

Working with Consultants

Ernesto Saldana, Early Edge

Belma Gonzalez, B Coaching and Consulting

Interview 12/13/12

1. What resulted from the coaching that was transformative?

Ernesto: I have so much more confidence going into situations, especially internal leadership within my group. I'm more able to stay true to my leadership voice in spite of my own doubts, fears about inserting my views. As a person of color, it's been great to be connected to Belma, who is a person conscious of issues that face leaders of color. The field we're in, the nonprofit sector, is an amazing field, but it has a tremendous amount of white privilege, and an unconscious promotion of certain communities over others. I needed a person to see that I'm not crazy and to affirm my struggles and doubts, and help me establish specific actions that I agree to take on to really live through my leadership.

The coaching has had immense dividends. Of course there have been some bumps with my leadership. Overall, I can sleep at night, feeling passionate and hopeful. There's still a lot of work to do on this. It's helped me professionally to bump up against my doubts and struggles. Now all I see are the consequences to work through doubts, fears, and questions about self worth. I can do this. The growth was a lot. I grew so much from the coaching; other folks may not see it but I'm doing it more consistently, holding more to my value and passion, and not allowing myself to doubt myself. If I do, committing to really working through it.

Belma: With Ernesto, I saw an incredible leader who was doubting himself, and that was keeping him from the leader that he wanted to be. That's not uncommon because with leaders of color, internalizing the "isms," and having no place to talk about that stuff can lead to paranoid and thinking something is wrong with him or herself. Assisting my client to establish a stand in their leadership can be incredibly powerful. To create a space for this inner work is what I want to do in the world so the leader can say this is how I want to do it, and this is the support I need to do it with. And for the leader to have a place to come up with specific actions, and spaces to think about meetings coming up, and come back to report on it and reflect with my support.

Key ingredients for coaching success are openness, honesty with themselves, able to be vulnerable and not everyone is! Ernesto was ready. Not only was he open, but he was ready to make the change. It's hard to change. If they're not ready to make the change, even the best coaching may not work. Ernesto was willing to take the risk of the change; as with any change,

there's no predicting the future, and there's no way to know that the change will generate positive results. He was frustrated with staying where he was.

2. Why is coaching still underutilized in the social sector?

Belma: A big reason is people don't understand what coaching is. There are two views: coaching is something that came from the corporate sector therefore there could be a question whether it could transfer to social sector. Second is coaching is too touchy-feely, and it's a privilege to have coaching. There is not yet an understanding for what it is and there isn't the awareness of it. "I don't know what this is..." is still the norm for a lot of leaders in the social sector. There's too much they're doing, and the idea "I am suppose to spend an hour talking about myself, how is that going to help me get done what I have to do?" And, who am I to deserve this? This concept can get quite far in that "we don't need this when people are out there dying... it's not about the cause." But even pulling back from the extreme, I don't deserve this and I should be able to figure this out for myself. Especially for EDs, many of them think, "I should already know this... if they knew I needed a coach..."

In this society, there's an overvaluing of cognitive skills and hard skills. So much of the capacity building says that's where the attention should be. Coaching is about the non-cognitive skills; it's about resourcefulness, resilience, and enhancing how leaders are in the world. It sounds too fluffy and they don't get it until they experience it by examining how they are in the world, and what actions come from it. There's an over valuing of cognitive skills over non-cognitive skills.

Ernesto: People don't get it and don't know about coaching. It often put in the same place as therapy and if often seen as a taboo. My general sense is there's resistance for people who work in the non-profit arena don't want to talk about themselves. I did a workshop with my staff about our own families, assets and values. It was two hours. One staff member said afterwards, "I have work to do! But it connected us, and our experiences in the world. Sharing this helps us to connect to why we do the work we do." We need to see this as part of our work and not separated from it. The guilt thing is powerful. There's so much guilt in nonprofit... people usually don't want to talk about themselves – it feels selfish. "I'm fine; we need to go save the world."

These are leadership skills. Character is how I lead with bravery, courage, and to take the step to do what needs to change no matter what. Cognitive skills alone will not get not get me there. We need to ask different questions to move the status quo. There is a lot of research that feels prescriptive regarding communities of color... as a person of color I often feel that my community is being diagnosed with some sort of disease. Communities of color are often seen through this deficit lens. With coaching and leadership development, it helps remind me to change that paradigm, shift the lens on how I work and challenge the deficit lens. There needs to more challenge of isms, and work from a different paradigm.

3. How was Ernesto "ready" for coaching?

Ernesto: Being raised by my mom, I have a value for open, honest conversations. It's work that I've done as a diversity consultant to fight for social justice and actively address issues of power and privilege such as racism, sexism, classism and homophobia. Those are values that are important to me. And growth... what I love about myself, it's hard for me to say, I know I'm imperfect, and living life is about taking risks and being vulnerable. I have that in me already. When I heard my President offer about getting a coach, I jumped on that. I have a strong appreciation for that and never had a coach before. This sounded really exciting. There was a coming together of an internal value for it, and having a process to have honest conversations for growth. I didn't know it would be this impactful. I still struggle with these areas but I have tools to reflect on to get over the bumps and to get the courage to jump over the bumps. What's great is I shared a lot of my coaching experience with my wife, Corina. She would be reflective of her own personal and professional development with each point I shared with her. In some ways she took on some of Belma's coaching techniques with me. One day I was struggling with an issue to bring up to my colleagues. My wife chimed in and asked the question Belma was famous for with me, "what's the worst thing that could happen if you say that thing?" She was indirectly coached by Belma too! It has had a domino effect.

