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Time

TODAY'S SENIOR EXECUTIVES MAINLY SHARE THE principal issues of a huge workload and a perceived lack of time. What is also true is that, through coaching, this invariably changes in a remarkable way without loss of impact, results or esteem. How is that possible?

John is Group HR Director of an internationally significant manufacturing business in the aviation sector. When I met with him it was clear that he was an effective individual with a great deal of knowledge and experience. He was the second highest paid director in the business, a consistently high performer. The cost side to this was the state of his health (hypertension) and his sense of wellbeing. John was working at least 50 percent more than his contracted commitment, traveling a great deal and trying to live in two different locations. Within a few hours of coaching over a month or so, he had made a significant number of changes. These included leaving work by 6 p.m. on most days when not traveling, taking up

his preferred sports and hobbies again, arranging to set up an office near his home and work from there most Mondays and Fridays (thus having four days near home rather than one and a half), setting up a new home-from-home in his other location rather than living in a hotel, resigning from a number of operational meetings and seconding members of his team to other meetings where appropriate.

Kate was a comparatively young, Technology Development Director in a major electronics business and had numerous Project Heads reporting to her. Kate told me over a few hours of coaching that she had been running high-capex projects for a few years but it had been noted by her COO that her position at Board now required a more strategic and holistic application of her knowledge and experience. Also, Kate had leap-frogged over colleagues, and a number of very competent people now reported to Kate or to her direct reports. This was creating ongoing difficulties. Her private life was a mess and she was literally married to the business.

Within a few hours of coaching over two or three months, Kate had made enormous progress. Her Project Heads were brought together to develop strategic networking opportunities for co-work and relationship management with colleagues in other countries. At the next level down, technical people were seconded in and out of the organization to improve company-to-company relations and impact on best practice. Kate started to turn down corporate representative opportunities at the many hospitality functions available to senior members in the business and went back to her main sport. She stopped smoking and spent more time with her children.

She developed far-reaching strategic plans for the integration of technology across the businesses and was promoted within three months to the International Board.

These events are typical. We all know the key pressures on anyone's time, and the standard answers, and still we work 20, 30 or 40 hours a week more than we should. So what stops so many of us from changing that?

Lock-in syndrome

The 'lock-in syndrome' (LIS) is a patterned response to pressure of work (whether externally real or self-generated). As the demands go up, we stretch the day. We start traveling on Sunday evenings, work a few hours each evening when at home, arrive at the office an hour before anyone else to clear the desk and leave two hours later than most people to catch-up on outstanding actions (and needs from peers and immediate bosses).

Once the pattern has started, the intense focus on work and action means that the ability to focus more widely is lost. You are already locked-in. It takes a major catastrophe or critical personal event to stimulate the revaluing of what we do and why we do it. As leaders, it is necessary not to follow the pattern blindly but, on entering that pattern of our own choice and will, we must exercise choice, review the options and, if necessary, back out.

To counteract the effect of lock-in, we need to see a wider picture of what is happening. There are a number of things

that, with awareness, might make a difference and enable us to take control of the situation:

- Recalibrate the relative importance of what we do in the greater context of our contributions in all our work.
- Prioritizing our health and wellbeing to ensure that we stay well and can contribute.
- Rethink the contribution we make to our families or friends.
- Realize that having trained our head to be busy, stillness demands effort of will to become rehabilitated for creative thought.
- Break our workday habits – change the start of each working day as much as possible.
- Work out where our contributions are most essential, setting out areas of essential influence and delegating and withdrawing from unessential functions/demands. Delegate more.
- Think about the skills and competencies of our immediate people (and therefore who is really best able to take over key tasks and when) and the level of support to offer them.

These actions are designed to gain wider perspective and to be calmer and more effective. Breaking workday habits is something we will flesh out in more detail later. It is

important because the lock-in syndrome (LIS) originates from patterned learning where we have lost full personal control.

Fire-fighting

Fire-fighting is the precursor to LIS (when the individual is no longer able to return to a relaxed state of being). Fire-fighting is not wrong per se if consciously chosen as a temporary need with a specific end, and if one can regain one's composure after that need has passed. The danger comes when the 'high' associated with one episode is so exciting¹ that the person is unable to calm down again. Instead, he or she compulsively goes to the next fire-fight, and if there isn't one, tends to make a drama in order to create one. Thus, LIS is a patterned behavior that arises when one starts to go from one fire-fight to the next without a pause for reflection, perspective and the deliberate use of choice. Since patterns often develop subconsciously, there are real dangers in being exposed to situations where multiple and sequential fire-fights are the norm. Repeated fire-fights may lead the person to LIS with no knowledge of how he or she arrived there!

