



**Marcia Reynolds,
Psy.D., MCC,
ICF Global Past
President**

*Marcia works with organizations worldwide, providing Executive Coaching and leadership training. She is the author of three books, including her latest on Leadership Coaching, *The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs* (Berrett-Koehler, 2014). She is the training director for the Healthcare Coaching Institute, regularly works with coaching organizations in China and Russia, and is the president elect of the Association for Coach Training Organizations (ACTO). Her doctorate is in organizational psychology.*



Why Transformative Coaching Takes Guts

Most trained coaches know how to be supportive, encouraging and nonjudgmental. These approaches are useful but often not enough to create a new awareness. Coaching starts by building trust and rapport, but as the conversation goes deeper you might need to generate a bit of discomfort to create a breakthrough in thinking.



What happens when you challenge someone's thinking?

In order to define who we are and make sense of the world around us, our brains develop constructs and rules that we strongly protect without much thought. In *Who's in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (Ecco, 2011), neuroscientist Michael S. Gazzaniga says we get stuck in our automatic thought-processing and fool ourselves into thinking we are right. When someone asks us why we did something, we immediately come up with an answer even if the response doesn't make complete sense. We instantly concoct a brilliant reason for procrastinating on a task, for prioritizing reading email over a project deadline or for making life decisions based on how we will feel in the future when, in truth, we can never be sure how the circumstances will impact us emotionally.

To disturb this automatic processing, you reflect holes in your client's logic and ask questions that reveal the fears, needs and desires keeping the constructs in place. NeuroBusiness Group founder and CEO Srinivasan S. Pillay, M.D., writes that this coaching approach is the only way to stop the automatic processing. Reflection and questions crack the force field that protects your client's sense of reality, enabling her to explore, examine and change strongly held beliefs and behavior.

The reaction to bringing these things to light will register somewhere between slight discomfort and an emotional outpour. Momentary confusion and abrupt realizations trigger emotional reactions. The truth can hurt or at least surprise you before it sets you free.

Therefore, negative emotions can be a good sign. When your client realizes she has blocked a truth that was in her face the entire time, she may feel mortified, angry or sad. She is finally confronting her rationalizations and seeing her blind spots. For a moment, her brain does not know what to think. As Nessa Victoria Bryce writes in the July/August 2014 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, this pause in certainty as the brain rushes to reinterpret information is necessary for a clearer and broader understanding of the situation to emerge. In researching how coaching works in the brain for *The Discomfort Zone*, I found this moment of uncertainty is necessary for behavioral learning to occur. Only with this new awareness will your client willfully commit to behaving in a different way.

CONTINUE ON NEXT PAGE >

Tuning In

Listening with an integrated mind takes conscious and consistent practice. Here are four tips to help you access your intuition and positively challenge your clients:

1. Sense what your client is experiencing as you listen.

Don't just analyze her words. Feel what emotions come up for you and reflect to her what you notice without assessing if you are right or wrong.

2. Ask yourself what you are feeling.

Your emotions are likely reacting to what your client is feeling. Either you are experiencing empathy where your brain is mirroring hers or you are feeling anxious because you sense her anger, fear, disappointment or confusion. Ask her if she is feeling the same emotions as you. If her experience is different, she will let you know, thereby creating an opportunity for deeper exploration.

3. Allow your heart and gut to have a voice.

Sit up tall and ground yourself in the present moment. Consciously guide yourself to feel curious (open mind), compassionate (open heart) and courageous (open at your core). Try to keep your head, heart and gut open and balanced while you listen. When you feel uncomfortable, speak and listen more deeply from your gut. When you feel impatient or begin to judge your client, focus on reopening your heart.

4. Use silence to allow your client to form new thoughts and perspectives.

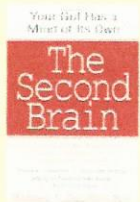
Silence is often an indication that your reflections and questions have penetrated your client's protective barrier. A new sense of self and reality is trying to emerge. It may take some time before your client can articulate what she now understands to be true. Be quiet while her brain is working.

Further Reading

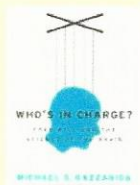
Books



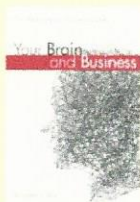
The Discomfort Zone: How Leaders Turn Difficult Conversations into Breakthroughs, by Marcia Reynolds (Berrett-Koehler, 2014)



The Second Brain: A Groundbreaking New Understanding of Nervous Disorders of the Stomach and Intestine, by Michael Gershon (Harper, 1998)



Who's in Charge?: Free Will and the Science of the Brain, by Michael S. Gazzaniga (Ecco, 2011)



Your Brain and Business: The Neuroscience of Great Leaders, by Srinivasan S. Pillay (FT Press, 2011)

Articles

"The Aha! Moment: A Step-by-Step Guide to Your Next Creative Breakthrough," by Nessa Victoria Bryce (in *Scientific American Mind*, July/August 2014, pages 36 – 43)

"Neuroscience and the Three Brains of Leadership," by Grant Soosalu and Marvin Oka

"Taking the Bad with the Good," by Tori Rodriguez (in *Scientific American Mind*, May/June 2013, pages 26 – 27)



How do you know what to say to trigger the brain to learn?

The powerful questions that change clients' minds emerge when you listen to your heart and gut as well as your head. You ask about what you sense—what fears, disappointment, needs or desires are conveyed to you without words. Your client then stops and questions herself.

You need to access your entire nervous system to pick up signals from your client's entire nervous system. Some people define this process as listening to your intuition; biologically, it means you're listening to and trusting all of the signals you receive from your heart and gut, as well as your head. In so doing, you access the critical data you need to fully comprehend what is going on in the human you are conversing with.

To activate your full sensory capabilities, you need to feel grounded in the present moment and visualize opening all three centers in your neural network where you receive input. Then you have to trust what you sense and courageously ask your client for permission to share these notions. When you do, you need to bravely accept how she reacts.

Depending on your personality, you may find it easier to access one sensory capability over the other. People who tend to be helpers listen more easily from the heart than the gut. Risk-takers who move quickly on instinct find it easier to listen from the gut than from the heart. As a born risk-taker, I have to consciously open my heart when I coach, teach or argue with my partner. I may feel vulnerable, but it's effective.

If you intentionally practice listening from your various centers every day, you will come to more naturally access your intuition. This will help you discover the reflections and questions that will crack the force field protecting your client's sense of self and reality, allowing a new awareness to emerge. The more you can get the neurons sparking in the brains of your clients, the greater the chance for a breakthrough in awareness to occur. Have the guts to use your heart and guts in coaching. 🧠