



# Coaching and Self-Generation

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Developing self-generation in ourselves (and in our team members and clients) establishes the grounding from which specific skills and competencies can be chosen and executed. As coaches, we are continually working at becoming more self-generative in our own lives. Similarly, to focus our coaching efforts simply on measurable outcomes while ignoring the calling to the inner work of self-generation misses the extraordinary leverage for extraordinary learning that self-generation provides.

A central question, then, is how we as coaches can support each of the four components of self-generation: self-observation, realization, reorganization, and stabilization. Let's explore how coaching with Janet helped her gain traction toward a different way of leading.

Janet was in the throes of a self-induced difficult situation. Recently promoted, she was taking personal responsibility for solving field problems, at which she was greatly skilled. Her job requirements had changed, but she was the same person. Her strong identity as a helpful problem solver was supported by the appreciation she received from others. In spite of her best intentions, Janet was paying an enormous price, and it was beginning to become evident, at least to herself, that she was overextended.

## Coaching Self-Observation

In self-observation, the client gains practice in observing her behaviors in action. Mostly this takes place after the fact. With practice, however, comes familiarity. And with familiarity comes recognition, in the moment, that a particular behavior or response is happening.

The coach is critical in inviting the team member or client into this process. We are generally unable to see our own habits. As coaches, we are often able to see the limited and habitual nature of how our client senses, interprets, and acts in her world. (Lest we become arrogant about our own perceptiveness and wisdom, it is important to remember that we are also creatures of habit, by definition unable to see our own limitations.)

The coach invites the client to observe her own habits and offers the structure of a self-observation practice so that, over time, she becomes increasingly familiar with their nature. The coach connects what happens in the moment with relevant context.

*In our conversations, it quickly became evident that Janet's urge to help was pretty automatic. When someone needed something of her, her body responded with an increase in energy, and she quickly organized herself around helping (read: rescuing) the other person. While the urge began in her body, there was also a story (probably learned many years ago) that she could solve the problem faster and more easily than others.*



*Through coaching, Janet began a regular body practice to help her become more skillful at noticing the subtle experiences within her body, particularly the increase in energy that was the first indication of her habitual urge to help. In addition, she began a rigorous self-observation practice to become more familiar with how this habit arose.*

*Within a few weeks, something that had previously been automatic became more conscious. She was able to see, in fine detail, exactly what happened within her when someone came to her with a problem. This included being able to describe the direct, sensory experience of her attachments to being kind, helping, and solving others' problems. She could sense the pull of her need for validation from others in her still new role.*

*Through becoming skilled at observing the minute details of her habits, she became intimately familiar with her own habits. She was now a conscious witness of something that previously had been automatic.*

## Coaching Realization

With familiarity comes recognition. This is the waking up to the moment of presence. The shift is from self-observation (in which we are observing a phenomenon, usually with hindsight) to realization (the recognition, in the moment, that this is the phenomenon). With realization come increased energy, expanded awareness, and simultaneous recognition that it is a phenomenon and we can choose whether to indulge our habit or do something else.

Realization tends to emerge naturally from a rigorous practice of self-observation. As we've noted elsewhere, the practice makes realization much more likely.

*Soon Janet had moments of realization. This was the Aha! moment. A call would come, Janet would be on the phone with someone in the field, and she would recognize the familiar urge to rescue. In this moment of recognition, Janet realized that she had a choice. The automatic nature of the reaction had been interrupted, the future was unwritten, and a new landscape of possibility was revealed.*

The coach can also support the waking of realization by reflecting to the client when the habit is arising during the coaching conversation itself. (Recall from Chapter One that June, in her conversation with Rick, provided a real-time assessment to Rick that invited him into a moment of realization that his defensiveness was arising right then.) This real-time experience, in the presence of the coach, is a powerful moment.

## Coaching Reorganization

Reorganization becomes possible in the moment of conscious realization. In this present intelligent moment, we have many choices available to us. The practiced, automatic response means following the default tendency. Self-observation and realization provide the possibility of interrupting a habit and replacing it with a new response. Reorganization is the actual shift



from this default habit to something new. We mobilize our bodies, our energies, and our nervous systems toward a new action.

