

Chapter 5: The Daring Group

"We yearn for an unquestioned experience of belonging, to feel at home with ourselves and others, at ease and fully accepted. But the trance of unworthiness keeps the sweetness of belonging out of reach".

(Kornfield and Brach, 2004)

Part One: Beginning

Introduction to the Daring Group

As I noted earlier, The Daring Group started as the pilot group, comprised of two coaches, Aileen and Sally⁸, who were daring enough to volunteer in early June 2017. As I described in Chapter 4, both were supervisees in one of my groups, and had independently volunteered. We had a shared purpose: we were motivated by strong desires to contribute to our professions. We were individually and collectively coming together for our own learning, the learning of the group, and to offer our initial experiences with the research to the groups that would begin in the Autumn.

Aileen and Sally varied by more than a decade in experience. Both were actively coaching and shared a similar level of competencies and capabilities in storytelling, working with executive clients, coaching methodologies and in commitment to their development and learning. They had comparable levels of ability to observe themselves, both in-the-moment and after the fact, to name what was going on for them and to imagine different ways of being. There was deep respect among us.

Coach	Years following certification	Actively coaching	Other roles	Gender
Aileen	1-5	yes	Facilitation and training	F
Sally	10+	yes	Facilitation	F

Table 5: Daring Group Demographics

⁸ Fictitious names are used.

Our life narratives

Aileen came to supervision a few years ago, immediately following her coaching certification. Her overarching internal stories were about perfectionism and pleasing others. She easily claimed her perfectionism—she needed and wanted to do things perfectly. With similar ease, she claimed being a people pleaser.

Sally came to supervision a year before the pilot, as a masterful coach with more than a decade of coaching experience. Her overarching internal story was about not being good enough—she wanted to consistently deliver value and perform. Both were committed to life-long learning, engaging regularly in certification programs, training and development courses, and group supervision.

My story was congruent; I don't think this was coincidental. I am a life-long learner, steeped in perfectionism, wondering if I provide enough value, and fulfilled by being in service to others. I was more driven by my internal stories when I was embarking on new learning, as I was in those early stages of the research—my first research endeavor—and entering my third year as a supervisor.

Logistics

The three pilot sessions, of 60 minutes each, were scheduled over the summer into early Autumn, before the year-long research groups began. We volunteered our time; Aileen and Sally would not pay for the supervision sessions⁹ and I would not be paid. I outlined the requirements of the Informed Consent agreements, which they reviewed, signed and returned.

⁹ In the sponsorship agreement, we agreed that the research participants would pay the standard rate for the supervision engagement to avoid any negative impact on the revenues of the sponsoring organization and to conduct the research within regularly operating supervision groups. I sent an email to COO that the pilot was set up, there were no revenue implications, and it would provide good information before the Autumn start. I did not ask for her concurrence, permission or approval; with all the give and take we continued to be engaged in, I was confident she would let me know if this was an issue.

The pilot was useful. Our experiences shaped my discussions with potential research participants. I felt a bit more grounded in how to inquire, reflectively, about a recording in a group. My assessment was our learning, as we progressed through the full year, would likely continue to inform the other groups. There were not yet confirmed participants, but I was guardedly optimistic. Both coaches wanted to continue. We agreed to extend to a full year's engagement with one change—the sessions would become part of the field texts. They also renewed with their larger supervision group. I revised the Informed Consent agreement; they agreed and signed (Appendix 3). I communicated this to the Sponsor.

After we extended the pilot into the full span of 10 sessions, we engaged beginning in July 2017 and ending in May 2018, and had four action learning meetings, between August 2017 and April 2019. All 14 hour-long sessions occurred on Zoom and were recorded and transcribed as part of the field texts. Aileen and Sally submitted individual journal entries following most of the sessions.

Note to you, the reader. As noted above (pp.85-85), I have named the role(s) that were at the forefront of my thinking, observing and reflecting, during the vignette. This is intended to assist the reader in understanding my primary frame of reference in those moments, and to experience as you read the complex dynamics of small group work.

Supervisory relationships shift

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

Almost immediately, I noticed shifts in our relationships. In the prior year, the prevalent feeling was I was in service to their learning. There were moments when I had shared what I had learned from them, yet my sense was that it didn't really land as significant. As we began, they were explicitly in service to my learning as a researcher; we were co-learners about our process of supervision. There was more mutuality and, contradictorily, it felt as though they had me on a slightly higher pedestal because I was undertaking doctoral studies. To further muddy the waters, there were performance anxieties as they were more visible in this intimate setting and wanted to do what was good for the

research. I was intentional in seeking more shoulder-to-shoulder relationships as supervisor and not reinforcing the researcher's pedestal.

There was respect among the three of us. Deference bounced in and out of the room, depending on the process or content. Sally was richly steeped in somatics and the use of the body. We looked to her to contribute that knowledge to our inquiries; we deferred to her greater expertise. Aileen was bold with experimentation with her clients; we collectively learned from her willingness to engage in new practices. We had an empathic resonance with each other, which enabled challenge and resourcefulness. Our familiarity with our inner critics was useful in co-creating a container for the six of us (ourselves and our inner critics) to engage in various configurations.

Heron (1999) defined four stages for a group (pp.51-52). The stage of defensiveness—as a new group is coming together and does not yet have trust and likely has anxieties; of working toward establishing trust and quieting anxieties; of authentic behavior—with openness, connection, learning and caring for the others; and of closure. As we started, we had anxieties and we had trust, which I discuss more below. The trust we brought forward from our past relationships enabled us to function mostly from a place of authenticity; our ability and openness to name our fears, anxieties, shame and other emotions, and be with those feelings was from a place of being true to ourselves with each other.

Balancing care of supervisees with care of research participants

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

One of the most important aspects of being a supervisor were the relationships I cultivated with each group member and with the group as a whole. I was quite attentive to building and nurturing our connectedness. My approach as supervisor aligned with the need for me, as researcher, to proceed with care (Coghlan and Brannick, 2014). I felt the need to attend to the overlay of supervising and researching. I wanted to stay awake to any relationship issues, especially for any divergence. What came initially to mind was how strongly to encourage the use of observational experiences. As a supervisor, I would

not have encouraged them to bring observational experiences; but as the researcher, I really wanted them to experiment. My belief was that they would develop in their self-awareness just as I had. I threaded these concerns carefully and stayed intentionally invitational with respect to the research asks.

Detailed contracting for the pilot

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

Our initial contracting was detailed and set forth our mutual expectations for three supervision sessions and one action learning meeting in the pilot, the process and structure we would use in each session, and the research asks. Collectively, we decided our usual practices in supervision would continue. These included advance reflection questions, verbal sharing of what the supervisees were bringing to each session, exploration and inquiry, and closing comments. The full details of the contracting are set for the Appendix 7.

The process invited Aileen and Sally to bring their work into the sessions, either a particular client case or an issue or theme, plus whatever was on their mind or in their heart related to their self, their self as coach or their coaching practice. There was space for them to bring issues of stress, depletion, burn-out, and other concerns. We agreed, following each session, that I would send a link to the recording of the session and we would continue to share resources including articles, books, podcasts and other references that supported our learning.

For the research, we would add to the process the occasional use of observational experiences and journal reflections following each session. The sessions would be recorded and included in the field texts. The sessions and action learning meetings would be confidential; however, our mutual intent was that I could share themes and learning to inform the other research groups.

