

REGENERATIVE COACHING: STEPPING UP AND STEPPING OUT

The existential climate change crisis we face has called for coaches to step up. Coach **Alison Whybrow** introduces a regenerative coaching framework, developed from ten conversations with a group of coaches and facilitators.

*'The role of coaches in the 21st century is changing significantly; coaches need to be part activists, part counsellors and part change agents.'*ⁱ

When Sir John Whitmore defined the purpose of coaching as raising awareness so that people could take responsibility and ownership for their choices, he did so mindful of our impending ecological crisis. He wondered whether 'coaching has emerged to be a midwife for a new era.'ⁱⁱ Similarly, Peter Hawkins notes that coaching needs to become part of 'the shift in collective human consciousness that our collective ecology is requiring from us as a species.'ⁱⁱⁱ

The way of life we have built has protected many of us with privilege from feeling the pain of the climate crisis, or from seeing

the daily reality of the impact of our choices on the environment. This dream world provides a sense of safety, as we continue the habits of being, doing and consuming that harm life on Earth. One of the fathers of venture capitalism, Ronnie Cohen, recently stated that our economic system is responsible for the environmental degradation we see around us. It couldn't be clearer. It's a situation our neoliberalist system is not designed to address.^{iv}

The self-inflicted wound is deep and the required response more fundamental than a simple shift to low carbon choices – it requires a complete restructure of the way we live. The question is, as Hetty Einzig asks: 'What is the potential for coaching to support leaders in transforming the rules of the game itself?' Especially, I would add, when we as coaches are stuck playing the same game.

THE CALL

There is a growing call for coaching and coaching psychology to raise their games, and a growing insight as to the role coaches are well positioned to play.^v But are we equipping ourselves to fully support and challenge our clients and ourselves to step up?

Shifting our lives and our practice in a way that responds effectively to this existential emergency is not easy or simple. Covid-19 has started to expose some dramatic cracks, yet we are quick to try to forget what we have seen as we allow a new normal to slide in as if it were always there. We need to see the water we are swimming in more clearly, and doing so requires new lenses, new instruments, a different level of attention and an emotional upgrade.

A FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH

How do we locate ourselves as a part of nature rather than apart from nature? We have become so deeply disconnected that we struggle to bring this fundamental truth into being. Many coaches I speak to feel ill-equipped to work with our crisis in their work, saying things like 'it goes against my [coaching] philosophy... Bringing something to someone's attention that they haven't chosen or have chosen to avoid.' Or they're afraid of 'moving from the traditional role of coach'. For those with a deeply systemic practice, and First Nations coaches I have met recently, the ecosystem is always in the room, and we are part of that ecosystem. The skill then becomes one of perspective-taking and enquiry, rather than an issue of agenda.

Reconnecting to this truth is painful and joyful. There are many coaches who have been activists for years, others have 'woken up' more recently. Grief emerges as we allow ourselves to feel the unravelling of Earth's life support systems and the departure of fellow sentient beings. This is described vividly by Linda Aspey, who describes listening to a radio programme: 'It was as if something had hit me. Tears started flooding down my face and I had to pull the car over. I sat there and literally wailed for a while.'^{vi} Climate is not where everyone starts, but 'it's what we all share'.

SHIFTING THE FRAME

Shifting ourselves as coaches requires us to shift the frame for coaching. Currently, the focus of coaching is often small, looking at only individual and organisational success. What about planetary success?^{ix}

Economist Kate Raworth points out that we have exceeded the boundaries of our ecological ceiling, and are putting strain on our social foundations (water, food, housing, social and family networks).^{vii} Sustaining what we have now is not sufficient – we would remain a planet in decline. Rather, we need to be in the game of restoring and regenerating.^{viii} This requires applying living systems thinking.

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We might define a regenerative purpose for coaching as: 'enhancing the health of our biosphere and life-giving properties of our planet, underpinned by models of coaching, grounded in established and emerging approaches associated with adult and child learning, psychology, leadership, living systems thinking, ecology, ecosystems, economy and regenerative design.'^x

This wide-angled focus does not deny individual and organisational success. They are now aligned within the context of the whole. Focusing on Earth's life force, which we fully participate in and have an impact on every day, invites us to co-evolve and partner with our planet. As Katherine Allen notes, our planet has 3.5 billion years of research and development know-how about how to create life. Why would we imagine we can do better?^x

A regenerative frame calls us to look again at what we do with the knowledge that we cannot offset our impact, nor can we externalise the costs that we impose: Earth has exceeded its capacity to hold our poisonous waste. A regenerative frame invites us to shift our awareness and take responsibility.

