

Coaching at Work

BE SAFE, BE FREE

Mark McMordie reports on the transformative power of feeling safe, and how mindfulness can help, boosting innovation, creativity, connection and collaboration

When a marketing director of a global sportswear brand invited me to facilitate a mindfulness offsite for her team to refuel creativity and innovation after a particularly intense 18 months, she shared as inspiration an article about highly successful record producer Rick Rubin (*Blatt, 2014*).

The article explains how Rubin consistently brings out the full potential of the diverse artists he works with. It suggests that his success lies in his lifelong practice of meditation and the non-judgemental stance cultivated through this. It seems that artists pick up on Rubin's openness and sense of safety through emotional contagion (*Hatfield et al, 1993*). As Rubin notes, "One of the main things I always try to do is to create an environment where the artist feels pretty comfortable being naked... That kind of safety zone where their guard is completely let down and they can truly be themselves... It's very powerful when people do that, when people really open up."

As an executive coach and mindfulness teacher this article resonated with my own experience and I affectionately came to refer to it as the 'Rick Rubin effect'.

The International Coach Federation (ICF) and other coach professional bodies refer to unconditional positive regard, a term coined by therapist Carl Rogers, as being central to the trust and intimacy of the change process. What might be the neurophysiological foundation for this? How might we actively and systematically cultivate and deepen this quality, this way of meeting our own and another's experience in coaching? One element, as per the Rick Rubin effect, is the deliberate creation of psychological safety.

Psychological safety

Google's in-depth two-year study, Project Aristotle, found that psychological safety was the number one factor differentiating its highest performing teams from other teams.

Psychological safety is a term introduced by Harvard's Amy Edmondson. It refers to an individual's perception of the consequences of taking an interpersonal risk or a belief that a team is safe for risk taking without being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative or disruptive. Edmondson's research (*Edmondson, 2018*) shows psychological safety enables healthy risk taking, innovation and sticking your neck out without fear of having it cut off.

In teams with high psychological safety, teammates feel safe to take risks and show vulnerability, confident that no one in the team will embarrass or punish anyone else for admitting a mistake, asking a question or offering a new idea. Where psychological safety was high, Google employees were less likely to leave, more likely to harness the power of diverse ideas from their teammates, brought in more revenue and were rated effective twice as often by executives. According to Abeer Dubey (*Inc, 2015*), a Google director, the revenue produced by sales teams varied by nearly 50% depending on reported feelings of psychological safety.

Neuroception of safety

The neuroception of safety is a term first used by Stephen Porges to describe how our neural circuits, operating below conscious awareness, distinguish whether situations or

people are safe, dangerous or life-threatening. Porges' Polyvagal Theory (*Porges, 2017*) explains the evolution of our autonomic nervous system as neural circuits that promote social behaviour and two classes of defensive behaviour – mobilisation associated with fight or flight and immobilisation associated with hiding or feigning death.

The most recent mammalian circuit fosters social behaviour and is defined by a face-heart connection in which our face and head muscles are neurophysiologically linked to the neural regulation of our heart through the vagus nerve. This face-heart connection enables us to detect and project features of safety through facial expressions and vocalisations that are a reflection of our deeper autonomic state. Within this model, how we look, listen and vocalise conveys information about whether we are safe to approach.

Positivity resonance and vagal tone

Research from Barbara Fredrickson's Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology (PEP) Lab (*Fredrickson et al, 2008*) suggests that certain mental training can have a significant positive impact on both our emotions and the strength and tone of the vagus nerve. Boosting vagal tone increases flexibility across a range of physical, mental and social domains.

It allows us to be more adaptable, agile and attuned to changing circumstances, as we navigate social exchanges and the ups and downs of life. It's a key indicator of the health of your parasympathetic nervous system, it reflects the strength of your immune system, and it can predict your likelihood of heart failure.

Even if you're not advantaged with high vagal tone today, research suggests that just as you can build muscle tone through regular physical exercise, you can build vagal tone through regular mental exercise.

After just a few months of practising Loving Kindness Meditation (LKM) for an average of 60 minutes a week, participants at Fredrickson's lab experienced significant increases in vagal tone and every positive emotion that they measured.

What's this got to do with coaching?

As Porges points out, safety is critical in enabling humans to optimise their potential not only with regard to social behaviour but also in accessing the higher brain structures that enable us to be creative and generative.

And while these positive emotions might be pleasant in and of themselves, for Fredrickson they serve a much more significant evolutionary function. According to her Broaden-and-Build theory (*Fredrickson, 2004*), positive emotions broaden our "thought-action repertoire" and help us build enduring resources, both of which enable us to better adapt in a world that is constantly changing.

