

Coaching at Work

“Tuned In”

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TUNED IN

Working through the body, we can explore and change how we connect and build trust with others. We can expand our capacity to make meaningful action. It is the essence of somatic coaching, says **Eunice Aquilina**



“To work somatically with someone is to work with the unity of the human organism. To do this we first observe how life takes shape in the individual, and how the individual organises him/herself towards life. We then intervene with listening, speaking, breathing, touch and movement practices”

Richard Strozzi-Heckler

If coaching is a learning conversation, somatic coaching offers an approach to learning that enables the client to take actions previously unavailable to them. It also cultivates their capacity to be self-educating and self-generating.

The term ‘somatics’ is from the Greek *soma* – or the “living body in its wholeness”. Somatics refers to the ‘body’ as the instrument that holds our lived experience and defines our way of being in the world. The body has a wisdom and intelligence all of its own. By bringing our awareness to our body – to our ‘self’ – we can tune in to that wisdom. Working ‘through the body’, a somatic coach can support their client to cultivate a self that embodies pragmatic wisdom, grounded compassion and skilful action¹.

One client, a leader in a UK energy company, says: “The concept of self as a leader being the primary source of power and our capacity to literally

Case study: The cat’s out of the bag

The client A lawyer seconded from a large public sector organisation to work as a line manager in a small one that is going through some difficult changes

I hadn’t really grasped what somatic meant when I arranged to work with a somatic coach. I wanted to find a way of asserting my own personality in the new role, rather than copying a model of management behaviour.

There was something else going on too. My day job has always felt like a front for my real ambition: earning a living from my writing talent. From the very start, working on centring and saying out loud my commitment to making it as a writer released a lot of energy and strength.

Another memorable session involved bodywork – lying on a massage table and working with statements and affirmations, locating where any discomfort might be and gently releasing it. In a third session I physically pushed back against negative energy-sapping thoughts, releasing energy and confidence in a way that then played out in the workplace and home.

Through the somatic work, I gained more confidence in bringing my creativity to play at work, and was able to use my influence to negotiate a return back to my original workplace on reduced hours after a month’s unpaid leave, giving myself more time to write and ending my tendency to get ‘seduced’ into taking on more work than I could manage. I now have a new novel underway and ideas for another in the pipeline.

Learning points

- Somatic coaching is not a set of techniques you apply to a client; it is a way of being, both for coach and client
- It focuses on managing clients' moods effectively so they can take meaningful action
- It supports clients to be self-educating and self-generating for the sake of having more power and choice in the design and achievement of their life
- It is transformational. Its focus is on cultivating a self that embodies pragmatic wisdom, grounded compassion and skilful action
- The approach centres on the lived experience of the body, requiring a holistic view of our presence and our self

“93 per cent of our ability to establish trust and credibility comes through our body”

embody what we want to achieve in a holistic sense, really spoke to me in a way that other coaching approaches had not done before.”

How we live in our bodies

The somatic coach works with the historical, psychological, social, linguistic, emotional and spiritual domains unique to the individual client. They work with the client on discovering their whole self, how they embody what they yearn for in their lives, what is important to them and what they care about. It's central to coaching somatically.

During our lifetime our body is conditioned by our experiences. We act out of those conditions and are shaped by them. To effect sustainable change, the somatic coach helps the client pay attention to how they organise themselves: the stories and narratives they hold; their moods; the physical shape of

their actions; and the sensations happening in their body.

They support them to go beyond simply understanding their own patterns and habits, helping them to feel and see those patterns as they manifest themselves in their body and in their actions.

What makes us credible?

According to Albert Mehrabian², a professor at UCLA who conducted a two-year study into this, 7 per cent is down to content, 38 per cent to voice tone and tempo and 55 per cent is determined by how we show up in our body. In other words, 93 per cent of our ability to establish trust and credibility comes through our body.

Working somatically, the coach helps the client notice the sensations that are disconnected from what they are saying. For example, if someone says “I'm fine” when in fact they are feeling nervous, it sends an

inconsistent message and raises a warning flag of distrust.

Our inner self is revealed through our bodies. When we learn to observe our actions, sensations and automatic reactions we begin to give ourselves more choices.

We move from an unexamined, unconscious, autopilot response structure to a conscious one.

Embodied learning

It is only when we can take new, more effective, action that we say we have learned. Becoming a successful leader does not happen by reading the latest books on leadership.

In the Western rationalistic tradition, mind and body are separated. The body is thought of simply as the vehicle to transport our brain from one meeting to another. Value is often placed on cognitive processes: the taking in of information and knowledge, which

is then processed so it can be understood and applied.

When we observe a client accessing a new action with ease we can say their learning is embodied. It is no longer just a good idea, but a new pattern of behaviour that opens new possibilities for them.

