
INTRODUCTION

In this book we share stories from our coaching practice. We look at a number of presenting issues which coaches will encounter again and again. Each chapter tells the story, describes what the coach did, and discusses what tools and techniques might be most helpful in relation to each presenting issue. We look at what we learned about our clients and about ourselves as coaches; because coaches are human and susceptible to these behaviours themselves, we also describe how supervision plays a key role in enabling the coach to be a more effective helper.

The book is grounded in many years of real experience and is intended to be of practical use to anyone who is involved in or interested in coaching either as a coach or as a client, or indeed to anyone who is interested in human behaviour.

The presenting issues which we examine in this book are:

- Impostor Syndrome
- People Pleasing
- Going to Excess
- Fierce Independence
- Cynicism
- Driven by Fear
- Ostrich Syndrome
- Perfectionism

- Procrastination
- Performance Anxiety
- Searching for Fulfilment
- Coping with Loss

We believe that most people will identify with one or more of the behaviours in this list. If you are a coach, you will probably have come across them in your work with clients. This book is intended to help you understand these behaviours better and to offer suggestions as to how those behaviours may be changed in a positive way.

Traits and Traps

All of these behaviours are capable of becoming problematic and obstructive in our lives. Our clients will often seek help because these behaviours have become a 'trap' for them, a set of repeating, inhibiting and sometimes destructive behaviours from which they are struggling to escape. However, our clients' stories tell us that each of these potentially problematic behaviours may also be useful, and indeed may have contributed greatly to an individual's achieving success in the world. It appears to us that in each case there is a spectrum, that aspects of the same behaviours may be a hindrance or may be useful. We therefore use the word 'trait' to refer to such behaviours – by which we mean a characteristic behaviour which may not necessarily be inherently harmful and which, most importantly, is capable of being modified and changed. We believe that as coaches we are not seeking to eliminate such behaviours, but to enable individuals to understand and manage these behaviours better so that they can achieve a healthy balance.

Traits may be either overdone or underdone. The trait which we describe as 'people pleasing' is an example. It is potentially valuable

for an individual to be able to take account of the feelings and interests of others, which can enable the building of effective and mutually rewarding relationships, professional and personal. If the trait is wholly absent and a person is incapable of recognising or taking account of the feelings of others, it is easy to see that this could be highly problematic for the individual and for society. However, if the trait is overdone and a person is always putting the feelings and needs of others before their own to the extent that they become incapable of expressing or asserting their own feelings or needs, this trait can become a trap.

In each chapter of this book the coach is working to help the client manage their traits. We use coaching to bring our clients' qualities and potential strengths into a constructive balance. In each chapter you will find a wide variety of tools and techniques which we suggest may be useful in relation to that particular trait. However, the essential elements of our approach are the same in every case. In each case the coach's objectives are:

- To understand and identify the root cause of the behaviour.
- To enable the client to acknowledge how the overuse of this trait is impacting upon the client and upon others.
- To enable the client to pay attention to other traits which are being underused.

We have included in this book a chapter on Coping with Loss. This is an issue which we all have to face as human beings and which will be a presenting issue for every coach at some stage in their career. We felt that this issue is so universal and important that it should be acknowledged within this book. It is not a presenting behaviour or trait in the same way as the others in this book. However, we believe that many of the learnings and principles regarding human behaviour set out in the book may be helpful when addressing the difficult question of how to cope with loss.

Getting the Best from This Book

You can read this book from cover to cover or you may choose to dip into a particular chapter to focus on a specific trait as it presents with your clients. Either way, we hope that you will want to add this casebook to your coaching toolkit and continue to use it to further your own development as well as that of your clients.

To provide an in-depth look at each trait, every chapter is divided into three parts:

Part One – The Coach's Casebook

The first part of each chapter presents a case study of an individual client. Although none of the case studies is based on an individual, all the case studies have a strong basis in reality and contain our own experiences of coaching combined into the singular viewpoint of 'the coach'.

Part Two - Tools and Techniques

Each case study describes the tools, techniques and approaches we used during the coaching sessions. These are embedded in the story and we hope that you will notice the many ways in which we work with the client to create some mobility in their thinking and behaviour.

Part Two builds on the techniques used in the case study and provides some additional approaches for working with this trait or trap and includes additional information with some powerful coaching questions to use. Our intention is to assist you in selecting which approach to use and when, whilst also giving you the confidence to apply them in different situations.

While we have selected three techniques for each chapter, many techniques in this book are applicable in many situations. At the end of the book is a matrix that maps which techniques can be useful for each of the traits. You can also use this matrix as a reference to locate specific techniques within the book.

