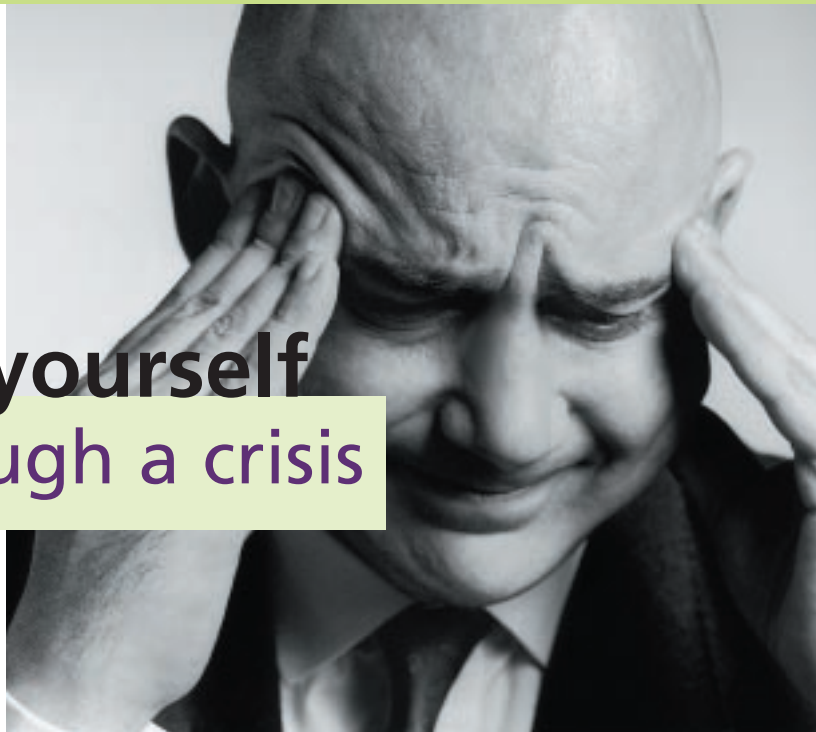


Coaching yourself through a crisis

Philip Atkinson



You have all the resources to help clients deal with crises, but can you use them to help yourself?

Introduction

Equipped with the strategies and skills to help others through difficult times, we sometimes overlook the fact that we, as coaches, may have our own big issues to resolve. In this module, Philip Atkinson outlines the actions and strategies available to coaches who have to confront and deal with crisis in their own lives.

Some years ago, an insurance company used to advertise its core message on TV with the theme 'Don't make a drama out of a crisis.' Scenes depicted included homes being flooded, cars falling over the edge of a quarry, and a 'war-torn' kitchen resulting from children mischievously placing cans of dog food in a very hot oven! All these scenarios were causes of trauma, and the message of the company was 'Don't let this momentary crisis become a theme or drama of your life.' I don't know how well the advert served the business, but it acts as a

constant reminder to me and my colleagues that sometimes we have to take one step back when things go wrong. Coaches really should have their own formal coach for this purpose but, surprisingly, most rely on their own resources.

In the absence of formal support, we coaches can take charge and deal with our own crises. You will, no doubt, have developed tools and techniques, and have relied on your own experience to support your clients. But how well equipped does this make you to deal with your own crisis? Many advisers argue against the 'heal thyself' idea, stating that you cannot be an objective observer and a participant at the same time. They say you cannot occupy two logical levels, and cannot appreciate and resolve issues both as a coach and a client. Others disagree: plenty of people have done and continue to do just this. They have taken personal responsibility for their future and

for resolving their crises. They are largely untrained. They do not need counsellors; they just get on with their lives.

An obvious example is seen in the power of the maternal influence – there are countless mothers who have confronted adversity and pulled their families through it. They did not have the organisational resource of a coach assigned to them. They had to rely on their intuition and experience, and on their own personal set of friends or family as their only resource.

Key learning points

- ◆ Used alongside a supportive network and methodology, coaching can help you through a crisis.
- ◆ Crisis busting: a definition and a six-step approach.

Step 4: Design a recovery plan

Quite simply, you have a long-term aim and future state, but you also need some sticking plasters – solutions that will get you through today, tomorrow and next week. Design your recovery plan. Write it down.

