

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

Clean Up Your Act! by Clarence Thomson

New E-Book

Out of the Box: Coaching with the Enneagram

For the first time, a pdf version of our book is available at both our sites (below), for only \$10.95.

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New E-Book

More Out of the Box Coaching

Our new e-book contains exciting ideas from our 2002—2007 newsletters, organized for easy access according to topic. Available at both our sites (below): the most up-to-date practices to bring about transformational change.

Northeast Kansas, my home, is surfing on adrenaline after the local Kansas University won the basketball championship. An outsider, say from Mars, would have some difficulty understanding why conservative Midwestern folk would go into a frenzy watching tall young men racing up and down 96 feet of hardwood. That is, the Martian would have difficulty until he understood ritual and symbol. The ritual: sacred space and time, detailed rubrics (rules), color, music, and masters of ceremonies wearing striped shirts. The community involvement is orchestrated brilliantly. Emotions run high and lives are changed forever.

Especially when I coach the withdrawn types, 4's, 5's and 9's, I try to help them make use of symbolic behavior. Mary and I have as an axiom that it is often easier to behave our way into new feelings than to try to feel our way into new behaviors. A lot of coaching and inspirational books tell us just to think differently and everything will change. That is correct, but usually impossible. For example, just try to think of one thing you are fairly certain is true and then attempt to think that it is not. A rush of evidence convinces you that you were right all along! If this doesn't convince you, get into a political argument with someone of an opposite conviction and notice that your information is eerily ineffective.

But symbols get through. A symbol is how we connect an outward action with an inward understanding which includes thought patterns and an emotional charge. That's why, when we do something that seems strange or bizarre to others, they say, "What do you think you're doing?" They know our actions symbolize something and they need to know what.

I am currently coaching three Nines, all of whom have a common component: their dwellings are a mess. Two have apartments and one a house and all dwellings are a disgrace to their mother's hopes. Nines erase themselves as active agents in their lives and their homes often reflect this inertia. (Continued on page 2)

Clean Up Your Act! (continued)

All three Nines confess to a problem of asserting themselves in important ways. One can't talk to her boss, another to his sister and one to her boyfriend. They wanted help to assert themselves. They thought they wanted some techniques, but the solution is not technical in the sense they wanted.

I borrowed some advice from the most successful spiritual program in the country, Alcoholics Anonymous. AA will not allow people with a drinking problem to enter bars. Their reason is perceptive: the bars have dozens of "triggers." Triggers are the sensory associations with drinking. Remember the basketball game? The triggers are colors, sounds, lights etc. Well, a chaotic room is replete with triggers that Nines cannot control the environment. The books are visual nags that they have to study, the clothes and shoes and dishes are triggers that they can't take care of themselves. These triggers keep telling them they cannot assert themselves, even over their own habitat.

Want an example of the power of triggers? Even drug habits can be broken by removing triggers. A huge number of American GI's came back from Viet Nam with nasty cocaine habits they developed to cope with the horrors of combat. The military was expecting serious problems with the drug addiction when they came home. The problem didn't materialize. Why not? Because when they came home, the triggers of place, time, smells, sights etc were missing and when they were, the habit fell away. When addicts from ghettos are taken to a non-toxic location, much of the problem disappears.

We minimize triggers because we dwell with the background of a split between our inner life and outer life, the Cartesian heritage that body and mind go their separate ways. Most of the self-help books assume you can change your mind by focus and will power. Just do it! The tell tale phrase, "All you have to do is believe..." When you read that phrase, you are in the presence of fantasy. You simply can't maintain a believe system in opposition to your sensory input. That's why we use the phrase "come to your senses" as a metaphor for sanity.

So I am having all the Nines clean up their act –literally. This is a symbolic way of asserting themselves. In graduate school I did my MA thesis on Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian media guru of the late 60's. His operative phrase was "First you create an environment and then the environment creates you." He was referring primarily to mass media, but the principle is portable. You can change your environment in small moves. You can do it by the two great coordinates of life: space and time. You can clean so many minutes a day or you can clean the debris from a small, deliberately chosen area. When you assert yourself, take effective action, over a symbolic area, you change your self-image.

Besides coaching Nines in personal areas, I also coach a social worker in Virginia whose office is a mess and whose computer reflects and repeats the office. (Continued on page 3)

Clean Up Your Act! (continued)

The attractiveness of the intervention is that it can be done in small increments and is external. Many coaches recommend journaling, and I think it is effective as a tool for self-observation. But after you observe, then you need to act. The old scholastic axiom works: *solvitur ambulando* – it is solved by walking. The understanding was that some things are solved not by thinking or willing, but by taking whatever action you thought you needed to take.

Symbols are quite arbitrary until you add your own intention. Red, white and blue are just colors until you associate them with patriotism and history. Just cleaning up your room is not going to do anything for you unless you intend to make it a symbolic act. That's why the old story about the two bricklayers persists. One said he was just mixing mud and the other said he was building a Cathedral. Same bricks, different symbolic content.

So it turns out that “clean up your act” is a tell-tale metaphor.

Help for Coaches

Want a quick summary of key coaching strategies for each Enneagram style? Now available as an e-book, our tips for coaching the nine styles point out how to match your clients at the level of first-order change, then help them break through to second-order change. A free preview of *Coaching the Nine Styles* is available at both our web sites.

Mary and Clarence

ONE-ON-ONE COACHING TELECLINIC

Mary or Clarence will mentor you in out-of-the-box coaching principles and practices applied to your own situations. Enrich your life and/or help others by learning how to accelerate transformational change.