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Jenny Campbell & Her Client Joint Submission

Introduction from Jenny

I have had the privilege of working with many people on transformational changes. This particular example of 2007 was the most profound of my career because of the combination of contexts – organisational, individual client and my own - plus what actually came about in one particular session with one of the key individuals, the Chair, of a Board I was working with.

My primary client was the Board of a mid sized organisation. As such the organisation itself was my overarching client. And, within this, I had to fully cater for each individual member of the Board as my client, as much as possible.

This organisation had gone through an extremely difficult, disruptive period, and was reeling from the effects. There was immense distrust and resentment amongst Board members. The Chair and I were, and continue to be, deeply affected by one coaching session we had together within the overall coaching contract.

For this Burditt submission, the Chair and myself decided to both write about and share our experience - independently, then together - and in doing so, we hope to sense-make more deeply together on our behalf and of the coaching community. We each have written the interchange of our coaching work under five main sections:

1. The Context
2. The First Coaching Session
3. The Second Coaching Session – The Breakthrough
4. The Impact
5. The Learning

As such, the story unfolds, with each of the client and coach's voices under each section.

There is a sixth section in this paper, resulting from the joint process of review. This very process, of joint comparison, reflection and sense-making, has given rise to further insights and far-reaching questions for coaches on two main themes :

- How can excellence in coaching be achieved without evaluation of the long-term impact?
- How do we cater for the ethical dilemma of short-term coaching contracts not offering sufficient support for transformation which the client experiences as unfolding across a long time?

The client has decided to remain anonymous for the purposes of protecting confidentiality.

1. THE CONTEXT IN 2007

The Client's Perspective

The Organisation

In 2007 I was Chair of a charitable, faith-based organisation that had a very long-established and highly-respected history of working with some of the most vulnerable people. At the point when Jenny Campbell became involved as a coach, I had served on the Board since 1999 and had been Chair since 2002.

The organisation was just emerging from a truly convulsive period of difficulty revolving around internal staff conflict that resulted in a lengthy suspension of the CEO. Some members of the Board had felt that the CEO should be dismissed and had perhaps even expected that this would be the outcome of the investigation. This was ultimately resolved and the CEO returned to work without facing any disciplinary charge, far less action. Every aspect of this process was bitterly contested at Staff and Board level and the resolution of the matter was in the form of an uneasy and somewhat reluctant truce.

Despite threats to the contrary, no Board members resigned as a consequence of the dispute although some relationships had been strained almost to breaking point.

The issues in that conflict were varied, complex and highly charged and I took legal advice from a leading employment law specialist at every step along the way and worked very hard, sometimes with considerable difficulty, to ensure that the Board stayed within the legal guidance. Just to be clear, I took advice privately (that is, without sharing it with the Board) because of my concern over the direction some decision-making threatened to take.

A situation that would have been difficult in any setting was further coloured by the organisation's values, vision and modus operandi being deeply rooted in and permeated by a Christian faith perspective. At its best, this was expressed in sincere and genuine loving-kindness towards the very vulnerable people for whom the organisation cares. As a consequence, the client-facing services provided were of the highest standard, a fact widely acknowledged and appreciated by the clients. All of us involved in running the organisation cherished that.

However, from my perspective, the price paid for this was a significant level of focus on a form of faith which could often be narrow and legalistic. This included what I saw as a sense of entitlement to call individuals to account in a direct and personal way that sits uneasily with the established standards and processes of organisational governance and accountability.

While most staff and volunteers in the organisation were drawn from a conservative, non-conformist background, the Board was more broadly spread across the theological spectrum with, perhaps significantly, the CEO and I both being viewed by some as theological 'outsiders'.

Given its value base and approach, there was a tendency for some within the organisation to feel increasingly constrained by, as they saw it, the encroachments of the legal and regulatory framework that applies to all places of work. (For example, at a meeting, one Board member declared they would be prepared go to prison in defence of their religiously conservative view of homosexuality and the place of homosexuals generally.) Within this context, the organisation was seeking and receiving grant funding from both the public purse and from secular funding bodies. These agencies were content to fund the humanitarian expression of the organisation's religious

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basis but were understandably anxious to ensure that they were neither funding, as it were, directly religious activities nor supporting values inconsistent with their own.