Fire-fights are common in task-oriented businesses running to tight schedules and pressures. Many of us used to associate fire-fighting with lower and middle management, but these days fire-fighting has infected the highest levels in many organizations. Fire-fighting at this level creates incipient

¹Highs are triggered by the release of adrenaline.

weakness. If most of our work is concerned with putting out fires, tactical decisions may be made but the strategic development of the business, in the myriad of areas in which this is essential for sustainability, must fall short. If fire-fighting characterizes the bulk of your work life, what can you do?

Earlier, I suggested changing the beginning of each day. This can start at home or at the hotel. The earlier in the day you make these changes, the better the impact of the result. Patterns are triggered by a sequence of psychological events that run rapidly and sequentially, and usually out of conscious awareness or control. To challenge the pattern, it is necessary to break it at an early part of the sequence. There are many things that can make a difference, including:

- Consider taking a morning walk for about 10 minutes, if you do not already do this. Buying a dog can save your life if it helps you to exercise and slow down. It can also save a relationship if you sometimes share this activity with a partner. If you have no aerobic exercises at present, consider including some in your morning routine.
 - If you take stimulants, such as caffeine (in coffee, tea and chocolate), nicotine (smoking of tobacco), beta-carotene (in fizzy, especially yellow and orange drinks, pastilles and lozenges), then consider starting the day without them and replace them with other desired foods/activities.
 - If you start the day by dealing with mail or email, schedule this activity for later in the morning. Mail requires a series of quick action loops – think–decision–action,
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think–decision–action – and these stimulate the mind into a fire-fighting pattern . . . tda, tda, tda (Figure 1.1). If you get hooked into that cycle, a whole day can be lost. You may have been active, but how productive have you been? And what contribution have you made to life tomorrow, next month, next year or 10 years ahead?

It is best to start each day with a period of reflection. Nobody told you that that was useful before they promoted you again and again! Thoughtful, strategic consideration will also get the mind to work in evolutionary processes rather than a rapid decision mode. With luck, your mind will be more able to return to this strategic work later, even if you are in fire-fighting in between. The mind is like a muscle: use it differently and often and it becomes more flexible, with quicker reactions.

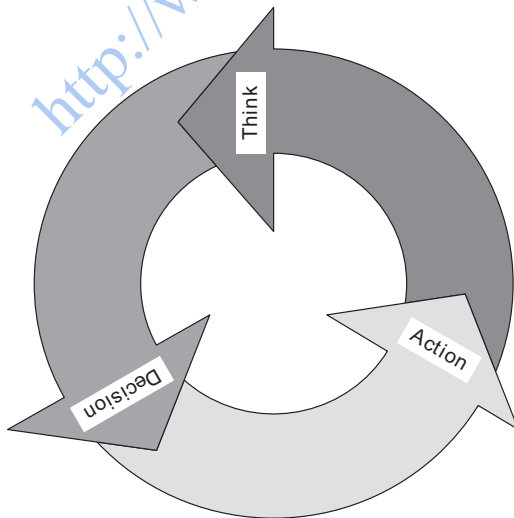


Figure 1.1 TDA fire-fighting cycle

The type of strategic thinking you could address may include:

1. Who else is influential in supporting or undermining my function and what can I do to create a better environment for the success of my function?
2. Which parts of my function could be managed elsewhere (in or outside the business) and are any of these options viable and useful to the business and, if so, what can I do to influence that change or protect that area from a less-effective option?
3. Of the major things that need to be communicated in the next period, when would be the best time to communicate them, who should be involved in advance of that, and how should the communication strategy be planned and carried out?
4. Who misunderstands me, the way I work or my motives, and what might I do to get them on-side?
5. What are the strengths, weaknesses and perceived potential of my immediate reports and what can be done to test their perceived potential and assist them in taking on more responsibility?

These are large aspect questions that demand a period of thought and self-reflection. If you are creating your own questions, make sure that they satisfy these criteria. The demands should not be urgent as this may encourage stress responses and periods of rapid judgment without thinking-through

solutions in significant depth. Urgency will also trigger more fire-fighting.

If you think about your own needs for strategic thinking, how much should you be doing, when should you be doing it, and to what should you be turning your attention? A typical answer adopted by the many people that I coach in senior jobs is to allocate two or more hours a week to these topics. The subjects for strategic thought are updated and planned as part of the process. Here are examples:

- Changing communication strategies
- Career plans
- Internal marketing
- Alliances
- Organizational development
- Support and resources for my team
- Succession planning.