We are not advocating that coaches should use the same techniques as we have used with each trait. Our approaches are merely suggested ways of working and we appreciate that every coaching client is unique and every coach will decide which approach to take depending on the client, the context and a number of other variables.

Part Three - The Interview

The final part of each chapter includes an interview with a successful and inspirational person who has generously agreed to share their story. As each of their stories unfolded, it became clear that they all have ways of managing their particular traits. We didn't seek out people who had difficult childhoods or who had been dealt a particularly bad hand in life. Almost all of the stories we heard in our interviews were a complete surprise to us (and some of them were even a surprise to our interviewees). In fact, the traits they have are so common that many of the interviewees said that they could have fitted in a number of the chapters.

Our Philosophy – 'Beware the man of one book'

We adopt an eclectic approach to coaching, employing approaches from different schools of thought across the worlds of coaching, personal development and psychology. For example, we use elements of Neuro Linguistic Programming, yet there may also be approaches that contradict or challenge some of NLP's tenets. You will notice applications of traditional Freudian or Jungian

psychology alongside more modern models such as The Growth Mindset or Mindfulness. Our objective is not to align ourselves with the 'best model' or even create one ourselves, but rather to give you what we have found to be helpful in our practice.

We also strongly believe in the value of coaching supervision.

Supervision – A Coach's Greatest Tool

In each case study, we include a section referring to the coach's reflections either during or after supervision. We believe that supervision is an essential element to effective coaching, enabling both the integrity of the coaching process and the self-development of the coach.

If your role involves helping others to be more effective, whether you are a team leader who coaches, an internal coach or a freelance coach, then having a trained coaching supervisor is indispensable to your development. A supervisor is someone who can help you work through your thought processes, develop your coaching capability, challenge your limiting beliefs and assumptions, and champion you when you need it. We believe that supervision is critical to your development and its purpose is to:

- Develop your coaching skills through the engagement of an experienced practitioner.
- Work through any ethical issues on a confidential basis.
- Maintain an approach of continuous learning, development and self-reflection.
- Gain greater awareness of your own 'hot spots' – things that reduce your effectiveness as a coach.
- Explore options, new ideas and perspectives.

While there are many forms of coaching supervision, the most common format is the one-on-one, formal engagement of a qualified coaching supervisor. Qualified coaching supervisors also run small supervision groups where the same group of coaches meet regularly to review and reflect on their practice under the guidance of the supervisor. Supervision accreditation is still relatively new in the coaching industry but in other similar fields – such as therapy – it is not only well established but mandatory.

We believe that the supervision elements in the following chapters give you an insight into how we, as coaches, dealt with the situations that we faced. They also serve as examples of how coaches think, operate and gain value from the process of supervision.

Break free from your traps

Normalisation is an essential part of the process of change and one of the powerful moments in a session is when our clients realise they are not the only ones struggling with a particular issue, but that it is common. As coaches, we are in a privileged position to be invited into the inner world of our clients and to help them recognise and maximise their strengths while minimising their limiting behaviours. We hope this book is useful to you as you also work to help people master the traits that can trap them.

CHAPTER ONE

Impostor Syndrome

*'Of all the judgements we pass in life,
none is more important than the judgement
we pass on ourselves.'*

NATHANIEL BRANDEN

THE CASE STUDY

'Everyone else is better than me. I am not as good as people think I am and I am going to get found out.'

'I feel like I am being left on the shelf professionally. Year after year, I'm overlooked for promotion as younger, smarter lawyers overtake me. I'm one of the longest-serving lawyers in the firm but I'm starting to think that I may never get invited to become partner.'

Jenny came to me after hearing my talk on the topic of 'Impostor Syndrome': the feeling that we are not as good as others think and that they will be found out. During the coffee break, Jenny sought me out, declaring 'I couldn't believe it – you were talking about me in your keynote address!' In fact, she initially thought I was literally talking about her and that someone had told me her story. When I assured her that many people feel this way but that the subject of my presentation was actually a composite fictional character, she experienced an immediate sense of relief. After finding out how coaching could help, Jenny engaged me as her coach on the spot.

She was aspiring to be a partner in a leading law firm and wanted coaching to help her get there. In our introductory chat, Jenny had impressed me with her career as a criminal lawyer but her Impostor Syndrome was so strong that, by the end of our first session, I was actually beginning to wonder not just how she held down the job, but how she had got the job in the first place!