It felt like a delicate balance had to be maintained to maintain the integrity of the organisation's internal and external relationships. Within these delicately poised dynamics I believed it was important to strike a balance to protect the best of what lay at the core of the organisation and, in a sense, to protect the organisation from over-spilling its banks in terms of its stance and how that shaped its relationships.

At the conclusion of the dispute the CEO told me that he was quite convinced that he would have been dismissed had I not been in the chair. Given that he was fully reinstated without ultimately having been charged with any disciplinary offence, the matter was for me one of justice for a falsely-accused individual as well as having significant wider resonance for the organisation. By careful management, the dispute did not leak out into the wider domain of the organisation's support base or the media, thereby avoiding the potential for considerable reputational damage to a trusted name and for damage to funding streams and partnerships.

Also in 2007 the organisation was also just recovering from a very serious financial crisis, which had at one point appeared to threaten closure or, at least, a painful reduction of service accompanied by redundancies. In fact, all elements of service were retained and there were no redundancies.

By the time the CEO and I moved on, the organisation was judged to be in the strongest organisational and financial position in its lengthy history.

The Coach's Perspective

The Coaching Contract

On entering into the contract, I was briefed in general terms by the Non-Exec (NED) who recommended me, on the recent events that the Board had experienced. I was not aware of the full situation or relationship damage, The budget of the organisation was very tight; I offered a swift process. Primarily, the contract was with the Board itself as an entity; any specific needs of individual would of course be handled as much as possible, but the primary goal was to enable the Board to start to function more smoothly again.

Due to the immense sensitivity that clearly existed, going straight to the Board and contracting around outcomes was impossible; it was simply too unsafe. And so it was agreed – with the NED acting as intermediary between myself and the Board - that the contract would include 2 confidential individual sessions initially, followed by a team session.

These individual sessions had a joint purpose of coaching each individual on what was present for them around the Board split, plus ascertaining what their goals were for the Board going forward. As part of this I would write a 1-page feedback covering my experience of them plus their needs for the Board. It would be discussed in my second session with each person, and serve as a means of agreeing how to bring any common Board goals into the team session.

This was highly bounded work and extreme professionalism was required to ensure no boundaries of confidentiality were crossed, *in any way*. One of the consequences was that I had to rely on my specific relationship with each person in my feedback.

My Personal Context in 2007

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2007 was a joyful but unsettled period in both my personal and business life: I had given birth to a daughter, had recently returned to work, and in the course of 2007 had become pregnant again. I had decided to concentrate wholly on executive coaching which felt risky financially; my pipeline of work on return from maternity was small and any contracts were important to me.

There was also a deeper context for me:

Firstly, I was –and am –bound to the purpose of the client organisation, to help the most vulnerable in society. As a Christian, this is profoundly meaningful for me. This triggered a focus about genuinely enabling the Board, which in turn created an inner state within me of extreme professionalism. This state includes an immense ability to focus, to withstand extreme uncertainty even if I feel vulnerable, and a demand of myself to bring the best of myself to the work.

Secondly, I hadn't actually been coaching for that long given my maternities. I was an experienced leader in business but I wasn't feeling experienced at all in my coaching practice.

Thirdly, I was – and continue to be somewhat - driven by values around success and being seen to be successful. I believed my place in coaching would be at the executive level, but I felt a nervousness about whether I could match up to the expectations of very senior executives. This contract, to coach a full Board, meant something to me, it was validation of my ability - at least to get the contract! But it also meant that I had my old gremlin present, of whether I was good enough.

Finally, as part of the work, it became apparent that I had partly been chosen as a coach because of my Christianity. I found this difficult, it was private information about me that I don't often share. I found the explicit references to my Christianity throughout the course of the work offbalancing.

