

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE RIGHT COACHING VENUE



FACTSHEET

Exploring how the environment can impact on the effectiveness of coaching



The natural environment employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquilizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system.



F. L. Olmsted, (1865)
The Value and Care of Parks

Where does most coaching take place? In a client's office, in a meeting room down the corridor, a local coffee shop or hotel lounge? How much thought goes into the selection of our coaching venues other than geographical convenience and minimising costs for the client? A journey through current coaching literature and thinking would suggest that the coaching community doesn't see the need to explore this issue in any depth, given the distinct lack of writing or discussion on the subject. Our research shows, however, that the places in which we coach can have a huge impact on the quality of the experience for both coach and the coachee.

The psychology of environment

Environmental Psychology has been exploring the impact of environments on the human psyche for five decades and what it shows us is that 'place really does matter.'

- We all perceive our local surroundings in different ways based on our previous life experiences and sensory preferences. This has a direct impact on the emotional and cognitive processing that ensues and thus the behaviours that we exhibit in these environments.
- Place Attachment (PA) Theory explains why we attach personal importance (both negative and positive) to particular places. They may fulfil physical needs, giving a sense of safety and security; they may offer necessary conditions for achieving personal goals; or they may provide continuity, matching our personal values and representing us or creating a sense of belonging.

- The Reasonable Person Model described by Steven and Rachel Kaplan takes Place Attachment a step further by suggesting that "people are more reasonable, cooperative, helpful and satisfied when their environment supports their basic informational needs".
- The research shows that the environment in which a person is learning can have a huge impact on their psychological state and therefore how open to learning they are.

The benefits of the right environment

- **Better coaching** – A key skill to effective coaching is being able to have focused attention and be wholly present and 'in the moment' with a client. The practice of 'mindfulness' is seen as the remedy to reducing a coach's 'inner dialogue' so that they can focus. This is much easier to do without distractions.
- **More issues tackled** – Numerous neuroscience studies demonstrate that we don't have as much control over our levels of focus as we might think. Distractions, or 'novel sensory inputs' such as high volumes, sudden movements, bright flashes or physical discomfort can easily break through a coach's or coachee's attention. The right type of venue would minimise these distractions allowing for more to be achieved in a shorter time.
- **More meaningful discussions** – Whilst Place Attachment can make somebody feel safe and secure in a particular place, it can also make somebody feel insecure. Coaching in a client's office for example might result in them feeling less willing to be honest about their real issues.



Many of the fascinations afforded by the natural setting qualify as 'soft' fascinations: clouds, sunsets, snow patterns, the motion of the leaves in the breeze – these readily hold the attention, but in an undramatic fashion. Attending to these patterns is effortless, and they leave ample opportunity for thinking about other things.



S. Kaplan, (1995)

*The Restorative Benefits of Nature:
Toward an Integrative Framework*

Coaching away from the office may give them the freedom to talk candidly and focus on the key issues for them.

- **Reduced stress** – Attention Restoration Theory asserts that that looking at scenes of nature can reduce stress. Coaching in the right environment - for example the outdoors - could mean that coachees return back to work feeling less stressed, more rested and therefore able to concentrate more.

What does the right venue look like?

So what would coaching in the right environment look like? Our research and experience has indicated that the most successful coaching happens under the following conditions:

- An exploration of the role of environment carried out by coaches in detail with their clients at the start of the relationship as part of the contracting stage.

- The coach having helped their client understand what their personal PA preferences are. They can then choose the most appropriate venue together.
- Time invested in finding spaces that are more inspirational for the client, more creative and that allow mind wandering to occur, thus generating a more impactful coaching encounter.
- Physical separation from the environment in which a client works to environment in which they are being coached.
- In the natural environment – even a park in the city centre is preferable to being in an office. The Biophilia hypothesis, Attention Restoration Theory and the Japanese 'Shinrin-yoku' (forest-bathing) have all empirically shown how exposure with nature, and in an environment informed by the preferences of the individual, can have a significant, positive impact on both their physical and emotional states.