



Let's look up

As we come to the third annual *Coaching at Work* Climate Action Day, how can more coaches make more of an impact? Linda Aspey considers this in the first of a regular column on the climate crisis

Well that went quickly, didn't it? Three years ago only a minority in our profession were thinking about the climate and ecological crisis, and what role coaching could play, if any. I don't think we'd even developed the term 'climate coaching.'

It was in 2019 after Zoe Cohen, Alison Whybrow and I issued a call to the profession to wake up, with the support of *Coaching at Work*¹, that the community responded – in typically innovative and pioneering ways. For example, Alison, Josie McLean and Eve Turner formed the CCA (Climate Coaching Alliance), inviting coaches to come together, with 11 of the major coaching bodies signing a joint statement committing to a collective voice and action.

Then Covid hit, waking us up further, along with repeated, urgent warnings from scientists and activists that climate change, ecological decline and systemic societal oppression and injustices could no longer be ignored.

It's been heartening to see the development of climate and biodiversity-related coaching courses, ecological and spiritual retreats, systemic teachings, communities of practice and support, offering us experiences and ways to do something positive and manage our own anxieties.

Because we know billions are in danger. And it's not just us – we'll take everything else with us. These are not empty words: the Intergovernmental

Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report in August 2021² was described by UN Secretary-General António Guterres as a "Code red for humanity". We are in an existential crisis.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Maybe you rose to the challenge too? Perhaps you're seeing yourself more as part of nature, not separate from it, and realising the negative impacts that dominant models of industrialisation, capitalism and consumerism are having on the life we have – and the future we may not. Or you've become more aware of the links between systemic racism, social inequality, privilege, climate change, environmental destruction, physical and mental health. Perhaps when your children tell you they can't sleep because they're worried for their future you're taking them seriously, and listening deeply, even though you feel anxious and helpless too. Maybe you've noticed that huge parts of society are living in a bubble that says if we don't talk about it, it's not happening, while it IS happening – at speed and scale – in others, and at great suffering. Or you've developed your own courses and events to take others on the journey.

If you have, I applaud your courage. These are not easy truths to confront.

SO WHAT NOW?

Herein I think lies another challenge for our profession. Climate coaching is a vague term but that aside, the demand for coaching around climate and environmental issues isn't as high as

the small but growing number of coaches wanting to work in this space. It doesn't mean they're not being raised – as some readers will attest, particularly those working with sustainability, environmental or social change champions and communities, and humanitarian NGOs. Some coaches tell me private clients are bringing what they think is climate anxiety and they're unsure whether to coach or refer onto a therapist. It's coming up a lot in my Time to Think courses, without me inviting it.

However, in corporate coaching, many coaches report that climate and environment are rarely mentioned – hardly surprising given 57% of global business leaders don't think their companies emit significant carbon emissions³. Even when organisations recognise their responsibilities and invest in coaching to help leaders work through daunting sustainability challenges – which involve public pledges and huge external scrutiny – it's not coming up. As one such coach told me: "The board says climate change is the top priority but the executives we coach never mention it."

Instead, they're still bringing what they've always done – stress, career, working relationships, confidence, change, competition. They're still tasked with growing that sector, scaling that business, cutting those costs. Perhaps some don't want to be unpopular by challenging the status quo, cause offence or stir up intense anxiety, creating instead what

Eviatar Zerubavel⁴ calls “Socially constructed silence”. I think many are still caught up – willingly or otherwise – in the pursuit of performance, power, pride, position or profit. I say that without judgement, because these are symptoms of a deeper systemic malaise, that signpost how we got into this mess, or of clients’ own climate avoidance – unspoken grief, fears, guilt.

We can’t assume it’s not in their psyche just because they aren’t talking about it; recent research from Imperial College⁵ and Bath University⁶ indicates it’s very much on or at the back of people’s minds – young and old.

I don’t have an easy answer. Just a question – to quote my friend and leadership coach, Grattan Donnelly, and who inspired the title of this coaching column – “Everyone knows that the way we’re living our lives is insane. Who is calling that out?”

WHY ARE WE WAITING?

Climate psychologists and scientists tell us that what people need most now is to talk about it. And that takes us back to the same question coaches were asking three years ago – and still ask. “How do we talk about it when it’s not on the client’s agenda?”

Perhaps we still have that niggling voice saying climate coaching means being scientifically informed, or fear that it’s grabbing clients by the shoulders, looking them in the eyes and saying, “We need to talk about climate change!” Or it taps into our desire to be the one that is sought out. That would be perfect, wouldn’t it? A queue of people ready to confront their biggest fears, biggest tasks, the most mind bogglingly important ever thing of all time, with us to help them.

But I don’t think it’s happening, nor is it going to – at least not at scale. They’re still focused on other things that feel more immediate. It’s human

nature. It’s also the reassuring seduction of BBAU: Business – and Busyness – as Usual. Yes, they will seek support when events have happened (businesses flooded, crops failed, no internet) but they won’t be asking for coaching. They’ll want practical help, money, and psychological support for their trauma.

HOW DO WE GO FORWARD?

If a coaching client was stuck on the same issue for three years, would we keep going along the same track? I think not. We’d either say we can no longer use their time or take their money, and suggest alternatives, or we’d recontract and set new objectives.

So what if more of us asked, during our discovery or chemistry sessions, contextual questions like, “What does your family – present and future – need from you at this time?” or


“How is what’s happening around the climate, environment and society impacting you?” or “Organisations are being expected, even pressurised to take action on the environment, climate change, and social equity – what challenges and opportunities do these present to this team?”

How they respond would tell you a lot, I think. I asked questions like these when recently approached to work with a leadership team for their next stage of growth. They told me, “The sustainability department is working on it” and saw no need to get involved. After more discussion we agreed I wasn’t the right coach for them. Some of my peer coaches are doing the same. While we could agree to coach, and try to convince them that climate change needs addressing, that’s disingenuous. It might be more impactful to say no and tell them why.

I realise my huge privilege in being able to turn work away these days – not everyone can. However, what if more of

us sent out stronger messages about the context we’re in without making ‘climate coaching’ seem like an add-on, and instead integral to us all? We wouldn’t be “pushing our agenda” by framing the context and inviting them to explore it as we would any other subject. Naming it is not a crime.

What if we were the “compassionate canary in the coal mine” proactively offering a safe, non-judgemental space for people to bring these massive issues, so they could feel less fearful to have vital conversations? To quote from the UK TV programme, *Dragon’s Den*, where entrepreneurs ask investors for money, expertise and time, imagine if these conversations became so normal that, “I won’t be investing; I’m out”? wasn’t only the gift of a few privileged coaches, but the norm.

Are you willing to “look up” too? 

REFERENCES

1. Coaches call For multipronged approach to the global climate crisis, in *Coaching at Work*, 14, 5, 2019 <https://bit.ly/3oNECJT>
2. *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis*, IPCC, August 2021 <https://bit.ly/3GKBvPB>
3. *Climate ignorance wins no talent war*: Margaret Heffernan Blog, 8 February 2021 <https://bit.ly/3Bl6eSr>
4. E Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room*, OUP, 2007 <https://bit.ly/3BtzDKl>
5. *Healthcare must include costs of climate-driven mental illness and eco-distress*, Grantham Institute <https://bit.ly/3GHokKN>
6. *Rise of ‘eco-anxiety’ affecting more and more children, says Bath climate psychologist* <https://bit.ly/3HRM6dz>

● **Linda Aspey** is a coach, facilitator, supervisor and therapist, working with individuals, teams and groups to meet a future that will be more challenging than the present.

● www.lindaaspey.com
● linda@aspey.com