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Shadow Coaching™ at the Speed of Laser

by Donna Karlin, CEC

Have you ever worked on an elevator speech, a two minute or less blurb about what you do, how you do it and why you're so amazing at it? (AKA your sales pitch). Picture having that same amount of time to do an entire session with a client. I'm not kidding. Oftentimes that's about all the time I have with a client in a secure elevator waiting for a car to whisk us to the Hill, or another department or meeting. Sometimes we're lucky enough to be in the car without other staff and can actually expand a session to 15 minutes! But even then, we're usually focused on the meeting that will happen so all conversation is around that, not the client's world. I, on the other hand, from a Shadow Coach's perspective, have to absorb everything from time lines, dynamics, conversations, energy levels, engagement, level of responsibility, global or financial implications, mandate, hierarchy, volume of memos, reading material, emails and correspondence, processing time, and staff support to name a few areas of focus. This is my clients' world. It defines the term "intensely complex".

Welcome to my world as a Shadow Coach™ to high level political, government and corporate leaders. Picture the TV show West Wing in all its wonderful chaos. Press releases are flying, TV's are going in every office, communications specialists, political advisors, high level government officials, world leaders, corporate leaders are running in and out of offices and meetings and BlackBerrys are buzzing constantly. That is the norm on a good day when all isn't going to hell in a hand basket. Add a crisis like a war, tsunami, quake, bombing, plunge in value of the dollar, a recall, and then it actually gets really busy. Truthfully, that's become the norm. I can't remember a day in the not so recent past when there wasn't a natural disaster, threat of a terrorist activity, war-related or even 'bottom-line challenge.

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Let's face it, to some people a fluctuation in the value of the dollar can be as devastating in their world and that of their shareholders as an earthquake is to others. Ramifications are different, definitely, but a client's world is their reality and it's not for me to rate crises on a scale of 1 – 10. It's for me to help them get to wherever they want to and have to get to by their definitions.

Take this chaotic environment and toss a Shadow Coach™ into the equation and now you have a good picture of what my life looks like. Sessions are fast and I mean laser fast. I have to get to a key dynamic of a situation in seconds, articulate what I need to get across in as clear a manner possible so my client gets it instantly; processes a quick clarifying conversation and integrates whatever changes are necessary now, not later. Later for most of my clients isn't an option.

Many of the clients I work with have their own elevators. They're secure, soundproof, guarded, and very private. The other day when I was in a government department where I work with all the leadership, I couldn't seem to get out of the elevator. Every time I got in to go to another floor to see a client, another client would get in and say, "Oh! Great! You're here! I need a few minutes to share something with you". I tried to get off and another client got on telling me pretty much the same thing. I went into the "boss's" office a bit later and said, "I need to borrow your elevator". He looked at me and started laughing. I told him: "I won't coach unless it's private and confidential and I could have spent an hour in the elevator because so many wanted me for 'a minute' and if I'm not going to have my own office, the least you could do is give me your elevator." He laughed and told me I was very welcome to use it when he was away. I might just take him up on that some day!

When I did a breakout session at last year's ICF conference, I emulated one of my feedback sessions, only I didn't let the group in on how much time they'd have for it. After two minutes I had the runners call 'time'. There was a collective uproar with people complaining that they didn't even get started. My response? "Welcome to my world where sessions can often be only two minutes. So, if I don't cut to the chase in a short, sweet, to-the-point manner in moments, it's lost, and a lot of time will go by before I can bring it up again. Without immediacy, a great deal of the effectiveness of the coaching would be lost".

Also consider that the key question I might ask might seem to have no relevance to my client at that moment. It's not unusual for me to bring up something that had happened days before that show trends and by asking them a question that might shock them into awareness, brings to the fore there might just be a pattern or trend

of behaviour at play that might not be serving them. Shocking them into awareness is not asking a question that judges, rather it's asking a question that is so truthful and so illustrative that it shocks them into realization that they are behaving in a certain way or reacting to certain things that might get them into trouble. It's an 'ahha!' moment and one that usually creates breakthrough. This happens in seconds not hours, depending on how and when that question is posed.

Shadow Coaching™ is not a model for a beginner coach or for the faint of heart. This is a way of coaching that lives in the instant, not even the moment. Nuances and subtleties are what makes this style of coaching so powerful as you can give 'in real time' feedback using those subtleties so the client gets it and fast. There is no time to craft the perfect question or orchestrate a session. Your session might be the length of one question and answer and relevant to that moment in time. And even in these time constraints, use of silence can be just as powerful as that perfect question. It's giving the client the space to process, think and share, even within a two minute window and for the coach, that can be the most powerful tool there is with which to move them forward. Open space, open thought, a moment to let the world in can be the biggest gift the coach can give a client. Even in tight time constraints, we as coaches do not have to fill it with words. A Shadow needs to know when to be quiet as much as when to jump in.

My clients already know the most important skill they'll ever have to know and that is how to learn. What I have to look for is how quickly they integrate their learning into the context of their worlds and I have to do the same. I don't necessarily have to know what they do; I have to know how they do it. However, in the context of our work together, I do absorb what they do and learn an amazing amount of information, from political policy and world challenges to the workings of the corporate world. Add to this how good a staff these leaders have, how much they can trust to delegate and that too impacts on their lives. They don't work 9-5. Their days are long, sometimes endless. They often work through weekends depending on the issues and what's at stake. Many, especially in the political or government world aren't allowed to turn off their BlackBerrys as they have to be available to the President or Prime Minister at all times. That's a given so they need to take control of any small part of their life that's in their power to control and make sure they make the most of it. They have to think fast, respond rather than react as most often they don't have the luxury of fixing mistakes.