Many of the people I work with on a 1-2-1 basis leave our coaching sessions with diary entries for the whole year blocked out for 'Planning', 'Strategic Development' or other appropriate phrase that suits the culture. They have commitment from their secretaries to book appropriate spaces for this work and to protect those spaces from being regularly captured by others.

Busy heads

Beware the busy head. It can feel great to be active, vital, moving toward goals but this activity, while useful, has not been successful if you look back on any day and think that you did nothing that will look after the needs of your business in six months time or longer. And if you reflect on your day and find that many of your intentions remain unfinished, then the thrill of being busy has reduced your effectiveness.

Leadership demands that we manage our time more effectively. It demands that we understand and act on our personal choices for what we do, how we do it and when we do it. Until we master this thinking and action for ourselves, we are unlikely to be wholly effective in managing those who are different from us in their methods of working and motivation.

The step back

'Step back' is a quick method of gaining objectivity. We have discussed the use of widening the focus in relation to the lock-in syndrome, and 'step back' is another device for checking our mental state and determining whether we are doing as well as we can on any given assignment.

When we notice the signs of fire-fighting, it is helpful to think 'step back'. If you can do this and literally 'step back' then the physical act provides bio-feedback to enhance the effect.

In any case, the pause should be enough to provide a space in which you can ask yourself questions and start some productive processing that will change the way in which you are working. Questions might include:

- Is this the best use of my time now?
- Can I bring other resources to this?
- Is there a more effective way of achieving the actual objective?
- What is most important both now and after completing this task?

Devise your own questions, or adapt these to have the same impact.

Busy bodies

A small number of executives at all levels believe that looking busy makes them appear important. Sadly, this is seldom true; many people are not impressed. In any case, being busy does not have a relationship with good leadership. The executive who cannot flex his diary to meet with staff is not really doing his job. Being late for meetings, making and taking cell-phone calls at every opportunity, and walking quickly from one appointment to another may show high activity but they do not raise confidence in those who know what real leadership should be.

Whether the reason for being busy is a misguided status thing or whether there is an inability to prioritize or manage adequately, the busy body needs to be slowed down – it's time to prioritize, to think where our contribution is most needed and to be effective, and how to support our role more adequately, if necessary. Continuing the busy body syndrome is not a sensible option.

As a matter of interest, I once worked for an American business in which people in its large European operation moved so rapidly around the building that they looked as if they were in a mad walking race. In the US holding company people moved around much more slowly. The difference was enormous. Business was not more relaxed in the USA; it was just that overseas everyone dashed around twice as fast. I decided to ignore that local culture when in the European business, but it took an effort of will not to be caught up in the tide. I have no idea whether it was culturally driven (it was actually a multiracial outfit) or caffeine driven.

Do your people move alertly but in a measured way? Or do they dart about like cats in headlights?

Focus on impact

'The misfortunes hardest to bear are those which never come'

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL

I have adapted the circles of influence and concern (Figure 1.2) from the work of Stephen Covey (1990)² and applied it suc-

²Habit #1: Be proactive.

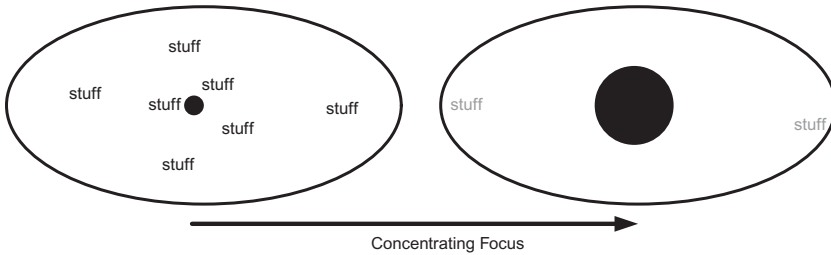


Figure 1.2 Focus for efficacy

cessfully in my coaching and training work with managers and leaders. The model suggests that mental activity is often wasted due to lack of focus and, further, when that happens, the focus should be applied where it will have impact in the world of work.

When we concentrate on 'stuff' that just exists in our work culture but over which, on reflection, we have no chance of effective impact, then we are not being effective. It is wasted time. When we notice ourselves and others doing this, we need to refocus on an area where we do have impact. These simple acts of letting go and refocusing for impact have a fantastic effect – within seconds the 'stuff' is no longer in the picture and we are suddenly being more effective again.