Coaches serve this component through several means. The first is by supporting the client in recognizing and describing what an alternative response to the triggering situation might be. In essence, this makes available to the client a new distinction that constitutes a more life-affirming and effective response. The second is by helping the client experience reorganization in real time, thus providing a direct experience of a reorganization move that can serve as a reference. And the third is to design practices with the client that she can work with, between coaching conversations, to build competency in the new behavior.

*We explored a range of alternative responses, as well as the potential benefits of placing more responsibility in the hands of Janet's field people. Along with alternative behavioral responses, she discovered that she could learn to interpret the field problem as a development opportunity for her people rather than as a rescuing opportunity for herself. This new interpretive choice led to an emerging identity as a developer of problem solvers rather than as the queen problem solver herself.*

*With this new view of her emerging identity, Janet learned to take advantage of her moments of realization. She learned to reorganize herself, in the moment, to explore with her people how a problem could best be solved without her. This was a new competency, and it took practice and discipline at first.*

*In these conversations, it usually became quickly apparent that there were other good alternatives. While a few of her direct reports initially leaned on her to travel, she discovered that most didn't actually expect her to jump on a plane. This came as a bit of a surprise and also as a relief.*

*Janet's new identity made intellectual sense to her, but it still took conscious attention, even effort, to override her historical urges to care-take and problem-solve. She actively practiced letting go of her need to be of help in the ways she had previously defined it. This was essential in order for her to build, and sustain, a new identity and role in the organization.*

## Coaching Stabilization

The final phase of self-generation is stabilization. This phase requires that we practice the reorganization and the new behavior to the point that it becomes our new default.

Repetition is key. As leaders, we tend to move to the level of our training, of our practice. It's not cerebral knowledge of what we should do that drives our actions in a crunch situation; it's what we've embodied through practice and repetition.<sup>8</sup> When we practice a habit, that's what we come, more and more, to embody. When we practice a new behavior, first it becomes increasingly available to us, and eventually it becomes our new default. The body's capacity to learn and incorporate new responses is much deeper than previously thought.



As coaches, we support this process by designing repetitive practices with clients that they can work with over time as they learn to embody the new behavior. The client takes these practices out into the world. Some practices may be done in the morning or evening outside work hours as a solitary activity; other practices require others or are best done in the context of a work environment and all the opportunities and challenges that go along with that environment.

It is through practices that clients become different people, capable of responding to inevitable difficulties in new and creative ways. If we want to change, we must practice something new.

*Janet became able, with practice, to stabilize her new behavior. She articulated her new role to her people and found, with few exceptions, that they welcomed her redefinition of her identity in relation to them. She practiced exploring alternative ways of responding to field issues. While she still traveled to the field, it was now a conscious choice made in consideration of a number of factors rather than an automatic default.*

*It was essential for Janet to be heartfelt and compassionate with herself when she lapsed. There were a number of breakdowns, and Janet had several periods of real anxiety that she was abandoning those who counted on her. When these occurred, it became important to practice forgiveness and compassion and to remind herself about the new leader that she was becoming.*

*She came to take great pleasure in her new identity as a developer of others and found herself looking at field problems through the bigger lens of overall organizational resources and priorities. She also found that it was much easier to keep a reasonable balance between professional and other priorities. She came to really enjoy the new role and went on to great success.*

With coaching support, Janet embarked on a process of *transcending* and *including* who she had been to become a different kind of leader. We can see the four components of self-generation in her development of this new identity and the associated competencies.

In our later conversations, Janet frequently reported to me that she responded to a previously challenging circumstance in a new way that had become effortless and normal. In fact, she sometimes didn't even notice the situation until afterward; the old habit simply didn't arise. A moment that previously would have triggered her desire to rescue passed so easily that it was unremarkable. The ground of Janet's being has changed, and she has literally become a different person.

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