I have to see how fast they process information, whether or not they're working through filters such as inadequate information, exhaustion, language issues, cultural

tethers, and make sense of the flow and dynamics of it all. Some want me there to help them build a strong organization. Others want me there for personal reasons such as they're not living in alignment with their personal values and ethics because their leader wants them to do something they don't agree with; however, their constituents expect their elected leaders to speak on their behalf, so often it's an internal tug of war. I, as their coach, have to be apolitical and have no personal political opinion whatsoever when I'm coaching them. If it's about their politics and the party they represent and I coach them based on my personal politics, then it's about me and my preferences, not them.

When coaching in the political world it's often very difficult to separate your political and party preferences from those of the client and remain unbiased and non-judgmental. That's a filter I have to be aware of when I'm working with those in the party I didn't vote for. Bottom line is, these are people and I have to coach the person, not their policies. They are bringing me in to help them in their careers, not give them political advice.

A while ago, I was contacted by a coach who was just starting her practice, and when she learned I worked in the political world she was thrilled as that's what she wanted to do. She wanted to work with her representative "So he would be a better political leader and represent her better". I told her if that was her reasoning, then to get out of politics. If she wanted to be an advisor or supporter, that's different but as a coach, would she be working with him based on his goals, aspirations and to achieve his level of excellence based on his definitions or hers? If it was the latter, then it would be about her not the client and we are advocates for the client. If we coach anyone based on what we think they should do, that in itself is a judgment call. That's what consultants and advisors are for, to give you direction. A coach is one who partners with you for you to determine or find your direction. Subtle difference, but in the scheme of things, a huge one!

My world, in the context of my coaching is a world where our country's policy is created and implemented, where world leaders come together to collaborate on strategy for wars, the environment, aid to underdeveloped countries and assistance in times of catastrophic events, and I can't begin to tell you how much I learn and grow in leaps and bounds every day. That is one of the best parts of being a Shadow Coach™, as my learning curve is huge, and whatever I learn about behaviours, ways of interaction, communication, political policy and global cultures can be applied in some way to my next client.

In some way, in many ways, you are making a huge difference in the lives of your clients and those people who live and work with them, so the ripple effect goes well beyond your knowledge or understanding. How, at the same time, can you grow as a person, coach, into a leader in your field and not only achieve your level of excellence or mastery in coaching but grow as an individual? Is your coaching practice feeding you in that way and, if not, what can you put in place to give you the richness of other people's worlds so you know what and how they live? In our world of open source, R & D teams, collaborative relationships, the world literally can be our oyster. Geographic location rarely applies for coaches as we span distance, time and thought processes. The only limitations that are often in place are those we impose on ourselves. Remove those barriers and there's no ceiling, just sky. See how high you'll fly as a coach.

One of the criteria I use for taking on new clients is "Will I learn"? Will I be engaged and energized when working with them? Once I begin the coaching relationship and it is a partnership in every way shape and form because I'm there "living with them" through their days, we have to have an understanding what the relationship will look like. I need to figure out and quickly if there are any personal filters in place such as the example I used with the new political coach. For example, are my political opinions getting in the way of me coaching this person? Can I truly remain apolitical? If it's a client who works in an area that I know will be heartbreaking for me, such as poverty or famine or a country that's dealing with the Aids epidemic, will I be able to park my emotions well enough to have total clarity with regards to what my client is living when dealing with these issues?

We as coaches come to the table with as many filters as our clients. Because the awareness factor is usually exponentially higher for that of a coach than the average lay-person, we need to be absolutely aware of when our filters kick in because with that comes judgment. And coaching is partnership without judgment. It's a fine line we dance. In our short sessions, the truth has to come through me, not from me.

Juggling all this at the speed of light or speed of laser isn't always easy but the dance is well worth it. I see change happen in real time and quickly. More important, over time, I see the sustainability of that change because it was integrated in real time, worked and why in the world would anyone stop doing what works and serves them?

Ahh but that's another conversation altogether.

Even though we work at the speed of laser, I start teaching my client to self-shadow, to be aware of their shadow personalities, their triggers and their talents. Once they

start learning how to self-shadow to the extent anyone can, I slowly back off and become redundant but in such a way they're not even aware of the change in dynamics. At that point I know I've been successful. My work with them is done, at least for the present. Oftentimes I'm called back in years later when the status quo has changed or my client has decided he or she wants to play again in a different realm and wants their partner in crime (as I'm called) to help them get there. I am only too happy to team up and see what unfolds. Usually it's well beyond both our imagination and blows us both away. You see, two minds working together are much more powerful than each individually. Most of the time ideas and concepts are generated together in ways that we hadn't imagined beforehand. That's the magic of coaching. Best intentions are often blown out of the water and replaced with extraordinary results.

Faster than laser but enduring all the same.



Donna Karlin CEC, founder of A Better Perspective™ (www.abetterperspective.com) has pioneered the specialized practice of [Shadow Coaching™](#) with over 130 senior organizational leaders in the public and private sectors and in national and global political realms. Donna is an author, lectures internationally and in response to widely expressed interest to her highly successful and innovative approach to coaching, she established the [School of Shadow Coaching™](#) to enable others to learn the practice.

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