These two steps do depend on having done, at some time, some reflective work on whether the 'stuff' issue (however important emotionally) is something that you can sensibly change. And if there is a chance of doing that, will it be without diminishing your energy for productive work or damaging your status? These are important questions and the answers should determine your action.

The suggestion to refocus on impactful actions seems counter to the measures for getting out of the lock-in syndrome (LIS) where focus is tightly upon work and I advised the use of a wider picture to gain perspective. The biggest difference is that in LIS the focus is roving from one fire to the next without a pause. In that case we need then to widen the focus to gain perspective. Here, we are using focus to counter the effect of unproductive extracurricular thoughts to enable us to become productive again. In many organizations, there are groups of people who continually reiterate the same complaints and trigger other members of their kind to adopt well-rehearsed expressions of helplessness and complaint. Phrases that trigger these unproductive conversations often include:

- HR has no productive benefit at all, in fact the reverse.
- IT again, they can't fix anything without messing up something else.
- Forget it, Facilities Management will just keep you waiting for a year or more.
- Learning & Development haven't a clue what they are doing.

When people spend their time repeating the same, familiar complaints they are contributing toward a growing culture of **we can't** rather than **we can**. By wasting time on conversations without action and any intention of making a difference, each individual is reducing his own energy for success. Focus on action and success, and the complaints disappear.

Being and doing

Another influence of whether we fire-fight or not depends upon our sense of our contribution to the organization. If our sense of impact in the organization is tied up principally with actions, then our sense of work-identity can be weakened if we relinquish our responsibilities (and actions). If our sense of influence goes wider than our actions, we will be more resilient. We will be less likely to be affected if we are given a reduced scope for decisions and action, for example. If we are to contribute more to the long-term health of our organization, then there has to be a tendency to be more active in other, strategic ways to create sustainable futures.

We will return to the subject of ‘personal contribution’ in Part Three, and here it may be useful to think about the personal pros and cons of letting go of specific responsibilities.

| PROS AND CONS OF LETTING GO |
|------------------------------------|
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Why not make an action list now of things that you feel ready to relinquish, delegate or drop completely?

| ACTIONS |
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Let's now test and flex another critical ability of leaders: that of extended perception.

Extended perception

Having worked out what you need to delegate and what you need to drop completely, imagine, if you will, that you are taking the actions now and that the clock is spinning forward. The outcomes are happening, your workload is less, and your days are less busy on average. What are you doing in your days and what is this experience like now? Is your job more satisfying to you now, or less?

| WHAT IS THIS EXPERIENCE LIKE NOW? |
|-----------------------------------|
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Running through such a scenario as if it is happening now is often called 'future pacing'. I call the process a *sensory journey*. The sensory journey is a journey into the future and each journey helps one to gain greater perspective. We miss that perspective if we spend all our time being active in the present. The objective of the sensory journey is to gather more information; the additional perspectives help us to make better, sustainable decisions that work *with* our personal motivations (and needs) rather than *against* them.

Viv works in school education. His workload was enormous. He often worked days of 18 hours and most of his meals were taken away from home, including breakfast and dinner. He rarely saw his children except at weekends. Even that leisure time was interrupted. After going through a process of recalibration and deciding upon actions, he constructed a plan of changes in the school's district administration. When asked to make a sensory journey,³ he imagined the clock spinning forward very fast. Sometimes he would slow it down again while he took in information about the scenario he was engaged in. He would notice things, people, sounds and light. Then he would let the clock spin forward again. In this sensory journey process Viv discovered that he was very uncomfortable with passing on two of the annual conferences that were a regular feature of his year. Invariably these took place in fabulous locations and provided an opportunity to network, share experiences and learn from the experiences of others in

³A sensory journey (or future-pacing) is simply the act of imagining being in a future moment as if it was really happening now. This can check that the mindset you have is sufficiently positive and can provide confidence and motivation to succeed.

similar roles. They also provided an opportunity to relax and widen the picture of what is possible. Of his own volition he used the same sensory journey process to imagine being at one of the upcoming conferences and, while there, sharing some of his strategic thinking (for corporate culture change) with a number of colleagues from another State. He determined to reconsider this aspect of 'letting-go' and decided to keep the two particular conferences on his agenda. Viv took two further steps: the first was to free up more time to help with this retention of tasks, and the second was to go on another sensory journey to check that these new areas for letting-go could be integrated into his future way of working – with a positive outcome for him as well as for the administration.

