

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

Good Coaching Cures Your Education by Clarence Thomson

Perhaps Kansas City's most prestigious corporation is Hallmark, the greeting card people. They're currently enthralled, I'm told by an insider, with Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton's new book *Now, Discover Your Strengths*.

If you know the Enneagram, you'll find it hard to avoid a certain degree of smugness. The authors do research for Gallup and then talk to mind-numbing numbers of people and then collate the answers. After exhaustive research they concluded what every grade school teacher could have told them: that most people have two assumptions about performance: 1) anyone can learn anything and 2) the most growth happens when we correct our weaknesses.



Really. It took a million interviews to discern that? When I coach, I make two background assumptions. I learn about their personal background and that's important, but I also assume two general prevailing pressures: 1) my client will be influenced by the Enneagram style of the culture and 2) my client will be influenced by the school system. I take it as self-evident that no matter what we learn, we always learn the system that taught it to us. Our school system makes those two assumptions above all the time. The consequence of this is that whatever you do poorly, you do more of. If you can't "get" math, you take remedial math. You love literature and so you already know how to read, so you don't have to take that elective.

Boys and girls, if you are going to coach and contribute to your client's life about motivation, keep one watershed distinction in mind. It is a simple distinction, almost self-evident, but crucial. How is your client motivated? Is your client's motivation "intrinsic" or "extrinsic?" In the book mentioned at the top, the search is for strengths in order to follow the geography of ability and desire. The underlying assumption is that our strengths are in line with our abilities coupled to our motivation.

When a coach looks for strengths, it never works to inquire whether the client is motivated. Not having motivation is like not having attention. The person is dead. Even the most supine style Nine, famous for inertia and "lack of motivation," is motivated by a desire for peace and quiet -- harmony is the motive. I coached a talented style Nine a year ago who was enormously helped when he stopped saying he lacked motivation and just said, "I hate my job."

I have bad news for the researchers above. Our school system is based on extrinsic motivation. And corporate life (the context of the book's research) is also based on extrinsic motivation. Bush's "No Child Left Behind" is hated by earnest teachers. I've talked to some and thought of my own 15 years in the classroom. "Teaching to the test," the strategy necessary to get federal funding, relies exclusively on extrinsic motivation.

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Poor teachers have always tested more than good ones -- to force the students to learn what they couldn't inspire them to learn. US schools and US corporations have long been in a symbiotic relationship. Our schools teach the skills needed by corporations.

Corporations recruit those who do best in school for good reason, and the reason is invisible: they fit the shared system well.



Corporations reward performance whether you like your work or not. Telling the corporations that happy employees are more productive and using the self-identified talents of the employee is good business will work a small percentage of the time. The more demanding, creative and enjoyable the job is, the better that advice works. Don't try that with Wal-Mart cashiers or any of the millions of under-employed or most of the people doing menial tasks. This advice works better as you go up the corporate ladder -- and there are problems there because the extrinsic motivation (\$\$\$) is so great people will hate to give those hated jobs up. If you're cooking onions, you can't smell perfume.

Schools and corporations, especially large ones (and for that matter especially large schools), have their own agenda and it overlaps with personal fulfillment accidentally and intermittently.

That's why coaching is so essential and in many cases is counter-cultural. Coaches are not teachers trying to impart information or meet any goal not clearly understood and relished by the client. You will have to consciously work against the educational system. Schools give praise, stars, grades, trophies, certificates and diplomas. They do not inquire about your enthusiasm for calculus or iambic pentameter. The team that scores the most points wins, not the team that enjoyed the game the most.

So when gurus pontificate, murmuring "follow your bliss," they are undermining the American way, academic success, corporate profits and long-term employment. Do yourself a favor. Read Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards* for some fine research on how this works in schools. A lighter, more business-context treatment of the same can be found in Daniel Pink's recent book, *Drive*.

The Enneagram coach needs to realize that no matter what extrinsic motivation is in play (and there are many good ones), the intrinsic motivation will always be a factor.

So when you coach, you usually contradict the two assumptions articulated by Buckingham and Clifton. You don't assume your client can do anything and you don't correct weaknesses. You coach: you identify, strengthen, polish, sculpt, encourage and accompany. You don't correct nearly as much as you encourage. Remember when you were in school and the teacher would "correct" your paper, making red marks on every mistake? You do the opposite. You read clients and point out what they do best and ask for more of that. What would school have been like if your teachers had done that? That's the way you want your clients to think and feel.

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