

From Lockdown to Legacy

Coaching the soul in
bureaucratic environments

By **Melanie DewBerry-Jones**

Each person, regardless of their circumstances, has two legacies — an inherited one, and one to leave for others when they die. The inherited legacy must be brought to an end. It consists of thought and behavior patterns which do not support our happiness. The legacy to leave behind is the one we create, the one that brings joy. Yet the opposite is often rewarded. This is why worthwhile legacies take great courage.

We are a nation of people desperately wanting to connect beyond the banter of the last quarter sales and weather statistics. Many people in our current culture are experiencing a crime, no matter where they are, no matter who they are — the crime of not being able to engage beneficially and creatively with themselves and others. Working hard in our boxes, we don't notice that the box itself brings separation rather than belonging. Boxing ourselves in is the un-incarcerated person's version of being in lockdown. Our self imposed limits make us our own jailers.

Coaching training for lifers

I've worked in two of the largest corporations in the United States — the federal government and the prison system. One of my mentors, Laura Whitworth, saw a great prospect — to give each of these groups transformative coaching skills. She knew that individuals are transformed by coaching training as much as clients are by the coaching itself. Laura is a living legacy. Laura inspired me to go into these seemingly dissimilar environments, neither of which I knew much about, including one that scared me to the core.

The curriculum taken to each of these opportunities was coaching training. My goals were ambitious — to have them know themselves as leaders regardless of their title or number, to facilitate connection with others at a deep

level, and finally to commit to a life worth living, regardless of present circumstance or environment.

Oddly enough, my experience in the federal government with high-level executives was really not that different than working with inmates. In both places, there were people who didn't want to be there, who hadn't planned to spend so much time there, or felt victim to being there. Everyone I met was just trying to do the best job they could. There were lifers in both populations, and people who excelled in both environments. Most of the federal employees I met really were trying to make a difference in the world. In the prisons, most of the individuals I met really were trying to make a difference within themselves. Both were in bureaucratic systems and cultures that did not support individualism.

The government employees felt hopeful, the inmates hopeless — and both felt disconnected from an outside world that neither understood them nor cared about them. Government employees struggled with competitiveness between departments and social cliques, while inmates had gangs with which to contend. Both told stories of bearing witness to the demise of the human spirit, albeit in different forms, but with similar results. All this is not to say that government agencies are prisons; nor do I wish you to understand that inmates are not in prison due to their own hands. What is common in both arenas is their human experience.

Differences and commonalities aside, as I coached and trained in these environments I found something that sent me into a bit of shock. I realized that the problem did not

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exist only within these two populations but was epidemic throughout our country. Prevalent in both the prison system and the federal government was a basic lack of understanding of how to be in relationship beyond manipulation. To be honest, I expected that among the prisoners, even under-

assist in this creation by coaching the human and not the problem. Better yet, coaches can be success-oriented rather than issue-oriented. Don't look for a problem to coach — see the success waiting in the wings. We serve our clients best in coaching them out of being the killers of

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stood it within the confines of the prison system. But I was deeply shaken by the lack of connection and the level of dealing with others encountered in the federal workplace.

An oppressive environment holds people in lockdown, where they are not free to experience being fully alive and human. While inmates are beaten physically for displaying the softer emotions, businesspeople must maintain a competitive edge, staying sharp and ahead of the game, or they will be bested. Win or lose, beating the competition or getting beat — the cost to spirit can be great.

The concept of legacy

Each coaching client has a legacy to uncover and to bring forward. Don't be intimidated by the idea of a legacy, as there are few requirements except these — it must be a gift to all and have a life beyond that of its creator. Easy, really! You've experienced the domino effect — someone is rude to you, which puts you in a foul mood, you then sneer at the driver going too slowly; or someone smiles at you just when you really need it, and you feel good inside and in turn open the door for five people behind you. This is how it begins. A legacy can be just that, an action or idea that moves forward, independent of its origin.

Clients can begin creating new legacies, legacies that will live on, that will further our human evolution. Coaches can

hope. We do this by giving them permission to recycle those boxes — and in encouraging them to aim for something larger, something sacred, and something grander than the systems in which they find themselves.

We expand by the legacies that inspire us or wither from the lack of them. Our collective and individual success is dependent on our willingness to dare, to be determined, to persevere. How do we know what we are willing to do, what we can become, until someone sees past our boxed, appropriate behavior, sees through to that beautiful brilliant spirit and stimulates its expression, along with coaching our goals, fears and day-to-day needs? It would be limiting to believe that as a profession we simply coach the client's agenda; we coach their highest potential, their human experience. And because that human experience is shared and has effects beyond our singular lives, our commitment to clients' larger, grander experiences is worthy of our own daring, courageous acts.

We are the teachers we are looking for; we are the deliverers of tomorrow's legacy, conscious or not. We all make an impact, and impact becomes legacy. Boxes should be for storage — not for our humanity.

And so it is! ●

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