Step 5: Implement and gain support

Progress is achieved solely by decisive action. Procrastination never built anything of value. Your faith in your recovery plan will increase when you take action. Each action should propel you forward. If you measure progress, you will know whether you are going forward, standing still or slipping back down. Developing the sensory acuity to know when things are on course (or not) depends on how well you know yourself. Deciding now on your objectives and documenting them is the key to success. Those who document them are 90 per cent more successful than those who do not. Keeping a log and ticking off progress will further bolster your strengths and add to the belief that the crisis will soon be resolved. Gain support from your growing network of helpers and supporters. Focus only on those who are committed to your advancement. Deny the cynics and sceptics a voice. What you achieve is determined by those with whom you associate. So focus on those that add strong emotional value and ditch the rest.

Step 6: Capture the learning and take preventative action

It is simple to capture the learnings as you maintain your log and work through your recovery plan. This is a powerful resource. It is a document that testifies that you overcame adversity, and it is a key step towards taking preventative action to halt, and certainly to reduce, the intensity of crises hitting you again. Perhaps the most

important element of any learning is what I believe to be a moral responsibility for the learner. Teach someone else how to use it to help others manage their crises.

Summary

Who knows when one of these crises will hit? Who knows how it will unfold and impact upon you? One thing for sure is that you decide how you respond.

Responses differ markedly. Two people may react very differently to the same threat. One can run away and hide; the other does their best to take action. One places trust in their actions; the other does not. One may be more optimistic than the other. The optimist may blame others; the pessimist blames the self and looks inward.

Break away from any pre-conditioned response and use the six steps. Be decisive. Seek the support of others.

What we do know is that people who deal with crises of any sort take action. They create a network

‘The real test is how you respond to crises’

of people and resources and they make decisions. Even if they make poor or ill-informed decisions, they are getting feedback on their progress. Action enables them to know that their actions and the responses are taking them nearer their goals of moving further away from the crisis.

We know that long before coaches and counsellors existed, people experienced crises and resolved them. Although having a network of coaching buddies is a powerful resource, focus on the six steps that can be taken to deal with your own crises. I know that many coaches have their own coach, but for those who don't, this approach can work. And just remember the analogy that doctors make the worst patients.

References

- 1 J M Fisher, The Process of Transition Diagram, updated 2003. See <http://www.businessballs.com/ProcessofchangeJF2003.pdf>

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Effective crisis control depends on how you respond

This is also the case in many other areas of life. Crisis control can work without coaches – but in addition to a supportive network, a methodology helps.

Life crises

We all experience life crises – but we don't always manage to deal with them well. They range from business to personal demands. There are a multitude of pressures. Only a few are mentioned here. They include:

- potential or actual job loss
- business failure
- Inland Revenue investigations
- separation from partner or family
- changes in other relationships
- divorce
- bankruptcy
- excessive debt
- infringements of the law
- coming to terms with addictions and bad habits
- ill-health and health scares.

These critical incidents are usually the precursors of negative emotional

states. We may experience these as temporary, short-lived states. We do, however, need to deal with them so they do not become a chronic drain on our energies.

Knowing how to deal with personal crises often helps us to take the steps to resolve them, and to seek the right network of people to support us through them. What follows is a sensible and sensitive guide to riding those crises and coming out stronger. The purpose of this approach is either to shorten the length of the dark tunnel, or to come out of it faster. It is about taking action and moving towards the end of the tunnel into the light of the future.

Crises are set to test our character

It's not what happens to us that is important; it's how we respond to what happens to us that matters. Bad things happen to good people – that's the real world. And you'll note that challenges arise just when you don't think you have the resources to deal with them. Crises do not usually occur when you are at your best emotionally – when your body is buzzing with a healthy, positive

attitude and your energy levels are at their best. Why might that be?

The real test is how you respond to crises. Action is the key. This is where one of the key principles of effective crisis control kicks in.