2. THE FIRST SESSION WITH THE CHAIR

The Client's Perspective

My expectations of the coach

Jenny Campbell was recommended by a member of the Board who was trusted by all other members. Jenny's professional standing and competence was the most important factor in engaging her services. The fact that she was described as a person of faith was certainly of significance too, although she did not lay stress on this in her engagement.

I think we all recognised that this was a very difficult task, given the degree to which relationships had been put under strain.

My first session with the coach

My first contact with Jenny was a telephone interview and by that time I had carried what seemed like such a weight for so long that I had – as I now see it – a deep need to download the whole experience and for someone from the outside to understand.

Certainly, at that point it was difficult for me to tell an edited version of the story – there was an overwhelming urge to rehearse the whole sequence of events. It was equally difficult to rehearse the story without re-living the emotions associated with the events being related, not least because I had been subjected to very personal attacks on my integrity. These events had been very shocking in an organisation committed, in principle at least, to high ethical standards.

In relating her experience of this conversation, Jenny noted, amongst other things, that I seemed almost to have forgotten that she was there. Without wishing to defend or excuse how I behaved, I can honestly say there was no conscious intention on my part to manipulate the exchange in any way. I believe that form of off-loading is often a symptom of the isolation and frustration engendered by such an experience. It just came out raw and unedited – the antithesis of professional communication, a very human expression of emotional pain nonetheless.

The Coach's Perspective

I entered into the phone session with the Chair as I would any other session – focussed, present to him, ready to listen, ready to coach in whatever way I could to enable good outcomes for him, the organisation, and ongoing learning.

I gleaned data around many aspects of the organisation, its relationships and the recent events. The main content of what was said illustrated the strong ethics within which the Chair operated and held himself to account.

But it was an incredibly poor experience for me since I felt really condescended to. How the Chair came over was quite at odds with what he said.

There were a number of reasons for this feeling of condescension. Firstly I was talked 'at'; this was not a conversation but more of a lecture. Secondly, the Chair kept asking questions of my understanding after each story or main topic, but without any time to answer eg 'Do you see what's happening Jenny?' 'Can you understand how that feels Jenny?' The continual repeat of my name and the rhetorical questioning meant that I began to feel like he thought I was stupid.

My Processing Post First Session

One element about the Chair that was aired openly and so can be written here, was that he was forceful. I felt from my own session, and the other inputs, that it was clear that the Chair's leadership style had to have strongly influenced the Board's division. I wasn't sure exactly how, but I sensed it was a very strong part of how the Board had resolved the issue –the Chair forcing the agreement - with the result included an aftermath of resentment and distrust.

I was left feeling quite angry (my old gremlins about being respected and not good enough were rattling), but also at a bit of a loss of how to approach our next session. How could I use this conversation to enable the whole process? How was I going to bring feedback to him that included this; it was so strong, it could be completely damaging to our relationship and the process, and potentially to him. I also felt my own credibility might be really shaken if I offered this to him whilst only based on one conversation, how credible was this?

I went through a significant process of reflection and in fact anxiously sought options before our second session. The mix was strong – my own ideas, my desire for the organisation to recover, my gremlins, my desire to deliver real value, my fears.

I made two decisions. Firstly, I had a job, to be professional and deliver on my contract. And as part of this, I would work with the Chair openly and on his agenda. Secondly, I decided that my feedback had to be written as honestly as I could, this was the only real way of entering into the relationship. The following is an extract from the feedback; it was updated later in the process, once we had talked. When writing, I became more and more puzzled by who the Chair really was:

