

The Rescuer Syndrome and the coaches desire to help

Why do you coach? Do you coach because you want to help people? The desire to help others is a great quality, but what if this desire goes too far? What if this desire to help becomes a need? This is when helping becomes a compulsion and turns into rescuing. This is the rescuer syndrome.

The rescuer syndrome is described by Manfred Kets de Vries in the article Leadership Coaching and the Rescuer Syndrome: How to Manage both Sides of the Couch. This is experienced in the helping professions and occurs when helpers turn into “rescuers” unable to differentiate between their own needs and those of their clients.

For example, a ‘helper’ may have a disproportionate need to be liked and to be seen to be helping. Manfred says that, “The Rescuer Syndrome manifests itself when helping turns into a compulsion based on one central, but very flawed conviction: “The only way to get what I need is to do what other people want”.” In the example of the person with the disproportionate need to be liked, their central view is that they must help in order to be liked. Manfred goes on to say that if coaches become incessant rescuers then an inappropriate dependent relationship will result.



Do you say to yourself “gosh that sounds terrible, I really want to help you” or “I appreciate your situation, and I can help”. The difference between “I really want to help” and “I can help” is significant. Really wanting to do something is driven by my needs, in that I have a personal need to be satisfied, as opposed to an objective ability to make a contribution.

Constructive helping:

So what should coaches do to ensure that they are constructively helping, rather than acting in a dysfunctional style of the rescuer? Manfred suggests that the role of a constructive helper is as follows:

- Hold the central intention to grow and develop the coachee
- Aim to make the continuing intervention unnecessary
- View the coaching assignment objectively
- Put aside their own interests and concerns in the presence of their clients
- Ensure that the coachee holds the responsibility for their development or solving their problem
- Continue to ask coachees what **they** have done to fix their own problems
- Encourage the coachee to face their difficulties honestly

- Be ready to tell the truth even if it is not what people would like to hear
- Constructive rescuers are exceptional listeners
- They have considerable tolerance for ambiguity; able to accept uncertainty without becoming over-anxious
- They show intentional open-mindedness without the need for closure
- They work to create reciprocity in the coaching
- They are able to build an effective working alliance with their clients

Manfred goes on to say that, "Executive coaches would do well to recognize the inner forces that motivate them to help others." As with all things, recognition and awareness creates choice. This suggests the importance of coaching supervision and so unpacking these inner forces and for the coach to explore their desire versus need to help.

Have you experienced the rescuer syndrome?

I also work with the Karpman Drama Triangle that brings the Rescuer, Victim and Persecutor into play!

Do contact me if you would like to discuss this model and any dilemmas in your work.

Peter

peter@peterwelchcoaching.co.uk

Many thanks to Ian Day for this inspiring article, October 2015