Life coaching: an interpreter’s experience

In addition to my freelance interpreting career of more than twenty years, for some years now I have also been working as a personal coach. I wanted to make changes to my life, and had some coaching.

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Essentially, it's about change. Here, I set out what life coaching involves, and then tell you about some of the approaches used that might be stimulating to interpreters seeking some sort of change.

Coaching, like interpreting, is often misunderstood. The most common idea is that coaching is a form of counselling, and therefore only for people "with problems". In fact, coaching focuses on the future, setting clear goals to achieve more or make big changes. A person needs to be psychologically and emotionally settled to engage in such a process, and most clients are already successful people who want more from life. Counselling addresses primarily emotional issues and can involve unpicking the past in order to deal with pain and self-destructive habits.

Another misconception is that a coach tells you what to do, or gives you advice. Essentially what a coach does is create a productive thinking space between two individuals, in which the clients can re-frame and develop their ideas and feelings about themselves. The coach is not a well-meaning friend, family member or manager, all figures who can tend to focus on advice and are convinced that they have the right solution to the issue. A coach often doesn't know much about the client's profession or life circumstances; they may come to discover a great deal through the coaching relationship, but that lack of knowledge provides the essential objectivity needed to focus on exploring the client's dilemmas, feelings, goals and obstacles. The core idea is that the clients have the answer to their own dilemma; if the coach empowers them to think better and facilitates that process, they will find that answer and many more besides.

So, how do we achieve change? The life coaching community focuses on self-awareness as the key to better performance and greater satisfaction. I would add self-belief to that. Anyone can improve their self-awareness, and can seek support in developing self-belief. Interpreters are no exception. Interpreting is a long-term career, with many years of study and training, so it is a lucky interpreter indeed who never experiences a desire for change at some point in their career. I've had many booth conversations about change, and could identify easily with most of them. I've also heard interpreting described as "the best job in the world" - not very reassuring if one is going through a mid-career crisis! So, what would a life coach suggest as an approach to each of the following interpreter dilemmas?

- I'd like to do something else - but I think I'm hooked on interpreting!
- I thought I was going to help people - but this feels so impersonal.
- I'd like to change - but I don't think I can do anything else.
- I thought freelance meant freedom - but I'm a slave to my diary!
- I love languages, but I feel strangely bored and frustrated.
When we think about what brought us to a given career path, we often focus on external facts and events - a particular teacher who inspired us, passing an exam, or a spell living abroad as a child. These are not unimportant, but there are so many other elements within us that have led us to where we are now. They can be summed up as personality preferences, values, behaviours and habits. Life coaching will highlight all of these and ask a client to reflect on them.

Psychometric tests help us gain an understanding of our personality preferences: the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), for example, is widely used in corporate and Government circles to help individuals understand themselves better and make the right choices. It's powerful stuff, ranging from our relationship with the rest of the world (extraversion vs. introversion), to how we like to take in information and how we make decisions. For an interpreter, understanding the difference between extraversion and introversion (one of the four main MBTI preferences) can be the key to understanding why we feel a strong desire to be more involved, have a higher profile or just be given the space to grapple with the puzzle of interpreting without interference. According to Myers and Briggs, an extrovert is someone who gets their energy from the outside world, who likes to work out their ideas by talking them through, and who tends to have a broad level of interest in many subjects.

Recognise yourself? An introvert is someone who gets their energy from their internal world - their own thoughts, ideas, and aims. They benefit from time to reflect, work out problems by analysing them alone and tend to have a deep interest in a few subjects. Could that be you? Being good at talking doesn't make you an extrovert, and enjoying analysis doesn't make you an introvert. Confused? Take the test yourself - available on the Internet - and find out how it relates to you and your professional choices.

Our values are powerful forces, often deeply buried, but can be so important in helping us understand why we do what we do. If I ask a client what their values are, they'll probably say something like integrity, honesty and professionalism. When probed further, we find values like affiliation (the importance of being liked or accepted by others), ambition, competition, happiness, and success. I could add many more, such as making a difference, helping others, and personal growth, which I find many clients have not yet begun to fulfil. Interpreters are often socially engaged and committed individuals, and for them the impersonal environment of the large global conference circuit can be frustrating. Likewise, being part of a highly specialised profession can be frustrating if we are ambitious in a conventional sense. These are generalised examples, but all these feelings can be made more manageable when we understand where they come from. How do you think your professional role fits with your values?

The word "habit" conjures up biting one's nails or fiddling with a pen while talking. But "life habits" as I would call them have a profound effect. They can stop us from achieving our aims and ambitions. If we take something we regard as a problem, or a personal defect, and decide to approach it as a habit such as nail-biting, we can achieve major breakthroughs. Diary management is often a "problem" for the busy freelance interpreter - although it is great to be in demand, deciding to turn down work can seem an impossible task. We end up overworked and frazzled, and with an underlying sense of powerlessness. The emotional effect of this can be very harmful. There are no doubt psychological causes (we were brought up to work hard, we fear competition), but sometimes choosing a different approach on a practical level, such as managing the diary in a different way, blocking out time for holidays and actually booking something up, or prioritising certain contracts can make a huge difference. This sounds obvious, but it's amazing how people can carry on burdened by their situation for years just because they've never tried to change a basic habit. On a more psychological level, the damaging habit of failing to recognise one's own successes can be re-framed. There will always be a colleague who has more working languages, or who did that speech so brilliantly, and we easily feel inadequate. In thinking about all these external factors, we
don't take enough time to mentally record our own successes and enjoy them. And yet it is not so difficult to re-train our thought processes using simple exercises.

Our behaviour is also crucial to our self-concept - and to our perceived desire for change. It is triggered by external events, other people and by our own attitude. Spending some time working out what triggers us to behave in a certain way, whether it be another person, a situation or a feeling, can make all the difference to our experience of professional life. Life coaches often introduce clients to tools like Transactional Analysis (developed by Dr Eric Berne), and Assertiveness Training to help them understand and modify their own behaviours without compromising their values and beliefs. One of the most helpful discoveries I made through having coaching myself was that you can't change other people, but you can change your behaviour. Doing so can change everyone's reaction to you in turn, and radically alter your experience of life and work. It might make you realise that you don't want to give up "the perfect job" after all...

For many clients, awareness of the above elements is enough in itself to generate self-acceptance, and therefore increased confidence and satisfaction. With the help of a good coach, individuals can achieve much higher levels of confidence than they thought possible, and are then empowered to fulfil their dreams.

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