.....
Initial Impressions

- Energetic, enthusiastic, result-focussed, hard working professional – probably understands very well when an organisation is on a good footing and what it takes to get there
- I suspect very giving and very kind
- Smart person who likes smart company
- Driven by faith, inherent in all of your thinking. Part of this is an openness to difference.
- Consider yourself an agent of change. I get the impression that you see yourself as a kind of saviour.
- A talker, a story-teller, stories full of detail, take a while to go through, independent of interest of listener. I had the impression you had asked me for some kind of testimony. Once set off impossible to stop. Also very difficult to interrupt. Leaves no room for conversation, we had no exchange. It felt self-indulgent. Were you aware of this?
- You asked questions, but they were all closed, and in fact rhetorical – you never waited for an answer. I had the impression you asked because of habit, and you believe it a way to re-engage your audience. You also used my name at the end of certain passages or phrases, again a way of re-engaging an audience. But overall the 2 things were patronising. This is tough feedback to give, but this is one of the overriding feelings I had during the call. Did you mean to patronise?
- Bottom line was I didn't feel at all included. I don't believe this is what you are at core, but there is something that drives you to behave in this way – my guess would be a combination of habit/perhaps an inner lack of confidence/wanting people to be impressed with you -?

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3. THE SECOND SESSION WITH THE CHAIR – THE BREAKTHROUGH

The Client's Perspective

When I met Jenny face-to-face I had no idea what to expect or what was coming. Nor did I have any sense of the apprehension that I now know she was feeling in anticipation of our meeting. I was very interested to hear her assessment of the situation and of my role within it and I came prepared to be open to what she had to say.

My first impressions of Jenny were entirely favourable - warm, empathetic and intelligent, I liked her immediately and felt I could trust her. As the conversation developed a note of earnestness emerged and then Jenny was asking my permission to be honest with me about sharing observations that she thought would be painful for me to hear. I believe I agreed to this without hesitation or reservation.

Jenny began by telling me that she thought I had an unusual ability to think analytically about organisational life and problematic situations. She said she thought I could very quickly assimilate and process information and could move equally rapidly to a point where I could see potential solutions. Naturally, that was encouraging and affirming to hear.

However, she went on to suggest that when other people did not move at similar speed – or, to put it another way, when I did not take them with me at a pace that suited them – then I perhaps became impatient and began to press my case too hard. Of course, this was harder to hear but it struck me forcefully as a very telling insight and it made immediate sense to me as an important interpretive prism for me.

If we had stopped there I would have had a significant learning experience but Jenny had decided to take the risk of sharing with me what she had noted of our original telephone conversation. None of this was easy to hear but the most painful observation was her sense of my having 'condescended' to her.

I was horrified that anything I had said or the manner in which I had said it should have left her with such an impression. This struck very deeply at the personal values which I most cherish and at my self-image. However, it also struck enough of a chord for me to want to explore how I could possibly have conveyed such an impression. I took very seriously Jenny's searching account of how she had come to that view and I think she ultimately believed me when I said that such an intention had formed no part of my thinking.

The Coach's Perspective

Having written the feedback, I then had to meet the Chair. I was nervous. Despite my decisions, I didn't really know how to enter into our second session together. I decided simply to care for him as my client and that really the only thing I could do was to listen. I saw my feedback as only my experience of him and not 'the truth', but also potentially a real gift if offered honestly and without an agenda.

I remember feeling quite stripped of technique, or insightful ways of working, I wanted more armoury. I didn't have that, but what I did have was a deep desire to help, a commitment to honesty in my interaction, and a trust that in some ways 'good would out'.

My most profound moment in my coaching career was during this second session with the Chair. I had been listening to him for around two hours, and had gradually engaging with him in real

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conversation. In this I had an 'aha' moment, about how he seemed to process his thoughts, and particularly his strategic thoughts when related to organisations or problems. This insight was - it seemed to me – that he processed complex situations, solutions and decisions *extremely (I mean extremely)* quickly. And when he arrived at his decision, he became entirely convinced that his solution was 'right', would become dogged in it, and hence set about persuading everyone else that this was so.

But the resistance he experienced often, in many examples he talked about, illustrated that others hadn't done his processing, asked obvious and inane questions, and his impatience would grow. This impatience, particularly when under stress, would be dominating; his doggedness would then increase.

The end result would be that people might feel forced into accepting his solution.
And he would feel lonely if this was the case.
And his loneliness would mean he would defend his position more emphatically.
And people would think he was forcing more.

