

THE ART OF COACHING

How can looking at a painting help leaders maximise their potential? **Rachel Ellison** explains how art can get a client – and their coach – out of ‘stuck’ and into new ways of seeing

“I’ve just realised I’m always drawn to where the noise is. Look at the reds and yellows in that part of the picture. I totally missed the story going on around the edges.”

Such was the inspiration produced by Jan Steen’s oil painting *Celebrating the Birth* (1664) for one pensions and reward expert. The canvas depicts a baby born to a man who thinks

he is the father. Various elements suggest otherwise. Broken eggs point to an infidelity. A sausage over the fireplace supports this historical nuance.

My client continued: “Looking at this picture makes me realise that I need to take a wider perspective on situations at work. I tend to be too focused on what’s going on in the middle of the room.”

The canvas created instant clarity for the client, a high-flying female executive who wanted to maximise her work potential and balance her professional development with a happy home life.

What was it about the scene that gave her energy and interest? How might these interpretations be relevant to “the picture” at work?

So began my experiment with using art as a vehicle for coaching high-potential talent and international business leaders.

Palpable inspiration

Consider this global head of sales and innovation. More at home on the cricket pitch than in a gallery, he embraced the chance to take a risk – even if he hated the art.

To his surprise, Canaletto’s *Venice, circa 1740*, created inspiration: “It’s really powerful for me, all of that blue sky, the water, the precision of the architecture,

could communicate more effectively with his new team. He says coaching with art brought him out of “stuck” and made him able to reach good solutions faster.

Of interest for both coach and client was what we noticed and what we didn’t and how different our interpretations of the same picture could be. Together, we were more creative in thinking about ideas and options: “You asked me what the view might be like from the clock tower or from the water. I’m more self-aware now. I ask myself: how could people perceive my actions?”

I asked the client to think further about his responses to art: “I’m still finding ways to apply what I learnt

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all on a canvas that’s hundreds of years old. This picture makes me feel really passionate.

“The quayside looks like an 18th-century Starbucks! Look at all those people – mainly men, which probably says something – they’re all meeting for business. What are they talking about?”

It had taken months of coaching to generate such energy and enthusiasm from this genuinely committed leader. One canvas and his thinking opened up in minutes. The coaching goal for that session was for the client to think how he

about how I think standing in front of the Canaletto. That’s got to be a good return on investment for my company.”

Outcomes and impact

So how might art help clients and their organisations? In my experience as a coach, the choice of art is irrelevant. It’s the power of a visual stimulus to provoke greater creativity. I notice that my clients seem to find it easier to access and express core emotions.

It was staggering to see how confidently clients knew how they

Exploring a work issue

Questions a coach might ask when standing in front of a picture with a client:

- What do you like about this picture?
- What do you feel when you look at it?
- What parts of the picture are you not looking at?
- What does “all that blue sky” mean for you?
- What might the view from the clock tower look like?
- And the quayside?
- Where would you like to be in this picture?

could apply a coaching-with-art conversation to a challenging work issue. Their energy and motivation seemed to glitter anew.

As for the coach, using art for coaching business leaders is at once inspiring and humbling. I could never have guessed at the originality of interpretation and imagination stimulated by a work of art. Even if the client loathes a piece... that is rich territory too.

For organisations questioning whether now is the time to encourage top talent to go to an art gallery during business hours one client offers this: “Coaching with art makes me challenge myself differently and think more laterally as a leader.”

That’s crucial in a fast changing world, where innovation and reinvention are key to retaining, energising and motivating the best to deliver even more. ■

Relating art to goals and actions

Make use of a client’s enjoyment of a picture to coach a work issue.

Ask them:

- How does all that “noise on the quayside” relate to your work issue?
- How might you deal with “that overwhelming crowd” in the picture?
- This picture has annoyed you... what annoys you at work right now?
- How does what you’ve just said about this picture inform what you’ll do when you go back to the office this afternoon?

About the author

Rachel Ellison MBE is Apecs and ICF-accredited. She coaches CEO- and board-level clients and emerging talent in the global banking, retail, telecoms and the arts sectors.

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