



Creating Structure

A structure is anything that keeps ideas and elements together and in place over time. There are visible and invisible structures in life that support our beliefs, the way we run our business, how we maintain friendships and so forth. Essentially, structures are what support us to manage our commitments, values and responsibilities.

Many structures are obvious. Maintaining a functioning car or keeping a copy of a bus timetable on our wall, are structures which allow us to get to work each day. Maintaining a diary is a structure that allows us to make and keep appointments and fulfil our time commitments to ourselves and others.

Some structures are subtle or “invisible” to the naked eye. We say that commitments are maintained by structures that support them and in the case of Underlying Automatic Commitments (UAC’s), we have structures that are just as hidden to us as the commitments themselves. For example, a person with an UAC called, “I am not worthy,” might have structures that help support this belief. This structure may be anything that would help prove the underlying judgment of feeling not worthy.

Self Application

One way to look at structures is to consider that everything in your life is a structure that supports something you are committed to. From this perspective, you have the choice to keep anything in your life that supports your chosen commitments, or to replace those things that do not support you, with structures that do. A helpful activity is to look around your house and your office and, item by item, ask yourself, “What does this support?” Take note of your findings as you go along. For example: an uncomfortable mattress that prevents you from having a good night’s sleep is bound to support an unhelpful UAC. On the other hand, your favorite painting hanging on the wall of your office (so you see it every time you walk in) is bound to support an UAC to being happy at work. Note: this exercise requires rigor, as your UAC’s could make you resist and find justification, or find good reasons as to why you should keep those things that don’t empower you.

You can apply this same activity to your diary. Look at everything you did yesterday (or the day before) from the time you woke up to the time you went to bed. Remember to include even small activities like washing your hair or having breakfast (or not having breakfast!) Then look at the activities, one by one, and ask yourself, “What does this activity support?” For example, if you slept in and then rushed in late to a meeting with your boss, OR you got up before your children were awake to exercise before work, what commitments would either of these alternatives support? What structures were in place to allow each alternative to happen?

The myth of willpower

Often people set goals for themselves and then don't realise that they have to put structures in place to support these goals. They have believed the myth that all they need to achieve what they want is more “willpower”. However, success through willpower alone is a myth. It is structures plus willpower that support us to achieve goals. Will power, like most emotions, waxes and wanes. Good structures are always there whether we are feeling focussed and determined or exhausted and disillusioned.

For example, imagine you want to become more fit. Selling your family's second car and buying a bike is a structure that will support this goal even on days when your will power is low. Having a group of people waiting for you to form the fifth member of a basketball team is a structure that will support this goal whether you are feeling focussed and determined or whether you are emotionally low and exhausted. Of course, in all of these circumstances, the structures won't make you become more fit, but they will empower you in your goal rather than creating a block or barrier to your goal.

Structures include people

It's amazing how much we can achieve with the support of others. By working with a coach, you have already put in place one of the most powerful structures possible for improving your life. But coaches are not the only people who can support us to achieve our dreams. When we want a change in our lives or want to take on a new goal its worth taking the time to explore whether there are people around who can support you in your endeavor.

Think of the people around you as resources with the potential to be enlisted into a “support team”. For example, if you want to start a small business then some of the people who might join a “support team” would be an accountant, a good financial planner, members of a business network, you, your coach, perhaps a helpful friend or relative. If you want to

become more fit than people who might join your support team could be a personal trainer, a gym buddy, a walking partner or a tennis coach.

When considering the people who might support you, it can be helpful to list the sorts of support that each person can comfortably be relied upon to provide. The following example is designed to help you think about support teams and how they might provide structure in your life.

At times of extreme stress, Scott had a bad habit of unloading on the staff that reported to him about the ferocious political environment that he operated in as a senior manager. Scott knew that his complaining was poisoning the whole team environment and making it hard for his direct reports to remain positive and focussed on their jobs. However, he found it hard to simply stop. Moreover, some of his direct reports encouraged his lack of professionalism in order to gather gossip and information, even if it left them feeling bad. Scott set a goal with his coach to stop this damaging behaviour.

