

# The body knows

## the pathway to implicit knowledge

Embodiment practitioners **Tsafi Lederman** and **Jenny Stacey** demonstrate how arts practices and somatic processes can be used to help clients access 'non-conscious' knowledge.

**E**mbodied coaching is a method that can help clients access their implicit 'non-conscious' knowledge and explore how it influences their explicit conscious knowledge, rational decision-making, behaviour, habits and relationships. Implicit knowledge is knowledge that is not processed consciously; it is something we 'know' but cannot easily express in words.

Embodied coaching can assist the process of acquiring this tacit information and bringing it into consciousness by accessing levels of awareness that are beyond thinking. This is achieved through an exploration of two primary pathways that can lead to implicit knowledge: focusing on body processes, and exploring image and metaphor using the arts. Both of these pathways act as a bridge between implicit and explicit knowledge, supporting communication and transformation. They allow expression that may not otherwise be possible and open the door for exploration of many layers of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

The term embodiment in this context refers to patterns of behaviour we develop throughout life to manage the world around us. These patterns have a physical manifestation expressed in body processes such as posture, movement, tone of voice and breath that are

often not in our awareness. We believe that change can be achieved more readily when the individual becomes more aware of these body processes and is able to recognise and integrate their embodied self.

### The child in the adult

This case study demonstrates how implicit knowledge from the body serves to inform the explicit and is used to promote behavioural relational change. Both the case studies that follow are fictional composites of various clients.

John works for an advertising agency in central London. He gets on with most of his colleagues and enjoys work. The only downside to his job is his relationship with his boss, Kevin. John's sense is that Kevin 'enjoys' belittling him whenever he gets the chance, which makes it difficult when John has to report to him. John decides to work with a coach, with the aim of managing and improving his working relationship with Kevin.

In one session John describes feeling worthless around Kevin: 'I know I am good at my job, but when Kevin's around I just feel useless and can't get the words out. I get so anxious and it's hard to shake that off.'

The coach asks John to imagine that he is about to meet Kevin. She asks John to focus his

attention on his body sensations and his 'felt sense'.<sup>2</sup> John begins to describe the muscles in his chest contracting, forcing his posture downwards and causing him to feel physically as well as mentally smaller. His breath is shallower and he finds it difficult to speak.

The coach asks if this experience is familiar. John says that this sensation reminds him of how he used to feel at boarding school, where he was bullied by some of the older boys. He always felt worthless around them, and wanted to disappear and hide in the hope that they would not notice him. Although this experience was from a different time in his life, John is re-enacting this body experience in Kevin's presence - ie contracting and making himself smaller, as if he were a nine-year-old all over again.

During further exploration of this relational dynamic, the coach observes how John is sitting while he talks. His shoulders are stooped and unconsciously he is stretching out his arm as if he is physically pushing somebody away with his palm, expanding and creating a boundary around his physical space. The coach asks him to be aware of the hand movements and attribute a word or statement that would accompany this gesture. John calls out 'Stop it' and, as he is speaking, a new movement and bodily posture emerges. He is now sitting erect, with his head







Embodied coaching can be used to raise the coach's awareness of their own implicit and explicit knowledge and their counter-transferential material in relation to the client



up, and maintaining eye contact with the coach. The coach notices this and invites John to explore this change in his body. John says, 'I now feel like an adult - my real age.'

The coach asks John to remain in the new posture and describe the difference in sensations. John describes his legs feeling strong and steady, with a sense of grounding. His chest

**Figure 1**



### Caught in the fishbowl

In this case study we demonstrate how sensation from the body and use of image and metaphor serve to help the client implement change at work.

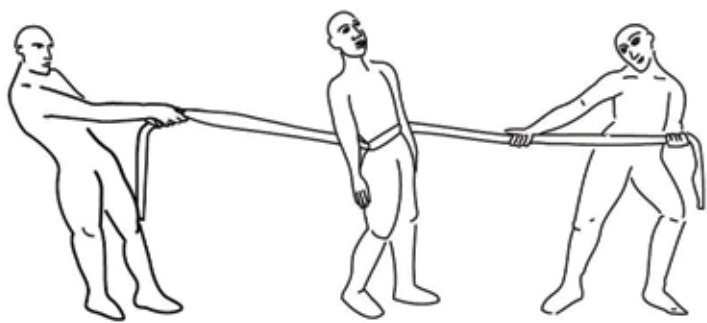
Maria is a manager in the public sector and her organisation has been undergoing many changes in personnel since the recession. Several people at her level have been made

feels more expanded, his breathing is easier and deeper and his voice less strained. He has a sense of being more robust and centred in his body. With this new awareness, John and his coach work on applying this physical expression/behaviour into an embodied way of being - one that he can keep in mind when confronted by Kevin: an embodied adult self.