In my job as coach I see part of my remit as building the confidence of my clients and helping them achieve their goals. The fact that I doubted Jenny's ability wasn't a great starting point for me and I felt uncomfortable having judgemental and uncharitable feelings towards her. This sat uneasily with one of my coaching mantras:

*'Treat a man as he is and we make him less than he is.
Treat a man as though he already were what he potentially could be
and we make him what he should be'*

GOETHE

However worrying this was for me professionally, I consoled myself with the assumption that how Jenny made me feel was a good barometer for how she made other people feel. In this case I noticed that I was in danger of losing respect for Jenny and believing that she was not very good at her job.

Most people have very strong 'life scripts' which determine what they say and how they behave and which elicit strong responses from people around them. As someone prone to feelings of Impostor Syndrome, Jenny was effectively telling herself:

'Everyone else is better than me. I am not as good as people think I am and I am going to get found out'

This underlying belief led her to magnify her failings, discount her achievements, and focus a lot more on what she couldn't do than what she could do. In short, people with Impostor Syndrome tend to be harder on themselves than they deserve and more generous in their views of others.

The classic symptoms of Impostor Syndrome are:

- Having an inability to internalise your accomplishments.
- Feeling that other people have an overinflated view of you.
- Attributing any success you have to luck or just being in the right place at the right time.
- Being fearful of being 'found out'.
- Feeling like a fraud.

- Believing that the very fact that you got the job/do this work means that it can't be that difficult. Your ability to do something negates the value of it.
- Looking more at what you can't do, rather than valuing what you can do.

In all the years that I have worked as a coach, I seldom meet clients who do not experience a bit of Impostor Syndrome. Clinical psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes [Ref 1] formulated the concept in 1978 to describe the set of feelings and responses they found to be particularly common in successful women (although my empirical evidence suggests that it is just as rife in men). In fact it has been claimed that up to 70% of people suffer from Impostor Syndrome at some point [Ref 2] and, although very difficult to prove, that statistic certainly seems to line up with my own coaching practice.

People experiencing Impostor Syndrome tend to have bouts of very high stress because they are never comfortable with their position or performance.

This syndrome is, therefore, very closely linked to perfectionism [See Chapter 8]. An impostor is so concerned about their imperfections that 'good enough' is never 'good enough' for them. They often push themselves further to compensate for their insecurity, which is one of the reasons that they are so successful. Of course, because their feelings inspire extreme conscientiousness and greater effort, this usually results in even more success, which in turn results in even greater feelings of being an impostor!

Over the course of our first session, as she got more into her story and the emotions became stronger, I noticed that Jenny began using more extreme language. She started catastrophising and overdramatising her situation. Phrases such as '*everyone* is better than me' and 'I know I'm *completely* not up to the job' began creeping in. This was frustrating and a little painful for me to hear because, as an objective observer, I knew these statements to be untrue.

Jenny, however, seemed to reach a point where she truly believed them.

Jenny was so resistant to seeing any good in herself that I found myself adopting an increasingly scattergun approach as I became desperate to get some kind of breakthrough. I tried all of the following coaching interventions, which are designed to redirect a client's attention to positive aspects of themselves and see themselves from a fresh perspective:

- Inviting her to give me a list of her strengths and qualities.
- Telling her how I considered her to be a successful and competent woman and giving her positive feedback.
- Asking her to remember peak moments in her career when she had enjoyed great success and how they had come about.
- Asking her to tell me about the positive feedback she had received from others in her career.
- Inviting her to 'change places' with her boss and speak from his perspective to explain why he had hired Jenny.

I drew a blank with all these coaching interventions and, by the end of the first session, realised that I was in the presence of one of the strongest cases of Impostor Syndrome I had ever encountered. Jenny unconsciously distorted all her answers to make them fit her life script. I was completely disheartened when Jenny walked away from the session without the slightest shift in her thinking. I was looking forward to a session with my coaching supervisor before I saw her again.

Supervision

The chance to talk through my situation with my supervisor was incredibly challenging and useful. Having a strong and trusting relationship with my supervisor allows him to ask provocative questions in order to change my perspective and give me different lenses through which to look at the situation.

After I had described Jenny's session, the first question that he asked me was 'Why are you in such a hurry?' Brilliant! I regularly tell people that coaching is not a quick fix; very little change happens in the first session and it can take months, or even years, for some of our life scripts to be rewritten to the extent that we desire. In Jenny's case, she had spent 35 years developing and reinforcing her life script and associated behaviours. Why would she change after spending a couple of hours with someone she had barely met?

