

## Perspectives: That's One Way to Look at It

This is a very simple, but sometimes-elusive truth: The way we look at things makes a difference. Here is a familiar, general example: "Blondes have more fun." Notice your tendency to take a stand, as if this is either true or false. It doesn't really matter. What matters is, if you take this on as a belief, or a way of looking at life situations, things are colored in a certain way. If you're a blonde, you probably expect to have more fun. If you're not a blonde you're either wishing you could be one, lamenting your bad fortune, or coming up with an alternative perspective that lets you have fun too!

Perspectives are expressions of a particular orientation to a topic. If I ask you to think of your life right now, today, in terms of the seasons of the year, would you say this is a "winter" time in your life? Spring? Autumn? Or summer? I don't even have to know exactly what you mean by your definition. Each of these is a perspective, a different way of looking at the same data: your life. If you're going to a meeting, or family gathering, or out on a date and you are "dreading it," you are in a perspective. The circumstances of the event will be essentially the same no matter what perspective you are in, AND your way of looking at the situation will have enormous impact.

Complete these sentences to notice your perspective:

- Being single is...
- The holiday time of year is always...
- Entertaining friends in my home is...

Notice an inclination to want to argue with these statements or determine if they are "really" true or "really" false.

It doesn't matter. There may be some truth in them, just as there is some truth in lots of alternative perspectives. You are not choosing "The One" that is true as if the others must be false. At this stage you are simply expanding the range of ways you can look at this situation by creating a universe of possibilities that are also true. Too often we take the historical experience and make it into "the way I am" or "the way IT is" whatever that situation is. As if we were powerless to have it any other way.

Here are some examples. No doubt you can think of a dozen more easily from your own life or from what you have heard clients say.

- "Everybody knows that, if you work in corporations, you have to be a team player. You have to sacrifice yourself for the good of the team."
- "I'm just no good at selling myself."

- “Either you’re committed to your career or you’re committed to being in a relationship. You can’t have both, successfully.”
- “It’s hopeless. Everybody knows how hard it is for women over 30 to find a husband. You’ve seen the statistics. There was even an article in Time magazine about it.”
- “It’s scary to ask for money.”
- “I’m a freelance designer. I can’t turn down work — not from my best clients.”
- “Really, you have no idea what it’s like to be a single parent. With my schedule I just can’t get in the exercise I need to be really healthy...”

As coaches, part of our job is to tune our ear to these absolute statements and recognize that they are merely one way of looking at the situation. There are other ways of looking which are also true; it’s just that often the client has an automatic response. The goal of the coaching at this early stage is to hear the default perspective and be curious about it. “What is it like, client, to look at your situation from that point of view?” Really stay in this question for a while so that clients have a deeper experience of this automatic perspective; they are actually awake to the way they look at this part of their lives rather than asleep. Explore the territory here: What does it get you? What’s the payoff? What’s the cost?

Then look for other alternatives that are also true. These last four words are important. As coach you are looking for alternative perspectives that are also true for that client.

Here are some tips for working with perspectives with clients:

1. Tune your own ear to listen for underlying assumptions that you go along with as if they are the truth — maybe they are beliefs you hold too, but your job is to test those underlying assumptions and be curious. For example, when your client says, “working full time and going to school nights, volunteering on Sundays... I’m overwhelmed.” Out of sympathy for their busy life you might just nod right along with this assessment — “yeah, it really is overwhelming.” If you buy into this perspective then all of the coaching and all of the resulting action comes out of a perspective called “I’m overwhelmed.” What would another perspective be that is also true? How about something like: “I’m living my fulfilling life, today.”
2. It’s not enough to come up with only one other alternative. That becomes an “either/or” game — a very limited assortment of choices. Look for a number of alternative perspectives. One tool you can use is the wheel divided into eight segments. It’s an easy graphic way of expanding perspectives and keeping track of them with the client. Note that you are not required to find eight every time.
3. Looking for perspectives is not about finding the “Pollyanna” perspective, the one where the client now feels good about his or her life or situation. Your job is not to make the client feel better but to have the client explore his or her experience and expand the ways of looking at it. You might ask your client for a perspective on the situation from his or her Captain and Crew... or in contrast, what is your Saboteur’s perspective on this situation?... Or, who is an important person who has great wisdom; what perspective would that person give you? What’s the perspective of a six year old? These are all ways to look at the same circumstances from different points of view.