

By Ann Lewis

Sometimes clients bring the baggage of past, negative work experiences like an invisible elephant into the coaching relationship, restricting their choices. It is the coach's job to bring them back to effectiveness

MANY PEOPLE EXPERIENCE significant setbacks at some point during their working lives. Often, over time, they recover, or seem to recover, and move on. Occasionally, however, what's happening in the moment will bring back the responses that were triggered by the original situation. If these negative associations are left unaddressed, the consequences may be that the client maintains a narrow and distorted view of themselves and their potential, and sometimes unconsciously takes a risk-averse approach to their future choices.

What follows is a hypothetical case study illustrating how you might coach someone back to full effectiveness when their confidence has been hit by previous bad experiences.

#### David's dilemma

Your client, David, is an experienced operations manager with a team of six direct and 35 indirect reports. He has a good track record in his current post, and his coaching is mainly developmental.

David reports to a newly appointed operations director. His normally ordered and calm approach has begun to disintegrate since his new boss arrived, and as his coach, you sense that there is more to this alteration in his demeanour than is warranted by an uncomplicated change of leader.

When you give him feedback about the recent changes to his working methods, David reluctantly tells you that, in a previous job, years ago, he was 'encouraged to leave' following the arrival of a new director. Consequently, he is now worrying about the stability of his current position.

Bad work experiences, whether they are the result of poorly managed mergers, bullying, toxic working relationships, severe stress or circumstances which challenge an individual's integrity, create negative emotions, which all adversely affect relationships with boss, colleagues and loved ones. The resulting stress reactions may eventually compromise health and general wellbeing.

The approach outlined here is designed to help David gain a rounded and realistic view of his changing circumstances, and to move forward positively, with greater awareness and resilience.

There are five key aims for David (the client) to work through:

1. To create space for him to understand and acknowledge the original experience and its effect on him. This may be a painful process and he may be reluctant to revisit the emotional memory, so he will need to feel safe.
2. To support him to create a clear and achievable vision of the way in which he would feel confident to be operating in his role in relation to his new boss.
3. To raise his awareness of who he is, in terms of his strengths, values, passion and contribution.

4. To ensure that he is able to acknowledge and learn from his own response to the way the original situation developed.
5. To create a plan for going forward to which he can commit.

Begin the coaching session by asking David to describe exactly how things happened in his earlier job, including the emotions he felt at the time: was he anxious, demeaned, humiliated? This emotional memory may be what is unconsciously coming into play now, and it is useful if you also encourage him to recall what events helped him to recover.

With a clear picture of the earlier event, ask him to talk about the differences between that situation and his current one, and what he is assuming about the new situation which stops him from seeing it in a positive light.

At this awareness-raising stage, David could also benefit from learning more about his personal stress responses, and if appropriate, you could offer him relaxation and visualisation tools.

#### Creating a vision

- *Time to start rebuilding* Ask David to describe, in detail, how he would like

are wrong"), which may make vital learning difficult to achieve. David needs space to consider how his response to his former director might have affected what happened. How has he changed? What, if anything, might he have handled differently? Absorbing this learning is important in helping to avoid a repeat of his earlier experience.

#### Moving on

Armed with raised awareness and reflection about himself, David can now devise a plan for developing his working relationship with his new boss, based on his strengths, expertise and values, all from a position of greater confidence. Now is the time to commit to an action plan for building this relationship.

It is likely to be a new piece of work, and will need separate and careful contracting, particularly around boundaries and confidentiality.

In most situations, this five-stage process will be effective in enabling clients to develop a more realistic and optimistic outlook. If a client continues to show signs of more deep seated anxiety, or appears depressed, he or she should be encouraged to talk to their GP or to seek help from a professional counsellor. ■

» Further reading and practical resources are available at [www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork](http://www.cipd.co.uk/coachingatwork)

#### About the author

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“Bad work experiences create negative emotions which affect relationships with boss, colleagues and loved ones”

#### Further information

- Daniel Goleman, with the Dalai Lama, *Destructive Emotions* (Bloomsbury)
- Graham Lee, *Leadership Coaching* (CIPD; in particular consider Lee's ACE FIRST model)
- Anna Rushton, *How to Cope Successfully with Stress* (Wellhouse Publishing)
- For assessing stress levels, StressScan™ from Consulting Tools [www.consultingtools.com](http://www.consultingtools.com)
- British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy. For a list of practitioners by location visit [www.bacp.co.uk](http://www.bacp.co.uk)

to relate to, and work with, his new boss. How would he recognise a fulfilling working relationship? What would he bring to it?

● *Revisiting skills, values and strengths* Much water has passed under many bridges since David's bad experience. How has he developed? What are his strengths? What is important to him, and how does he bring that to his work? How would his team describe his strengths? What personal resources does he bring to this situation which he may not have had in the earlier one? The answers to these questions are his building blocks.

● *Taking on the learning* Often when bad experiences occur, people don't have the opportunity to take stock with someone neutral. Friends and family can be enormously supportive, but they may construct a coping myth ("You are 100 per cent right; 'they'

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