Silent time for reflection

'And in much of your talking, thinking is half murdered'

KAHLIL GIBRAN

There is another use of time that may sound counter-intuitive to productive working – it is that of still space, or silence. Reflective thought is enormously helpful and the benefits are obvious when we think about it – we become more strategic and can see the wider, holistic implications of our actions. So what is this stillness stuff? Stillness is the opposite of the busy head state. There is a spectrum of mental activity that ranges from rapid, logical processing to quiet, low-level being. Figure 1.3 shows the Psychological Stillness–Activity Dimension.

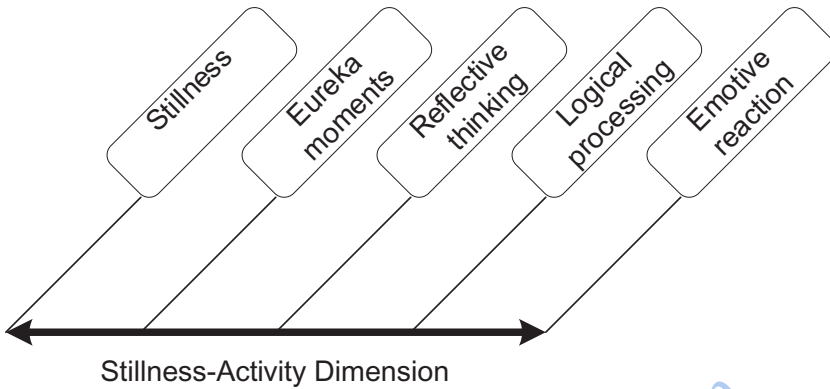


Figure 1.3 Stillness–Activity Dimension

What is your range? Would it be useful to extend the range? If we are to use our skills, flexibly, from logical tasking (busy head) to reflective thought and even further, then a quantum leap is obtained, even to the level of genius. In order to make that more likely it is helpful to exercise our minds to the full limit of our potential. This is similar to a physical workout for the mind. You cannot be comfortable at any level of sustained physical work unless you have worked harder in training. It is the same with our minds; we need to flex and test our minds to explore more widely than we do already so that our range of competence is extended. The methodology for this is similar to strategies for meditation or sleeping, and we all know how to sleep – or do we?

First, switch your attention to noticing your breathing *or* heartbeat. By concentrating on *one* new internal object, the externals fade away. An example in daily life might be the experience of listening to the radio while driving a vehicle. Something happens outside to challenge you and what you

were listening to on the radio has gone without your notice. It is only later, when safe, that you realize that you have missed everything that went before. People who use hands-off cell phones while driving on major roads are three times more likely to have accidents than non-phone users. The statistic for those handling the phones may be worse than that!

Spend some minutes to become as calmly concentrated as you can. Now let your awareness of your breathing or your heart-beat diminish. If a thought or observation comes into your mind, allow it to fade away. If you find images coming into your consciousness, let them shrink and drift away into darkness. If there are sounds, allow them to fade too, and maintain this calm attitude of letting everything else go. Physically your breathing will slow and become increasingly shallow.

Stilling the mind in this way increases conscious dominion over your 'personal state'⁴ as well as extending your competence in the dimension of mental activity. Now let's consider the far right of the stillness–activity dimension.

Road-rage at work!

You can see that emotive reaction is at the busy end of the dimension in Figure 1.3. Emotional reactions are not wholly cognitive; the bulk of emotional reactivity happens in the mid-brain rather than in the processing higher-brain, the cere-

⁴By personal state I mean psychological state. We have many of them, not one. Some of us are able to decide on our state, others have little or no control and simply respond to stimuli, often in highly predictable ways.

brum. Importantly, the mid-brain processes about 8,000 times faster than the higher, logical brain. Why is that interesting? Think of colleagues who get very aggressive or over-expressive in meetings? Think of road-rage at the extreme of behaviors. When the mid-brain takes control, it takes a successful, patterned mental adaptation to stop the roller-coaster!

Such emotional responses are normal, commonplace and largely go unnoticed at the less extreme responses. For example, if you or a colleague sometimes experience intense anger in meetings and hence miss a large part of the dialogue as a result (of 'going internal'), then you now know why that is. The mid-brain has taken over and left the highest logical processing behind. A success strategy to change that might also be useful too; so let's take a look at the emotive impact curve in Figure 1.4.

