

Focusing and Coaching: Quick Dips and Deep Dives

By Susan Lennox

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Focusing and coaching are natural companions. I have been coaching for almost as long as I have been Focusing. I learned Focusing from Joan Klagsbrun in 1997 and began my coaching practice a year later after 25 years as a (dare I say it?) employment law attorney. I became a Certified Focusing Professional in 2000. I now teach MBA courses on Professional Effectiveness and Leadership, do some organizational development work, and primarily coach business people who are seeking to be more effective and satisfied in their business or career, as well as mid- and later-life people who are searching for their authentic next steps in life.

Sometimes I wonder why it took me so long to bring Focusing and coaching together. Part of the answer lies in the gradual shift in the predominant cultural paradigm away from total reliance on logic, planning, and willpower as the preferred mode of being in the business world to greater respect and appreciation for more intuitive ways of knowing. When Daniel Goleman popularized the concept of Emotional Intelligence in the mid-1990's, we finally had a more widely accepted language and rationale for connecting the dots between bottom line business results and the softer side of our human capacities.

Over time I have been progressively more successful in bringing Focusing into my business-oriented coaching. When I first attempted to introduce Focusing into my coaching approach, I tried the direct route. I explained to my clients that, as both a certified executive coach and certified Focusing trainer, I could work with them at both levels and offered to teach them the Focusing process. Results: Few takers. In retrospect, I should not have been surprised. I remember my own experience when I first read Gene Gendlin's and Ann Weiser Cornell's books on Focusing before Joan taught me how to focus. I simply didn't have the experiential base to make sense of what their words were pointing to.

Now I don't even say the word "Focusing" to my clients until after they have had the experience of contacting the felt sense. Instead, when the obvious opportunities arise during coaching, I just invite my client into the inner Focusing space by using gentle invitations such as "Would you like to take that a little deeper?" or "Would you like to try an experiment to see if you can get a different angle on that?" In other words, I open the door using the vernacular of the business world and they seem to walk quite easily through it.

In a typical coaching session, these Focusing moments might take the form of quick dips into the pool of the client's inner wisdom or deeper, lengthier dives into a recurrent issue that has been plaguing the client for years. Let me give an example of each scenario from my practice.

Quick Dips

I was coaching an entrepreneur who was having a devil of a time getting himself organized. He wanted to eliminate the clutter in his office and develop a sustainable organizational system. He had read books on how to get organized, but – guess what – no change! No amount of determination and willpower could move him towards his goal. I asked him if he wanted to try a little experiment to see if he could gain some insight into what was going on. He was game.

I invited him to close his eyes, take a few deep breaths, and scan his body at his own pace until he felt relaxed and ready to move on. I then suggested that he imagine himself going

through the motions of the organizational system he wanted to implement—see himself in detail picking up a sheet of paper, deciding what action it needed, and placing it where it belonged. When he had fully developed that imaginary scene, I asked him to notice how he was feeling in his body. He soon identified a deep sense of resistance to the task. After I invited him to linger a bit longer with the body feel of the whole situation, he became aware of two parts of himself, a bossy part that was pushing him to get organized and a rebellious part that was having none of it! This surprised him greatly since previously he had only been in touch with the rational, planful side. Yet here he was face-to-face with the inner saboteur, the rebel. As he put it, “I don’t want to eat my spinach even when it’s me who’s telling me to do so!”

Focusing allowed him to see that the harder he pushed, the harder his inner rebel pushed back. With the direct experience of these inner dynamics, I guided him to focus on how it would feel in his body when he had achieved the goal that he had set out to attain. This body awareness allowed him to experience a positive pull forward that the inner rebel did not need to resist. Result: His motivation and excitement about the upcoming office paper purge skyrocketed.

Deep Dives

Generally my clients do not set out to go for a deep dive. We go in for a quick dip and the client’s own process rolls forward with its own momentum, often to the utter astonishment of the client. For example, recently I have been coaching a female military officer who was extremely frustrated because her subordinate would not step up to the level of leadership that my client felt was essential. She had tried and failed with all sorts of strategies to get her subordinate to bend to her will. When I asked my client how this made her feel, she said “highly annoyed and frustrated.” I asked her how often she felt highly annoyed and frustrated at work. Her answer: “All the time.” I reminded her that there are two sides of the equation, the outer situation and her inner response. She decided that she wanted to work on her inner response.