More instructions on recordings needed

Role(s) at forefront: Researcher

The potential use of observational experiences created discomfort, particularly for Sally. Aileen had previously recorded client sessions as part of the coach certification program. Sally was certified as a coach prior to their use; she had never recorded a coaching session. She was concerned that she didn't know how to do so. Her questions included how to approach her clients, wondering if it was appropriate to share that she was looking at her own development, what the typical provision for confidentialities was, and about the logistics of recording and transcribing. At their request, I created a guide for recording and transcribing sessions, and Aileen added to it based on her experience. I also provided a draft agreement for "permission to record and use in supervision" for the coaches to review, revise and use with clients (See Appendix 8). I did this as the researcher, providing my own experiences, to facilitate the participants' abilities to respond to the research asks.

Part Two: Vignettes

Paradox: anxieties and vulnerability

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice and as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

Aileen, Sally and I were meeting as a trio for the first time. Though we had worked together in a larger supervision group before, I anticipated we would need to give ourselves the time to get to know each other in this setting and develop a rhythm. The session started with Aileen, caught in traffic, on the phone in her car. Just as she arrived home and went to join from her office, Sally came on. A few moments later the three of us were on Zoom, each of us in our video windows—Aileen in her home office on the East Coast with a painting of branches with buds behind her. Sally on the comfy looking sofa in her living room in Northern California, a beautiful cabinet behind her. I was in my home office in the central coast of California at my desktop, with a large poster framed on the

wall behind me and the French doors to a small patio casting warm sunlight into the room. We recognized each other's spaces, as we had been in a larger group the prior year. We already knew some of each other's family life—the passing of a father, the planning for a wedding, the raising of a teenage daughter, recovery from major health challenges, and other bits and pieces. Sally and I had met in person at a learning conference; Aileen and I had only met virtually.

There were greetings and small talk. I was warm and welcoming, happy to be with them and to be starting the research. I invited each to respond to the question, "How are you arriving?" Sally checked in anxious, excited, and curious. Aileen was in a place of appreciation and gratitude. Both noticed the synchronicity of raising the same theme for the coaching issue—the transactional nature of a current coaching relationship. I acknowledged and responded after they shared that I was a little anxious, excited, and was internally reassuring myself this was "just supervision."

Both Aileen and Sally noticed how much more visible they felt in such a small group, without "the ability to hide in the larger group". Paradoxically, even with the anxieties of increased visibility, both were more revealing. Sally shared that she still felt new to supervision, having had "only" one year of experience; she was "intimidated" with the overall setting and "terrified" of getting the inquiry wrong. This surprised me—I had no inkling, as this had not come to light in the prior year. I had assumed she was confident and settled in the process. Hiding in the larger group she had ceded space to other coaches, perhaps assuming they were getting it right. Here, with significantly greater visibility, nowhere to hide, she shared her truth. There must have been a level of safety present in that hour, for her to admit what she had not been able to share before.

Shame arrived

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

Aileen brought a transcript to our second session. I was relieved; this was our first experience with one of the specific asks for the research. Aileen and I inquired about it together as Sally was unable to join until halfway into the session. I was surprised by

Aileen's inquiry—she did not want positive feedback, she wanted only to look at what was not good. She was nervous and had performance anxieties about sharing the transcript; she was also “anticipating feeling very appreciative” of what she would learn. Following the session, my reflections were about how we had reflected on the transcript, teasing out an element or two of the distinction between a transcript used as a competency review and one used in reflective practice.

When Sally joined us, I welcomed her, and she checked in briefly with apologies. We continued the inquiry with Aileen’s transcript and then worked with Sally’s client situation. I did not sense any impact on safety among the three of us. Following that session, Aileen and Sally responded to the journal prompts. I was surprised at the perceived difference between what they had written and our interactions in the session. Their reflections opened up new views for me.

Sally’s entries were filled with shame. She had felt disruptive arriving late and was doubting her value in heartfelt terms; she also wrote from her head that she knew this wasn’t true. There was a pivotal moment in the session, which I had not realized. I returned to the recording—her written words were verbatim the phrases she had used in the session. Yet, in the group those words did not register—they were spoken, but not totally heard. They registered differently with me when I read them, and I felt my own shift into shame for having missed it. In contrast, Aileen was not impacted by Sally’s late arrival; she had not felt the disruption. She had designed how she would engage in experiential learning having identified three specific practices she was going to experiment with as a result of reflecting on the whole session.

Three people, same Zoom room, together in dialogue, with three distinct experiences underlying a mutual emotional experience of anxiety and shame. Aileen’s, how to step into managing her shame about bringing a transcript and anticipating experiential learning while resisting positive feedback; Sally’s shame and unworthiness at arriving late; and mine in the session of how to facilitate using a transcript, and after the session strengthening my attunement to energetic ripples I had missed.

Contracting for what had not yet been experienced

*Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.
Researcher.*

In our first action learning set, we inquired about our process in the first two sessions considering what we could learn about our process that would be useful for the full year research groups. One issue that was highlighted by Sally was how could a coach engaging in supervision for the first time or agreeing to be a research participant understand what was expected.

In the first vignette I shared the unexpected disclosure by Sally that she was unsure how to be a supervisee. She raised this again “self-reveal...being new to supervision...part of my struggle was am I doing this right? Am I contributing?” and focused on how a coach new to supervision could understand the initial contracting. Her recommendations came from her interior needs to do it “right”. She was using her experience of being terrified of doing it wrong to recommend the supervisor provide experiences of the process as part of the contracting conversation for group members who were coming to supervision for the first time. This could address the challenge of how to know what one was agreeing to, when one had not yet engaged.

I noticed the parallel process—I was doing the Pilot for just those reasons, to give me first-hand experience in the process before the full-year research groups began. It raised questions for me: to what extent had Aileen and Sally known what they were agreeing to as participants? How could I enhance the recruiting process, in service to a more comprehensible consent, for the full-year participants? As I started new supervision groups with coaches who had not previously had supervision, how might I contract differently?

A possibility shaped the coach

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

The second theme in the action learning meeting was about recordings. Aileen had brought a transcript of a recording. She was able to observe herself, notice aspects that she was unaware of, share the transcript with us, and inquire with us. Sally noticed that the possibility of recording a coaching session flooded her with worry that she wasn't the masterful coach she thought she was. The thought of recording was both impossible for her to imagine doing and impacted how she coached. She noticed she was shifting in her client sessions toward what she thought was better coaching, what might be recorded as such. "Just the possibility of it...it has shaped my coaching even without having done it...just the idea of it." Aileen had enough experiences with recordings to be able to do them; yet she limited the feedback to only negative reflections. Sally was unable to record; yet she saw positive shifts in how she was as a coach as a result of our working with recordings. I noted I would share these experiences as the full-year groups formed.

Following the session, my reflections were largely on what Sally shared about recordings and how the mere thought sharpened her awareness within the coaching session. I wondered if this was conducive to her practice or inhibiting her presence. Her deep competitive and comparative instincts were at the forefront as were her desires to be useful, valuable, and effective with clients. I wondered what it meant about the likelihood other coaches would bring recordings to their groups.