Our embodied patterns are often automatic, learned behaviour from the past that can play out in the present without our awareness.<sup>3</sup> When John becomes more aware of his habitual reaction around Kevin, he is able to explore new ways of being by using his body process to inform and support this change. John learns to identify the sensations that are triggered in his body when relating to Kevin and how they are linked to his past. This becomes an embodied change that allows John to reassert his embodied presence in relationships: he no longer has to regress when working with Kevin.

Using tacit knowledge and working with the body in coaching helps the client understand the feelings and experiences of the body. Our bodies 'know more than we can tell'.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 2**



redundant and the company is now employing young graduates. Maria has been taking on more responsibility for training the new workers, without any professional or financial recognition of her contribution. This situation has resulted in Maria experiencing high levels of anxiety and stress. Following a conversation with her manager, Maria has secured six coaching sessions with an external coach.

During one session the coach asks Maria to focus on her physical experience as she is talking about her difficulties. Maria appears anxious and describes a sensation of breathlessness when talking about her job. The coach asks her if she has an image of herself at work. Maria comes up with an image of a fish in a fishbowl, and then adds that the bowl is too small. Using the image that emerges from her body experience, the coach asks Maria to draw her image. She draws a small bowl with a large golden fish surrounded by water plants (Figure 1). Looking at the picture, Maria realises there is not enough space in the bowl for the fish. Referring to the image, the coach asks Maria to describe what it is like for the fish. Maria replies: 'It's just too big for this bowl now. It can hardly swim and when it does it just sees the same things over and over again. The water plants are taking up all the room and all the oxygen... they are growing everywhere... The fish can hardly breathe...'

As she looks at the image, Maria begins to get in touch with the feelings surrounding her situation and says: 'It is clearly too crowded in there... the fish can't grow any more in this fishbowl.' Consequently she realises how

frustrated she feels at work and how she has out-grown the organisation. Before commencing the coaching sessions, Maria was aware that she was stressed at work. However, by exploring her body process and the emerging images, she has expanded her insight and understanding through accessing this layer of implicit knowledge.

In the next session Maria is feeling clearer about the situation at work and aware of the complexity of implementing a change. Here, the coach provides Maria with a ready-made drawing of a person being pulled by ropes in opposite directions (Figure 2). Maria uses this image to explore the conflict between wanting to develop professionally and feeling restricted at work, as well as her dilemma of whether to stay or leave her job. By using the drawing she externalises her internal dialogue, with each side of the drawing providing an opposing argument to the dilemma. Using the arts in this way helps Maria raise her awareness and allows her to move on to explore her options about making a change.

Maria's sessions demonstrate a progression from body processes to an exploration of images that spontaneously emerge from the unconscious. These are externalised by drawing and, while looking at the picture, the coach and client can further develop their understanding and reflections of Maria's internal and external dynamics.

Image and metaphor are used to organise and express our experiences and communicate our thoughts and feelings.<sup>5</sup> They allow expression that may not be possible otherwise, enabling layers of meaning to emerge and be explored. Images can provide containment by offering distance from experiences, while paradoxically allowing the person to get more in touch with their feelings. They can allow a client to talk about an uncomfortable situation from a comfortable position. For example, by drawing or choosing an image, the client can detach herself from the words and feelings that connect her too strongly to the situation and, instead, attribute them to a fictitious figure on the page. The client can imagine what the figure might say and extend empathy as she gives her a voice, allowing the story and feelings to emerge. In this process, what was internal is now external,

enabling a new perspective.

Images can also be used when exploring the change process, allowing clients to get in touch with drives and blocks and supporting problem solving. They can offer clients a connection with their creative, curious and playful selves. They can be also used to embody the client's hopes and dreams as a rehearsal for the future.

Working with the arts doesn't require any artistic ability from either the coach or the client. Images can be drawn, imagined or used as a figure of speech. While observing the image, the coach can enquire into what is going on in the picture, using the metaphor to support as well as challenge the client.

### The coaching relationship

It is important to have a secure coaching relationship when working with this creative approach and using the methods described above. The client needs to feel safe in the coaching relationship<sup>6</sup> to be able to take risks and experiment with using the arts and the body. Working in this way should be introduced to the client and discussed when contracting. These creative methods are co-created<sup>7</sup> and emerge from the material that the client brings to the coaching sessions.

As with any form of coaching, we believe that it is essential for coaches using embodiment methods to have a good level of self-awareness. Bluckert points out that the personal development of the coach is as important as theory and skill development.<sup>8</sup>

The embodied coaching method can also be used to raise the coach's awareness of their own implicit and explicit knowledge and their counter-transferential material in relation to the client. Furthermore, the coach can use their own body processes and images to look at the coaching relationship. At times the coach may choose to share these experiences with the client (use of self). However, it is essential for the coach to feel comfortable and familiar with this approach before using it as an additional resource in their coaching practice.

Embodied coaching methods can expand the scope of practice and provide deeper understanding and reflection of the dynamics in coaching, enabling clients to discover more and

expand their repertoire beyond known restrictive patterns, assist them in their decision making, improve working relations and support them in the process of change.

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