SLOWING DOWN TO CREATE SPACE

Robert Biswas-Diener and **Christian van Nieuwerburgh** invite us to embrace time in abundance and to notice how it can transform a coaching experience.

Too Slow for those who Wait,
Too Swift for those who Fear,
Too Long for those who Grieve,
Too Short for those who Rejoice;
But for those who Love,
Time is not.
– Henry Van Dyke, Music and Other Poems, 1904

If there is a single theme that courses through all coaching conversations, it is time. This takes many forms: clients feeling that they do not have enough time, that they are stuck in the past, that they are obsessed with the future, that they do not know how to organise their time, or that they are suffering under the tyranny of deadlines. What's more, in the post-pandemic world, organisations and individuals are thinking about time as directly linked to wellbeing. Given the surfeit of attention given to time in coaching, it makes sense to explore it so that we might better serve our clients.

KEEPING TIME

It is tempting to think of time as a uniform metric – hours are standard and one minute is equal to the next. A minute in Kobe lasts the same 60 seconds that it does in Kinshasa. But that line of reasoning does not hold up to scrutiny. Anyone who has had the opportunity to travel has likely experienced the ways that people from various corners of the world relate differently to time.

The late psychologist Bob Levine spent much of his career studying pace of life across cultures. He was a clever scientist and he used creative metrics to measure the tempo of societies. For example, he compared the main clock at central train stations with the time kept by the atomic clock; he surreptitiously timed how fast postal employees sold a stamp to a customer; and he clocked how fast pedestrians walked a standard city block during the morning commute. He ultimately discarded other methods, such as measuring the time between honks in rush hour traffic.

Levine discovered that societies differ markedly in their relationship with time. Some cultures prize punctuality and efficiency

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(Switzerland tops the list), while others advocate a more laid-back attitude about arrivals, departures and deadlines (examples include Brazil and Mexico). He also discovered that pace of life matters. People who live in slower-paced societies suffer less heart disease and there is a slight tendency towards helping others more. On the other hand, people from quicker places experience more economic vitality and report being somewhat happier.

There is another way the 'time is standard' approach does not hold up. Time does not feel the same from one moment to the next. You will admit that time varies greatly in quality. Your birthday, for instance, might feel different in many ways to the day before it. Your last day of work stands apart from the others. The day before a new product launch might feel abnormally short! Weekends stand in contrast to weekdays. Thirty minutes in the dentist's chair is different from 30 minutes walking along a sandy beach. This is known as subjective time, and it stands apart from the more objective clock time on which societies run. Scholars sometimes deconstruct subjective time into three distinct categories:

1. **Mental time travel.** This refers to the tendency of people to shift their time focus by remembering the past, experiencing the present and anticipating the future. This is an important skill as it helps us envision consequences, link past and present experiences, create plans and dream about a future self. Coaches tend to explicitly focus on this element of subjective time.
2. **Perceiving time.** This refers to a person's ability to notice time: noting milestones, appreciating time available, and

implementing routines. Perceiving time allows us to pace ourselves, take breaks, increase urgency and appreciate limited time.

3. **Interpretation of time.** As the name suggests, this aspect of subjective time is all about understanding time through a cultural lens. It includes the value a person places on time and the strategies they use for engaging with it. For instance, in one culture, being ten minutes late to a meeting might be offensive, while in another culture that would be considered normal.

SUBJECTIVE TIME IN COACHING

Recently, we have begun to think of coaching as time set apart. At their best, coaching sessions feel slow and spacious. In the fast-paced world of work, coaching can feel like a mental time-out, giving our clients the chance to take a breath and to reflect and plan outside of the pressures of daily life. Coaching is a castle in time, with a moat that keeps the siege of clock time from breaching the walls. We have identified four specific ways that coaches can think about time to improve their interactions with clients (see panel).

THINK OF TIME AS BEING ABUNDANT

We have noticed that less experienced coaches sometimes fret about time. As the session winds to a close, they feel pressured to work harder and ensure their clients arrive at new insights. Unfortunately, this can be contagious, and clients are sensitive to the change in pace. As an alternative, we recommend that coaches perceive time as abundant. Instead of worrying that there are only five minutes left, say, the coach can appreciate that there is still a full five minutes left. There is an irony here in that thinking of a session as being abundant in time allows coaches to slow down and, in doing so, offer more opportunities for reflection. Not only that, but coaches can remind themselves that a huge amount of client change occurs in the ample time between sessions, not just within them.

THINK OF TIME AS ACTIVE LISTENING

We live in an age of talking. Technology has amplified lessons, opinions and news at a scale never matched in history. As a result, giving clients the time to be heard and to reflect can feel like quality time. It has been said that what we spend time focusing on is what we value. If this is true, coaching can be profoundly validating because what we focus on is the client – their learning, their growth, their wellbeing and their self-awareness. What's more, the temporal space and silence that mark great coaching sessions can model to clients that downtime is not wasted time.

SLOW TIME IS REFLECTIVE TIME

It can be tempting to think of our sessions as unfolding at a constant pace. Instead, coaches can think of their coaching conversations in much the same way that Levine thought of societies: as varying in pace. Good coaches can employ perceiving time to recognise when to slow things down and when to speed them up. The slower moments are more reflective and the faster ones can be more practical. Daniel Kahneman's book *Thinking, Fast and Slow* is an excellent resource for coaches.

RELAX AND SLOW DOWN

In the Swahili speaking regions of east Africa, you sometimes hear the phrase *pole na kazi*. It means, in essence, 'sorry you have to work'. It is a general expression of empathy, but it also denotes a 'take it easy' attitude. You can see similar sentiments in Spanish-speaking cultures that suggest that work can be done tomorrow, in various island cultures where rushing is discouraged and in the Japanese concept of *ma* (the pause between). Coaches can adopt this mindset by feeling comfortable if their client wants time to think in silence, shows up late for an appointment or if not everything gets covered in a single session.

The tension for coaches is to create a sense of abundance of time (spaciousness) while also using the constraints of time-bound conversations to create a sense of urgency for the client to make decisions and commit to experimentation. What do you need to do for yourself so that you are not feeling under time pressure when coaching? Here are some suggestions for coaches:

1. Arrive early so that you are not feeling time pressure.
2. Engineer your space to create listening environments.
3. Slow things down at the start of the session.
4. Say 'we still have 15 minutes' rather than 'there's only 15 minutes left'.
5. Avoid standing up or leaving an online meeting before the client at the end of the session.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr Robert Biswas-Diener is a thought leader in positive psychology coaching. He frequently publishes research on topics such as happiness, hospitality, teaching and coaching. Robert loves to apply his background in psychology to the coaching endeavor and is eager to add nuance to and improve coaching practice. His forthcoming book, *Positive Provocation* (2023), is a call to coaches to re-examine their foundational assumptions about how coaching works. Robert has trained coaches at Positive Acorn for a decade and has run workshops for professionals in 25 countries.

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