

Gradually, Then Suddenly: How Coaching Works

There is a much-quoted moment from Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* in which a character explains how he went bankrupt. "Two ways," he says, "Gradually and then suddenly."

We've all experienced it. Physics calls it the *tipping point*. A Buddhist proverb says, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." Jesus talked about acquiring "eyes to see and ears to hear." Lillian Hellman wrote, "Nothing, of course, begins at the time you think it did." My grandfather talked about "the last straw."

If you're like me, "Suddenly" can be a quiet dawning or a jarring moment of truth. "Suddenly" can happen in your own awareness, or if you wait too long, it can slam into you from the outside. It can be an epiphany or a moment of dread, or just a quiet conviction that something must change. For example:

- *Gradually, I've taken on too much at work and all of a sudden, (a) I'm mad or (b) things are imploding*
- *Gradually, I've wanted to volunteer more and out of the blue, this non-profit comes looking for me*
- *Gradually, I've put on weight and all of a sudden, my chest hurts*
- *Gradually, what I really want to do more of in my work has come into focus*

Recently I heard a common "gradually" from a new client: "Gradually," he said, "I've gotten restless in my work. I know I'm capable of far more contribution and satisfaction. I've thought about hiring you for a while and this is the right time."

In the four months that followed, this client and I met together ten times. He took a hard look at a gradual and unsatisfying trend in his life and work, and then he began to bend the trajectory of his life into a new direction. He found a new job, and along the way he clarified and learned to talk about *what* he wanted (more of, less of, same as) and *how* he wanted to begin showing up with colleagues, new bosses, new teams and even with his family.

Then this note came from him, "I am super excited to move into this role--and I cannot thank you enough for everything that you did to help me get to this point. Without your coaching I feel I would have been spinning in circles trying to decide what I wanted to do, bringing more frustration to myself and my family."

He's very gracious and I'll enjoy working with him any time he's got a new "coaching agenda" in the future.

However change comes, I work with people and organizations to help them think through what happens next: What to expect and pay attention to, how to hold steady in the process, how to think about obstacles (and those little hecklers and resisters in your head) and how to talk about it all along the way.

A first question any good coach will ask you is some version of, "What do you want to work on, leave behind, do more of, do less of or get better at?" You may have responses from more than one area of your life, and your spouse or team probably have their opinions. Sometimes when I ask, "What do you want to work on?" I hear a hunch or an idea that's just forming. As we refine the agenda, the essential experiments begin to be clear.

Coaching is famous for helping you to discover, test and learn. Sometimes, the process isn't very linear. Sometimes you find out that what seems like a great idea is just not right for you. If it's "not right" then why? The answer might be where it gets brilliant. Something else—better, deeper and unexpected—begins to be clear. The process is about paying attention, exploring, testing and learning in ways that are focused, clarifying and well-paced. The process includes both courage and accountability.

Gradually, then suddenly. What's gaining on you? If you're like most of my clients, you'll find that a season of professional coaching can be a crucial pilgrimage in the middle of a cherished, and all-too-short life.