Facilitating a group of two

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

Group size came up again. At the end of our first session Aileen had said she was already feeling sad that we would only have three sessions together; she preferred this format already. It was rich and satisfying for her. She continued to prefer the group of two to her experiences in the group of six. Sally contrasted her sense with Aileen's—she would prefer three coaches to lessen her sense of "needing to step up...contribute in a different

way". As I noted in the introduction above, they continued supervision in the group of six coaches with another supervisor during the year as research participants. They often observed in our sessions how they felt more visible, more accountable and "safer" in this group. They attributed those feelings to being only with each other. I wondered what else might be in the mix.

This was my first experience supervising a group of two, though I had been in a group of two as a supervisee for several years. I noticed that I had not greatly varied my approach or facilitation because we were a smaller group, and that I enjoyed the intimacy. There was ease. Contributors to my ease included facilitating two instead of six, the mutual compatibility and appreciation, our commitments to collectively learning, and engagement with two actively coaching supervisees who brought a seriousness of consideration to diverse and complex client situations and had good reflection skills.

I had come to see through the research that each of the four supervisors had different processes, approaches, requirements, styles and personalities; the supervisor for Sally and Aileen's group of six was not a participant in the research yet I was sure this was true for her as well. I wondered how these facets of who we each were contributed to the container and which supported more visibility and accountability? How might the participation in service to the profession infuse the container? My hunch was our bonds were different in a group of two, the bonds between Sally and Aileen, between me and each of them and among the three of us. I imagined our collective inquiries might be changed by the very nature that the process anticipated that both coaches would bring a case to every session. In short, what was it about what the three of us were doing that made it a container able to hold more vulnerability and visibility?

Experimentation

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

As we were ending the action learning meeting, Aileen reflected on the principles of adult learning and the role of the supervisor. She could see a supervisor might want to be in teach mode as the supervision engagement started and that while she was an adult

learner she would be “very happy to be told up front” what it takes for successful supervision experiences. Sally asked if I would share what I knew about best practices for supervision, while acknowledging that she understood the purpose of this research was to discover what those might be.

I briefly explained what was useful to me as a supervisee in a group of 2, a group of 8, and one-on-one. I continued by sharing with them a few creative approaches I used in my non-Sponsor related supervision groups. I used experimentation with mini metaphors, with cards and objects, and with drawings; I did not use these in my groups within the supervision center. Aileen and Sally challenged me about my stories about what was acceptable—they felt I had boxed myself in unnecessarily. They asked me to bring these approaches into the work with them. This was a transformative moment—I let go of the belief that I could not utilize these kinds of interventions in all of my groups. I decided to use more experimentation.

The research asked a coach to experiment with observational experiences. It was an ask for experimentation. I wondered how else I might introduce new elements that could be playful, or move us out of our intellect and into our hearts, or intuition, or bodies in different ways? What might strengthen the container or add to its flexibility, fluidity or texture? I use three words that are not similar, and may not exist in the same container, to represent that the container is different to each member of the group – for some it is fluid, for others it is a texture weaving or fabric, for others it is a flexible space, and for me it can be any of those as well as a garden, the metaphor I use in Chapter 8.

Our inner critics were with us

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

Our dialogue in the sessions included recurring elements of being with our inner critics. Sally committed several times to bring a recording, yet she did not do so. I offered that she might explore recording just for her own listening. Would it be safer for her to record if she knew she did not have to share it with us? She found she still could not. The process of recording was too much—she reiterated it was too risky, that she feared

exposing herself as a less-than masterful coach. This was her inner critic, a deep belief that she was not enough.

Sally's inner critic showed up frequently in the sessions and in her journal reflections. In one session, I had started facilitating in a hierarchical stance, and then invited us to move to a co-cooperative inquiry (Heron, 1999, p.8). Sally engaged enthusiastically, and then noticed her engagement and retreated, labeling her enthusiasm as "taking up too much space". She continued to hold these feelings in her reflection afterwards.

Aileen framed her inquiries in the sessions with her inner critic's voice. She inquired about what she was missing, what she had not done or had done wrong, what she should be doing. She was focused on improving, becoming a better coach. In her journaling, Aileen's focus was on what she had learned and what she was taking forward in her work with a client. She resisted receiving positive feedback or considering her strengths—the inner critic would not allow her to land on what was good enough.

My own inner critic's voice was alive and well in our sessions too. I found myself hedging statements at the start of my inquiries, e.g., "I am not sure this will resonate" "I wonder, this may not be a good question, but..." At the time, I considered this to be in service to Sally's and Aileen's learning. I interpreted it as inviting their consideration of a question while signaling that I had no attachment to its value. My focus, as I reflected on our sessions, was like Aileen, consistently geared toward what I could have done differently in the session, what I might have missed, and what I would do differently in upcoming sessions.

Energetically, there was tension as we navigated how to be open in relationship with each other and how to quiet our inner critics in order to move into a space where dialogue was possible (Isaacs, 1999). What were the qualities and conditions necessary for showing up, being vulnerable, engaging in inquiry, and learning?

Our inner critics pushed us to identify areas to develop, shift, and to pay attention. They did not assist in our abilities to notice, articulate or deepen what we did well. I wondered

why supervision was structured to reflect on what was not going well—on cases where we were stuck or struggling or knew something wasn't quite right. Where was the space to catch up with our development—moments where we were the coaches we wanted to be—and explore what it was that we were doing in those instances that made visible our learning and development?

[Comparison fed the inner critics](#)

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

In an earlier session, I asked Aileen and Sally to watch a short video of an infant¹⁰ reaching for a toy and notice what came up for them as a coach. We had a light and fun time exploring what they could see in themselves. It was a neutral practice space for them to observe themselves in the moment. Drawing on the learning from this experiment, in one of our subsequent sessions, as a reflection question, I asked Aileen and Sally to watch a short video of a coach using metaphor with a client to notice what they noticed about themselves as coach. I wrote about their reactions in my published book chapter (full text provided in Appendix 9) (Downing, 2019):

As we started to explore, judgment, comparison and the inner critic entered immediately. The coaches noticed that they had a lot of judgment about the coaching session. Was it staged? Was it too easy for the client to use the metaphor? They then moved from negative judgment of the coach to judgment of themselves as they acknowledged feelings of inadequacy of their coaching. This led to a rich discussion of judgment of our clients and of our inner critic. The sense of why judgment was so front and center in the use of this video was expressed by one coach as because it “put me with coaches, that is so close to what I do and how I serve the world, it feels, the word, threatening is coming up. What if they're so much better and I figure out I really suck at this?” Looking from the balcony at the whole of the supervision

¹⁰ Downing, 2019, pp.91-92

session, I could see the inner critic and comparison gremlins threading through from the moments we checked-in until we concluded.

You may notice that this group has developed the depth of safety between them, and with their supervisor, that they dared to surface fears, inadequacies and the painful voice of their inner critics in service of the group and individual learning. As one coach shared “What I have learned from supervision is that there is learning in everything. The power in becoming the observer is how it opens up access to choice.” Choice, to this coach, means the ability to recognize in the moment how she is feeling and choose how to proceed rather than reacting (p.94).

This raised a number of questions for me. How did comparison come into play in our inquiries? Were there times when either or both felt inadequate as we explored with the other? I could see more clearly the deference in Aileen to Sally’s expertise with somatics; how did this influence or contaminate our container? Where did she hold back? If deference was there, was it fueled by the comparison gremlin? I held these questions as I marveled at how they were able to reveal their “fears, inadequacies and the painful voice of their inner critics” (*ibid.*). This was mystical and magical to me – that they could so fully come into our container.