And it might lead to people feeling condescended to.

It was startling to spot this pattern emerging in the content of our conversation, it helped me make sense of my own experience with him, and that told by others. I asked to share this with him – and did – and this was the turning point of our conversation. I shared with him verbally that he had puzzled me, and that now I could see why he could come over as someone who condescended.

The word 'condescend', this one word used to describe him, was awful for him. He stopped talking and asked to understand. I knew this was serious for him, indeed he said this was against his core values. This was his first real question of himself in this whole conversation. I knew it was a turning point. He had completely changed demeanour. He was still, listening, questioning, seeking to understand and perhaps even seeking validation.

We became engaged in a very intense dialogue. Our work consisted of making new sense of his experience of the world as a senior leader, looking through both his eyes and that of others. And tackling the loneliness that he had assumed was his duty to carry as Chair.

It seemed it had taken a really difficult moment to help him stop and listen.

4. WHAT WAS THE IMPACT?

The Client's Perspective

It is difficult at this distance to remember exactly what I thought at the time of this exchange and in its immediate aftermath. Perhaps I wondered if there might have been some shaping influence in Jenny's experience that could have led her to react in the way she had to me. There might have been a half-thought about how very hard it is to convey the sensitivities and painfulness of a protracted encounter to one who has not lived through it. To say the least, it is rare in life for there to be an unalloyed exchange. And yet I do believe that there was – the only word for it is - grace in this conversation, despite the fact that we had only just met.

Sometimes only that spiritual connection, painful as it often is, will answer. Perhaps this is the only way that what I see as the depth work around matters of ego, self-image, humility and openness can proceed. This encounter took me to a new level of self-examination focusing on these and related themes and I continue to endeavour to be always mindful of the way in which I relate to other people - not just in a professional context. It has had a deep and lasting impact and I am thankful for it and for Jenny.

Not long after that conversation I became aware of the writings of two people that have guided much of my subsequent thinking about how I relate to other people and how I think about myself.

Marshall Goldsmith's book 'What Got You Here Won't Get You There'; there seems to me to be a kind of grid referred to as the twenty most common 'behavioural tics' that prevent people from fulfilling their full leadership potential, that can be placed, as it were, over one's patterns of interaction. I look at them often as they remind me of how much a work in progress I still am.

Richard Rohr, a Franciscan priest and spiritual guide: 'Adam's Return', with its portrayal of a "redeemed" type of masculinity that is 'ecstatic, communal, earthy and humble' continues to speak to me deeply and to describe my core aspirations..

The Coach's Perspective

In the short term, the Chair carried and followed through a commitment to listening at the team session with the Board. This stance within this session was critical for the creation of a frame of openness.

It was clear that one session wouldn't heal the Board. However, the initial stages showed a real willingness to reconnect around how to rebuild trust, and within this very practical actions were agreed upon around individuals taking roles to share the leadership agenda, and to follow through with more informally oriented Board sessions that would help rebuild personal relationships. The session provided the first step towards healing: there was a working solution to how to perform their duties as Board together.

For longer term change in the Chair himself, I wasn't sure what might happen. I suppose my expectation was that such an intense moment of insight would affect his life in many contexts, and I hoped that he would be more at ease with other people and with himself.

My contract closed and I did not work any further with him.

We have kept in touch, and there is evidently a deep connection between us. The process of jointly writing this paper has increased this further.

5. THE LEARNING

The Client's Perspective

1. It is important to listen carefully to other people.
2. Humility is a very under-rated virtue in professional life.
3. Deeper learning is often, perhaps always, accompanied by pain.
4. Coaching is at times – perhaps often – a spiritual transaction on both sides. Marshall Goldsmith shows that the coach's message need not be expressed in religious or even spiritual language to be, nonetheless, spiritually telling.
5. Honesty and risk taking on the part of the coach can give something profound and lasting to the client, beginning with opening the gate for the client to also be honest and take a risk.
6. The connection between coach and client need not be perfect (if this is even possible) for it to be extremely valuable.

