

Artful coaching: Visual Explorer as a tool for one-on-one leadership coaching

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One-on-one coaching of leaders can benefit from artful coaching methods and tools (summarized below). Visual Explorer is one such artful coaching tool supporting a variety of coaching processes and objectives.

Here is a link to our article on this subject. Palus, C.J. (2006). Artful coaching. In Ting, S., & Scisco, P. (Eds.), *The CCL Handbook of Coaching: A Guide for the Leader Coach*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 259-285.

[Here is another excellent resource](#) on the topic.



Benefits of Visual Explorer in leadership coaching:

- Supports the key leadership abilities of visioning, perspective taking, creative thinking and action, and presence in expression and communication
- Supports positive development and whole person functioning
- Engage the client as a creative, imaginative person
- Help the client make sense of and navigate turbulence and complexity
- Build client-coach rapport
- Supports brief coaching
- Supports online / virtual coaching contexts

Artful coaching is the application of abilities, media, and methods from or related to the arts within the practice of one-on-one coaching of managers, professionals, and leaders.

The media and methods of artful coaching fall into six basic categories:

1. Creating, perceiving, and interpreting images such as drawings and photographs
2. Making, telling, and listening to stories
3. Becoming aware of and crafting metaphors;
4. Dialogue around artifacts from people's work and personal lives, including their creative endeavors
5. Becoming aware of and crafting the environments in which coaching occurs
6. Becoming aware of and reshaping body movement, posture, kinesthetics, and voice

In our research on how coaches used artful practices, we observed that coaches were using these artful practices for the reasons shown in Table 1. Visual Explorer is a useful

tool within this range of artful coaching objectives.

Example

Where are you?: A Presencing Exercise

By Tzipi Radonsky

Presence is the art of being in the moment: all distractions laid aside and the space cleared for the work of coaching to happen. Coaching sometimes is only seen as getting “there.” Often forgotten is that coaching is a process of being alive in the moment to what arises in total support of assisting the client in getting what they want. So there is all this wandering from Here to There that must happen. Each place must be defined through presence, as a process of noticing what is. During the session there needs to be an awareness of distractions and then making the choice to listen to the words, the rhythm, the pauses, the sighs. Through inquiry the coachee can be brought into the present moment so they can do their work. So we start with here and the first question can be: Where are you?



The coaching encounter below illustrates some key insights regarding presence during coaching.

- Help the coachee separate from where he or she is coming from. Clear the space, as the threshold is crossed into the coaching session.
- Ask: Where are you? Use images to explore the present. The move to the image and establish presence, rather than starting with a goal statement.

Consider this disguised case. Jim is Jo’s coach. They had met once in person for a session, now they are doing a follow-up phone coaching session. Jo is a little late for the call. After greetings, Jim asks:

“Is there something that happened that made you late? Is there something going on for you that might want to get out of the way before we move into our time together?” “No” she said.

In this exchange Jim had sensed some unknownns and did not want to move forward without evoking presence. Jim then asks,

“Relax and take a few deep breaths ... Close your eyes if that feels comfortable.”

Then Jim slowly led Jo through a brief guided reflection:

“Ok, Jo, I want you to ask yourself ‘Where am I?’ and respond, silently to yourself, in terms of the four worlds: Physically where are you ... emotionally where are you ... where are your thoughts ... and, where are you in connection with the mystery of life.”

In less than a minute she responded in each realm. Then Jim invited Jo to look at the set of Visual Explorer images they could both see on their computer screens. Jim asked the framing question:

“What is going on for you right now? Where are you?”

Jo picked two images, the fencer, and the cathedral. She described each image, then what it meant to her. Looking closely at these same images, Jim listened and asked questions to keep Jo focused on each image.

“I am feeling strong and courageous. The fencer is both out of focus, and focused. I am feeling both strong and vulnerable. Both graceful, and decisive.”

Jo went on to talk about her sense of “do not fear.” She described how she had recently begun looking at people with love and appreciations, and she could see the positive changes that had caused.

