

Mantras and Magic

State Management in Coaching

By Dr Angus McLeod

John Abulafia is an accomplished opera producer and director. Although not trained as an actor, the art and science of acting fascinated him. He began to delve into the sometimes phenomenally impactful communication of emotion, mood and identity through nuance, non-verbal communication and body language. He has been instrumental in devising methods that enable actors to play and learn about expression in novel and inspiring ways. He has been a gift to opera where acting is, unfortunately, the most secondary of attributes if the voice is superb. He works with the ENO and other established and developing companies.

John spent a day with the Coaching Foundation at the invitation of Steve Breibart and this day proved to be truly inspirational. But what, you may ask, has the stage to do with coaching? Stage work provides the a-z of impact, management of space, charisma and status. How is it that a simple change in posture can cause an entire audience to stop breathing at the same point? That a change in pitch may cause a shudder of emotion? Understanding our impact and state within the dynamics of coaching can also be influential¹. The good coach will want to use these intelligently and have a measure of control over their impact. Theatre provides models for understanding more about our management of state and ownership of space.

Seen or Seeing?

John uses an exercise in which we were invited to move around the room with the thought that we were both 'seen and seeing'. We worked with a whole matrix of permutations thus:

- Seen and seeing
- Not seen but seeing
- Seen but not seeing
- Not seen and not seeing

The effects of this mind-game are considerable. The 'not seen but seeing' (a useful state during client-thought and catharsis) created a room of graceful, aware people fluidly moving as if in a poetic dance. This was an enormous contrast to the attitude of 'seen AND seeing' where we seemed to be larger than life, energetic and interactive; this might be useful state for developing rapport. But the point is, how well have we prepared for coaching? What is our state and is it appropriate for coaching (this coachee).

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¹ Ref: 'Coaching Mindsets –Attitude is Cool' by Angus McLeod, Effective Consulting, VXXX, 2002.

We also did some work with mantras. Most of us are familiar with or have heard of the 'Om' of the Buddhist. The Transcendentalists have a wide range of sounds or mantras for assisting the mental state to high delta flux. These are repeated on the outbreath. Mantras may also be simple phrases that summarize our thinking (or beliefs) for a whole life or simply for a single task. Mantras may thus be used by coaches as part of their state management prior to coaching. Mantras can also be used profitably by coachees where they summarize and represent a new and desired way of 'being.' To explore this idea of mantras and 'state' we rôle-played a board presentation with four presenters. Each presenter was given a covert mantra and the board, subsequently, asked to guess what the mantras might be. Whilst enormous fun, it is clear that the taking up of a simple thought/mantra makes a very significant difference to our way of being and expression and interaction with others. It also demonstrated how phenomenally acute the human mind is at intuitively recognizing subliminal messages. As a consequence and in the coaching context, state management may be even more important than any of us imagined before this event.

Angus McLeod is a performance coach and team developer. He is author of 'Me, Myself, My Team (Crown House). Angus consults and trains in the area of performance coaching and team development.

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