Why would she trust me straight away? Good relationships – like the one between my supervisor and me – take time to develop. If he had asked me provocative questions in our first session, I think I would have run a mile... or at least become very defensive. Jenny needed to trust that I was congruent and authentic before she could believe my feedback. However, I did believe that, once really good trust was established in our coaching relationship, then a provocative approach could potentially work well.

I also realised that I had fallen into two traps myself. Firstly, I had tried to rescue Jenny and 'force' her to see herself through my eyes. Secondly, I was aware that Jenny's actions were having an impact on my perceptions because I had started to believe that she might be right about herself.

We all develop a number of unconscious behaviour patterns or 'games' to support our life script.

Transactional Analysis creator, Eric Berne, suggests that these 'games' serve to maintain our life position by 'proving' that we are right about ourselves, so creating a self-fulfilling prophecy [Ref 3].

As coaches, we can easily become conditioned by our client's 'game' in seemingly innocuous ways and, just as it is important to notice how you feel when you are with your clients, it is also important to notice how their actions can surreptitiously affect your perceptions and behaviour. For example, imagine seeing a beautifully presented woman at a social event and admiring her appearance and sense of style. On meeting her, she points out a small stain on her jacket and constantly touches it, apologising for it, explaining how it got there and how it has ruined the outfit for her. She has immediately taken your attention to a flaw and it is quite likely that your eyes will be drawn to that stain for the rest of the day. Jenny had constantly downplayed her achievements, drawing my attention to her failings. As a result, I had fallen into the trap of being distracted by the metaphorical stain on her jacket!

My supervisor and I talked a lot about how I seemed to be in a rush and why that might be. This was interesting for me and, I reflected, the main reason was that I seemed to be taking too much responsibility for making the change happen. As tempting as it was to believe that I was a good coach with the ability to bring about change in my clients, ultimately the only person who could make the change was Jenny herself. But this wasn't deep enough reflection for my supervisor – and this is what makes supervision so useful – so he pushed me to explore why I was taking on this responsibility.

We did some work on my drivers. One of my biggest drivers is the need for achievement and my desire for 'success' was getting in the way of my coaching work with Jenny. As a result of the supervision session, I realised that what I really needed was a more carefully thought out plan for the coaching sessions and a more sophisticated approach than I had used in the first session.

For the benefit of my client, I had to rein in my personal desire to achieve success and actually focus on what Jenny really wanted from the coaching.

To do this I probably needed to look at what else was going on in her life and where her Impostor Syndrome originated rather than trying to deal with the presenting issue.

Session Two

Jenny arrived in a state of agitation. She told me immediately that she had made a mistake in her work and been to see the senior partner in the law firm to tell him that she didn't think she was 'up to the job'. He had sent her away with reassurances that everyone else thought she was perfectly capable and that everyone makes mistakes from time to time. Jenny remained unmoved by these words of reassurance and had taken all her recent work to the partners, asking them to check if she was making more mistakes than the other lawyers.

The partners were understandably baffled by this request but reluctantly agreed to check her work. They reported back that she was performing as well as anyone else in the firm but they were more worried about her state of mind than her work. The entire incident had caused her so much stress that she had been signed off by her GP.

This was a crisis moment for Jenny. Her lack of self-belief had now led to her employers doubting her sanity and her stress levels were sky-high. She realised that she needed to address the issue once and for all.

Although moments of crisis are obviously difficult, they often have a positive flip-side as it can take a moment of crisis to bring about transformational learning. Mezirow [Ref 4] identified four situations that give rise to transformational learning:

1. Experiencing a disorienting dilemma.
2. Being in a state of puzzlement.

3. Recognising that others share our feelings.

4. The presence of an empathetic provocateur.

Jenny had experienced all these situations over the past few weeks: starting with the recognition that others shared her feelings when she attended my keynote address and culminating in a state of puzzlement and disorientation. She had also had two encounters with empathetic provocateurs – the partners in her law firm and now me.

I often think that people only change when either the pain of their current situation becomes too great, or the pleasure on offer in the alternative situation is sufficient. Jenny had arrived at the point where there was considerable pain in her current situation. Her thinking patterns had become detrimental to her life, her work and her well-being and I knew that she was now really ready to begin the work needed to change them.

Session Three

Having worked with Jenny to identify the detrimental impact which Impostor Syndrome had on her, we then looked at what pay-off or gain she might lose if she chose to believe something different about herself.

When embarking on a significant behaviour change, it is also important to acknowledge what we will be losing.