Now that Jo was able to describe where she is, Jim felt comfortable in approaching Jo to talk about where she wants to be going.

Table 1: Typical Objectives of Artful Coaching Practices

Objective	Description
Provide key leadership perspectives and abilities	Artful methods are a way to promote leader qualities such as vision, perspective taking, creative thinking and action, expression and communication, etc. “Business leaders have much more in common with artists ... and other creative thinkers (Zaleznik, 1977).”
Engage the client as a creative, imaginative person	Many coaches encounter ambivalence towards creativity and imagination in the workplace, and choose to declare their support for these qualities in their clients, especially as tied to leadership and whole-life issues. Also many clients are “stuck” in some way, and VE can be used to get unstuck.
Help the client navigate turbulence and complexity	Metaphors, stories, and images provide ways of engaging the complex and often chaotic worlds the client is operating in. Data by itself is not enough for representing meaningful connections and patterns.
Build positive client-coach relationships	Artful methods potentially lead to a deeper rapport with the client. This is about being present, paying attention to, and resonating with a client’s language, environment, artifacts, and physical being. Mutual vulnerability and trust are served.

Supports positive development and whole person functioning	Coaching can shift from transactional to transformational, and one needs more resources to do this Artful methods work from inner recognition and integration, rather than a sense of “broken getting fixed.” Artful methods are seen as natural to whole people. “We as humans talk and think naturally in metaphors, stories, and images.”
Supports the coaches themselves	Many coaches claim to feel more engaged and authentic when using their artful approaches. Typically coaches have invented or adapted methods resonant with their own talents. Some organizations with coaching processes provide (in the words of one coach) “a specific template on the coaching relationship,” which some coaches find restrictive and narrow.
Brief or distance relationships with some coachees requires bolder methods	Artful coaching provides some ways to quickly connect and deepen reflection, presence, and shared meaning with clients. Distance coaching (i.e. telephone) can benefit from methods for creating shared imagery.

Table 2: Three Levels of Artful Coaching

Levels of Artful Coaching	A: Coach	B: Coachee	C: Coaching Encounter
Level 1: Attention (Entry) Initiation of relationship / Beginner as artful coach Supporting active perception by coach and coachee	Coach “reads” (pays careful attention to) the coachee, situation, and environment by listening and looking for stories, metaphors, images, artifacts, etc.	The client is supported in paying attention to (“reading”) self, relationships, and environment, using an expanding repertoire of senses and devices.	The context is one of rapport building. The environment provides opportunities for each party to pay attention. The notion of artistry is implicit rather than explicit, and involves attending to artifacts rather than creating art.

<p>Level 2: Tool Use (Instrumental)</p> <p>Intermediate / Experimentation</p> <p>Using tools and media for the creation of meaning</p>	<p>The coach helps the coachee deliberately construct and shape various kinds of meaningful artifacts such as self-narratives, personal metaphors, scenarios, etc.</p>	<p>The client is actively constructing various kinds of representations and perspectives using any of a variety of media.</p>	<p>The encounter involves more explicit use of artistry. Artful tools and methods are at hand, and offered depending on readiness and need. An environment of shared sensemaking and reflection is provided or created.</p>
<p>Level 3: World Making (Mastery)</p> <p>Mastery / Integrated Artful Practice</p> <p>Remaking the relationship of self and world</p>	<p>The coach has a refined sensibility and philosophy for using artistic means in service of human transformation, including experience and competence in a variety of media and tools.</p>	<p>The client explores and develops his/her own competency as a world-maker or artist with respect to the transformation of self, relationships, and environments.</p>	<p>There is a sense of risk associated with exploring the unknown, and commitment to transformation. All creative resources are fair game for application toward further development.</p>

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Note: The term Artful Coaching is used by the Adler School of Professional Coaching (www.adlercoachsw.com/pdf/artfulcoaching.pdf), and predates my use of the term. The meanings are compatible but I use it as an umbrella for a family of perspectives and practices, and the Adler School's is a proper name of a course offering as well as a specific set of principles.