

Releasing Judgement

Like many words in English, the Oxford English Dictionary lists a number of definitions for the word “judgement”. One of the definitions is “discernment, good sense”. Further down, however, another definition is “criticism, against what one really feels to be advisable.” The first definition of judgement is more about using your intuition to make a decision. To weigh up everything you have before you and using your intuition, make a decision. The second definition is crippling. It is this notion of judgement that we are going to explore, looking at the impact it has on our lives.

When Judgement Happens

A strange thing happens when human beings feel that they are being judged. The first response is to feel guilty, even if it’s only for a very short time. Most human beings, even those who are extremely emotionally strong are susceptible to feeling guilty when they are being judged. Research into the way the brain functions, tells us that this is because strong negative emotions like guilt and fear, actually bypass the cognitive pathways of the brain. Daniel Goleman, the author of Emotional Intelligence, refers to this experience as an “emotional hijacking”. It’s a largely uncontrollable phenomenon where the brain makes an immediate emotional response before it has time to process whether the particular emotion (in this case, guilt) is even justified.

The next stage of the process is where the cognitive part of the brain kicks into work. Nobody likes feeling guilty. It is one of the most damaging and distressing of emotions. When guilt surfaces the standard human response is to try to relieve it. All of our energy goes into trying to repel the guilty feeling by repelling the judgement that created it.

Let’s consider that concept for a moment. Those who judge others usually justify it to themselves on the basis that the judgement has some basis in “truth” or “expertise”. However, our knowledge of the way human minds work, tells us that the “truth” of the judgement doesn’t make one iota of difference. Our response to judgement is emotional, not rational, so even if the advice is based on years of data and experience, we are still likely to have a negative response to it. When we are being judged, we go into defensive mode; we cease feeling

comfortable, we stop listening, and worst of all, we begin to see the person judging us as someone who is capable of hurting us instead of someone we can trust.

Judgement is not only unhelpful; it is counter-productive. We believe that creating a “trusting space” is a prerequisite to powerful living. Judgment destroys a trusting space quicker than anything else. It closes people off at a time when they need to open up. It shifts the power balance from one of partnership to one of inequality. It is impossible for you to create a trusting space when judgement is present.

Judgement and Criticism

Judgement and criticism come from the same family. Criticism is sometimes interchanged with the notion of critique. Critiquing is about measuring something against a set of competencies or theories, an assessment. Criticism is sometimes confused with the notion of critiquing, believing that we are criticising against a set of measures. However, these measures are our own measures, our own beliefs. Critiquing is not the definition of criticism that we are referring to. The Criticism we are referring to is where you decide to criticise a person, judge them and the result is that they feel “put down”. The Criticism we are referring to is where you decide that your opinion is the right or better one and the other people is wrong or not as good. This may be a very black and white perspective about criticism but criticism is really black and white. You are either criticising or you are not.

Criticism is the practice of judging. Let’s think about judgement in the sense of judging or being a judge. If you think of a judge in the legal sense, their role is to look at a situation and to judge, according to law, what the ramification should be of a certain action. In a legal system, judges refer to the law. If we take this concept and relate it to our life, we are the judges of our life. We have a rule book, a book of beliefs, and a set of laws if you like, that we live by. Unlike societal laws, these are the laws or rules that we have decided to live our life by. These rules were created a very long time ago, often by our parents or the adults in our life as we were growing up. As children, these rules are reinforced to us over and over again.

The rules were initially built around a value system or a set of beliefs. An example of different rules is someone who believes it is fine to be late to an engagement as opposed to someone

who believes you should be there five minutes early. Let's call this rule one and rule two. Rule one comes late, rule two comes early. Rule one was perhaps creating around the belief that it is impolite to arrive early. It shows no social grace to be early. It is much better to arrive a little after the set time to show you have respect for the person. For rule two being early is about respecting the time you are going to be taking of the person you are meeting. It is impolite and rude to be late and being early shows eagerness and commitment to the appointment and thus respect for the person you are meeting.