All too often we focus on the benefits of the new behaviour and underestimate how attached we are to our current behaviour. We believe that every behaviour, no matter how destructive it may seem, has a secondary purpose or gain. In Jenny's case, she identified the following:

- She regularly received lots of compliments as people tried to convince her that she was valuable and worthy.
- Setting herself up for failure meant that she and others had low expectations of her and were not disappointed in her.

I then asked Jenny to collect feedback about herself from people whose opinions she trusted and respected, and who would be scrupulously honest. She sent out the following questions to them:

- What do you most admire about me?
- What do you consider to be my greatest strength?
- What do you consider to be my greatest achievement?
- What one thing could I change for my own benefit?
- What one word sums me up for you?

When she received the responses, it was amazing for her to see their similarity. Almost all the respondents said the same positive things about her; namely that she was very bright and often thought of things that others missed. They were also consistent in stating that she needed to believe in herself more. Faced with such compelling and consistent data, it was hard for her to argue with it, especially as it had come from people that she had selected specifically for their honesty and good judgement.

Further Sessions

After several weeks, I felt that we had established enough of a trusting relationship for me to mention what came up in my supervision session and so I asked Jenny when she first remembered thinking that other people were better than her. After some time, she remembered the feeling of inadequacy when failing her 11+ exam.

Although she had subsequently done very well at school, gone on to University and achieved a first class honours degree she remained 'hypnotised' by the belief that she was not as good as others because she had failed an exam at age 11. I felt that reviewing this incident was key to Jenny changing her thinking patterns, as I wanted to enable Jenny to bring her adult wisdom and objectivity to the situation.

I invited her to imagine that, as the adult she is today, she could travel back in time and meet 11-year-old Jenny. I asked her what adult Jenny thought about the little girl, what she felt about her and what she would like to say to her. Jenny found this an emotional experience but it enabled her to revisit the incident and separate her adult responses from her 11-year-old responses.

Adult Jenny saw a little child who was doing her best in an important exam at an emotional time. Her parents were getting divorced and Jenny did not have much support or stability at home. Looking with fresh and adult eyes, she was actually amazed at how well she had coped with this situation as a young child. She also saw how resilient and determined young Jenny was because she had not let this setback stop her from getting a brilliant degree.

Adult Jenny realised that she had been negating all her achievements after the failure of her 11+ exam and she exclaimed, 'I have been letting 11-year-old Jenny rule my thinking!' I explained that when we are young and impressionable and we receive a message about ourselves from a perceived 'authority' (in this case the 11+ examination board) we tend to accept it as an unquestionable truth. For Jenny, this was: 'I am not as good as other people'.

Only by revisiting the experience and bringing to bear on it all of our adult wisdom, experience, logic, reasoning and compassion can we re-evaluate the experience and see it for what it was.

This was a revelation for Jenny and, over the next few weeks, she practiced accepting compliments, speaking positively about herself and acknowledging her strengths and weaknesses. When

she received feedback, she learned to stop and consider whether the person giving feedback was someone whose opinion she trusted and respected.

I continue to see Jenny twice a year for what she calls 'an MOT'. She still falls back into old thinking patterns from time to time but usually recognises when this is happening and consciously employs the strategies we used to get her back on track.

TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Many people experience the feeling that they are an impostor and, just as with Jenny, the insecurity this can create is often a major factor that drives success. By constantly striving to prove herself, Jenny impressed her colleagues with her dedication and thoroughness but eventually her Impostor Syndrome spiralled into a chronic lack of confidence and almost paranoia. It was not until Jenny explored the source of her Impostor Syndrome that she could begin to bring this trait into a healthy balance.

Many people with Impostor Syndrome minimise their achievements and maximise their deficiencies. They often put their achievements down to factors outside their control. They might say, '*I was lucky*' or '*if only they knew the real me and what was going on*'. This is not through a sense of humility but simply because they struggle to internalise their achievements. The techniques that follow here are aimed at helping clients acknowledge their qualities and achievements in order to begin giving themselves more credit.

Career Timeline

The 'Impostor Syndrome Gap' is the difference between our perception of self and the perception others have of us.

When faced with a roomful of people, somebody who is trapped by their Impostor Syndrome trait immediately assumes that they know less, and are worth less, than the other people in the room. One way to help your client begin to close that gap is by having them walk you through their career timeline.

Although not essential, this technique works best when you have a good degree of floor space available. Introduce the technique by explaining that you are going to ask them to remember, and then tell you about, some of the high points in their career.