Identifying and naming parallel process

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice and focused on supervisory relationships.

The idea of parallel process is that what the coach feels while coaching a client may be parallel to what the client is feeling in their system; in supervision, the supervisor may feel or act in a way that is in parallel to the struggle of the coach with the client (Tracey, Bludworth, and Glidden-Tracey, 2012). Tracey and her co-authors note, there is little consensus of the definition of parallel process in the psychoanalytic realm, except the recognition that there are parallels in the client-therapist relationships that sometimes show up in the therapist-supervisor relationships, and that this can be bi-directional

(ibid.). Parallel process in the coaching realm has been frequently written about, but there is little research about it. There are a number of examples of parallel process throughout these field texts, across the groups.

Aileen brought a case—she was struggling with a client who did not have any resourcefulness. She found herself resorting to advising—providing the answers—rather than staying in coaching stance. Her metaphor was that the opportunities to give answers was like giving candy. Aileen’s pace at the start of the session was fast, with few deep breaths. As she started to explore her work, she slowed down, and her facial expressions conveyed more seriousness.

In inquiring about this case with her, she felt little resourcefulness and I found myself advising her, rather than staying in supervisor stance. This was parallel process in action, and I caught myself when I noticed she was furiously taking notes. I laughed and pointed it out to her. (See Appendix 10 for a storyboard presentation of this.) That moment of pointing out parallel process brought a lightness to the inquiry, the awareness that we are all susceptible. We identified three parallels: the client in his system moved to expert stance and felt good about having the answers; Aileen moved from curiosity with him to knowing, providing the answers to the questions he couldn’t answer; I had just moved to giving Aileen answers. She relaxed into a sliver of self-acceptance, which created space for her to learn and grow. She could feel her desire for me to give her an answer, which led her to recognize her desire to give her needy client an answer. She moved to wanting to experiment with noticing her proclivity to be the expert; to increased awareness of when she was going after the candy.

The container expanded a bit. My “not getting it right” as a supervisor opened up receptivity. Our mutual laughter at my foibles softened the self-criticism. Naming parallel process normalized their experiences and gave them something to notice in the future. My noticing in the moment was role modeling how to use immediacy in client sessions to share one’s own fallibility.

Challenge and assessing readiness

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice and focused on supervisory relationships.

As described above, in our second session Aileen had brought a transcript of her coaching session and her inquiry was only about what had not gone well. I easily agreed. My assessment was that her courage and willingness to be vulnerable was fully tapped by bringing the transcript; I should not push her.

A few sessions later, Aileen brought a recorded video segment of a client session as her case. She introduced it briefly, noticing that she wanted to edit her story “to justify where I am with this client” and that she was quite uncomfortable listening to it again, because it was inconsistent with how she thinks of herself. We watched about 10 minutes together, bearing witness to what had happened in the coaching session. At the conclusion of the segment, Aileen shared how difficult it had been to watch it again, and yet, she realized, it was more comfortable to watch and process with “people I trust to do it with me”. This was a key learning for her: that inquiring together with us was a safer place than on her own with her fierce inner critic.

I asked her if we could start the inquiry by sharing what she had done well. Her automatic response was that she’d prefer for us to focus on the negatives. I wondered what would emerge if she could open up to more than that. If she could let go of her judgment, open her heart to the trusting connection with us, and let go of her need to control the focus. I did not share my reasoning with her, I merely inquired “Would it work for you for us to share what we loved about this part of the coaching session or not?” She sat in resistance; embodying disbelief that anything went well. I held the silence while she processed. She continued to resist and promised to argue with any positive points by putting up her fists in the screen. Aileen had not made that kind of gesture before. Then she shifted her stance slightly. With a deep breath she shared that since she could imagine no good things had happened, she was curious what we’d seen. She had opened

a small part of herself to consider different possibilities and facts, to stay in heart-to-heart connection, to let go of her need to control the reflections.

We had moved, in those moments, to deep listening, described by Scharmer (2009) as having these “three conditions...unconditional witnessing or no judgment, impersonal love, and seeing the essential self” (p.187).

We took our time, moving slowly, to share with her what we had seen, and as we shared our observations with her, Aileen began to experience a change in the aperture of her self-perceptions. She could see places we had described where she had been present, curious, engaged with the client. She discovered that she was negative about the session in large part because of a subsequent development that she could not have anticipated. She was holding herself responsible for what happened in another setting for her client. She came next to the “biggest question[s]”—was she staying transactional with the client rather than moving to explore the deeper emotions, and how did that relate to whether she was in coach stance or advisor/consultant stance? She discovered a recurring theme of moving from curiosity to knowing and then to advising, rather than coaching.

Aileen, in the challenge and her recognition that there was more than “everything was wrong”, learned it was not safe to listen to recordings on her own due to her very loud inner critic. In the future, she would hope to listen to recordings with trusted friends and colleagues who could help her balance her observations. Sally also journaled that this conversation was a strong reminder that she, too, focused primarily on what was wrong in her sessions, just as Aileen had done with the recording; here was her “not-good-enough” frame of reference again.

Challenge was the enabler of learning, and it was dependent on some combination of three variables—my challenge, coming from my assessment that there was enough of a working alliance and there was potential learning in considering the fullness of the segment; the coach’s willingness to consider the challenge, and decision to embrace it; and the other group member’s ability to identify positive attributes within the coaching.