She suggests that positive emotions broaden people's attention and thinking, undo lingering negative emotional arousal, fuel psychological resilience, build personal resources, trigger upward spirals towards greater wellbeing and prompt human flourishing. When positive emotions are in short supply people and organisations get stuck and become predictable but when they are in ample supply they become generative, creative, resilient and ripe with possibility. And the positive feelings generated through daily LKM practice, for example, can imbue the rest of your day and positively impact those you meet – what Fredrickson refers to as 'Positivity Resonance'.

The role of mindfulness

I believe it's no coincidence that Google both trains its leaders in mindfulness-based approaches and excels in creating highly innovative teams. As Chade-Meng Tan (*2012*), the creator of Google's mindfulness-based emotional intelligence programme, Search Inside Yourself, suggests, when you practise certain mental training regularly, others

unconsciously pick up on the warm and positive feelings generated from such practice through subtle changes in your posture, facial expression and tone of voice.

Porges (2017) says, “Mindfulness requires feeling safe... if we don’t feel safe we can’t engage others and we can’t recruit the wonderful neural circuits that enable us to express the expansive, creative and benevolent aspects of being human.”

Dan Siegel (2010) suggests that during mindfulness practice a process of internal attunement comes into play as we create a non-judgemental relationship with our own direct experience. Through regular practice this can become an embodied quality as the observing self meets the experiencing self with curiosity, acceptance and kindness, and over time, this can grow from a temporary state to a more enduring trait.

The Positivity Resonance described by Frederickson can show up as more openness in your posture, face, breathing and intonation – openness unconsciously picked up by others well after you practise (the Rick Rubin effect), and helping others feel a greater sense of safety in your presence. For coaches this might be experienced as a deeper embodiment of unconditional positive regard.

For leaders or anyone else in organisational life this may show up as increased psychological safety, collaboration and openness to diverse thinking, and the innovation and performance that follow.

In the world of professional coaching, many of the factors highlighted by the ICF as indicators of coaching mastery in establishing trust and intimacy are simply outer expressions of a deeper internal state – what Siegel might refer to as ‘neural integration’. This deeper state, researchers like Porges suggest, has neurobiological correlations that lead to a softening of the facial muscles and a relaxation in vocal tone. Our internal states are often communicated more by way of body language, facial expression and tone of voice than anything else.

Much of how we communicate safety and acceptance to clients takes place at an unconscious level, through facial expression and vocal tone – both of which reveal our own inner state of open receptivity to what the client is bringing. It only takes a momentary micro-expression or a subtle change in tone on the part of the coach to communicate a subtle level of distress, anxiety or closed-ness to what is being brought. And, in that moment, the client holds and withholds, rather than continuing to open to their experience. If instead, through regular mindfulness practice, we develop embodied mindful presence, relating to all experience with genuine curiosity, openness and acceptance, we can provide enough safety for clients to move towards and engage with what is vulnerable, difficult or perhaps even part of their shadow, allowing a deeper exploration and potential transformation.

Generative attention and Time to Think

For the past 15 years, Nancy Kline has been training coaches and leaders in generative attention as a central component of her ‘Time to Think’ approach. Key here is her recognition that the quality of attention provided by one person directly impacts on the quality of thinking by another. High calibre listening ignites the mind of the person being listened to. She also points out the importance of the face, the eyes and non-interruption in signalling this quality of attention to another.

While researching *Mindfulness for Coaches* (2017), I wondered whether mindful attention and generative attention might be similar, or the same thing. Certainly creating psychological safety is central to both.

In a personal interview, Kline said, “ I’m interested in what happens when we look into a face and we know we are safe... I’m interested in this second by second thing that’s happening between the partner and the thinker. The thinker is in their present moment... moving around through ideas and feelings but their attention... is also on the partner to be sure that the safety is still there. And the partner... who’s giving generative attention, is

second by second with the thinker, and is also alert to whether they themselves are continuing to be a thinking partner. So they're checking in, are they still producing safety? Are they keeping up with the thinker?

"As the partner we are listening and ...focused entirely as it were on one point – which is the thinker. We are aware of what they have said – that's one string of attention. And the second one is our response to it, which is full of judgement. Sometimes in a good sense – discerning – and sometimes in a not so good sense of harsh critique. And then there's the third stream which is awareness of our behaviour in creating a 'Thinking Environment'." Kline, too, sees a connection between generative attention and mindfulness: "It's a fascinating thing to me... how active the mindfulness state can be and still be in the most purely simple way in this second of uncomplicated being... Before this conversation today, I pretty much assumed they were cousins, not that they were the same thing, or even brother or sister."