Ask your client to do the following:

1. Stand up and imagine that a timeline of your career is in front of you.
2. Position yourself somewhere in the room to represent where you are at the present moment in your career.
3. Think of about four or five key highlights of your career to date – these could be job moves, promotions, training, qualifications etc.
4. When you have had time to think through your career, walk me down your timeline to the most recent career highlight and recall that moment as vividly as possible. What did you hear, say, see, feel at that point in time? Tell me about it in as much detail as you can.
5. Consider all the strengths and skills you used as well as the achievements, positive feedback and accolades you received at that time.

6. Once you have done this, move one stage further back down your timeline and describe the next significant highlight of your career.

Repeat this process until they are back at the start of their career and ask them to talk about the experience. What did they realise? How can they take all of the positive aspects of their career to date and plan their next steps?

There is an optional, extra stage where you can ask them to walk back up their timeline, noticing any more achievements and high points, back to the present day point. Encourage them to gather up all of the realisations about their career and achievements then look back and acknowledge all that they have achieved.

It may be useful to remember that people who are struggling with Impostor Syndrome are prone to ascribe successes to luck so be sure to focus the client on **themselves** and what **they** did. At each stage of their career timeline, be prepared to ask some prompting questions if needed such as 'What does it say about you?' and 'What qualities did you need to make this happen?'

Powerful Coaching Question:

If you knew that everyone in the room had the same insecurity, how would that change your outlook?

The 5-5-5 Technique

People with Impostor Syndrome have a tendency to dilute or not accept compliments. They will put their successes down to luck or other factors rather than internalise them.

One way to begin to counter this is to ask for and, most importantly, practice accepting compliments. Imagine a compliment as a gift: you wouldn't reject a birthday present would you? So why reject a compliment?

One technique to use with 'impostors' is the '5-5-5' technique. This is a short form of 360° appraisal and, as with all the best techniques, is very simple. It usually works very well as a homework exercise i.e. something that the client does in between coaching sessions.

Give your client the following instructions:

1. Think of **five** people whose opinions you respect and trust and give them a short form with **five** questions to complete. The questions should only take **five** minutes to answer. [See template below]
2. Ask each of the five people to read out their answers to you. (Many people do this exercise over email, which is still beneficial but not as powerful as having that person in the room actually saying the words).
3. Ask them to pause after reading out each of their answers.
4. During that pause, repeat what they have said in the first person in your head. For example if the person says, 'I think your greatest strength is your creativity because you always see options that others would never even consider', you would say to yourself: 'My greatest strength is creativity because I always see options that others would never consider'.
5. Thank them unreservedly for the feedback.

Template for the 5-5-5 questionnaire

Below are five questions that I would like you to answer based on your perception of me. I have chosen you as one of five people whose opinions I trust, value and respect. I hope and expect you to be honest. This will probably take about five minutes of your time and I would like you to write down your answers first. Then, when you are ready, I would like you to tell me what you have written, one answer at a time.

Thank you

What one word or phrase describes me best?
What do you think is my greatest achievement?
What do you value most about me?
What one thing could I change for my own benefit?
What do you believe to be my greatest strength?

A note on feedback from others

People with Impostor Syndrome tend to take feedback, and especially criticism, too personally.

As coach, it can be useful to help your client consciously deconstruct feedback that they receive. The feedback should be interpreted as about the result, outcome or action rather than them as a person. Just because a child did something naughty does not make them a naughty child. Equally, they may have made a decision that didn't turn out the way they wanted it to. That doesn't make them a bad decision-maker, let alone a bad leader or a bad person.

Feedback is rarely true or false either and, because of this, coaches should encourage their clients to assess the 'credibility of the witness' and help them filter any subjectivity or bias. Finally, it is also important for coaches to help their clients see feedback as an opportunity to improve, rather than an eternal judgement upon them. This is especially important in cases of Impostor Syndrome.

Powerful Coaching Question:

Which of your assumptions about yourself would your good friends challenge?

Magazine Interview

It is easier to be fair and generous to yourself when you are looking through someone else's eyes.

Because of this, another helpful homework exercise for people with Impostor Syndrome is the magazine interview.

Ask your client to imagine that they have been interviewed by a magazine of their choice. Encourage your client to view themselves through the eyes of the interviewer, who wants to show your client in the best possible light, showcasing all of their skills, career highlights and qualities in order to inspire their readers.

Ask your client to write the interview in the third person, including some photographs, and bring it to the next session. It is even more powerful if they are prepared to read it out to you.

As this exercise is positioned to highlight our strengths in order to inspire others, we are less able to negate our achievements. In essence, this technique gives your client a legitimate device to enable them to be positive about themselves.

