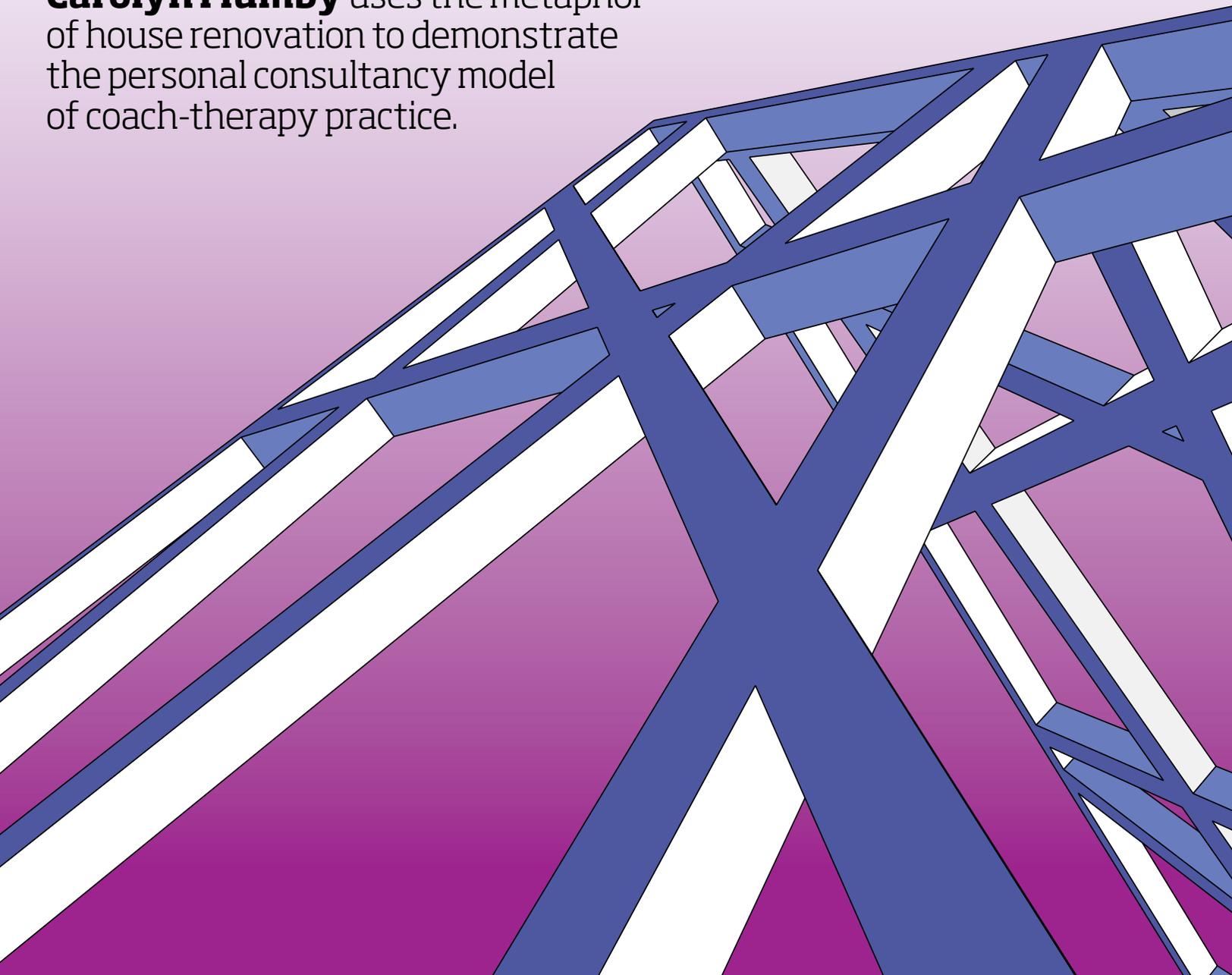


Personal consultancy: a grand design?

Carolyn Mumby uses the metaphor of house renovation to demonstrate the personal consultancy model of coach-therapy practice.