The Coach's Perspective

1. That really significant transformation can happen in the room, and within a short-term coaching relationship – so I know not to expect less if that's what my client needs!
2. Methods and processes of coaching all are based on one key skill which is listening; I can have lots of options for how to work, but learning to listen in all situations is an ongoing process.
3. That the capability to listen only can come if I can hold an openness about my client and myself, in both a deep and wide way.
4. That my own sense of transformation on behalf of my client, depended on my willingness to transform myself. In this I felt I had to be vulnerable.
5. That at the end of the day, the transformation happened because my client really wanted it to; I think he longed to be understood and it was a big relief for him to have someone try deeply to do so.
6. That coaching on topics that matter to me makes a difference, I really engage everything I've got to try to help. It could get me in trouble since I am not detached, unless I connect with a balanced perspective. But it does make a difference to the client somehow.
7. That letting go of my own hangups definitely made a difference in this session. Overall I now know that continual work on this enables and increase in flexibility and ease in my coaching.
8. That having to cater for such difficult boundary issues within a team may be an indication that team coaching is the wrong intervention. I continue to hold this question.
9. Finally, that having experienced transformation with a client, I share a very deep bond which is a real blessing in life.

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6. THE QUESTIONS THAT ARE RAISED THROUGH THIS JOINT PROCESS OF REFLECTION

The Client's Perspective

Some of the questions I am left with centre around just how far mere technique on the part of the coach can carry the client in some situations, it is surely often a more blood and guts matter.

I am also aware that the continuing conversations with Jenny have, for both of us, opened up questions around the longer-term resonances and effects of an intense exchange such as we were privileged to have.

Much of this continuing exchange has been about identity, the nature of risk, boundaries and the almost alchemical dimensions to this kind of process or encounter. Questions that all, in my mind, relate to the nature of 'professionalism'.

The Coach's Perspective

This joint process of reviewing what happened, very openly between coach and client, has been extremely thought-provoking. I note many areas for further enquiry:

We coaches do not engage in longitudinal evaluation, what really as the long term impact of our work together. Yet how do we know? The process is relevatory.

In this case:

The client in the time after the work wondered whether some of what had been raised had really been true, was the experience of the coach not because of the coach's hangups or frames, how could the coach really understand. For example, the client challenged me that as a coach, we can be at best sympathetic if we haven't gone through very similar experiences. He asked whether I had ever 'been in the trenches' in such circumstances as he had had; I had to some extent, but not like he had. Should coaches really have walked the walk so they can enable transformation?

Also I did not recognise my entry/exit points within the total journey of experience that this organisation lived through. This lasted years; I worked for 3 months with them. Recognition of this, that we see only a glimpse of the whole picture, is necessary for ensuring clarity of thought. The situation would have been simpler to understand and my own expectations for the work – and possibly therefore the clients - would have been both ambitious and pragmatic.

The impact was different than I imagined at the time. There is no doubt this was deep. There is no doubt that it helped increase the Chair's self-awareness. There is no doubt that this formed a new background of his self-image. But what behavioural changes specifically did it enable are still unclear to me. My supposition is that they are a little foggy for the client still. And so my thoughts are around 'Was the process too short to allow for real embedding of the transformation?'

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I conclude around evaluation and transformation with two questions:

1. If we want excellence, should we not engage with some form of systematic evaluation on long-term impact. Executive Education undertakes this longitudinal evaluation,; should we not?
2. Secondly in the context of transformation coaching, there is an ethical dilemma that arises because short-term coaching contracts do not offer long term support for the transformation which the client may experience as unfolding across a long time. How do we cater for this?

LAST WORDS FROM JENNY

I know that the coaching sessions I experienced with the Chair had a very profound impact on my coaching practice since 2007. And now I can say that this process of joint reflection is like a second circle of profundity surrounding the first. It has affected me deeply. I intend to act on the questions raised.

I am grateful to my client for such honest sharing, and for the chance to share it all with you.



(Total of 5505 words, thank you for the grace of the extra 10%!)