If they are finding it difficult, you could prompt them with questions such as:

- What is unique about this person?
- What details of their life have set them apart from others?
- What were the reasons for them taking the path they took?
- What obstacles have they overcome along the way?
- What are the key personal characteristics that have been valuable to them?

- Who would you ask for a background quote and what would they say?

Powerful Coaching Question:

How would you describe yourself if you were being as kind and generous to yourself as you are to your friends?

THE INTERVIEW

Joe Lynam

A major component of Impostor Syndrome is the inability for sufferers to own their own successes. Instead they attribute their successes to luck, fate or other people's contributions. In the following interview with Joe Lynam, a business correspondent working for the BBC in the United Kingdom, you will notice the word 'luck' comes up a lot. Joe is a presenter on the BBC's flagship Today programme – having previously been a correspondent with Newsnight, BBC Breakfast TV and Radio Five Live among others. Before becoming a journalist, Joe ran a chain of pubs in Germany in the 1990s and speaks fluent German, Dutch and Italian. Joe has broken many stories of national and international importance, especially relating to the banking and Eurozone crises of 2008-2012. Despite his successes, throughout his career Joe regularly found himself thinking, 'this is as good as it's going to get'. Thanks to a couple of key events, he managed to construct a strategy to bring his Impostor Syndrome trait into balance.

'I was being interviewed live on the BBC *Ten O'Clock News* when I suddenly froze after being asked a question. My mind went blank and I literally didn't know what to say. I had my notes below me but I felt as if I couldn't look down, as it would have underlined my ineptitude. Instead I just sat there unable to speak for what felt like a lifetime. I felt myself going white and thought to myself, 'That's it. It's all over. My dream job at the BBC has gone.' I couldn't sleep that night and I couldn't bring myself to watch it. My fiancée Riina tried to tell me that actually it was fine, that it was actually only a second and a half and that nobody thought anything of it, but in my mind I had 'died' on screen. The next day I rang my editor and apologised and his reaction was: 'Sorry for what?'

Joe Lynam is an experienced correspondent for the BBC, but he tells me that he got the job almost completely because of luck:

'I hated my previous job and, even though I had a mortgage to pay, I decided I couldn't take it any more and quit. This was in 1999 and at the height of the Dot Com boom. I knew nothing about technology but happened to know some people who did and so got them round, plied them with wine and got them to teach me. The next day I wrote an 800-word piece about technology and sent it off to Ireland's business bible, *Business & Finance* magazine, claiming to be a technology correspondent. There was so much demand for content in those days that I got a job writing about technology immediately.'

'Not long after that I bumped into a friend of a friend who was a senior producer of a show called *The Last Word* on the Irish National Radio channel Today FM, and I suggested that he should do a tech show. He told me to put my idea on paper and send it to him. I didn't actually think he would follow up but I sent him my idea anyway and *The Tech Show* was born.'

He attributes both of these events to luck rather than his efforts – a common trait of Impostor Syndrome – and then goes on to say that it was a lucky break that led to him being nominated for Journalist of the Year. He also says that it was luck that he happened to pick

up the *Guardian* newspaper one day and see an advert for a job at the BBC, and how it was lucky that they were rapidly hiring at the time he applied.

'When I got the job it felt like the left-side of my body had gone numb, almost like a stroke. I was so happy that I was shaking too much to call them back. Once I had the job offer in writing and knew it wasn't a joke I called them back and asked them why they had given me the job because my interview was a disaster!'

When I call Joe out on how his success could be explained in other ways than good fortune, he says that it was a big moment when the interviewer said that it was some skills Joe wasn't aware of that caused them to offer him the job. He then tells me what he believes to be the three keys to success:

'You have to have a modicum of talent, that's true, but a lot of success is down to luck. The third factor is perseverance. I took a lot of knocks after I got my foot in the door at the BBC, but this was where I dreamed of working so I wasn't going to give it up easily. I came from a poorly regarded school and a modest university by international standards (not Eton, Harrow or Oxbridge for example). This, and the fact that I presumed that an Irish accent wasn't exactly fashionable at the time, meant that I had to work hard.'

Joe comes from a broadcasting family and despite running a chain of pubs in Germany in his early 20s, he always knew that he wanted to be in broadcasting. He describes his father as a talented presenter, but one who couldn't handle his nerves.