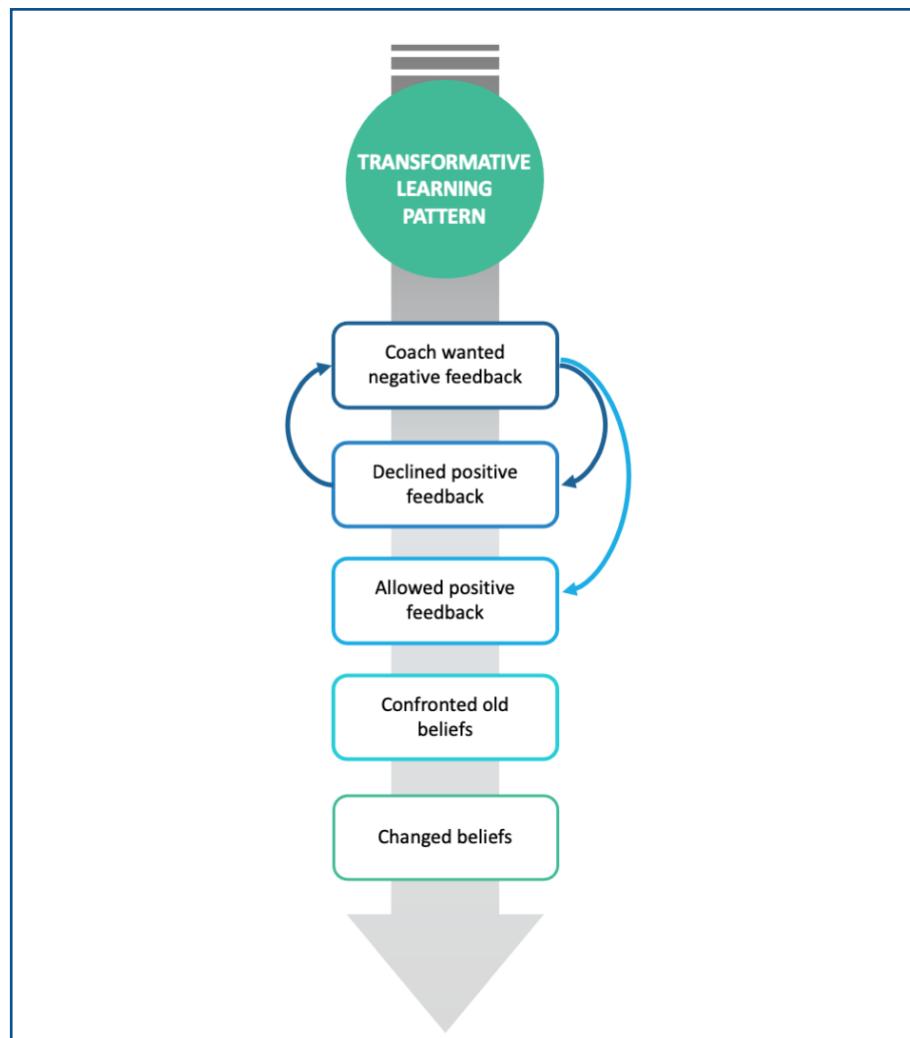


Figure 11: Transformative Learning Pattern

I had a realization following this session: I wanted to invite coaches to explore what was going well, what might demonstrate progress in their journey toward mastery. I wanted, as well, to reflect on what went well in my own practice when I met with my supervisor. The exploration and identification of these moments had the potential to assist in our abilities to articulate, integrate, and catch up with our learning.

Cultivating presencing practices

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

The fullness of life impacted how Sally and Aileen came into the sessions; the qualities and conditions of the container were not always sufficient to contain all that they brought. Sally frequently arrived discombobulated with the overwhelming aspects of her

personal life, and not having prepared for the session. While she had been motivated to make a commitment to show up to our sessions prepared, her ability to live into this was not yet firm. Aileen often arrived with a faster pace, a frenetic energy, getting ready to hop on an international flight with short notice, or addressing parenting issues. The write-ups in advance of the session often would not happen; sometimes one of them would not have something for us to consider together.

In exploring how it was for them to arrive in these ways, we agreed on a centering practice to start each session. Sally typically led the practice; occasionally either Aileen or I did. It became our opening ritual and contributed to our settling into reflective space; to moving into presence. Its impact on our lives outside of the sessions was variable.

Sally identified in an early session that rushing into a client session, without a centering practice prior to the start of the session, negatively impacted her ability to be present. She committed to schedule time ahead of each session to center herself. A few sessions later, she “caught herself” in the same situation as before—that she was not allowing herself time to center. We became a place of accountability for her—she could notice with us that she had previously decided to shift her practice to schedule time to prepare for each coaching session. She could share she had not consistently done so and acknowledge that in this client situation it had gotten in her way. She was frustrated with herself; she re-committed. The commitment was part of her training as a somatic coach, the theory she sought to embody was that centering was done in support of a commitment, a purpose. By the end of the year, centering had become a more regular practice for her. The learning and integration came over time: initially noticing, committing to a different practice, noticing it wasn’t consistently implemented, committing again, practicing, and integrating it going forward. The container provided a place for her to notice, commit, notice and practice.

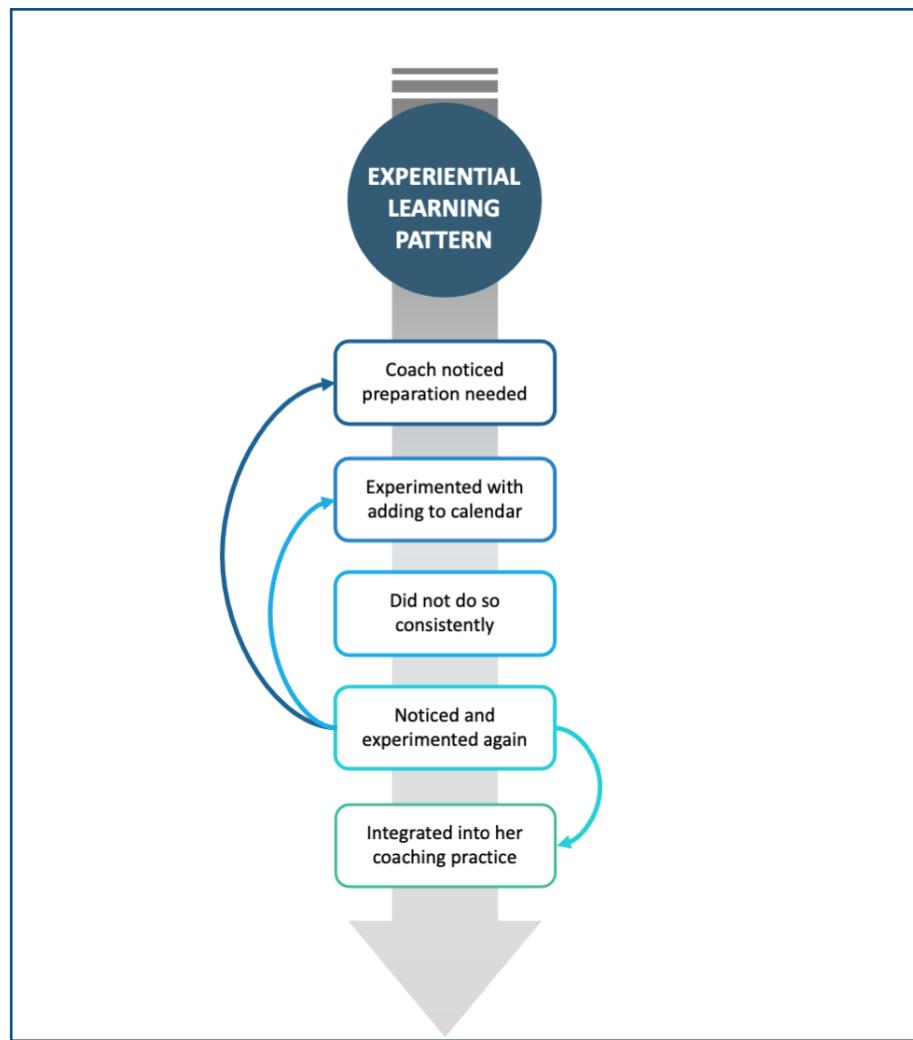


Figure 12: Experiential Learning Pattern

Sally and Aileen ultimately adopted it as a preparation ritual prior to going into most client sessions, now and again they would use it with their clients. However, they did not consistently use it ahead of our sessions to create preparation times. My stance continued to be acceptance—however they were arriving was acceptable, they were welcome as they were. One of the purposes of supervision is resourcing the coach; I believed my acceptance was in service to that purpose.

Business arrangements

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice.

The impacts of the business arrangements for the coaching engagement were discovered in a handful of our inquiries. The purposes of supervision are usually expressed as

developmental, qualitative and resourcing (Hawkins and Smith, 2006). Hawkins and Smith also observe that the complexities of coaches working within organizational settings requires a more systemic perspective.