Now as you read this example you may be aligned with either rule one or rule two. It does not really matter. What does matter is that you live your life according to one of these rules? You decided to accept a rule some time ago about the notion of time and engagements. This in itself is okay. The judgement enters when you see the other rule as being wrong. As we know both rules are about the owners of the rules anyway and not the person they are meeting up with. We may though tend to believe that we are really abiding by our rule because it respects the other person. As you can see by both rules, they are interpreted as being respectful to someone else. But they are actually about ourselves and our value of respect. Again this is okay if we are aware of this. Sometimes though we are not and we sit in judgement of others who do not value the same rules as us. We think that they are not as equal to us.

Self Application

We judge people because our self-esteem is low. Judging is a form of comparison. We compare ourselves against others. When we do this, we initially feel better about ourselves. We think our life is better than someone else's. However, this feeling is very very short lived. We judge others because we do not like who we are. This is the sad outcome of judgement. Imagine if all the energy we put into judging others we turned back on ourselves and spent that energy on liking ourselves.

Judgement is a sign

A great way to bring about awareness is to know that when you are judging someone, you are not feeling on top of your game. There is something about yourself that you are not valuing or liking. Every time you judge someone, you are projecting outwards what you are feeling about yourself. Think about the underlying value of a judgement next time you make it. If you think someone does not respect you then it is likely that you are not respecting yourself.

Judgement is also a conversation that occurs in our mind. It is based around our own self-talk. Our self-talk can be quite destructive, weighing up all the reasons why someone isn't equal to you. Again notice your self-talk and put a stop to it. Self-talk is not about being present in the moment. It is about going back over the past or thinking about what might happen next. It is not an activity of presence.

To move away from judging others is to move towards loving who you are.

The Cure for Judgement

The cure for judgement is not simply acceptance of the other. The path is slightly more circuitous than that. The cure for judgement is self-love. When people lack love for themselves, they move into the world from an unstable base. In order to try to gain a sense of their place in the world, they begin comparing themselves to others. When you compare yourself to others, you are in a state of judgment, because no two people are the same and you will always end up with a conclusion that you are better than the other person or they are better than you.

People, who truly love and value themselves, don't feel the need to compare themselves to others. Where they do make comparisons, it is with their own performance at an earlier point in time and their vision of themselves in the future. They become their own touchstone for achievement and success. Once you are in this state of feeling in control of your own success, you have a stable base from which to engage with others. Instead of comparing other people's lives to yours, you are able to allow them their own journey.

When you practice self-love and focus on your own life journey, it is a natural extension to then allow others to do the same. A person is able to look at another person, without comparing

their life to his or her own. Instead, they support the person to go through a similar process of growth, to become their own touchstone for achievement and success. A person who doesn't judge is able to respect and celebrate the separate and unique human journey of another person.

The world is not divided up between those who practice self-love and those who don't. Self-love is a long-term disciplined practice, which all human beings struggle with over time. If you feel that judgement is creeping into your relationships, perhaps this is a signal to stop for a moment and focus on nurturing yourself. Revisit your own goals, acknowledge yourself, reconnect with your support circle, celebrate your magnificence, and then feel the judgement simply fall away!!

Coaching Application

The Leading Question

One way that judgement can become present in a coaching session is through the "leading question". Fans of courtroom dramas will be familiar with "leading questions". These are questions that imply criticism or judgement. For example, "Would you agree that you were the last person to see the victim that day?" In this example, the speaker is not really asking a question but making a judgment and "dressing it up" as a question.

In a coaching context, a leading question usually begins with "why?" For example, "why did you call your colleague so late at night?" The implication of this "why?" question is that the client has done something wrong that they need to justify. Parents wanting to reprimand their children often use leading questions. For example: "Why is there a tear in your brand new dress?", "Why are you still awake at 9 o'clock at night?" "Why is the television still on?"

Below are some examples of leading questions and below them is the implicit judgement that each question implies;

- Why did you call the meeting on a Friday afternoon?
- There is something wrong or unusual about meetings on a Friday afternoon.