Since 2010 I have been using a framework originated by Popovic and developed with Jinks¹ to integrate coaching with elements of my previous therapy practice. At the first BACP Coaching network meeting in September 2011 at the University of East London, Popovic made a statement that resonated with my experience as a qualified therapist and coach: that 'we may be able to split the professions but we can't split the person'. In my experience, clients are very drawn to this approach, which can enable them both to move forward purposefully and to ensure that change is built on secure foundations.

Four 'stages' are identified in personal consultancy: *authentic listening*, which is where we begin and which underpins all the other stages; *rebalancing*, which may focus on cognitive emotional and behavioural patterns existing now or in the past; *generating*, where the focus is on the preferred future and, finally, *supporting*, wherein the practitioner provides support and encouragement and enables the client to be accountable to themselves for the changes they want to make. In relationship with the client, the practitioner ensures that they attend to both 'being' and 'doing' with the client, to working at depth and on the surface and with both the past and existing patterns as well as supporting new emerging patterns. It's important to note that despite the use of the word 'stages', this is not a linear model and the stages do not neatly follow on one from another in my experience, but are visited as necessary in a more dynamic flow, which I aim to provide a flavour of in this article.

The metaphor of house renovation helps to elucidate this approach when explaining it to clients, who come for coaching but are aware from my background that I am also a qualified therapist. They may already have a 'grand design' in mind that they would like to achieve, or be aware of the need for specific 'renovations' in their life or work, or simply know that they are not happy with their existing situation but do not know what they can do about it. The analogy of setting out to build a conservatory and then realising that the existing wall needs underpinning shows how coaching and therapy can be complementary; we may need to go back

to the foundations in the service of the building of something new. Paul Brown, a coach who writes extensively about neuropsychology, maintains that clients continually present with their past. Ignoring this is like architects not bothering about foundations: *'If the coach doesn't understand the foundations, they will make errors, and that is hugely irresponsible. There can be no future that can be properly understood without an understanding of who (people) were'*².

On the best build there is a continuing relationship between the architectural design and the practicalities of the building process. In a collaboration of equals (practitioner and client) personal consultancy can provide a framework to hold the importance of both the vision and future focus usually associated with coaching and the restorative and rebalancing aspects commonly associated with counselling. In my view, the personal consultancy framework enables both transparent negotiation within the work and the sense of a coherent form. I agree with Jinks and Popovic that if as practitioners we have confidence about the overall intention and focus of our work, we *'have the flexibility and freedom to be more responsive to the client and their needs'*¹. It is my experience that this orientation mediates against confusion and helps both client and practitioner to keep their eye on what is purposeful about what we are doing together.