Our history in our shape

Our explicit memory is our conscious memory. It allows us to recall events, information and data, whereas our implicit memory works below our consciousness, extracting patterns from our life experiences.

These patterns are stored in our living tissue, in the neural pathways that become our habits. How we handle our emotions and relate to others is shaped by our implicit memory³. For example, we all know people we would characterise as withdrawn, or the opposite, overbearing. We can look at their shape, respectively, and see a caved-in chest or one that is puffed out.

We are what we practise

“We are what we repeatedly do,” said Aristotle. We are always practising something, so our behaviour patterns are repeated, practised and further reinforced.

These automatic patterns are deeply established in neural pathways, just under conscious awareness, and are highly resistant to change. When we learn something new or perform a new behaviour, we begin to lay down a new pathway. Therefore an integral part of somatic coaching is practice.

To embed new learning the client is supported to create new practices that will strengthen those neural pathways, literally re-shaping their body – the self.

Action comes from mood

Somatic coaching emphasises the importance of working with

emotions and moods. Emotions are relatively brief experiences; moods are longer lasting. Mood directly affects our capacity to take action and co-ordinate effectively with others, and has an impact on the quality of our relationships.

Through coaching, clients begin to see how moods of resignation, anger, ambition and sadness are directly experienced through the body. For example, we can notice in ourselves the contracting sensations of fear, or the opening, expansive feeling of joy.

Background

Somatics found its roots through Dr Wilhelm Reich, a psychoanalyst and psychotherapist who worked alongside Dr Sigmund Freud. He believed, as did Freud, that neurosis lived in the body⁴. As a physical response to a particular event, we would constrict in a certain way,

and that would become embodied. We would learn to behave that way as a matter of practice. Pioneers such as Elsa Gindler, Moshé Feldenkrais, and Dr Randolph Stone dedicated a lifetime of practice, observation and reflection to develop a fundamental understanding of embodiment⁵.

Dr Richard Strozzi-Heckler, is a respected thought leader in the field, having spent more than 40 years researching and developing the methodology of embodiment. He has developed somatic coaching, drawing on the principles and practices of embodiment developed by those early pioneers, and integrating Gestalt and linguistics, with the martial art of Aikido and teachings of meditative practices.

Neuroscience has added its voice to the somatic field. Recent studies have established a direct link

Case study: What's right for me?

The client A learning and development manager for a large UK energy company

I wanted to bring more of myself to work, to be more emotionally present and in doing so develop my personal impact and leadership of my team – I wanted to be seen as a key decision-maker and someone to whom people turned for expertise and guidance.

Working somatically, for example by focusing on my current feelings and where energy showed up in my body, channelling my personal power and creating a declaration or ‘commitment’ around my intention, really helped me to focus on my purpose and shift my sense of what I brought to the role, team and organisation.

Lately, during a time of change and ambiguity at work, I have been practising remaining centred, connecting and extending out to others and building my capacity to make requests to those around me.

The outcomes I have achieved include increased confidence about who I am and what's right for me. Through practice I find I am more able to listen to my body and pay attention to what's showing up for me in certain situations. I have more authentic conversations with others and have had feedback that I am more visible and present and more credible in the space that I occupy.

I feel I am more able to connect with others, both professionally and personally, and I'm clear on my options and choices for the future.

Working somatically has helped me move forward in a way that has had an immediate impact.

between the brain and body, not only through our neural pathways but also through the discovery of neurotransmitters in our heart, our gut and our connective tissue. Our enteric nervous system consists of around 100 million neurons and can send as many messages to the brain as it receives. Science is saying that our brain extends down into our entire body: “I can no longer make a strong distinction between the brain and the body”, says

“ When we learn to observe our actions, sensations and automatic reactions we give ourselves choices ”

Dr Candace Pert⁶, an internationally recognised pharmacologist who has published more than 250 scientific articles.

Other coaching disciplines work with the body such as ontological coaching, NLP and Gestalt. Ontological coaching, as developed by Newfield Network and New Ventures West, focuses on conversational competence and the ability to develop effective interpretations of the human condition and use them to intervene in the way in which a client takes action in life.

Somatic coaching opens the doorway to transformational learning by working with the client directly through the body so they can build the capacity to make choices and take action accordingly. ■

● **Dr Eunice Aquilina** is a certified somatic coach and director of *eaconsult*, a business specialising in coaching, facilitating learning and bringing embodied leadership to individuals and groups. She is also a member of faculty of *i-coach academy*.

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Training

- Somatic Coaching at Strozzi Institute, California
www.strozziinstitute.com/somatic+coaching+mastery
- Ontological Coaching at Newfield, USA, Europe and Australia
www.newfieldnetwork.com/New/CoachTraining/index.cfm
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