- Why didn't your boss attend?
- Your boss should have attended. If she didn't, this might indicate a problem.
- Why did you feel the need to include your PA in the discussion?
- There's something wrong or unusual about including a PA in a discussion of this kind.
- I'm wondering why you couldn't have held the meeting earlier in the day.
- It would have been better to hold the meeting earlier in the day.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of asking a leading question. Asking powerful questions that are devoid of judgement takes practice. When you are beginning as a coach, a good strategy can be to write down some useful, judgement free questions to use as a prompt until you become more practised. Some examples of judgement free questions are the following:

- What makes this an issue now?
- How important is it on a scale of 1 – 10?
- How much energy do you have for a solution to this issue?
- What have you already tried?
- Imagine that this challenge has been overcome. What would it feel like? What's standing in the way of an ideal outcome?
- When you're at your most resourceful, what do you think of this issue? What are the options for action here?
- What criteria will you use to assess the options?
- So what's the next first step? (Rogers, 2004)

Criticism is at the extreme end of judgement. It's easy to see criticism coming, to recognise it and to combat it. Most clients would not stand for criticism from a coach. Any coach who engages in criticism would be unlikely to find any success in the coaching field at all.

Most coaches would never criticise their clients, however, there are other forms of judgement that are less obvious than criticism. These forms of judgement are harder to see so they are harder to guard against. It is these more subtle forms of judgement that a coach needs to work hard over time to avoid.

One of the basic premises of coaching is articulated in the following statement from our Philosophy of Coaching:

“We believe that the client is the expert in his or her own life. As coaches, our role is to support the client to help them find the answers to their life challenges.”

If the client truly is the expert in his or her life, then what we as coaches “really feel to be advisable” is irrelevant. It is not our role as coaches to criticise or advise the client. It is our role to support them to realise their own magnificence so that they can find the answers to the challenges of their own lives. It is a process of empowerment, and judgement doesn’t create empowerment.

Consider also this quote from the ICF Definition of Coaching:

“The International Coach Federation ...believes that every client is creative, resourceful, and whole.”

If a client is creative, resourceful and whole, then there are no grounds for us to judge, nor advise them. Coaching doesn't assume that the service provider (the coach) comes to the relationship with greater skill or insight than the service recipient (the client). Coaching is a partnership of equals. If the coach/client relationship begins to feel like that of a master and apprentice or a teacher and learner or a guru and disciple, then you have moved out of the realm of coaching into something else altogether. The challenge is to remove all judgement so that you can return to being a “partner with” rather than a “leader of” the client.

Advice

If you look back at the Oxford definition of “judgement” you will see a clue to the most common form of judgement. The dictionary defines judgement as something that is “against what one really feels to be advisable”. In other words, any time you would “advise” someone to do

something different, you are standing in judgement. The noun of “advise” is “advice” and, like its cousin “criticism”, it has no place in coaching.

Advice has a much better reputation than criticism. Most people would consider criticism a negative but might think that advice is okay. Even if they think some advice is unhelpful, they might think that “well-meaning advice” is okay. Or they might think that advice based on strong knowledge and experience is okay. Some people even think that one of the things that clients pay coaches for is to give them advice.

All advice, even “well-meaning advice” or “expert advice” is a form of judgement. Imagine that a young executive is being coached around getting a promotion to a more senior executive role. The coach, who has been a senior executive himself, observes that the way the young man dresses is more casual than the senior executives in the companies where he has previously worked. After a few sessions working on strategies to prepare for promotion, the coach offers some advice. “You know, one of the best ways to be considered for a senior role is to display those qualities at a junior level. That way promoting you seems a natural thing and not a big leap. Can I give you some advice?” The young man agrees. “One of the ways you can do this is to begin dressing in the same way as the senior executives. Try to eliminate any differences between them and you so that people look at you and see a senior executive.”

This advice is undoubtedly well-meaning. The coach genuinely wants the client to achieve the goal of promotion. The advice could also be considered expert and based on sound data, (the coach's experience as a senior executive). The coach doesn't criticise the client, and he even asks permission before giving advice.

Nonetheless, there are a number of judgements implicit in his advice which the client hears as clearly as if they had been spoken. These are:

- You currently dress like a junior staff member.
- You don't know what the difference between a junior and senior executive is. This has to be pointed out to you.
- Senior executives look at you and see a junior executive.

- I know more about being a senior executive in your workplace than you do even though you have worked there for 8 years & I have never worked there.
- Being different is not valued.

Although the coach did not make each of these judgements out loud, they are implied by his advice. This client has come to the coach for support to reach the goal of promotion and instead has been given the subtle and unhelpful message that he is not ready. Even if the coach is completely right (and he may not be; there are very different dress practices in different organisations) and the client follows his advice, the client is left with this final disempowering message from the coach: “Live by my values not your own.”