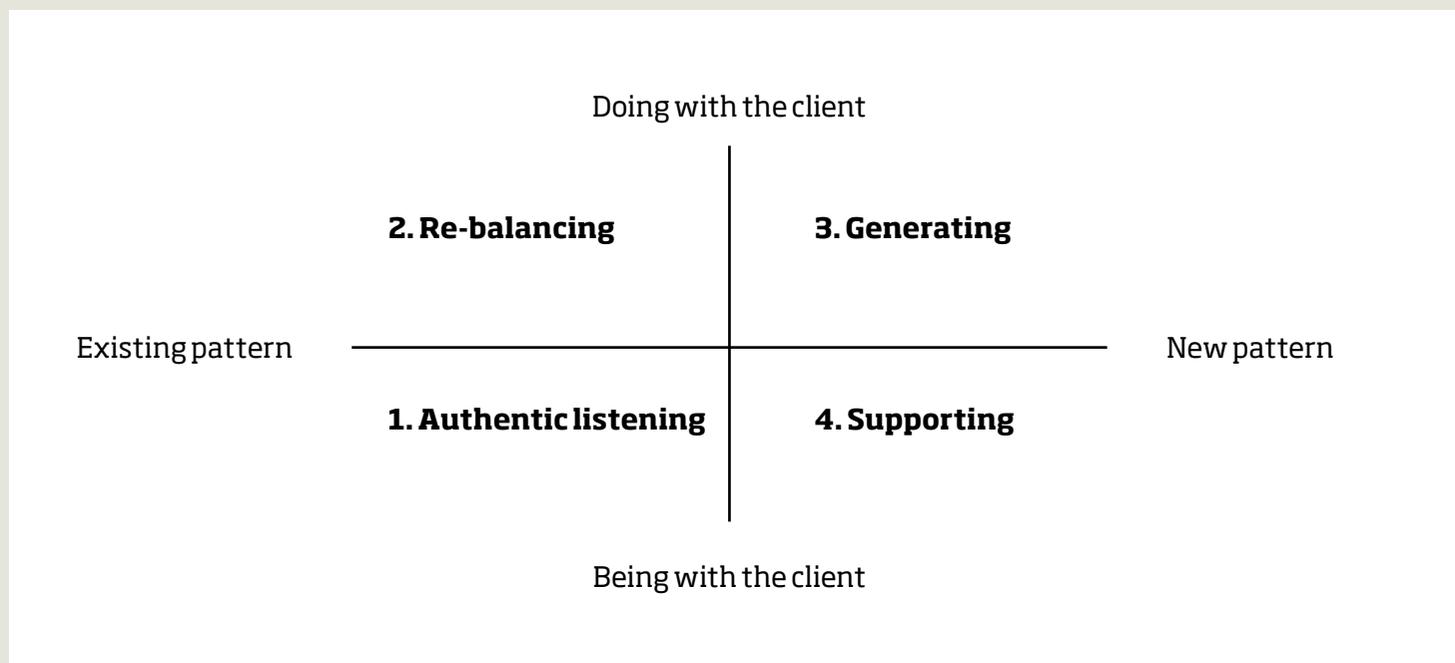
In terms of authentic listening, I seek to offer the kind of attention that Nancy Kline describes as listening to 'ignite' the thinking of the other rather than listening in order to reply.³ The more I work within the Thinking Environment® approach, and seek to work within the 10 components⁴ (of Attention, Equality, Ease, Appreciation, Encouragement, Feelings, Information, Diversity, Incisive Questions™ and Place) which Kline has identified as important to support the client's best independent thinking, the more I realise just how much can be achieved by this kind of listening. →



The analogy of setting out to build a conservatory and then realising that the existing wall needs underpinning shows how coaching and therapy can be complementary; we may need to go back to the foundations in the service of building something new



Figure 1:
The four stages of personal consultancy¹



1. Authentic listening: practitioner and client develop their understanding of the change that is being sought (what does the client think, feel, want, need? What do they want to improve or change?)

2. Rebalancing: surveying and supporting foundations for change (is there a need to strengthen the existing 'structure' to find what is load bearing and maintain it, to find and replace the limiting assumptions, to shine a light on difficult areas, release or work with feelings 'to improve what is obstructive and nurture what is effective, in order to reach the client's goals?') [EMCC ICF joint code of conduct for coaching and mentoring, June 2011]

3. Generating: planning the specifics and making the changes. What avenues need to be explored, decisions made, actions taken and reviewed etc? Planning the work and working the plan.

4. Supporting: ensuring the work is well scaffolded. What ongoing support is needed to help embed the changes? How can the client hold himself or herself to account through being with the practitioner? Where can they find further external support/supporters to help them achieve the change?

(Adapted from Jinks D, Popovic N. Personal consultancy: a model for integrating counselling and coaching. Hove and New York: Routledge; 2014. Figure 6.1, p68. Reproduced with permission of the authors and Routledge.)



The ability to work both at foundational and aspirational levels means the client's likelihood of making successful renovations or creating their grand design is greatly heightened



In common with an architect, my role in the generating stage is to create the conditions for the client to identify his or her own vision or the point of change they want to reach. Reflecting on the potential impact of the change on themselves or others may be important; sometimes a kind of 'planning permission' is needed before we start, either from within (in recognition that making change is not often easy), or externally (there may be a sponsor paying for the work who needs to sign off on the direction). Surveying the current structure and environment for the 'build' and agreeing what can be retained and strengthened may involve identifying values and existing strengths and skills.

