

UK Coaching Summit 2016: The psychology of successful change

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Damian Hughes 1



Damian Hughes had delegates roaring with laughter one minute and nodding thoughtfully in agreement the next

In a brilliant presentation, Damian Hughes questioned whether we really knew our left from our right – brains, that is. Exercising the right side of our brain holds the key to changing our, and other people’s, habitual behaviour, necessary if we are to effect a culture of positive change.

What a privilege it was to witness Damian Hughes in full flow at the [2016 UK Coaching Summit in Manchester](#).

Judging by the animated reactions of the audience in the room and the buzz it generated on social media, it is a safe assumption that his words left a lasting impression on the 270-plus delegates in attendance and will have a positive, far-reaching impact on the coaching sector.

In 90 gripping minutes that, for entertainment value, surely rivalled any Saturday afternoon at the King Power Stadium last season watching Premier League champions Leicester City, Damian delivered a quick-witted, thought-provoking presentation on the psychology of successful change – before returning for an encore performance later in the afternoon to give the conference’s closing keynote speech.

As the author of three acclaimed boxing biographies, detailing the lives of Thomas Hearn, Sugar Ray Robinson and Marvin Hagler, it was fitting he received a drawn out, Michael Buffer-style introduction – the ring announcer with the trademark ‘Let’s get ready to rumble’ catchphrase.

When you are a best-selling author, a former Manchester United coach and England schoolboys footballer, owner of your own consultancy (LiquidThinker), current professor of organisational psychology and change at Manchester Metropolitan University, and also work as a sports psychologist for Sale Sharks rugby union team and the Warrington Wolves, France and England rugby league teams, you learn to remain in your seat for a few extra seconds when you hear the words, ‘Welcome our next speaker to the stage...’.

And that’s not all. As well as an in demand keynote speaker, Damian is a passionate boxing coach, running an inner-city community youth project in Manchester set up by his father that has produced several world champions.

Great things were expected on the back of this introduction, and Damian delivered from the first bell.

A life on autopilot

He began by quoting the wise words of Basil Fawlty, who, in an episode of Fawlty Towers told his long-suffering wife Sybil, in his own inimitable style: ‘If you were to go on Mastermind, your specialised subject would be the bleedin’ obvious.’

And this, in a nutshell, was the overriding message of Damian's presentation, that change is all about the bleedin' obvious, or, rather, our natural propensity to overlook the bleedin' obvious due to the fact we live the vast majority of our lives on autopilot.

A basic biology lesson on how our brains are wired provided an understanding of why this is so – and the importance of looking at things from a different perspective.

If we learn to engage the more creative side of our brain and witness the possibilities, armed with that newfound confidence to shake up our approach, we can begin making a real difference by pushing the boundaries and messing with the status quo.

As Damian puts it: 'Change is tough, but it doesn't have to be.'

A crash course for the layman on the workings of the human brain helped him illustrate this point.

Highlighting the distinction between the left and right hemispheres of the brain, Damian explained how, in general, the left is process-driven, controls logic, habits, facts, figures, routine; the right is in charge of emotions, flair and helps us make sense of what we see.

It is the right side we need to tap into to effect change.

The problem is that we are experts in exercising the left side of our brains, and, says Damian, 'that can be our greatest enemy.'

It is estimated we spend 95% of our lives on autopilot – a figure Damian contests, believing it to be even higher.

It's not that the left brain extinguishes creativity, so much as it reduces the likelihood of innovative ideas sparking into life in the first place.

'For most of us the model of our working day is heavily weighted to the left, so getting others to embrace change just isn't happening,' he explained.

'When we come under pressure, and change brings its own pressure, most of us resort to left-brain thinking, as you tend to rely on the most dominant muscle.'

Damian drew the comparison of training at the gym every day, working on a particular muscle set: 'Those muscles develop and get stronger and more obdurate.'

Picture the image of a bodybuilder with a ripped torso posing in the mirror, only for the camera to pan down to spindly, pipe-cleaner legs that they had neglected to exercise with anything like the same effort and consistency.

Traditional education techniques haven't helped matters, as for generations children were asked to perform tasks in a repetitive, sequential way from the day they entered reception class. Like chanting the letters of the alphabet, one after the other, by rote.

Rather than breaking the mechanical cycle of left-side thinking, such an unsuitable method of learning only exacerbated and perpetuated the problem of how we processed information.

'It's not that one side of the brain is more effective than the other,' Damian added, 'it's more the fact that it is under-utilised.'

To habitually tap into the right side of your brain to access the relevant resources needed to effect change may sound a daunting challenge, but opening our minds to the process that is at work inside our heads is a great starting point.