In one of the cases brought forward, Sally discovered she was not bringing her full coaching methodology to the engagement; she was holding the belief that the organization that sub-contracted with her would not want her to use some of her expertise and process.

The financial arrangements she had in this engagement led her to coach differently. There were four parties involved: the coach, the organization providing the coaches, the client and the client's organization, which led to at least four contracting relationships. The contracting between the two organizations for the financial arrangements and scope of work; the contracting between the provider of the coaches and the coach for what she would be paid and her scope of work; the contracting between the client and his or her boss on the expectations for their development through the coaching engagement; the contracting between the coach and client about the client's goals, the coaching process and the confidentialities. In the coach's regular engagements, she contracted directly with the client's organization and the client; in this specific context she had no dialogue with the client's organization. She had not had a discussion with the company that sub-contracted with her specifically about her coaching methodology; she had made certain assumptions. These assumptions came to light in our inquiry.

In another setting Sally was to coach newly hired senior leaders, for their first six months, as they were onboarded into the organization. She was hired by the recruiting firm that had placed the client. If the senior leader left the organization within the first six months, the recruitment fees were refundable to the hiring organization. In exploring this situation, the coach discovered that as a result of this financial arrangement she was driving to deliver results; she felt responsible for and was taking on the client's responsibilities.

In our inquiry and reflections, it was typical to explore the contracting between the coach and client, and almost always between the coach and the client's organization. As the above scenarios came to light, we introduced into our practice an inquiry about the contracting arrangements with the coach. These questions came to life for Sally; they made her question these: What assumptions was the coach making because of those arrangements? What provisions were emerging as a challenge for the coach? What provisions would the coach want to agree to in the future, and what provisions would she want to renegotiate or decline? What additional conversations might be necessary or useful?

There was an interesting parallel to the assumptions I made about what creativity I could bring to my Sponsor groups as contrasted with my non-Sponsor groups, described earlier in the vignette about experimentation. Just as Sally and Aileen had challenged me to not box myself in, Aileen and I challenged Sally not to box herself in based on the financial arrangements.

Beginning of Pivot #2

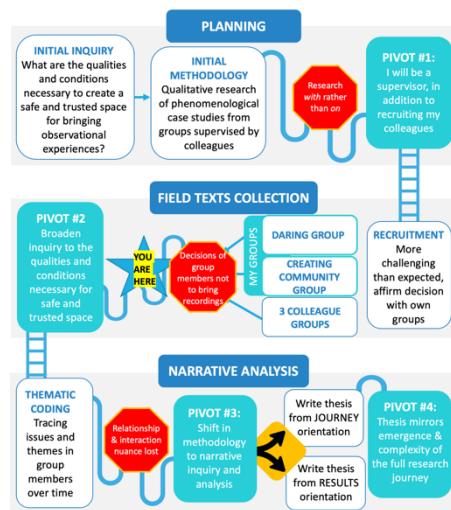


Figure 13: Beginning Pivot #2

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as guardian of reflective practice and focused on supervisory relationships.

In our second action learning meeting we explored the use of recordings and transcripts in supervision. Only one transcript had been brought in the 5 sessions to date. It was not clear what to make of that, there were a number of possibilities: too time consuming, a lack of willing clients, too scary, not useful, no motivation to do so, new process that needed encouragement, or some combination of these or other reasons.

We explored what was inhibiting using recordings and discussed a variety of approaches that might address those barriers. Both Aileen and Sally committed to bring recordings in the coming sessions. The starkness of their reactions to bringing recordings imbued the discussion with richer components, I believe, than if we had explored what they brought to supervision and did not bring. This was the opening to learning about stewardship of the container and what its dimensions might be in the context of an inquiry about an experimental intervention. I felt some stirring that the inquiry was more than the use of recordings and transcripts. I took in what they shared; I remained drawn to observational experiences with a growing sense that maybe it was different than that. These moments I had a sense that I needed to lean into what was emerging; I felt resistance to completely letting go. It is useful to note that although this was an action learning meeting, which I approached with more of the stance of the researcher, I moved to my supervisor stance as the meeting began, staying in service to their supervision experience.

I did not yet know that the research groups would refocus the overall inquiry to the qualities of the container for self-disclosure, reflection and learning rather than on the use of observational experiences.

Using a quote; crossing a threshold

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

Earlier on the morning of our 7th session (as we had extended to a full 10 sessions), I was a supervisee participating in the supervision group with my colleagues. In the “How are you arriving?” check-in, a colleague shared a reflection that included the quote from Ram Dass (Dass and Das, 2013) of his teacher asking, “Don’t you see it’s all perfect?” (p.104). I

was intrigued in those few moments about how it would be to live into that phrase. I decided to experiment with its application in two ways. With myself, in the continuing practice of self-compassion, self-kindness, and acceptance of my foibles and idiosyncrasies; and with the Daring Group, as collectively we had continued to notice our own stories.

We began our Daring Group session at noon that day; it was unusual for us to start that late. Our usual custom was to start early to mid-morning Pacific time. We arrived, the three of us on Zoom, each of us in our video windows—Aileen in her home office with a painting of branches with buds behind her, on the East Coast. Sally in her spot on the comfy looking sofa in her living room, with the backdrop of a beautiful cabinet, in Northern California. I had been displaced from my home office; I was upstairs in the guest room on my laptop, with very little visible in my setting other than a small glimpse of a lace curtain on the window, a bit of white wall and sky-blue ceiling. I preferred to do these sessions on my desktop with its larger screen. I would have been more visible—not just my face and a bit of my neck but also my hands which were often animated, and the Zoom windows for the coaches were larger on a desktop, which would have enabled me to see their faces more clearly.

We began. I introduced the quote in my check-in with Aileen and Sally, sharing that I had been in my own supervision group that morning. This was important context; I too was a supervisee in a group exploring my work. Aileen’s response to my sharing of the quote “Don’t you see it’s all perfect?” (Dass and Das, 2013, p.104) was immediate and candid:

I just have such a hard time with that. My whole identity is about it's not perfect. It's not all perfect and seeking more perfect...its identity-shaking to hear that quote, or to be in that question.

For Sally she shared that she was showing up “embarrassed to say I have absolutely nothing (laughs)”. I said that was perfect. Her response illuminated the struggle of self-acceptance, the failure to live up to her responsibility to bring a case each session.

At the end of our session, I offered to Sally:

I just want to come back to you for a minute and notice that we are out of time and doesn't it emphasize the note of perfection, of just how we come? It would've been a very different discussion if we had had two situations to work...

I left the session curious about what impact introducing the concept of acceptance had had. As it turned out offering the quote opened a door and we stepped across a threshold.

Accountability may not have a place

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

I was holding tension throughout the first several months of the research. What accountability should I hold as supervisor, if any, and what accountability should I hold as researcher, if any? I had not previously considered the place for accountability in supervision. I had taken an invitational stance and trusted the coaches would do what was useful for them.

Through the research process, I learned that the other supervisors, and their groups, had more requirements in the supervisory process. It was not clear whether these were requested by the supervisor or co-created in contracting with the group members. One group required case write-ups in advance, two encouraged them; one had the coaches assigned to a particular month for bringing the primary case to the group; one asked the group, meeting in the peer learning¹¹ session, to organize who would bring the case or cases to the next session. As the researcher, I wondered if I should actively encourage my groups to experiment with the research asks or stay purely in my supervisor role. I asked myself if, as researcher, I should encourage, push or cajole the groups who were not using observational experiences. I was aware of the tension; I explored it, as a supervisee, in the supervision of my supervision.