4. What are two or three things that made your coaching partnership tick? More joyous? More impact? And, for Belma, you've coached lots of social sector leaders, what made Ernesto stand out?

Ernesto: She truly got me. She knew who I was. She knew where I came from. I felt that was a shorthand in our conversations and I didn't have to explain. There was a strong identity connection. And the struggles I was facing she identified so crisply. As a man of color, not having to explain my struggle and doubts. Oftentimes, I see myself defending my beliefs. Talk about battle fatigue. With Belma she was already there and our strong connection allowed us to start at a more advanced place. Also, receiving her affirmation and validation was more than half the battle. I have always struggled with either being overly seen, or invisible as a man of color. Afraid to assert my voice too much... I've seen how folks talk about folks of color who talk too much. I want to matter. Belma allowed me to be courageous, validated my self-worth, I'm an expert on the issues effecting communities of color. I have an obligation to share my expertise and awareness regarding these areas that others with influence do not understand.

Belma understood the issues of race, was very empathic about my background, and knew where to go... there was this intrinsic connection right off the bat. I've had therapists... just to figure out how to tell the story. With Belma, it's a relationship based on sharing our lives and where we're trying to get to. That expedited our work, made it deeper, and incredibly valuable.

Belma: Ernesto and I had a unique connection. We shared a lot of history. His life and my life stories have a lot of dovetailing that we recognized in our first session. I don't necessarily have the historical connection with other clients... most of my clients are of color and need to figure

out how to walk in more than one world while facing all the isms. I choose to work with people who are committed to social justice. It was really heartfelt to have our common history. My motivation for the work is this man needs to be heard. Whatever I can do to support his voice to be heard is what I need to do. There were times when it could've been easy to be empathic and not push coming from an understanding of how hard things can be. Because of my motivation to have Ernesto be the leader he can be, I felt like a hard***. Acknowledge it, feeling it, and so what? Let's move on.

The trust has to be there to hear the hard truth, be willing to be pushed, the trust for the person doing the pushing to recognize how hard it is, they really get it, and they're going to be there. My motivation with any client is to find that way I can have that heartfelt connection in service of having them be the best they can be. I can be empathic, and isn't that hard? That's not enough to make things different. Whatever is hard can be a motivation to do what they're committed to doing in the world. In coaching, we're not caregivers; we're partners. My coaching practice with social justice folks is to tell my hard truths, and the hard *** is you're committed to this, what needs to happen in order for you to serve your purpose? The stories are important, and we've told them for years. What now needs to happen? You were primed to do this work. I sense there is a frustration with your situation. It's a great motivator for doing something different. Not status quo complacent. The motivation serves them.

5. Advice to others?

Ernesto: Do it! You are so worth it. The gifts, guilt, fear, strengths and shame you have, bring it all, talk about it. It's okay to be afraid because you are not alone in your fear. Don't be afraid to see the leader that you are. Get angry, get frustrated – share this! Get mad. Be honest with your coach. It's an amazing experience of let it all out. She'd tears on every call. Not from a place of care giving, but full of love and connection. When she was kicking my tail, from people who I really love I allow that, and she'd issue a challenge as an invitation, what would it be like if you talk to your team, can you do that on Tuesday? Raise that point, will you do it?

I responded to Belma's challenges often with a deep sigh, and she would push me to explain what the sigh was about. What was the emotion behind it? After our call I would have less anxiety but still needed to remind myself to remain true to myself and community before I would share the point I needed to make, then I would do it. It's really caring about yourself. If you really care about your community, you really got to care about yourself first. I'm a better advocate, because I'm a better advocate for myself. If not, it comes off as patronizing, missionary... this way it lasts longer, deeper, and you've got to know what you want. I was fully aware that I wanted a coach of color. I knew what type of work I wanted to do with my coach. It is very rare that people talk about race and class but we see the effects, read the research every day but we don't talk about "it." Those entering coaching should know why you're angry about and that you know you want to address this. I want this to change. I know that I can not change others, but I can change myself – how I act on or not act on something. Coaching helps expose and clarify this.

Belma: It's important to reflect and create the space for reflection and how that can enhance your work. If you don't have a practice of reflection, and you're acting reactively, not utilizing options and seeing opportunities and not working from values, and you're not having regular opportunities to look at who am I, why is this important, what I want to be doing and how do I do it, coaching can create that space. The coaching relationship doesn't have to last forever, but the coach can transfer the skills to the leader so s/he can continue to have that for themselves post engagement. You can hold on to that. What I do is not un-learnable. What I do can be easily learned. I attempt to do that and leave with people who I coach. My advice is to take a moment, think about reflection and what that might offer.

There are some of us from coaching sector pushing the envelope of what coaching can provide to the sector. We value 1:1 coaching. We're also seeing the value of bringing coaching into communities and transferring those skills to people working on the ground. Build more of an awareness of coaching. Access is not exclusive. Imagine the folks in the communities, if they have had coaching, and learn those skills, and recognize their own personal leadership, and make that happen with more people... what powerful results we will have!