Reflecting on her workplace interactions, she began to see patterns. She noticed that, when frustrated, she tended to withdraw from the situation, which, of course, made it impossible for her to engage constructively with her subordinate around the leadership issue. With this realization she began to shift her stance from anger and blaming to seeing her own contribution to the problem. This realization set the stage for an impromptu Focusing session that became a deep dive with profound implications for this client.

Knowing I was going to write this article, I tracked the Focusing session in detail. Here’s how it unfolded. Remember this client had no prior Focusing experience.

SL: “I’d like to invite you to just sit with that sense of frustration and just notice where you are feeling it in your body.”

Client: “It’s in the pit of my stomach.”

SL: “So just sit with it for a bit and notice the quality of that.”

Client: “There’s a tenseness there...a sense of impending doom.”

SL: “You might notice if there is an emotional quality to it.”

Client: “It’s a fear of failure, that whatever happens will come back on me. I don’t want to let people down. I don’t always have time to correct it. Frustration comes.”

SL: “You might just sit with that for a bit longer and notice if it shifts or changes in any way.”

Client: "It's relaxing."

SL: "Ah! Perhaps you might just ask, 'What's the crux of this?'—and allow yourself to be surprised by what comes."

Client: "It's saying, 'Patience.' It wants me to remain calm. When I start to feel it (the frustration), I start to panic and get upset."

SL: "See if you can sense the panic."

Client: "It feels it's out of control, out of my span."

SL: "So you might ask, 'What's so out of control there?'"

Client: "In my head . . .there's so much going on! I'm scared I'm going to miss something. I don't always take notes. I'm afraid I'm going to lose track of something."

SL: "So just notice where you're feeling that."

Client: "It's in the head, in the middle, like things bouncing around, like an asteroid field in Star Wars."

SL: "And you might notice if it has an emotional quality."

Client: "It's overwhelming, like a kid in a candy store, taking everything in rapidly, with a lack of focus."

SL: "You might notice if you feel a bias for or against this feeling."

Client: "Against!"

SL: "So just notice where you are sensing that bias."

Client: "It's in my head too. It's a warring faction, a critic. There's fear there."

SL: "Maybe you might just sit with this a bit and see what it wants to say."

Client: "It's sitting there, like a heckler in the back of the room, shouting me down. It's impatient. It says, 'You don't have time for this!'"

SL: "Perhaps you can sense what the critic is feeling emotionally."

Client: "It's in reaction to the panic. It's afraid the panic will get me."

SL: "Ah! So it's trying to protect you."

Client: "It's trying to protect me from the overwhelm, from the feeling that I'm going to have a mental breakdown, literally sitting in my chair, crying.... I don't want to show that to others."

SL: "What is it not wanting you to experience?"

Client: "I might be exposed. It is about becoming the center of attention for reasons other than doing my job, because I'm losing my mind. I don't want to share my emotions. I'm not really the most trusting person. If I were to trust someone and they betrayed my trust, that would be awful. I have a fear of sharing. It's okay to be seen as angry (in fact, people say they never see me smile much)."

At that point, I noted that our time was growing short and that in a minute or so we would be stopping the Focusing, but I asked her to first "Just notice how it is inside right now."

Client: “I feel more peaceful. My ultimate goal is to feel peaceful. I see I do a lot of avoidance. I want to balance my ambitious/aggressive side with my emotional side.”

After she came out of Focusing, I invited my client to brainstorm what she could do in everyday life to respond differently to the types of situations she had found so intolerably frustrating before. Before Focusing she had been at an utter loss to know what to do. After Focusing, she rapidly listed a bevy of new responses: 1) Remember not to react immediately. Take five minutes to be with the feelings before responding. 2) Be more proactive. 3) Give myself time to feel more fully into the initial sense of impending doom that triggers my emotional pattern. 4) Do what makes me happy. 5) Don’t always be practical. 6) Don’t let my logic override my passion. She saw ways in which this newfound wisdom related to other parts of her life.

So why is Focusing such an effective complement to more traditional coaching techniques? I could write volumes, but let me cut to the nub. Pick up any coaching text and you will find that the basic principles are that the coach’s job is to use powerful questions to help the client gain deeper awareness of what is happening and then to discern how to use the self in new ways to attain the desired result. While cognitive reflection is helpful and can, in time, untangle some of the more superficial knots, just a few minutes of Focusing can bring to awareness the deeper inner dynamics of the situation. Thus informed, the client can then use Focusing in a forward-oriented direction to feel into the state, the body sense, of what she or he is really seeking. Like my client who thought she just wanted her subordinate to fall into line, Focusing enabled her to realize that what she really sought was inner peace and that she could find several paths within herself for getting there.

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