

Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence, January 2019

Following Through

By Amanda Berger

Last week we sent you Damon's reflections of our first in-person session for Coaching for Healing and Non-Violence Cohort 01 at CA State Men's Prison in Lancaster. This week we share co-facilitator, Amanda Berger's thoughts and insights..

Damon and I meet Dave Mashore at 7am at the hotel we are staying at in Lancaster, CA. We are all excited as we drive over in his van to the prison. It's been a year since I've personally seen the men in the program. In that year, we worked to straighten out logistics, to gain access to the prison, to raise funds and to prepare the curriculum for use in a prison setting where there is no technology and no infrastructure or support for tele-classes. We are improvising and creating prison "work arounds". We realize we need to be flexible and to let go of all pretense of control. We are ready to go and to move forward.

I am curious to see how coaching can be of service to men who are serving life sentences, some of which face life without parole. The context we are working in forces us to "keep it real" and puts us face to face with one of the most oppressive and racist systems in the world. This will guide all our work over the next 6 months.

I feel a great sense of humility and purpose as we head over to the prison.

We go through the requisite gates and points of entry to the prison showing our IDs, checking our clearances and Dave gets the alarm he is required to carry. This time they got Damon's name correct on the roster so we are not delayed or worried that we won't make it in. We walk down the path to YARD A and go through the gate--men are walking around the track in the yard and we see some of the dogs from Paws 4 Life being walked too. We head over to the education room and are greeted by Junior, the Correctional Officer on duty that day. I am relieved that he greets us with a friendly face. Dave tells us that Junior is very supportive of programing and is getting his PHD in divinity. His welcoming attitude is unusual in my experience working in prisons, but I am grateful that he is on duty.

We walk into the classroom where a large group of men wait. The welcome and happiness they offer us is palpable. "You came back, you followed through!" they exclaim and right away I start to think about accountability. Accountability is a basic principle of coaching but in this context I see it in a whole new light. Many of these men have been let down by a lot of people in their lives who have promised to come back but never followed through--family members, loved ones, program providers, volunteers --they are used to people saying "I will follow through" but never do so.

With the support of 130 donors and Damon's determination to get this 6 month coaching certification program off the ground, we have delivered. We have proven that we keep our word. In a prison context this is huge. As a coaching concept this is deeply important.

We settle in and I look around the room seeing a bunch of familiar faces from last January, they are all leaders on YARD A and I know they hold a lot of weight in the prison. I see new faces too and some younger guys which is always bittersweet for me because I know they are in the earlier parts of their long sentences. Tyson, one of the youngest guys, has brought his Coaching for Transformation (CFT) book and it looks like he read the whole thing and underlined all the important passages in yellow. Wow! Here we go--

I am also aware that four of the men in the group have been commuted from Life Without Parole to Parole Eligibility since I last saw them. The profound impact of this will come up several times over the next two days. It is almost unbearable for me to consider that other men in the group applied to be commuted and got passed over in this round. I am also so moved by the fact that four men in the program will go home in the next year. Four men who thought they might die in prison--it feels like a miracle. Two of them ask Damon and me if they can join the Leadership That Works (LTW) training program on the outside. We talk about Ken Hartman, also a former prisoner at Lancaster who was released in 2017, and his participation in the program this year.

We are operating in two realities at once, one looking outside those walls and the other making the most of the work that is happening right here on this yard, right now.

Damon starts the day, we are reviewing a lot of what we covered last January so it does not feel completely new. We are getting everyone aligned, the guys from last year and the new men that join us for the first time. Just like last year everyone is present and completely engaged.

The next day I arrive feeling a bit more rested and oriented to the experience. The men also show up and are ready to go.

On day two, my coaching demo in front of the room is with Demetri. He is 30, African American, observant and smart. I am an older white woman. I acknowledge our obvious differences and ask Demetri if he needs anything from me. When working in prisons and/or with people across race I never want to make assumptions about our mutuality (and or differences) but just to acknowledge who we are and to create space for our work together. We dive into the coaching-

"What would you like some coaching on today?" I ask him. Demetri talks about this soaring eagle that lives inside of him, in his chest. He asks how he can keep that alive no matter what or where he is.

As the coaching unfolds, it is clear that Demetri both wants others to take his leadership more seriously and he wants to value himself more completely. Through the coaching we move through the layers of this complexity, we talk about about shedding silliness, I ask "What will you put in that space where silliness once lived?" We hold space for Demetri the leader. That special thing is happening in the coaching demo, the energy is shifting and we end with Demetri feeling his power and potential. He is more radiant and self assured--he is also committed to eating less sugar (at least for three days).

Towards the end of the second day we ask the group how they might apply their coaching skills as they move forward. In some ways this is the most poignant moment for me. I see that the men are really grappling with the ways that coaching can help and where the skills may not be so useful. You can feel the intensity in the room as the men start to discuss this. The first thing that comes up is the fact that men who may have been friends for years and even cellmates for decades, now face the fact that some will go home and others will have to wait until the new Governor announces his position on commutations. The men talk about how traumatic this has been, especially for those left behind. They decide that this topic can be best held in one-on-one conversations--it is too charged, too raw to discuss in the large group.

We honor the group's decision, move on and ask again, "How might coaching be of service to your work on YARD A?" Several men talk about the leadership vacuum that will be created as commuted men leave. They think about Lee and Harper, for example, and, they wonder, "How will we lead without them"? Other important questions come up including, "How will we engage some of the newer, younger guys on the yard? How do we maintain the culture on YARD A and not have it destroyed by men coming in who don't really understand it or buy into it?"

We wander around in this conversation a bit more and suddenly some of the younger men speak up and start to get animated as they talk about what it will take to engage younger guys and the possibilities in their groups. They talk about the coaching principles and why it is important to offer listening to younger men and to keep asking questions rather than "speechifying" or offering advice. The younger men in the group remind the rest of the group that they lead groups all over the yard, they *are* the leadership in the room, they also hold the wisdom and knowledge for what to do.

As the men continue to talk, it is clear they are embodying basic coaching principles wholeness, diversity of experience, resourcefulness (believing that people are inherently resourceful and wise) and possibility-- more is possible than any of us could imagine. All of this is alive and at work in the room, the task at hand is to take that out to the yard and to the hundreds of men imprisoned on Yard A. It feels like they all got a big coaching challenge for action and movement forward and I am so deeply curious about how it will all unfold.

We end the day in a hurry as the men prepare to return to their building for 4pm count. There is no flexibility in time or schedule, we cannot add on another 60 minutes to finish our day. Still, we shake hands and exchange heartfelt goodbyes--I leave so grateful to the men in the group, to Damon and to Dave Mashore for holding this experience with utmost care and attention. Stay tuned for more work, more learning and more light in March, May and July -

Deeper and Transformational Agenda that emerged from the two days

What does it mean to be a man?

What does it mean to be a leader?

What does it mean to manage transition?

What about commutation versus non-commutation?
How can coaching be of service?

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