WHAT COULD THIS LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

The roots of a regenerative practice might keep us connected to what is real and jumpstart the process of reconnecting with what has been lost. From my conversations with coaches, these roots could include:

- Intentional and real contact with the earth. Whether through gardening, walking, mindfulness or other practice: paying deliberate attention to 'building relationships with elements of the natural world'.
- An openness to allowing the earth to work on us and through us: 'experiencing nature acting through me, outside my awareness over time'; and 'an open heart enables the work of the soul'.
- Working on how we show up, with the self as the site of change; the work is 'in here rather than out there'. 'It's not what we say or do, it's the way we are.' It's how we focus, not what we focus on.
- Letting go. Ask: how can I be a helper and provider of a more holistic approach? How do I serve the unfolding of the potential around me and manifest that potential within myself?
- Stepping into a more connected frame and a wider sense of leadership enables a greater sense of purpose, an ease with speaking truth to power. Coaches note a 'blossoming energy and transparency' and 'feeling more me'.
- Deepening connection as a way of seeing one's place in the world: 'everything is alive, everything is connected, we are all interconnected in one conversation'.

Coming into personal integrity seems a necessary part of developing a healthy coaching root system. The idea of coming home to who we are was captured by one coach, who said: 'I am not a planet or a tree, the depth of my caring for humanity is the only door through which regeneration can happen.'

These roots resonate with the four shifts described by Joanna Macy and Chris Johnston.^{xi} To be able to hear the call from Earth, it helps if we are in active, physical communication and conversation with

the planet. Allowing a response to that call to emerge over time is in keeping with complexity thinking,^{xiii} and aligns to a larger view of time. Regenerative coaching is rooted in self work as the foremost site of change, enabling us to engage differently with the context we find ourselves in.

If we act from a place of judgement, anger or rescuing others, it follows that our ability to engage with the wider human and the non-human world will be disrupted; our sense of connection will be diminished. 'Only those like me here please' will be the request. We will be starring in our self-created 'ecocidal' drama triangle.

Interdependence and inter-being are part of the wider sense of self and richer experience of community. This critical self work enables us to access *power-with*, a partnership model, rather than the *power-over* dominator framework enshrined in neoliberal capitalism.

THE TRUNK AND CROWN OF THE TREE

Moving beyond the roots, how might we create regenerative coaching approaches? Coaches I spoke with talked about working with clients in nature in a variety of ways, respecting ancestors and attending to unfolding emergence, slowing right down and listening, bringing courage, compassion, curiosity and a mindset of abundance.

As the crown of the tree reaches upwards, how do we make contact? Coaches talked about being transparent and bringing their climate focus into contracting, their coach profile and their systemic approaches. Earth and wider stakeholders are explicitly invited to show up in the coaching space.

One coach noted the following. 'In my chemistry sessions, I now ask: how is this related to one of the bigger challenges facing society? How is this related to the climate crisis?' In response, I might say that when we take a systemic approach we bring in a wider stakeholder group – including the environment. What is our invitation? How do we start? Coach Neil Scotton simply asks: 'I care about this. Do you care about this too?'¹ The human impact, the human concern, is more powerful than the science.

STEPPING OUT

Deepening our self work, learning how to connect, to contract differently, to clarify our offer and to co-create pathways are the bread and butter of coaching practice. With a regenerative coaching framework to house our practice, we can rapidly become a forest of coaches, growing ourselves and our Earth-centred practice, able to hold greater depth, challenge and compassion. Our clients and our planet need us to catch up.

Peter Wohlleben writes that a healthy forest root system is deeply connected to the wider forest community, able to draw up more water and nutrients than it would alone and receive greater protection.^{xiii}

It is time to take a leaf out of nature's playbook.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A chartered and registered psychologist, Alison consults, coaches and supervises across industries and engages in pro bono work in local and global communities. Always curious, playful and provocative, Alison brings systemic depth, somatics and story. She invites clients to step up and live their legacy in their different communities. Prior to co-founding the Climate Coaching Alliance with Eve Turner and Josie McLean, she co-authored an open letter to the coaching profession to declare a climate emergency. She writes on subjects from complexity and gestalt practice through to coach accreditation.

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1. See *Coaching Perspectives* issue 27, pages 30-31