

Provocative Coaching

By Dr Angus McLeod

Provocative Therapy is a sometimes controversial methodology that seeks to shock and cajole the client to rethink their problem, laugh at their predicament and move on. What, if anything, can we learn that is applicable to coaching?

Provocative Therapy¹ was developed by Frank Farrelly from novel, experimental interventions in the late 1950's and early 1960's arriving at a name, Provocative Therapy, in 1966. At that time Frank was a psychiatric social worker who broke from client-centred therapy due to frustration with the repetitive nature of his client's predicaments. He began with acutely honest feedback of how he saw his clients. This was mixed with exaggerated free-associations (on his part) coupled with humour. His clients began to improve. Frank will even encourage clients to persist and enhance their dysfunctional behaviours and symptoms. He may exaggerate any negative self-image they may have to provoke them to take a more positive view (or laugh at themselves) sometimes for the first time in years. PT is particularly useful where the client's issues relate to low self-esteem and negative belief patterns.

Unlike modern coaching, where the coach aims to establish a high degree of rapport and to maintain it, the Provocative Therapist will risk good rapport. That is not to say that Frank works without a mindset of caring. Indeed, it is unlikely that he could achieve what he does without a loving nature. He recommends that the Therapist think of a time with good friends, laughing, relaxed and enjoying their presence. He suggests they maintain this state, particularly during interventions. Without doubt, a healthy mindset in the coach is critically important².

Frank also brings truly exceptional attention to his clients. The extent of this attention is such that in a room of onlookers, convulsing with laughter at his free associations and exaggerations, the coachee will typically have no recall of any events outside the therapeutic space.

I recently organised (with Steve Breibart) a Coaching Foundation event at which two of Frank's disciples, Dr Brian Kaplan and Phil Jeremiah, demonstrated some of the thirty or so intervention strategies that Frank Farrelly has developed. Brian and Phil demonstrated a number of Frank's intervention strategies, or 'Farrelly Factors' during their sessions. These include:

- solving the client's problems using idiotic ideas, "You want a PhD so much, just buy one for a couple of hundred dollars"
- frequently interrupting the client's flow when repeating the same issue (it does not matter with how)

¹ Provocative Therapy, Frank Farrelly & Jeff Brandsma, Meta Publications 1974.

² 'Fundamentals for the Coach', Angus McLeod, Rapport V37., pp15-16, 1997; 'Mindsets for the Coach – Coaching with Attitude', Angus McLeod, Effective Consulting, May/June 2002; Me, Myself, My Team, Angus McLeod, p. 108 et seq., Crown House 2000.

- minimising the problem, “Everybody has this problem, so what! Any other problems?”
- trivializing dysfunctional behaviours, “You don’t need to read thirty books to do a PhD, research shows that people get side-tracked by books and are better off relying on instinct!”

In coaching we often put so much emphasis on rapport that our challenges could be thought overly ‘soft.’ How many times have you been jolted to re-assess an issue following an exaggerated or humorous view of your situation from a friend or colleague? I recall as a child struggling to walk on tall, home-made stilts and saying something like, “I can’t do it, it’s impossible!” and a response, “You’re right, give up and do something else, no-one could do it!” That provoked renewed effort and, of course, success. Frank Farrelly’s view is, “It is crucial to proceed with a twinkle in the eye and affection in the heart.” Perhaps then, there is scope for this type of provocative intervention in more formal coaching where the relationship is already established and trusted? Dr Kaplan suggests a five minute switch to PC interventions during a conventional coaching session, but only starting with the approval of the client.

The quality of attention that Frank provides is also critical to his success. He creates a ‘bubble safety net’ around both himself and his client. Coaches would do well to emulate this strategy by taking care of the whole space and providing exquisite attention. In coaching we add an ability to accurately reflect the precise language of the client to help them maintain state when dealing with their issues.

Frank and Jeff Brandsma¹ put forward ten PT assumptions and one of these is that the ‘most important messages between people are non-verbal.’ This suggests that the PT approach is largely instinctive. Those who have exposure to Frank’s work affirm his ability to intuit an issue from thin air with penetrating accuracy. This contrasts sharply with the views of many coaches who believe that a set of coaching tools is all they need to coach well - they are certainly limited by that view. Intuition shared carefully with the coachee and seeking the coachee’s evidence for it can be phenomenally powerful.

PC is most likely to appeal to coaches who are already funny, provocative and creative. It remains to be seen how popular it is with coachees. A line of caution, Brian and Phil always video their sessions in case of legal action!

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