inadequate when I applied for my first job as a teacher in Ontario. In my interview the principal said, ‘You are here to teach music – the English will come later.’”

“My friend helped me learn how to drive. One day she came by to pick me up in her own car to teach me how to start the engine and run the car. Finally I did ... She told me I could learn fast and that I would be a good driver.”

6. **Supporting What People Are Interested in** – the respondent’s qualities and/or skills form the basis for the guidance and support provided (as opposed to having the encourager’s qualities or skills be the focus of their interaction, as in role modeling).

“She encouraged me to capitalize on my love for children.”

“Life is too short not to enjoy it... be your own person.”

7. **Encouraging Career Choices** – themes here emphasize specific career choices made, due to the influence of or help from others’ input.

“Since she said I had a gift for math and I would do well in the subject, I explored careers with this talent in mind.”

“I knew I wanted to be a nurse and she helped me get into a school after I was rejected by the first one.”

It is important to realize that encouragement can be experienced in many ways other than just with and because of people. Many of us feel a sense of calm and a feeling of well-being when we find a beautiful natural setting: an ocean, mountain, garden, mountain stream or forest. We might also find calm in a special tree-house or in some other magical place. Likewise, pets, animals, and plants are all capable of encouragement.

Here is the rank order of who actually encouraged our sample of over 1,000 respondents: parents, teachers, friends, coaches, grandparents and other relatives, media (books, films), and strangers. Parents, teachers and friends accounted for almost two-thirds of all encouragers.

MULTI-CULTURAL EXAMPLES OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Linda Cross-Berg (1997) has written about *ikeban*, the Japanese art of flower arranging, and relates this Japanese tradition to the empty spaces that exists between the words. Unlike the Western floral tradition, *ikeban* is concerned with how mass (the flowers) is related to space (the area surround the flowers). The flowers and greens are obviously important, but the *simple spaces* between the flowers and greens are also all-important for the Japanese. *Ikeban* requires that all masses be well-balanced by aesthetic spaces.

Parents, teachers and friends accounted for almost two-thirds of all encouragers.

Encouragement can be viewed as analogous to the art of ikeban. So much time and effort are spent focusing on the mass: “what he said and she said; what he did and she did.” Berg-Cross believes that the *spaces* in a relationship are just as important and mean what goes on in between and around the conversations and the interactions. For example, when two people are trying to discuss a problem, are they sitting so that they can hear each other easily and see each other? Is there competing noise from surrounding environment? Are others interrupting? Is the phone ringing? Is cleaning underway at the same time? Is each person filled with extraneous thoughts and inner conversations while the problem is being addressed? Or does the “space” between the conversations enhance the problem solving and flow together as in a painted scene?

The subtle use of the space around a relationship can be viewed as the non-verbal component of encouragement. Encouragement is not just verbal responses (*doing*); it can also be a quiet receptive responsive attitude of *being*. The Eastern concepts of yin and yang (feminine receptivity and masculine activity, respectively) are good examples of both the “being” and “doing” aspects of encouragement.

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FIFTEEN APPLICATIONS FOR COACHES

The positive psychology movement has confronted the tendency for coaches to focus on such things as the presenting problems, a clinical diagnosis, self-defeating beliefs and behaviors. Here are fifteen suggestions for coaches in applying the skills of encouragement.

1. Have clients take the VA Signature Strengths Inventory on-line (www.authentic happiness.com) prior to coming to a session. The 24 strengths that are identified and scored at no cost can then be an initial way to focus the opening discussions on the strengths rather than the shortcomings of the client.
2. Begin coaching sessions with things that bring the person happiness and joy. Also, close sessions with a peak experience.
3. During the session, interview the client regarding who has encouraged them and how they have been encouraged.
4. Start client feedback with strengths.
5. Link identified weaknesses with suggested learning improvement examples.
6. Begin all communications with the person's name.
7. Close your comments by saying, “I welcome your reaction to what I've just said.”

With respect to confrontation,

8. Focus on discrepancies between the following:
 - What a client says and what a client does.
 - Coach's vs. client's perceptions and assessments of the quality of client's performance.
 - Organizational objectives and the behavior of the client.

We also offer the following suggestions regarding ways to increase awareness of the interrelationship (and synergistic effect) of encouragement and confrontation:

9. Provide candid feedback focuses on the performance or product, not the person. As in child development theory, separate the “deed from the doer”.

10. Provide a benchmark for where the client is right now. Illuminate the pathway leading to improved future performance at a new standard of excellence.
11. Validate the commitment to enhancing skills. Remind your clients that a primary purpose for coaching is the improvement of existing skills.
12. State specific requirements clearly, if you have them.
13. Set effective boundaries. Specifically, setting effective boundaries is part of the art of delineating expectations.
14. In group meetings, have members interview each other on who encouraged them, how they did it, and what impact they have had on who they are today.
15. In individual, team or group meetings, have individuals fill out and interview each other if more than one person is present. Do this by completing the parts of Table One (see below) that are relevant to them. In a group sharing situation, invite individuals to volunteer short stories of their responses to everyone.

Table 1: Types and Sources of Encouragement

TYPES	SOURCES						
	Parents	Teachers	Friends	Coaches	Relatives	Media	Strangers
Role Modeling							
Seeing Strengths and Abilities							
Supporting Over the Long Haul							
Seeing People as Special							
How to Inspire Self and Others							
Supporting What People are Interested In							
Encouraging Career Choices							

CONCLUSIONS

In addition to the fifteen methods of encouragement, here are the four directions of encouragement. These were originally proposed by Dinkmeyer and Eckstein (1996) in *Leadership by Encouragement* and later by Eckstein, Belongia, and Elliott-Applegate (2000). If there is an actual organizational leader in the room, she can also make comments.

Downward

This is the form of encouragement most of us think of in the coaching area. In contrast to praise which often focuses on the person himself, make comments to the group relative to how whatever is being described was helpful to the needs of the situation. Since a prime tenet of social learning theory underscores the complementary roles of modeling and imitation in learning, when the coach initiates such encouragement, she is modeling such behavior to the group.

Across (peer to peer)

Often, when one member of an organization gets an honor or some type of positive recognition, "sibling rivalry" can be triggered. Other colleagues are envious and jealous of that person. The second direction of encouragements focuses on total group appreciation and/or helpful behaviors of one or more individuals.

Upward

Many coaching clients are reluctant to provide their bosses with positive feedback, for fear of characterization as “sucking up” or “apple-polishing”. Of course, leaders have the same needs as other people.

Inward

Maslow proposed that we should get twice as many “internal strokes” as external motivators. Many people have reversed this guideline; they focus on external motivators. So the fourth and final direction in which coaches and their client might wish to move is internal. Coaches can ask their clients to write positive affirmations to themselves, not to be shared with other people.

By using this four directions method, the atmosphere of a coaching session can be positively changed in only five to seven minutes.

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