

“Painting the Picture”

“I dream of painting, and then I paint my dream.”

-Vincent Van Gogh



Words wield immense power.

As executive coaches, we continually strive to develop our ability to intently listen to clients, seeking to understand, striving to truly grasp the underlying messages being expressed. While recognizing the profound value of active listening, we must also thoughtfully consider the words we **do** use to effectively promote our client’s growth and progress.

A picture is worth a thousand words.

Visualization, the practice of repeating desired outcomes in the mind in order to attract and achieve results, has been used by successful athletes for decades to achieve a competitive edge. Michael Phelps, successful swimmer and the most decorated Olympian of all time, used visualization techniques even as early as 11 years of age to see “in his mind’s eye” his perfect race, leading to consistency in his stroke and development of his confidence in and out of the pool. Visualization gives athletes the ability to handle high-pressure situations by staying focused on the image or picture of the outcome they wish to achieve. Frequently credited with accelerating an athlete’s progress, visualization stands out as a powerful and invaluable tool when striving toward specific goals or outcomes.

In her book, *The Heart of Laser-Focused Coaching*, Marion Franklin shares that coaches often ask, “What do you envision for yourself in one year, five years, or 10 years?” This question, Ms. Franklin writes, leads to a response of what the client *hopes* to achieve, including supposition and guesswork. In contrast, with an intentional shift in words, we, as executive coaches, can

elicit a visceral response from clients by painting a vivid picture with distinct and realistic details, even “getting thinkers to feel.”¹ “Painting the picture is about putting your client literally into a situation in their mind as though it’s occurring right now rather than imagining it at a later time.”¹

Let’s take a look at how this might work.

Inexperienced in his new role as superintendent, Mr. Smith found himself very overwhelmed, perceiving everything as urgent crises. We explored two main facets that were contributing to these feelings: a struggle to discern priorities and a shortage of qualified staff for delegation.

*Hearing these, I began to paint a picture for him of a team of qualified individuals, while keeping all other aspects of the situation the same. I described a team that had a common purpose, a commitment to excellence, and had built a foundation of trust in one another. When I asked, “**What about this works for you?**”, his response was that he still didn’t know what to even ask them to do.*

*Then we explored understanding how to prioritize responsibilities. “Presume that as you begin your day, you consider the actions and goals within your strategic plan, focusing first on the ‘important work’ to be accomplished, making your to-do list. As the “urgent” matters arise via phone calls and emails throughout the day, you move promptly to address those efficiently before returning to your strategic tasks. **What about this works for you?**”*

Immediately, Mr. Smith launched into a description - and even a commitment - of how to prioritize responsibilities, instinctively realizing that the obstacle had been his own inability to act. He recognized possibilities first, then looked at what was realistic, bringing a large portion of the “painted picture” into his vision and consequently, into his reality. He even further commented on how some of the urgent tasks might be delegated to specific individuals across the district.

As executive coaches, we are privileged to have opportunities to draw out insights from the hearts and minds of our clients as we serve in the role of a trusted partner. By using discernment to gauge when to “paint a picture” for a client, we provide them with the space to step into this visualization, explore its nuances, and discern what resonates with them. This process can lead to profound realizations about their path forward and how to navigate it effectively.

Painting a picture often creates a passageway to the possible.

References:

1. Franklin, M. (2019). The heart of laser-focused coaching, a revolutionary approach to masterful coaching. Marion Franklin.