We refer to crisis control, not crisis management. You cannot manage a crisis. It is too unpredictable. If it were not, it would not be a crisis. A crisis has to be controlled, not organised. You either take control and deal with it directly, or share and

consult and work with others who can help. You cannot manage it, because you have yet to understand what it means to you. Once key issues are resolved, you can, however, later manage your way out of the nitty-gritty elements, but the big picture needs you to take charge. Yet, what is all too common is that no action is taken. The biggest problem is that when the crisis hits, what most people do is the worst thing they can do: they ignore it, they hide away from it. They think it will go away.

Crisis busting

Crisis busting is an explosive term which conjures up the image and the visualisation of taking action and taking the problem apart, reducing its emotional intensity before managing the tactics of resolving the smaller issues that compose the larger problem. It highlights that this is a passing issue which, when confronted, will reside in the memory as something learned, making you stronger for the future.

The route for crisis busting is outlined in a six-step approach. The following outline helps people take charge and control the process:

Step 1: Define the crisis and gain perspective.

Step 2: Assess the implications.

Step 3: Creatively review possibilities and resources.

Step 4: Design a recovery plan.

Step 5: Implement and gain support.

Step 6: Capture the learning and take preventative action.

The stages in this six-step approach are very similar to some of the key issues within the transition curve.¹ Coaches are well aware of the methodology and the key stages within that curve. They will know that each of us moves through shock and denial towards learning and full integration. We know that each step forward is a step away from crisis, ambiguity and conflict, and a step towards taking charge and being in control. The six-step process provides the knowledge that things will get better as long as decisive action is taken. By knowing the steps in advance, one can adopt a more optimistic attitude and feel that every day and every action moves us in the right direction

Step 1: Define the crisis and gain perspective

Probably the most difficult thing to do is to gain perspective on the problem, and to avoid catastrophising the event and feeling overwhelmed.

Assess what has happened and look at it from several perspectives. View it from different positions. What meanings can you deduce from being the subjective recipient of bad news? What could be the meanings that other objective observers could derive from the situation? How do these differ from your perception? For instance, using temporal perceptual positions, in three years'

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time, what meanings could a complete outsider gain from the incident? By doing this, you are creating alternative meanings and interpretations for the current crisis. This takes the sense of being overwhelmed and the fear out of the problem, and enables the crisis to be handled without the emotional intensity. Asking, ‘What could this mean to me?’ is very positive. Rather than a direct cause-effect statement on the lines of ‘X has happened, so that means Y’, you have alternative meanings. By developing a more flexible level of interpretation, you can construct a more positive way of dealing with the issue.

Step 2: Assess the implications

What are the real implications of the crisis, or what might they be? Develop a different perceptual position. Imagine that the problem is now resolved. Decide how long you think it may have taken to resolve it. Guess, if need be. Use your intuition for the resolution of the crisis. From this future perceptual position, look back to the problem today. Think through the major barriers you faced and the key steps you took in anticipating, walking around or reducing their intensity. I realise you may not know – but if you do, what are the key things that you need to commit to today that will make the solution much easier to identify and implement? Work through your own personalised SWOT of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats; and imagine what you will learn in resolving this crisis that can make you stronger.

Step 3: Creatively review possibilities and resources

In crises, people tend to focus on lone or single solutions. The pressure of the problem does not encourage right-brain thinking.

Walt Disney used a powerful process to break away from any left-brain thinking, and this has become a technique for innovation and creative thinking. When experiencing huge difficulties with producing new films, he applied the Disney Formula of dreamer, critic and realist. He would apply the three perceptual positions. The first was the dreamer, encouraging staff to think outside the box and explore new, impossible solutions. He would then ask them to change their attitude to that of the critic, and look for as many ways as they could to make the ideas fail. Then, in the new perceptual position of the realist, they would work through the issues from a rounded perspective, resulting in completely new approaches. Using this approach gets you away from the feeling of being overwhelmed.

Now, focus on your personal resources, based on your SWOT. To make it even easier, think of your current skill sets and your positive beliefs about how you have made things work in the past. Think about how you can leverage these trusted and tested skills and beliefs to resolve any possible problems. And how can you turn and treat perceived roadblocks as simple learning curves, developing new resilience and robustness? Take confidence in your new thinking and design a plan for recovery.