'You have all the resources, it's not about learning anything new,' he explained.

Are you on the crest of a slump?

Damian was keen to offer coaches some practical ideas they can use to gain some tangible results.

You'll find some of them below, but not before a cheeky dig in the ribs of stick in the muds who have an aversion to change and who, whether intentionally or not, extinguish the enthusiasm and ideas of the more progressive-minded – as if fighting the circuitry of your brain was not hard enough!

The half empty brigade are everywhere. We all know a moaning Minnie or three, peevish complainers who infect colleagues with their negative energy.

Damian had the audience in hysterics with some of the responses he had heard over the years from work colleagues and acquaintances, who, when politely asked how things were going, would reply forlornly: 'Huh! I'm on the crest of a slump', or 'I'm a day away from the womb, another step closer to the tomb (disconsolate sigh).'

We may pride ourselves on being an optimistic soul, but are we really? It is easy to become cynical and apathetic, Damian argues, when you take the element of choice away from someone.

Most of the time, however, there **is** choice, it's just that we don't see it because we are wired to automatically look for the negatives in everyday situations.

Ask a 'woe is me' colleague why they are doing their job if they dislike it so much and, says Damian, you will probably be met with one of these three responses: 'It pays the mortgage,' 'I've got mouths to feed', or, 'I have no choice in the matter.'

You can already see how these inherent attitudes can hinder progress in the world of coaching.

With so much of the population set in their ways, little wonder creative, forward-thinking coaches, educators and decision-makers struggle to get their voices heard in a roomful of cynics.

Think positive

Damian asked the audience to look at a mock school report for just a few seconds as it flashed up on the big screen. I, along with the vast majority of others in the audience, fastened our gaze on the F grade for Maths. There were other subject grades listed, Cs and Bs, along with an A for Art.

So why were we all transfixed by the F and not the A? Why not focus on the positives for a change?

We should endeavour to wrestle with our natural instincts to moan and complain about what went wrong and analyse what went right, was Damian's advice.

And if by doing that we can change the behaviour of the players we coach or the behaviour of our coaching colleagues, then we have taken the first baby steps into promoting a culture of change.

'We spend an awful lot of time looking to keep those people and players who complain happy. The reality is they will always find something wrong in whatever you offer them,' he said.

'I want to make an obvious suggestion. Whenever you start any meeting or any session where you are encouraging people to change, start with what they are good at, what their strengths are. Then stop. Don't progress to what they could have done better. Concentrate on deconstructing the DNA of those strengths.'

Damian said it irked him every time he heard a manager or player say after losing a game that they were going to get straight back on the training ground and work even harder to put the problems right. The truth of the matter is, they will struggle to find any solutions with that approach.

If the usual starting point of your conversations is who failed to perform, then you will arrow straight in on the problems without ever analysing the positives.

'By changing your first question to "What has been your biggest success of the last few weeks", or "What are you most proud of", you are starting with the assumption that someone is doing a really great job. That's when you can start to really change things.'

Damian Hughes

Rubbing salt into the wound

Song 2

Coaches need to preserve the mental imagery and become proficient in using emotional language to build a connection.

‘Convincing people to change by giving them endless stats, facts and figures that nobody will remember is hard because nobody is interested in that. You’ve taken all the emotion of your favourite song and squeezed it, filtered it through your left brain. Make it about feeling, not a game of numbers,’ said Damian.

‘Your job is to hit their emotional solar plexus from the outset. That is your holy grail as a coach. Then, and only then, do you explain what the message is.

‘When an emotion is evoked, people will take action. Engage the left, and they will debate until the cows come home.’

Time to make yourself heard

So many important principles, explained in simple, easy to understand language, tied together with a generous helping of humour.

I sincerely hope I have captured Damian’s message in this abridged summary of his presentation and encouraged you to stimulate the right side of your brain to come up with new ways of solving problems.

As Damian said, ‘lots of coaches have good intentions, it is their execution that is flawed’.

Hopefully, in the future, you will have the knowledge and the courage to apply these principles and to make yourself heard instead of get drowned out by all the negative noise.

Experiment bypassing the familiar route when it comes to addressing problems, and take a detour. See where it takes you. You should find the opportunity to explore some far more interesting pathways a lot more beneficial to you and to those you coach.

The final words to Damian: ‘When we talk about getting people to embrace change and embracing change ourselves, you have all the resources you need, you just have to have the courage to implement a different way of doing it – and the only person who can do that, is you.’

If you have any thoughts on the topics raised in this blog, please leave a comment below.

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