

SGCP Workshop report

Jennifer Liston-Smith

Getting Emotional about Goal Setting

Presented by Bruce Grimley, Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Director of Achieving Lives Ltd

Aim

To examine the coaching issue of goal setting and why it is essential to engage our 'emotional brain' when we set our goals.

Bruce began the workshop by envisaging the main outcome would be 'a sense of personal responsibility' and the hope, ultimately, for 'the ability to control your emotional response in any situation, so as to provide the appropriate framework for cognition, speech and behaviour which will take you toward your goals'.

Theoretical roots

Bruce defined emotion as: 'an unconscious visceral message mediated via our limbic system: painful messages passing via the thalamus-amygdala route, pleasant ones via the thalamus-nucleus accumbens route'. This message is 'a response to the equally unconscious patterning that helps create our maps through which we experience our lives.' Presumably this definition is most apt for instances of what Daniel Goleman called an 'amygdala hijacking' where neural messages bypass the cortical areas en route to and from the amygdala (Goleman, 1995).

Bruce Grimley then drew attention to the work of neuroscientist Benjamin Libet and others originating in the 1950s (Libet, 1990). This indicates that our sense organs detecting something in the world produce a spike of neuronal activity in the cortex, of which we are not 'consciously' aware. A half second later, if the stimulus was big or important enough to keep the relevant cortical neurons active, the stimulus reaches so-called neuronal adequacy and the conscious

mind becomes aware of it, cleverly also registering that it occurred at the time of the initial spike (half a second earlier). So, although we may eventually become conscious of the sensory stimulus we cannot use what we might term our conscious will to respond to it in anything less than half a second. This appears to leave our unconscious minds responsible for initiating any rapid reactions to the world.

Drawing together these ideas about the literally unconscious nature of our emotional responses to our own maps of the world, Bruce proposed we consider the value of the APET model of Joe Griffin and Ivan Tyrrell (2003). Griffin and Tyrrell compare APET with the more established rational-emotive-behavioural (REBT) model of Albert Ellis (e.g. Ellis, 1998). In Ellis' ABC model an Activating event triggers a Belief in the person which leads to Consequences, usually in the shape of an undesirable emotion, behaviour or thoughts. The therapeutic solution is: dispute and modify the Belief, and you change the outcome. Griffin and Tyrrell claim this model does not take account of the findings of neuro-physiology showing humans process data much more quickly emotionally than cognitively. It is posited that the unproductive emotional states are not so much the product of irrational thinking as their cause. Their preferred sequence is: Activating agent, Pattern matching, Emotional Arousal, Thinking process (distortion leading to inappropriate behaviour).

This served Bruce as a spur to suggest we attempt to modify our emotional stance to our goals at an unconscious level, drawing on techniques from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (e.g. Bandler & Grinder, 1982)

Practical applications in our coaching work

Our clients can define all the SMART (or SMARTER) goals they like and still not move toward them unless they have the desire to do so. Bruce suggests that ‘people develop behavioural flexibility in an organisational context as the rewards are high, and we take on appropriate cognitions to back up the behaviours so as not to seem “fake”; however we don’t usually go the extra emotional mile.’ It is proposed in this workshop that we might apply techniques which directly address the emotions, taking account of research in neuropsychology indicating the speed of emotional processing relative to more ‘conscious’ thought.

Experiential Elements of the Workshop: an example

To drive personal responsibility into our viscera and emotions, not simply our heads:

Process

- a) Think of a goal
- b) Think of something that’s MINE: I’d never give it away (e.g. toothbrush, home, partner!)
- c) Mime the posture that goes with MINE and register it
- d) Position the goal spatially in front of you in your imagination: look at it and consider each and every emotion it arouses for you. Imagine squashing those emotions together (in a visual/kinaesthetic sense) into the experience of MINE. Do the same with the thoughts it arouses: those thoughts are MINE. Recognise that your behaviour in relation to the goal is all MINE too.
- e) Whenever you consider the goal, remember your private powers of thought and emotion, your public powers of behaviour and speech and remember that you are the author of your own destiny.

One practical tool or idea you could take forward

To identify the goal, build emotion and take the first step

Process

- a) Name one goal for this year and rate your sense of it on scale of 1–10.
- b) Saturate the Goal: build the detail. Position the goal in one (or more) of the following eight dimensions (Grimley, in print).

Eight Dimensions:

1. Relationship with self
 2. Relationship with intimate others
 3. Relationship with work colleagues
 4. General interpersonal skills
 5. Money
 6. Career
 7. Health
 8. Relaxation, chilling out and enjoyment.
- c) Vitalise the Goal: imagine yourself achieving it and assess how it will benefit you along the chosen dimension(s).
 - d) Associate into the person of the future who has achieved that goal. Describe, using your five senses, what is going on when it’s a 10/10 success, who else is there, what type of interaction you are having, what behaviour is present, what activity will be taken forward, what are your beliefs about yourself now you’ve achieved it?
 - e) Look back at yourself now: what is the one critical piece of behaviour that person in the chair needs to do right now to facilitate better achievement of the goal?
 - f) Dissociate if necessary a third time into coach position and mediate between future, successful you and you in the chair to help communicate that.
 - g) Reassess the strength and clarity of your goal against your original measure.

Whatever our position on the theoretical basis of this workshop might have been, my working partner and I both found this and similar exercises enabled us to make notable shifts in relation to our respective goals.

Where next?

The workshop handout began: ‘Bruce is aware NLP in the psychology world is

regarded as Californian hype, generated in expressive days of the 1970s without a strong theoretical base or empirical evidence to back it up ... Bruce is hoping he can convince you that NLP is a useful constructivist/behaviourist framework within which to work for any psychologist interested in creating change through coaching.' Discuss!

It might also be worth questioning the theoretical supremacy of the APET model over the ABC on the basis that the 'thoughts'

and 'core beliefs' unearthed by the Socratic questioning of REBT may be more like Griffin and Tyrrell's unconscious patterns than they are like higher cognitions. This could offer a topic for debate on the SGCP Forum.

SGCP events will be reported regularly adopting a similar format, enabling readers to pick up on some of the essential elements conveyed. Feedback would be welcome to: SGCPevents@pip.co.uk

References

- Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1982). *Reframing: Neurolinguistic Programming and the Transformation of Meaning*. Moab, Utah: Real People Press
- Benjamin, L. (1990) Time delays in conscious processes. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 13.
- Ellis, A. & Blau, S. (Ed.) (1998). *The Albert Ellis Reader*. Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Griffin, J. & Tyrrell, I. (2003). *The APET model: Patterns in the brain organising ideas monograph series*. Chalmington, E. Sussex: Human Givens Publishing Ltd
- Grimley, B. *Sailing the 7 C's of Courage* (in press).
- Libet, B. (1990). Time delays in conscious processes. *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 13, 672.

Conference Diary

Starting with the next issue, I will be compiling a diary of conferences of interest to Coaching Psychologists. I plan to list events that bring together a range of expert opinion and knowledge on a particular topic, rather than training seminars hosted by a single tutor or company.

Please help to make this a useful listing: send details of all appropriate conferences, well in advance, to me:

BY POST: People in Progress Ltd, 5 Rochester Mansions, Hove, East Sussex BN3 2HA
 BY FAX: +44 (0)8707 050 895
 BY E-MAIL: SGCPevents@pip.co.uk

I look forward to hearing from you.

Jennifer Liston-Smith

SGCP Conference & Events Correspondent