

Out of the Box Coaching Newsletter

Going for the Gold—Alchemy in Coaching

by Mary Bast



Our collective predicament depends much on individual human transformation and... we cannot afford not arousing the potential and motivation of individuals to work on themselves to the extent that they can." Claudio Naranjo, "Suggestions for Further Work on Self," *Character and Neurosis*.

I was lucky enough to see Xue Shen and Hongbo Zhao's incredibly graceful and Olympic gold-winning pairs skating performance. "This is our fourth Olympics," noted Shen. "We made a comeback to give it our last shot at gold. Words cannot describe how I feel right now. I just want to cry. It is a dream." Then a friend linked me to a video of another Chinese pair in a "she without arm, he without leg" ballet (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnlVRQCjh8c>), whose profoundly moving performance changed the meaning for me of "going for the gold."

In coaching we have the privilege of witnessing both kinds of "gold." During my first few years as an executive coach, I was more focused on Olympian goals with my clients, who achieved their promotions, managed their teams for higher morale and productivity, or—in the bronze medal category of coaching—reinstated themselves instead of being fired.

With some, however, my simply being present and mirroring encouraged much more, so I began to look for ways to reframe "going for the gold" in coaching. This is not about winning, not about being right, more caring, confident, unique, smart, inventive, strong, or content, but about a greater illumination. Alchemy may seem a bit grandiose as a metaphor for this awakening, but alchemists believe everything will become more advanced given time; the "Great Work" is simply to speed up that process. So why not imagine our Great Work is to help accelerate our clients' transformation?

Now envision the Enneagram as a dynamic vessel within which the necessary alchemical processes of the Great Work take place. Below are nine elements of alchemy, arranged in numerical sequence so you can see the Enneagram parallels. Also keep in mind that each element, rather than being unique to an Enneagram style, is vital to the transformation process in all nine (phrases in italics from Michael Goldberg's *Nine Ways of Working*):

Calciniatio—*purifying by fire* is the first of the alchemy procedures, subjecting the basic material to intense heat, driving away alien substances and leaving a pure, whitened ash. Psychologically speaking, this works on the mind and ego, burning away the false self. The whitened ash represents release from our personality's fixated illusion of reality.

Solutio—*melting hard hearts and entrenched positions*, the second order of alchemical practices, uses the purifying and dissolving properties of water to return the ash to its most basic state so it can be worked with successfully. This dissolution works on the heart to release buried emotions.

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Going for the Gold—Alchemy in Coaching (continued)

Solificatio—*making things real*, represents moving from the lower to the higher mind. Our deep intention to change is not limited by rational thought and conscious goal attainment, but rather our thoughts are “enlightened,” literally transformed into light, a vision of what is possible.

Nigredo—*separating the extraneous from the real*. This aspect of alchemy means putrefaction or decomposition, all ingredients cleansed and cooked to a uniform black matter—representing the moment of maximum despair, the dark night of the soul, the dying of inner chaos and doubt, discovering what really matters, what is authentic essence.

Separatio—*separating wholes into components*, separating the essence of dissolution from its wastes. This refers to “dismembering” the personality, retrieving the energy released by dissolution of negative beliefs and emotional blockages.

Mortificatio—*killing or dead-making*, consciously working on reduction of ego attachments; in Jungian terms going inside ourselves to embrace the shadow so our self reflects the whole instead of a dissociated part.

Sublimatio—*infusing with spirit*, transmuting to a higher form. In chemistry a solid, when heated, passes directly into gas and ascends to the top of the vessel, where it resolidifies. Metaphorically we are made spiritual, we move “above” and see objectively.

Coagulatio—*mastering the forces of nature*, accessing our own soul power to change our reality on all levels. This refers to earth and to being solid, to a chemical reaction that produces a new compound. In *coagulatio* we seek stability with our newfound peace and become accustomed to our spirit-based self.

Coniunctio—*uniting apparent opposites to make a larger whole*. Here we unite conscious/unconscious, balance masculine/feminine principles, increase intuitive insights/synchronicities, and enter psychological wholeness.

Some of you may ask if we have the right to challenge clients to transformational work when they have asked only for help with their leadership or communication skills, or similar behavioral goals. This is a legitimate concern, because deep change—as indicated by these alchemical metaphors—is disorienting, discomfiting, and even frightening. Nonetheless, I believe it is our Great Work to be courageous enough to “go for the gold.” Of course, not every client is ready or wants to make the leap great coaching demands, but those who do find far more rewards than they could have anticipated when they started out to resolve an immediate problem.



To join the mystery with clients entering the crucible, we, too, must prepare, asking “How can my presence as a coach help them step into the fire (*calcinatio*), free buried and repressed emotions (*olutio*), discover and pursue an illuminated vision (*solificatio*), hold to the course when shaken by disorientation or despair (*nigredo*), dissolve negative beliefs (*separatio*), “kill” their ego attachments (*mortificatio*), find a new spiritual perspective (*sublimatio*) and soul power (*coagulatio*), and become more whole (*coniunctio*)?”

Over the next few months my Coach Mentor blog will feature client examples in each alchemy category.

GO FOR THE GOLD!

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