

You Don't Have to Hold It All Together Here: The Radical Relief of Real Coaching

This week, a highly successful senior leader unravelled during a coaching session with one of our team." Not dramatically. Not destructively. But quietly in a way she couldn't allow herself to at work, or even at home. She cried. She said the hard things. She let go of the unbearable emotional weight she'd been carrying for months. And here's what matters most:



She'll walk back into the office with more clarity, more focus, and more capacity to lead.

Not because she "got it out of her system," but because her nervous system finally got what it needed: **space to process**. This is what real coaching provides not just reflection, but **regulation**. When we experience attuned, emotionally safe relationships, the brain shifts:

- The **amygdala** (fear/threat centre) calms down
- The **prefrontal cortex** (reasoning, empathy, executive function) comes online
- **Cortisol** drops
- The nervous system shifts from **fight-or-flight** to **rest-and-respond**

“If you can name it, you can tame it.” — Dr. Dan Siegel, UCLA neuropsychiatrist
This isn't therapy. And it isn't fluff. It's **leadership hygiene**. And coaching at its best is one of the few professional relationships that makes it possible.

The Emotional Cost of Being “On” All the Time

In most work environments today, we've replaced genuine connection with highly managed communication. We optimise for clarity and output but rarely for presence, trust, or depth. So leaders adapt. They self-edit. They manage impressions. They regulate for everyone else. Because the system rewards it. But it also **erodes** something essential: **relational oxygen** the freedom to be real, to admit uncertainty, to feel. That's why so many senior leaders arrive in coaching burnt out, disoriented, emotionally flat. Because the thing they're missing isn't feedback or strategy. It's **a relationship where they don't have to hold it all together**.

The stats back this up:

- Fewer than **1 in 2 employees** trust their senior leaders (Edelman, 2024)
- Over **50% of CEOs** report feeling lonely (HBR, 2023)
- **62% of adults globally** say they regularly feel isolated (Cigna, 2023)
- Only **14% of leaders** believe their teams feel psychologically safe (Deloitte, 2023)

We tell people to “*bring your whole self to work*,” but the truth is: **most organisations aren't relationally equipped to receive that**.

Why “Be Yourself” Is the Wrong Advice for Leaders

In his recent book *Don't Be Yourself: Why Authenticity Is Overrated and What to Do Instead*, psychologist **Thomas Chamorro-Premuzic** calls out the modern authenticity myth:

“There is nothing virtuous about being yourself if you're rude, selfish, or close-minded.”

He argues that authenticity, as it's often sold, is a lazy substitute for growth an excuse to stay emotionally rigid, to avoid discomfort, or to double down on habits that no longer serve you. And here's the reality: leaders are constantly **performing versions of themselves**. They don't do this because they're inauthentic. They do it because leadership *requires* impression management:

- Calibrating tone

- Managing visibility
- Adjusting emotional expression
- Shaping how others feel often at cost to their own regulation

This isn't manipulation. As Chamorro-Premuzic points out, it's **emotional intelligence**. But it's also exhausting.

Because there's no space in the day where they can safely stop performing. No space to say, *"I'm not sure,"* or *"This is too much,"* or *"I don't know how to do this anymore."* Except sometimes in coaching.

The Most Emotionally Honest Relationship in Your Work Life?

Here's something we don't say enough:

A great coaching relationship can be the most emotionally honest relationship a leader has in their work life.

And strangely it has a lot in common with a romantic relationship. Not inappropriately. But **intentionally**:

- Both require **trust, presence, and emotional attunement**
- Both offer a space to be seen without judgement
- Both include moments of rupture and require repair
- Both regulate our nervous system through connection
- Both become a **secure base**: somewhere you can return to in order to grow

This is attachment theory, not poetry. And neuroscience backs it up.

Coaching releases **oxytocin** (bonding), **dopamine** (reward), and reduces **cortisol** (stress). The client feels safer, more grounded, and better able to access their full emotional and cognitive range.

The difference is: **coaching does this in service of leadership**.

It allows people to:

- Risk new behaviours
- Expand their emotional range
- Face feedback without shame
- Learn how to stay regulated in complexity

That's why it can feel *life-changing*. Because for many leaders, it's the *only* place where this kind of emotional safety and challenge coexist.

Real Relationship, Real Work: What Happens When Teams Drop the Performance

Over the past 18 months, we've been supporting a team of four founders

Their context? High-stakes. High-speed. High visibility. Their dynamic? Strategic but emotionally guarded. Functional, but fragile.

In the early days, our coaching focused on tools and tactics. But over time, something deeper unfolded:

- They began to *see* each other
- They named conflict without blame
- They stayed in conversations they once avoided
- They repaired relationships that had been quietly fraying

And it didn't happen overnight. It took over six months before they dropped the armour. But when they did?

- Psychological safety increased
- Strategic decision-making got faster and more thoughtful
- They stopped performing and started collaborating

They didn't just grow as individuals. They became a real team. And it didn't start with process. It started with **relationship**.

Coaching Shouldn't Be a Last Resort

Just this week, we began working with a new client a seasoned leader whose organisation *gets it*.

They're not waiting for things to break. They're not sending people into coaching as damage control.

They're building relational infrastructure early. Because they know:

- Emotional literacy is leadership literacy
- People need space to reflect *before* they burn out
- Coaching isn't a fix it's a foundation

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Because the earlier we offer this kind of relationship, the less repair we need to do later.

If You're Leading (or Coaching) in 2026...

For Coaches:

- Rapport isn't a nice-to-have. It *is* the work
- Offer emotional honesty without judgement
- Name the rupture. Stay through the repair

For Leaders:

- You don't need to have all the answers. But you do need space to reflect
- Stop performing. Start processing.
- Coaching isn't indulgent it's intelligent

For Organisations:

- Invest in coaching early, not reactively
- Create cultures where emotional regulation is modelled
- Treat relational safety as a strategic advantage — because it is

Final Reflection

Something we often hear from clients

"This is the only place in my work life where I don't have to hold it all together."

That's not a weakness. It's what most professional environments are missing.

Coaching can't fix everything. But it can offer **one real, honest, emotionally attuned relationship** a place where people stop performing and start becoming.

And in a world of curated leadership and strategic small talk?

That kind of relationship might just be the most valuable thing we can offer.

👋 *Are you working in a high-stakes environment where trust feels thin and everything feels performative? Coaching might be the relief valve your leadership team needs.* ✉️

Drop us a message or share your experience what does *real relationship* look like in your work life?

Key takeaways in clean, simple bullet points:

- Real coaching gives leaders a safe space to regulate their nervous system, not just reflect.
- Emotional suppression at work drains clarity, presence, and resilience — even for top performers.
- Attuned coaching activates the brain's higher-functioning systems, reducing stress and improving decision-making.

- The coaching relationship is often the only place a leader can be fully honest, stop performing, and truly process.
- Coaching is most powerful when used proactively — as relational infrastructure, not crisis response.