Coaching With Grace


“People who help people move by the grace within the human spirit. This grace is the primary source of effective helping behaviour. Its presence and expression are entirely independent of professional training: it can inform and be enhanced by the latter, but can also be obscured, suppressed and distorted by it.”

- John Heron, The Complete Facilitator’s Handbook

Think of a person in your life who moves through the world with grace. Not necessarily a physical grace, but a spiritual form that lightens your burdens and touches you at your core. How do you feel in this person’s presence? How do they carry themself? What do you notice about their tone, body language, gestures, or other non-verbal communication? How do they respond to you when you are struggling and take a risk to express emotion? What do they say that puts you at ease? What do their actions convey about their feelings toward and belief in you?

Author John Heron articulates what he calls “Keys of Grace” to describe the qualities of a helping professional. Heron believes that inner grace is a “spiritual endowment and potential that everyone has” (Heron 1999); when cultivated, this grace manifests toward clients, or coachees, in multiple ways.

The three that we pay close attention to in coaching are:

1. **Empathy:** Do I feel and express warm concern and acceptance for my coachee?

2. **Respect for Persons:** Can I respect the full autonomy of the coachee to choose when to change and grow?

3. **Distress-Free Authority:** Can I resist the displacement of my own anxieties onto my actions when coaching others?

As basic as these three “keys” of grace may sound, they can be extraordinarily difficult to enact when people’s fear, anxiety, and distress are at play. Education Professor Robert Sylwester tells us, “Our emotional system is a complex and error-prone system that is quite resistant to change. Emotion is often a more powerful determinate of our behavior than our brain’s logical/rational processes” (Sylwester 1994)
Recent advances in neuroscience have elucidated that social threats to our sense of status, belonging, autonomy, or justice can trigger the same primitive brain response as a physical survival threat. In other words, we enter self-preservation mode: shut down, tune out, and become defensive or closed to “outside” forces.

Now drop down into the complex social-political terrain of schools, where power dynamics and perceived disrespect often characterize human interactions. Into this scene you walk, a new coach, ready to help and support your coachee. Just imagine what fears and emotional reactions may be triggered, perhaps unconsciously, for this person you don’t yet know.

- Why was I assigned a coach?
- What is wrong with me? Am I inadequate at my job?
- Why can’t I just close my door and do my own thing? I know what I’m doing!
- What does this person think they have to offer me anyway?
- This is completely unfair. Mr. Smith is a far worse teacher than I am, and he didn’t get assigned a coach.

If any such concerns are triggered for your coachee, your ability to coach with grace becomes all the more important. If you can communicate warmth, acceptance of this person no matter what they are struggling with, absolute respect, and distress-free authority, you exponentially increase your chances of building a viable coaching relationship.