The diagram represents the effect of a comment or event that creates a mid-brain, emotive reaction. The level of impact may follow a typical course like that shown in the dashed line. The person experiences a trigger (T) that may be a

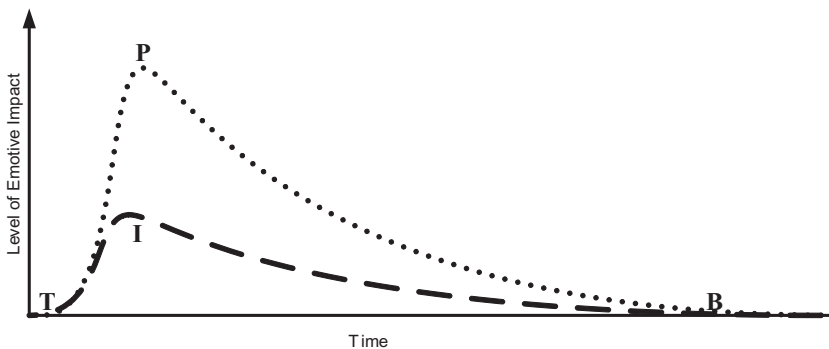


Figure 1.4 Emotive impact curve

comment, observation or physical event. The person 'goes internal' and there may or may not be a series of processing checks and thoughts that kick in after the initial rise (dotted curve).⁵ If lucky, the impact will not go sky-high, but will reach an early peak (P) and mellow out until the base level (B) is again reached. During this period, the individual can then slowly increase his or her attention on what is happening externally again. Sometimes there is a sinusoidal effect rather than a slow down-curve, creating waves of emotional impact and also sometimes reaction – inappropriate anger, verbal abuses, and so forth. Hormones are also affected when there are greater levels of emotive impact, and the slow removal of these by the liver and kidneys can make the process of recovery even longer.

In order to head-off the emotional responses, it is necessary to notice the earliest possible part of the response pattern and make an intervention (I) that will ameliorate the effects, as shown on the dashed curve. For maximum effect, the intervention needs to be a question. It might also be an event that breaks the installed pattern⁶ or initiates a more useful (learned pattern of response⁷). The simplest method, naturally enough, is to ask an internal question such as:

⁵This is analogous to the chaining of events in patterned behaviors discussed earlier.

⁶Many people will be familiar with the use of an elastic band worn on the wrist in order to help to break unwanted patterns. Similar thinking is used in the training of animals.

⁷I am referring here to the method of establishing 'anchors'. Anchors are learned patterns that are positive. These anchored patterns can easily be linked to 'negative' triggers in order to break existing patterns and automatically replace them with a useful one. The methodology for this can be found in a number of NLP books and in McLeod (2003).

- What is really happening here now?
- Is a response needed now or later?
- What would be the most professional attitude to adopt right now?

In asking and then answering questions like these, our attention creates increased activity in the cerebrum; we start thinking logically again. The effects of the mid-brain are reduced over time!

Because the mid-brain is so fast, the question will invariably be some way up the emotive impact curve. It's a steep curve, so the question needs to be short, fast and early! In coaching people, we ask them what they first notice when they experience these events. Here is a typical dialogue:

Angus: *So, what do you first notice when this pattern starts?*

Coachee: *My head starts to throb.*

Angus: *And if something happens just before that throb, what is that thing that happens just before?*

Coachee: *It's like there is a freezing of time for a millisecond and a cold blade opens up my forehead.*

Angus: *And if something happens just before that freezing and the cold blade opens up 'my forehead', what is that thing that happens just before that freezing?*

In practice, the longer the pattern has been experienced, the more the number of levels of experience one typically finds. It is quite common to discover 20 levels of experience, all of them happening within an instant. I note these on a timeline, all of

them falling on the first part of the impact curve. Generally, the longer period of time over which the individual has had the pattern, the more details one finds when unpacking it.

The questioning above is designed to help the coachee to stay deeply in the discovery process. As you can see, the words that are expressed are reflected back as perfectly as possible, so there is no need to translate them. It is like a keyhole that lets words (the key) out and then I insert my key (the coachee's reflected words) – my key slots right back in again without any resistance. The coachee does not notice or question the words because those are the words the coachee used. Because this process of reflective-questioning is so perfect for the keyhole, the coachee does not notice the construction of the sentences⁸ either. The coachee is able to stay with his or her own evolutionary thinking and discovery in an exquisite way.

⁸A systematic approach is that of Symbolic Modeling, identified in the excellent and effective work of Lawley and Tompkins (2000).