Once Scott had identified that it was wrong to rely on his direct reports for emotional support, his coach asked him to consider whom he could enlist into a support team to help with the goal and to consider what he could rely on each person to provide. Scott identified his coach as someone he could fully trust to debrief and vent his frustration with if necessary. He identified another trusted senior manager who he could discuss general company directions within a more positive and appropriate way. He identified his gym buddy, Brian, as someone who always took his mind off work problems through sheer hard exercise and he also identified Maria, one of his direct reports, as someone with an incredibly sunny nature who never encouraged his complaining.

With his coach's support, Scott looked at how he could structure his life to better use the resources available to him. First he changed the timing of his coaching sessions so that they immediately followed senior management team meetings, a time when he had gotten into the habit of gossiping and complaining with his staff. Then he organized to meet his senior management colleague for a breakfast meeting so that they could catch up and discuss business. He organized with his buddy Brian to increase their gym sessions and he asked Maria for her advice and support to create a more positive team culture.

In the example above, Scott created a range of structures to support him to change his behavior. Given how ingrained his previous behavior was, and how others encouraged it, it would be unlikely that he could change through will power alone. The structures he put in

place made achievement of his goal much more likely.

The other powerful thing that Scott did was to muster a range of structures to overcome one challenge. Scott didn't try to tackle every challenge in his current workplace at once. By focusing on this one damaging behaviour, Scott and his coach increased the likelihood of his success. Once he had achieved this goal, his coach could now assist Scott to reflect on and learn from this experience to build other empowering structures in his work life.

The process of change requires more structures. If you look back at times when you were not in action you may notice that you had fewer structures in your life to support you. In times of change and action, we put in place structures to support us to achieve our goals.

Coaching Application

Structures that empower

One of the most valuable things you can do as a coach is to work with your clients to create structures that empower them. Furthermore, to have them replace those structures that don't with those that do.

People often take their success for granted and don't see the structures that have contributed to the achievement of their goals. By acknowledging the structures that a client has in place to support them, they may be able to learn from these experiences to create new structures in other parts of their lives.

As we have discussed before, your clients already have structures in their life. They may not refer to them as structures or perhaps are not even aware of them. Nevertheless, they do have structures. From setting an alarm to get out of bed and get to work, to making appointments in a diary so that they don't forget them. One of the enriching opportunities that we have as a coach is to create awareness of these structures so that our clients can notice them and create an environment that empowers them. By doing so, they can set up structures that support what they really want in life.

Powerful Structures

Coaches can support their clients to set up structures that empower. Simply asking the client how they plan to support a new goal can help them to reflect on the structures that they need. Some powerful questions for helping a client to build empowering structures into their lives are:

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- “What are some of the structures that will make this goal easier to achieve?”
 - “What things can you bring into your routine to support this new behavior?”
 - “What things exist in your life to support this new aim?” and “How can you enhance those things to really make this work?”
 - What structures have supported you in the past?

The other part of the equation is identifying structures that block or disempower. Some powerful questions to ask a client are:

- “What do you need to let go of to allow this goal to be achieved?”
- “What things in your life are feeding this unhelpful behavior?”
- “Is there anything in your environment that is sending you a different message to the one you’ve outlined today?”
- “What do you need to change to achieve this goal?”

Have you ever looked at one of those “magic eye” pictures? One minute you think you are just looking at a benign pattern. Through concentration, suddenly images emerge and literally jump out of the page. You can’t believe you hadn’t noticed them all along! Helping clients to identify the structures in their lives can be a similar process. Clients will be amazed at how many structures exist in their lives that they didn’t even notice. Things will jump out at them. They will be able to see how the structures in their life have supported their success and how structures have supported other unhelpful behaviours.

Unfortunately as life becomes busy and we fall into our routines, the structures in our lives can sink back into the pattern of life. A skilled coach can help a client to pause for a moment, and really see the things that are supporting them and the things that are holding them back. Once people can see, they can act. Once they act to build positive structures, success simply falls into place. Once they commit, success follows.

Reflection

1. What role do structures play in your life or your achievements?
2. What would your life be like if you replaced all the structures that don’t work with those that empower you?
3. List 10 structures in your life that empower you. What lessons can you learn from these structures that you could apply to other aspects of your life?
4. How do you use, or could you use, the identification and development of structures in your coaching practice?

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5. How can you support clients to identify the structures that will support their goals and the structures that might act as barriers or blockers?
 6. How can you support clients to enlist the help of others around them?