If we come to see mindful presence as a state of open receptivity we can begin to see how this might contribute to psychological safety and the breakthrough thinking that emerges from it. This state of calmness seems to be contagious, as does the state of mental clarity arising from it. Perhaps now, we have a neurophysiological explanation for the 'Rick Rubin effect' and generative attention.

Conclusion

As the speed and complexity of change globally increases, the need for coaches and leaders who can enable innovation and growth becomes key. Organisations that understand how coaching, psychological safety and mindfulness can accelerate this will have an important competitive advantage.

The ideas from this article can be applied in two very specific ways to increase innovation and growth. First, with training, leaders and coaches can develop their capacity to offer generative/mindful attention to enable innovative thinking in others. Second, leaders and coaches can deepen this quality of attention and the psychological safety they offer others through regular mindfulness practice.

Encouraging leader clients to embrace more regular mindfulness practice can support a shift from pace-setting and heroic styles of leadership to something more inclusive of the collective intelligence around them. Research suggests it supports the vertical development of leaders to Catalysts, Co-creators and Synergists (*Joiner & Josephs, 2007*) capable of enabling the innovation and transformation their organisations need. As Google knows through Project Aristotle, a team is certainly greater than the sum of its parts when a leader embodies and creates the psychological safety for a team to contribute its very best thinking in all its rich diversity.

As Nancy Kline (2011) speculates:

"I wonder what new levels of superb we might reach if we could become expert at generating this kind of attention, this silence."

As more coaches and leaders are drawn to regular mindfulness practice, we may be about to find out.

- **Mark McMordie** is CEO of The Conscious Leader and co-author of *Mindfulness for Coaches* (Routledge, 2017). He presented at the annual UK ICF conference on 7 May (see news).

Tips for developing psychological safety Outer Practices, Amy Edmondson suggests:

1. Reframing work in terms of failure, uncertainty and interdependence to clarify the need for a voice

2. Inviting participation by acknowledging gaps in understanding and practising enquiry (asking good questions and modelling intense listening)
3. Expressing appreciation to develop an orientation towards continuous learning

Points 2 and 3 are a central feature of Nancy Kline's 'Time to Think' approach

Inner Practice Guided meditation:

Try this free online 'Loving Kindness Resonance' practice to deepen your own embodiment of unconditional positive regard: <http://bit.ly/2WqKVZt>

What mindful coaches say

"When I am grounded and present there is a sense of internal safety – I'm OK with whatever arises, I'm OK trusting emergence. It's wired into my nervous system as a consequence of my mindfulness practice. I'm therefore much less likely to become reactive, to get triggered and then lose presence. Through the biological process of neuroception the client will unconsciously register this safety and this will enhance their capacity to open, to trust, to explore and to be more curious. There's less bumping up against interpersonal reactivity which results in defensive strategies where relational contact is lost."

Jane Brendgen

Mindfulness has been profound in helping me regulate my anxiety...it helps me to stay in my window of tolerance...that Dan Siegel notion of how much arousal we can tolerate while still being functioning, thoughtful and spacious. If my client is anxious or the context is anxious or the problem is very scary to the client or to me, I have the capacity to stay regulated, to stay present...and that has an interpersonal regulating effect...It's as if I become the auxiliary cortex if the client is very agitated. Through my quality of presence, I help them to regulate down, often without saying anything... and that supports far better mental processing, synaptic firing, creativity and innovation. Mindfulness is the supportive quality that allows complex, stressful questions to be held and new possibilities to emerge rather than just being reacted to.

Simon Cavicchia

Source: Mindfulness for Coaches

References

- R Blatt, 'How super producer Rick Rubin gets people to do their best work', in *Forbes*, 28 April, 2014
- A Edmondson, *The Fearless Organization*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018
- B Fredrickson, *The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions*, The Royal Society, 2004
- B Fredrickson et al, 'Open hearts build lives', in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(5), 1045-1062, 2008
- E Hatfield et al, 'Emotional contagion', in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2(3), 96-99, 1993
- 'How Google builds its best teams', in *Inc*, 18 November, 2015
- B Joiner and S Josephs, *Leadership Agility*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007
- N Kline, *What happens in the silence?, The Real Art of Coaching*, 2011. Available at: <http://bit.ly/2KC8YCE>

- S Porges, *The Pocket Guide to The Polyvagal Theory*, New York: WW Norton & Co, 2017
- D Siegel, *The Mindful Therapist*, New York: WW Norton & Co, 2010
- C-M Tan, *Search Inside Yourself*, London: Harper Collins, 2012