¹¹ The Sponsor's format for supervision included 10 peer learning sessions, in addition to the 10 sessions with the supervisor.

Crossing the threshold with the Daring Group through the use of the quote that day, I let go of the tension. I did not want or need to provide greater accountability. I was savoring a different experience of acceptance; I could feel I had moved to a deeper belief in unconditional positive regard for the coaches I supervised, and saw that this enriched, rather than limited, the research.

As a supervisor

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, using my self-reflection to inform guardian of reflective practice and focus on supervisory relationships.

As I shared above, I felt anxious about the pilot. I wanted to show up as a good supervisor and wanted to be a good researcher. I took this issue to my own supervisor and to my peer triad to process, reflect and settle into. Growth required letting go of wanting to get the research “right,” just as Sally and Aileen’s growth required letting go of wanting to get it “right.”

Ultimately, I supervised as I normally did, intentionally from a stance of appreciation and affirmation. I normalized their experiences and noticed the courage, depth and tenderness of what they were sharing. Aileen and Sally did the same with each other. Our pace was spacious for reflection, for considering possibilities, and for inquiring together. Both coaches brought a case or issue to be considered more frequently than not. We discussed the reflection question, inquired into each of their cases, considered what learning there was from each situation, and concluded the session. Throughout the year, there was ease; there were anxieties; there was shame; there were joyful discoveries. We found our rhythm as a group.

Trust was in our field

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

In a professional practice book that I have used for almost a decade, Feltman (2009) makes the case that there are four elements to building trusting relationships—

competence, sincerity, reliability and care. His articulation of trust resonates with my experiences, in the corporate world, in coaching and in coaching supervision. All four elements emerged in the Daring Group's interactions.

He defines competency as others believing "you have the requisite capacity, skill, knowledge, resources and time to do a particular task or job" (*ibid.*, p.35). Sally and Aileen exhibited these consistently bringing forward client situations, holding them to the light, and learning together. As I described in the introduction of this group, they both brought similar levels of competencies, capabilities and capacities.

Sincerity is about being honest, expressing thoughtful opinions and maintaining "actions align(ed) with your words"; reliability is doing what we say we are going to, that we "keep our promises"; and care is being concerned about the group, the profession, each other individually, not just our own success (Feltman, 2009, p.4). We lived these values in our sessions—the care of each other, our showing up for every session, bringing our work forward and giving feedback, challenge and encouragement, holding up of mirrors for each other, offering feedback, and inquiring together. We trusted that we were in service of our mutual growth.

There was another part of establishing and nurturing trust in the group and that was forgiveness as a part of care. It was the balance between reliability—keeping our promises to show up in the group, bring cases or recordings forward—and care with others in the times when it was not actualized. We had the opportunity to practice not striving for perfection, not holding each other to perfect track records when one of them was late because of car troubles, discombobulated and distracted because of a major life event or a new laptop, or showed up with low energy. Through our relationships we practiced the ability to meet others where they were and hold them in unconditional positive regard.

Contributions to our learning

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

Our interactions, reflections and learning were informed by relationships and interactions beyond our monthly meetings. Sally and Aileen developed their relationships, and how to reflect, in their larger group supervision experiences as well as within our trio. There were references, not infrequently, to something that had happened in their other supervision group of six; they would bring that knowledge and experience, incorporating the learning into our inquiries. I would reference my learning from readings, other supervision groups, in my own reflections as a supervisee, and from having watched our prior sessions. I often identified when I was bringing a new pattern; and requested their agreement to introduce it. We came to each session having been slightly changed by what had transpired in between.

Designing our process for the coming year – co-creation of the container

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, utilizing all three roles: supervisory relationships, guardian of reflective practice and facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

The third action learning meeting occurred after our final session. We reflected on the past year and utilized our experiences to design the process for our next year in supervision. I weighted these elements more heavily than I did others that had arisen because we were using them to plan our future work. The elements we agreed to bring forward were about the container we were co-creating in each session:

- to remain as a group of two coaches
- to continue, within our overall process:
 - my invitational stance
 - to use the quote “don’t you see its all perfect” (Dass and Das, 2013) – trust that whatever emerges is just what we need
 - to identify and name moments of parallel process
 - the use invitations to try things differently, to experiment

- to send reflection questions a few days in advance and the journal prompts immediately after the session

There was no interest, from the coaches, in committing to the use of observational experiences.

There was an ache for a continued broader purpose in our upcoming season. Aileen noticed her greater seriousness in supervision, the past year, because she had been in service to the broader profession; she had a different commitment in her engagement. She wondered aloud if we could frame a shared purpose that was bigger than our own learning for the upcoming year. Sally shared the resonance of that sentiment; and added that she needed community as nourishment in her development. In those discussions they both felt the positive impact of the experience as participants.

As they shared these reflections, they interwove their work with their clients. Each shared how they brought these experiences into their client sessions, and how the “us” expanded to include the client’s system and stakeholders; their introduction of experimentation; and their ability to move into new depths of acceptance.

They called out the need for stewardship of our space; that we could not rest on what came before. We remembered moments of discomfort, and moments of joyful discovery. We held on to the feelings of being together with the wisdom to know it was not a given. Yet we could feel it was stronger in our final sessions than in the beginning; our connection had developed over time. As Aileen shared “it’s special, it’s safe and it’s intimate. I feel this worry inside me that brings me to tears, which is, is it fragile”. Our relationships, and the space within which we worked, took continuous intentional attention.

My embodiment of the “don’t you see it’s all perfect” (Dass and Das, 2013, p.104) was transformative for all three of us. Aileen and Sally referenced instances when they had arrived unprepared and felt the grace of being embraced, not judged. One necessary ingredient was the repetition of this response before it could be felt fully. As Sally shared

the “honoring our wholeness of however we show up... I feel seen, I feel heard, I feel taken care of, and I feel in relationship with each of you individually and collectively”.