What we think we can build and what we believe we are entitled to may also be impacted by what Kline refers to as 'limiting assumptions'.³ These assumptions can affect the ways in which we function and envisage what is possible and can be explored further in the rebalancing stage. Linda Aspey outlines the importance revisiting past patterns when coaching leaders in organisations: *'I believe self-understanding is vitally important. They need to be able to question - from a stance of self-kindness, not critical judgement - old and existing behaviours and patterns and decide if they'd like to make a shift to new ones - and how they might do this.'*⁵

Together we assess or survey their current situation using tools that are most appropriate for their circumstances. For example, a psychometric like the MBTI[®],⁶ and if appropriate 360 feedback, a strengths-based assessment, or a tool such as the 'wheel of life' to look at work-life balance. When working in organisations I may also use a simple mapping process using an aspect of systemic constellations (created by Bert Hellinger⁷ and further developed by others, including John Whittington⁸) to enable the coachee to first stand in the truth of their current situation, the current reality. These 'surveys' can provide insight in and of themselves and or direction for our work together and are a dynamic combination of the use of authentic listening - 'being' with the client - and rebalancing 'doing' with the client.

At the generating stage the practitioner is also involved in 'doing' with the client and the

focus is on developing new more constructive patterns. The client is choosing a way forward and making tangible change. Identifying, refining and working towards goals is a key part of the process. The vision of change may alter as the project moves forward; plans may get more ambitious or may be scaled back depending on what is discovered in the structure, on the resources available and a rethinking of what is possible.

In the supporting stage the focus is on creating the conditions for the client to sustain the changes. Maintaining change can be challenging and clients can appreciate returning both to celebrate achievement and also to regroup when maintenance is proving harder. It has also been my experience that when clients have built up their confidence and authority they can sometimes return to rebalancing to face areas of the past that still hold vulnerability for them. Furthermore, as I explored in my own chapter in *Personal Consultancy* clients may also revisit previous topics at a deeper level. *'As adults, if we have undertaken any kind of deeper self-reflection we will be familiar with this reprise of particular themes or stumbling blocks, sometimes coming back to that "same old chestnut". If we have the self-compassion, which may develop through a positive helping relationship with someone who will listen with acceptance, we might dig a little deeper or gain more insight yet.'*⁹

In that sense I am not of the view that we completely sort out all the foundations before we move on to focusing on desired patterns and behaviours with the client. It is true to say that if noted and left unaddressed, wobbly foundations will not support the work; but sometimes, for example, the extent of the internal critical voice does not become clear until new behaviours have been identified and tried. The coachee may then be invited by the coach to practise greater self-compassion¹⁰ or more positive self-talk, as they recognise the extent of the, often unwitting, undermining of self they are engaged in.

New patterns of feeling, thinking and behaviour, identified and practised repeatedly, seem from recent neuroscience research to establish new neural pathways, making the change easier to sustain. However, under great

stress one might revert to the original less useful habit.¹¹ This 'slip' or relapse may be understood as a frequent part of the change cycle as originally explored by Prochaska and DiClemente and described by Passmore.¹² The personal consultant or coach-therapist (providing this is part of the contract with the client) can, with their permission, revisit the foundations with them at any point, and seek to enable them to identify what triggered the reversion, extending self-compassion rather than judgment, and seeking to re-establish the newer behaviours with greater insight.

Thus change is an iterative process, perhaps more so than house renovation, though that often has a greater potential for setback than we anticipate, which is part of the exquisite drama of the popular television programme *Grand Designs*. There is always a place in the programme where presenter Kevin McCloud speaks in confidential hushed tones directly to the viewer and apparently out of earshot of the client, along the lines of *'Have they taken on too much? Will this setback with the foundations undermine the whole project? Will they run out of cash and fail to complete?'* There is in my experience often a similar point of doubt within the coaching process. Can the change be made? Will it be sustainable? Will others like it? Do I really want it? The personal consultancy framework allows me to temper the promise of coaching up front, to introduce the possibility of setbacks and the possibility of the need for some work on the foundations. It allows me to acknowledge the whole person and it seems often to give the client confidence that their practitioner, like a surveyor, architect, builder and project manager has the requisite skills to help them work themselves with all these aspects from the beginning. The ability to work both at foundational and aspirational levels means the client's likelihood of making successful renovations or creating their grand design is greatly heightened.