Many coaches come from fields where advice is important. Consultancy, counselling, management, and career guidance counselling are examples of these. When they come into coaching they may find it hard to break the advice habit. However, break it they must in order to become a great coach. “Coaching is about drawing out ...intrinsic human resourcefulness. It follows then that if you do genuinely believe in the resourcefulness of your clients, you will have to find alternatives to giving advice. So the first step to establishing trust is to abandon advice-giving as a coaching tactic.” (Rogers, 2004)

Hidden Advice

In the example above, it is obvious that the coach is giving advice. Once coaches have learnt how unhelpful advice is as a coaching strategy, they soon learn not to give it. However, sometimes advice can be even subtler again. We call this “hidden advice”.

Advice doesn't always begin with the words "My advice is...." Advice can begin with the words "Have you tried....." or "Would it help to do....." or "Is it worth checking with" This type of advice is gentler than saying "I advise you to do", but it is still advice, and therefore, it still includes an element of judgement.

Because it is subtler than other forms of advice, hidden advice can be much harder to overcome. Many coaches come to the field with a strong desire to be of service. Their motivation is to help the client. They may acutely feel the client's distress at facing a challenging hurdle and may find it hard to resist the urge to rush in and rescue them with some well-meaning advice. It seems counter-intuitive that something motivated by positive emotions can produce a negative result with a client. However refraining from advice, including hidden advice, is one of the disciplines required of a coach. The way to gain this discipline is through practice, practice and more practice.

Advice and Feedback

As we have mentioned earlier, the advice is unhelpful in coaching; however, feedback is important to coaching. So what are the differences between advice and feedback?

Feedback is an observation, it is data that the coach has gathered through working with the client that the client might be able to use to help them make decisions and move forward. For example, using the scenario of the young junior executive being coached, the following is feedback: "I've noticed over the session, that you are talking in a more and more passionate way about this promotion. You sound really determined" or alternatively, "I noticed when you began talking about the promotion that you used the term "when I get this promotion" and now you're saying "if I get this promotion". Can you tell me about the shift in language?" Both of these observations are free of judgement. They are statements of observation, which the client can either use or discard. Neither of these statements tells the client what to do and therefore there is no judgement implicit in them.

The differences between feedback and advice can be complex and subtle. It can take practice to give effective feedback that is devoid of judgement and is not "advice in disguise". Sometimes new coaches can be so fearful of being in judgement that they hold back from

offering feedback. This is unfortunate. Feedback is an art developed over time through practice. If this is an area that you find challenging, ask your peer clients for their support. Ask them to give you feedback on your feedback! It's a fantastic way to learn.

Releasing Judgement

This next aspect of the judgement is less about what you say and do as a coach, than how you feel. It is less about behaviour than attitude. Even if you never criticise clients, and don't ask leading questions and don't give advice, and hold back from asking questions that imply advice, you might still be operating from a position of judgement. To ensure that you are operating without judgement in a coaching situation, ask yourself the following questions:

- At this moment in time, do I value the client and do I equally value myself?
- Do I accept this client's life choices including when they are very different from my own?
- Am I guiding the coaching process but completely letting go of the coaching agenda and entrusting it to the hands of the client?
- Am I comfortable in this state of "not-knowing"?

If you are unable to answer yes to all of these questions then you have not fully released judgement, even though you might not be exercising any overly judgemental behaviour.

Simply recognising that you are in a state of judgement, is often enough to release it. Judgement is a human weakness that even the most reflective and self-aware human beings can fall into. We all make judgements. The answer is not to feel bad or wrong about judgement, after all, this would be judging you! The answer is to recognise the judgement, take a deep breath and then LET IT GO!!!

Reflection

1. Have you experienced a guilt-based “emotional hijacking”? Can you remember how it felt and how you responded?
2. What are some judgements you make?
3. Do you agree that the cure for judgement is self-love? Are there any other cures for judgement?
4. Can you think of examples of receiving “expert advice” or “well-meaning advice”? Did you act on them? Why or why not?
5. Can you think of a time when you have been given “hidden advice” or asked a “leading question?” How can you practice giving feedback without slipping into advice and judgement?
6. How would you have coached the young executive in the story?