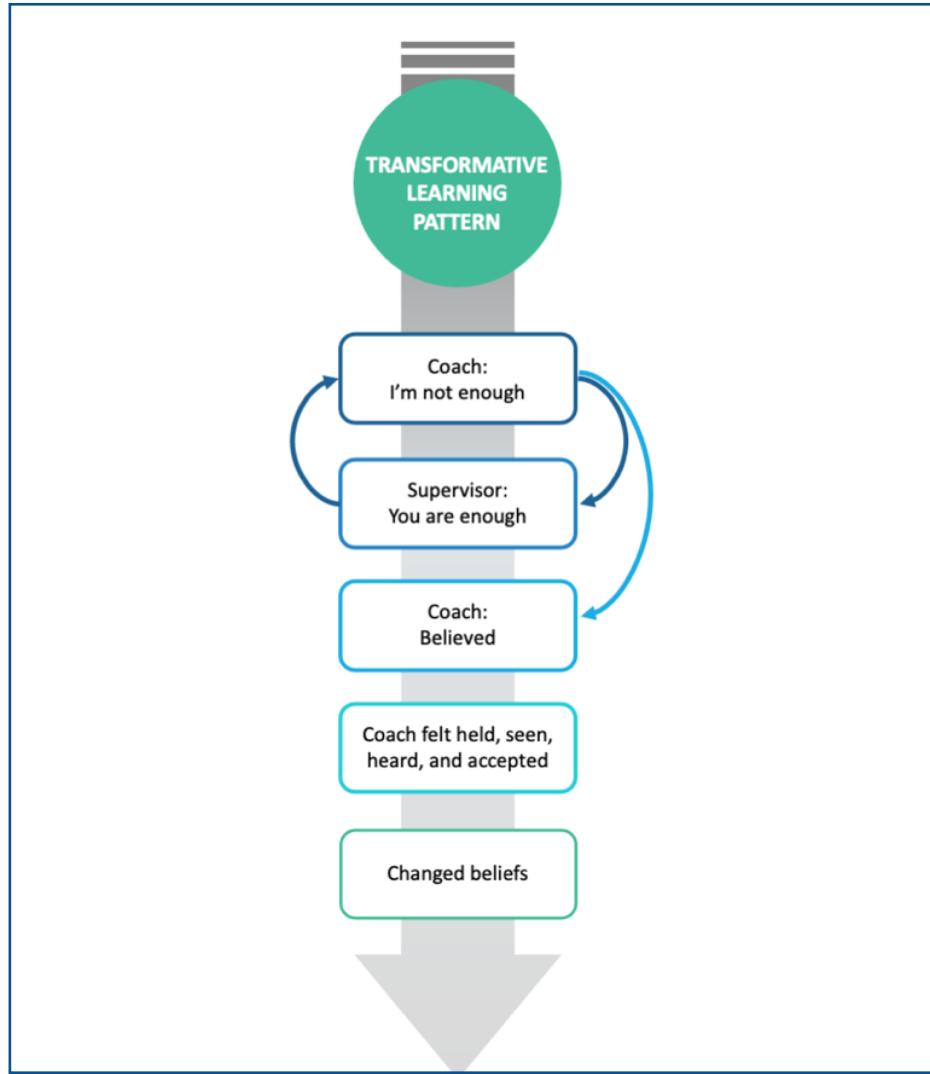


Figure 14: Transformative Learning Pattern

I felt humbled by the mysteries of how we interacted, created the container, used the idea of “it’s all perfect” in service of not being perfect, in service of looking at our failings, our mistakes, our foibles, together.

Expansive acceptance, reflecting 11 months later

Role(s) at forefront: Researcher

The fourth action learning meeting occurred several months later. With time and distance, there were four themes front and center for Sally and Aileen.

- The first—the expansive acceptance from me that they experienced with the use of the concept that whatever happens is just what we need: “don’t you see its all perfect?”, “that’s just the way it should be”, “isn’t that great, what a useful starting point!” They felt the honoring of their wholeness, their humanity.
- The second—how we collectively took care of the whole: the “us”, which included our clients, their systems, our communities, our profession; our “intuitive sense of what that means and looks like”.
- The third—my introduction of different ways of engaging, reflecting, learning; the value of “disrupting and disorganizing”. The experiments (i.e. using recordings, watching the infant video, the coaching with metaphor video, using the Dass quote, self-disclosing I had gotten caught up in the parallel process) were fun; they created new possibilities.
- The fourth—they took more risks in how they showed up, with their clients and in our intimate group.

Group size

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

There were benefits and drawbacks to a group of two and a group of six. The group size has a number of variables to be considered with respect to its contribution to the container. Because of the difficulty of recruiting, and the willingness of these two coaches, I made the decision to start the pilot with only two supervisees instead of the Sponsor’s norm of six. What those two coaches expressed, in our first session, was that they felt safer than in their group of six, even though there was more visibility and responsibility to come prepared and to participate. As is evident in the vignettes, we had participated actively in inquiring with the presenting coach, in challenging and appreciating the situations.

This group, after the initial sessions of performance anxiety, had frequently epitomized dialogue (Isaacs, 1999). The mutual vulnerability, the depth of trust in the relationships, the commitment to mutual learning, the connective tissue, or muscle, was well

developed. If one looked only at this group, it would be evident that the three of us together engaged in meaningful explorations that resulted in significant learning. At the end of the research, they concluded that it was safest with just the two of them. They had renewed for another year in both groups; there were benefits to the group of 6 and it was safe enough. I wondered about how many reasons, conditions and qualities were in their assessments of which groups to join or stay in or conclude.

Technology glitches

Role(s) at forefront: Supervisor, as facilitator of the dynamics of the group setting.

We experienced technology glitches. They varied from instability of WIFI, a new laptop that was not yet set up for Zoom, Zoom connectivity issues, audio issues, and so on. I intentionally was calm, accepting, and did not raise any frustrations. We worked to solve them, and then continued. They occurred frequently enough that I was used to them and let them come and go. My sense was that this way of being, as though they were disruptive traffic noises coming in an open window in a meeting room, communicated acceptance of whatever came into the space. My calm acceptance was not mentioned or referred to in the context of Zoom; yet it feels to me to have been an important ingredient.

Impacts of participating in the research

Role(s) at forefront: Researcher and Supervisor, focused on supervisory relationships.

There was development, over time, of their perspectives of the impacts of being participants. Initially, Aileen and Sally were anxious and worried about being “good lab rats”. Through the ten sessions they referred to a “much more serious level of importance and responsibility” which contributed to their engagement and learning. They shared its positive impact with their clients. At the end of our year, they had shared a number of benefits. Identification of negative impact did not arise until our last meeting, 22 months after we began, when Aileen shared that she had felt observed, which had created moments of lack of safety for her. We had moved another step closer to fuller disclosure; she could, at that moment, share more fully her experience within

the research, a negative to go along with the positives. I wondered if she had recently come to the awareness of the feelings of being observed, as I had asked her to read some of my writing about our work together; she had read only the first few pages and stopped. Or was this an example of something she could not say out loud before, evidence of how many facets and complexities there are about what the container can hold at any point in time?

I had not included in the original ask of the participants that they review my writings. Sally and Aileen offered in January 2019 that they would be willing to do so if it would be useful to me. I offered that it could be potentially, and that I was worried it could alter our current relationships in unanticipated ways. I shared a draft chapter with the following care:

If you have time to read or scan it, would you notice what feelings arise, any stirrings about each of you and us together. What is on my mind is wanting to be quite careful that if in your review of the writing you feel shifts in our relationships that we make that explicit and talk about whether your potential review of the subsequent chapters, which are deeply about our work together, will be useful to you and to our collective ways of being, or if you detect any discomfort that means we should pause and re-evaluate whether you want to read the other chapters (Downing, 2019).

I agreed to consider their comments but not necessarily to make the edits they suggested or requested. If their understandings were different from mine it would inform my writing and I would acknowledge the multiple perspectives. They both reviewed the first few pages of the chapter and did not continue. There could be any number of reasons for that and I honor their decisions. In fact, I was quite relieved which I shared with them. The benefits of having them read the chapter did not seem worth the risk that it might have any detrimental impact on our continuing relationships; I was particularly concerned that they might feel “observed” in our current or future work and that would interfere with how we were together.

In this chapter, I have brought to light the experiences of the Daring Group, across the span of the research inquiry, sharing how we began, the initial co-creation of the container, how we experienced the dance of supervision.

In the next Chapter, I describe the experiences of the Creating Community Group, a group of six.