McCloud¹³ provides a detailed 10-point checklist for anyone wishing to create a 'grand design'. Along with the obvious importance of finding effective and appropriate professionals, he emphasises the importance of making sure the design contains the elements that you →

Case study

Richard, a corporate executive, was being offered internal promotion and simultaneously being headhunted for his 'dream job' in a rival company. His stress levels were rising, culminating in a panic attack just before an important client meeting. Richard's goal for the work was 'to feel calmer, manage stress more effectively and to decide which direction to take next in my career'. We contracted to use the personal consultancy approach. Authentic listening (being with the client) revealed that Richard was very driven and had always succeeded at whatever he put his mind to. He had been the son that his parents had never had to worry about, unlike his brother who had struggled as a teenager and become addicted to alcohol. Richard had been bullied at school himself but had never wanted to bring it to the attention of his parents, so had tended to dismiss his own vulnerability as a result. His role in the family as the 'successful one' became clearer to him and he was able to see where he had been taking responsibility for others rather than for his own needs. Richard's horror of failure had driven him to work very long hours, often in a state of high anxiety. The 'wheel of life' began our move into the rebalancing stage ('doing' with the client) through highlighting achievements and strengths, which can be used to leverage change as well as clarifying imbalances and identifying what needed to change to establish a better foundation for building change.

Richard realised that he had lost touch with many friends, no longer spent time playing the guitar, and that communication problems were beginning to arise with his partner. We also uncovered a pattern of self-talk wherein he spoke harshly to himself at any potential sign of weakness or when things at work did not go as planned. We explored the impact of this on his already heightened threat response,⁹ which was making him very vigilant which, coupled with a strong need to achieve, did not allow him much relaxation or self-compassion.

As a qualified Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessor, I facilitate self-assessment to enable clients to identify their preferences,

which form a dynamic 'type'. Knowing our preferences can help us to play to our strengths and identify strategies to develop what comes less easily to us. Richard discovered that he had a preference for introversion, and began to see why he was stressed by working in an open-plan office with constant interaction. We identified how he might choose to find time away from others to recharge both at home and at work (generating stage). We explored a basic mindfulness exercise to find greater equanimity when stressed, and I signposted him to a mindfulness-based stress reduction course. I also recommended that he read *Your Brain at Work*, by David Rock,¹⁴ which uses insights from neuroscience and shows through the narrative of case study how to be more effective in managing daily life as a busy executive. Richard was able to identify how he might change his behaviours to progress at work, balancing this with a new emphasis on other areas of his life (generating). Having decided to stay within the company and secured the promotion, he practised new ways of responding to critical thoughts, found ways to prepare for and speak up in meetings which previously depleted him, left work at a more reasonable time, ensured he communicated in more depth with his partner, particularly when feeling vulnerable, and used mindfulness exercises intermittently prior to important meetings or whenever he felt tense. He also made sure to have time alone at lunchtime and in the evenings directly after work. Through revisiting aspects of the foundations of his life, and understanding the impact now of early less conscious decisions to meet difficult circumstances, Richard gained more insight into the potential for making different choices. He was more able to accept that perfection was not required and that self-compassion was a smart move. This enabled him to continue to move forward in his career rather than to burn out, and helped him redefine what success looked like in his life.



Through a process of listening and questioning and offering different tools the practitioner creates the conditions for the client to become their own surveyor, architect, builder and sustainer of change



already know make you happy. It is his view that it is not the finished house that changes who you are: *'It's more likely that the process of building it will teach you more about yourself'*, and I think this is equally pertinent in the personal consultancy approach.

Through a process of listening and questioning and offering different tools, the practitioner creates the conditions for the client to become their own surveyor, architect, builder and sustainer of change. The client also signs off on the process, feeding back on the effectiveness of the intervention, noting the knowledge skills and change of attitude that they have gained along the way and evaluating their satisfaction with the outcome of their own 'grand design'.

This case study shows how the 'stages' of the model are connected and how the work flows back and forth between rebalancing and generating, both processes being underpinned by authentic listening and supporting. I don't assume the need for extensive rebalancing before we can engage in generating, but neither do I persist in the generating if it is clear that there is a need to give space to rebalancing. As Popovic asserts: *'It is not always appropriate or necessary to go into depth, but it is also sometimes futile to stay on the surface'*.¹ ■

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