'He would worry all day before a three-minute slot. We wouldn't be able to talk to him because he was so stressed. And then, afterwards, to take the edge off, he would have a few beers. Eventually he quit broadcasting and focused on his more comfortable job with the Irish Tourist Board. I knew, even aged 10 or 11, that this wasn't right and I think it taught me that talent alone isn't enough to succeed in broadcasting.'

Joe and I discuss the possibility that this is where his insecurity came from: the fear that you might never be good enough and that something great might be taken away from you.

I ask him about his scariest moment and he tells me about a time in October 2010, in the midst of the financial crisis, when he had broken the story on the *Six O'Clock News* that Ireland was in negotiations with the EU about getting a bail out.

'I was due to break this story again on the *Ten O'Clock News* that night but, just before we were about to go live, the Irish government – a democratically elected and credible Western government – came out and flatly denied it. They effectively called me a liar and I knew my career was on the line. I had double-checked and triple-checked my sources and eventually decided to put my neck on the line and run with it.'

I want to know what the turning point was that changed him from the rabbit in the headlights of his early career to the person confident enough to back themselves against a government calling him a liar. He reflects that this was arguably the point where he really had to evaluate whether he was an impostor or not. Previously he had relied on perseverance to make up for when he wasn't being lucky, but now he had to look to his talent, or at least objectively evaluate his talent against other people's.

'Eventually I realised that governments are just a collection of humans too – they make mistakes and they lie just like any other humans. I was confident that I had done my due diligence and in my heart I knew I was right.'

Unwittingly, Joe had employed a common tactic for dealing with Impostor Syndrome. He had levelled the playing field by bringing others – in this case the Irish government – down from the pedestal on which he had previously placed them. A similar thing happened in 2003 when he was accidentally given an 'access all areas' pass to the World Economic Forum in Davos. He tells me about being in a room with the OPEC Secretary General, Prime Ministers and

Heads of State and, because the press weren't allowed in, they had their guard down.

'I looked at these important, powerful people without their entourage and the professional face they put on when they know they are on camera. Some of them were sitting on their own looking nervous, sheepish even, and I realised they are just human beings.'

So normalisation was a big help to him too. Was there anything else that helped him throw off his Impostor Syndrome?

He thinks about it and tells me about a time when he was being interviewed about Microsoft's row with the European Commission.

'The main presenter was Oliver Scott, who had a big and somewhat fearsome reputation. I had prepared the script with the questions he would ask me, and the answers I would give. As I was settling in, I handed him the script. Oliver took the script from me, smiled and, while looking me in the eye, dropped the script into the bin.'

Joe explains that part of Scott's fearsome reputation came from the fact that he often disregarded scripts.

'I could feel the colour drain from my cheeks and I imagined dying on air for the second time as he fired me a question that I hadn't prepared an answer for. My over-riding thought was that I HAD to get this right. And I remember my mother's voice in my head telling me that I would do it and that I would do it right. Luckily I had done a lot of research and so I could answer the question.'

I highlight to him that most people wouldn't put the fact that he had researched a topic that he was reporting on down to luck and then ask him about the significance of his mother's voice.

'My mother was where I got my inner steel from if you like. She always used to say to me that 'Shy bairns get nae sweets' and it was this that gave me the confidence to push on through the insecurities that I had. Every time I got a promotion – even when I joined the

BBC on the absolute bottom rung as a 'meet and greet' - I thought that it might prove to be the high watermark of my career; that this was as good as it would ever get, so I might as well enjoy it - but my mother always said that this wouldn't be the case.'

I ask him what else helped him deal with his self-doubt and he says how valuable it was for him to know how common self-doubt is.

'I was very lucky to have an inspirational uncle as a mentor,' he says. His uncle – Des Lynam – is a legendary UK sports presenter. 'I was amazed to find out how much self-doubt he had because, when you looked at him on screen, he seemed so calm and in control – a natural. I realised that if even he can doubt himself then it can't be that strange that I doubt myself.'

He also explains that 'Uncle Des' was one of the reasons why he was able to cope with Oliver Scott's interview.

'He (Des) told me that you can't be everything to everyone, so I should specialise in something. I used to spend hours and hours reading encyclopaedias in my grandparents' house in Donegal to pick up random facts about as many topics as I could in order to be able to join in conversations and appear intelligent, but getting a depth of knowledge in one area was the best thing I ever did and certainly gave me more confidence in myself.'

His final piece of advice is to remember that:

'I've been lucky enough to have people, such as my fiancée Riina, who will give me a cold, objective evaluation of my performance. Making sure that you are constantly getting perspective is invaluable.'

'You're never as good or never as bad as you think you are.'