



Leanne's Story

A coach's tale by Bob Janes

This is one of a series of short articles looking at real life coaching interventions and what lies behind them. Each story is true, though names and details have been changed.

Leanne is a bright bubbly woman with an infectious giggle. We had worked for a short while on her personal alignment – checking out the 'logical levels' and re-framing a part or two that seemed out of place. Leanne was delighted and all seemed to be well. The following day we chatted over coffee and she mentioned how she had talked to her 'ex' the previous evening – he'd helped her out with a problem at home. It seemed he often did that. Something seemed a little dissonant and I asked her how long they had been apart? 'Four years' she answered.

Putting myself – as best I could -- in her shoes I wondered how it would be to have an 'ex' who was still often around my house four years on. Perhaps it was OK but it didn't seem to leave much space. I asked her if it didn't cramp her style a bit. She looked askance, "No, not really, there's no-one else around". No wonder -- I thought to myself. Aloud I said "Do you mind if we explore this a bit, just look at boundaries for a while?"

She agreed and we found a quiet undisturbed space. I asked her to stand more or less in the middle of the space and said "Let's imagine that this is you here and all the people you know, all your relationships, are around you here, some near some further away." She scanned around herself.

"Where is your best friend?" I asked. Leanne looked just to the left of her centre and focused about five metres away. I pointed where she seemed to be looking "Over there? That seems a way away. Does she belong any closer than that?"

"Perhaps", Leanne said, "it would be nicer if she were here." Pointing to a spot a few feet in front of herself.

"That's good." I moved close to that spot and used my hands to move her 'friend' closer and turned her to face the same way. "How is it if she's nearer still and facing the same way?"

"Nearer is OK, but I need to see her face – if she goes there it's good." Pointing just off to her left. She nodded as she moved her 'friend' again.

"Good, now where are your parents?"

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“My father is right here.” Pointing to herself.

“Oh! Would you try moving him outside you – you aren’t him and he isn’t you.” Leanne visibly moved him just to one side of her. “And your mother?”

“She’s way back there.” Pointing behind her.

“Oh, is that the right place for her?”

“Yes”, an emphatic nod. Nothing to do there at the moment.

“So where’s your ‘ex’?” I asked.

“Right behind me here.” looking over her right shoulder.

“Very supportive, but feels a bit close for me. How about you try moving him a bit further away?” I pointed off perhaps twenty metres back.

“Well, yes a bit would be good.” Leanne said looking perhaps half the distance behind her. “Yes, that feels better, not so crowded.”

“OK, that creates a bit of space, perhaps sometime there might be room for someone else in there.”

“Hmmm, maybe.” She moved her head from side to side in a ‘maybe, maybe not’ gesture, drew her hand up in front of her. “It doesn’t feel as though I have enough space.”

“OK, maybe not just yet. Can we just test this out? Let’s imagine that sometime in the future the ideal partner for you comes along.” I pointed way off in the distance and gradually drew the focus nearer using my hand to have him take form as he got close. “What happens as he gets close?”

I had been looking over my shoulder at the approaching imaginary future partner. As my hand got roughly to my shoulder, still a couple of metres from Leanne I heard a sound and looked back towards her. As my hand had got to that point she had suddenly involuntarily jumped backwards and was looking more than a little surprised.

“OK, so what happens there?” I held my hand more or less in the same place while Leanne moved back to the centre of our space.

“It’s too close, too much for me!” she said looking with some trepidation at my hand.

“Hmm, seems to me that there’s only one boundary here and you are asking it to do a whole lot. That makes it really difficult to let people close to you even if you want to”.

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“How would it be if back there . . .” I swept out an arc on the floor perhaps five or ten metres in front of her. You had just a little low fence, not enough to stop anyone, but enough so you’d notice when they stepped over.” Leanne nodded.

“And maybe here” gesturing about three metres from her “you could have a bigger fence, a boundary that you only let people through when you want to. And maybe here” a metre-and a half away” a really secure personal fence so that you can be really, really clear when you choose to let people through here and only do so when you are completely sure that it is the right thing for you.” Leanne nodded.

“So is it OK if you let this ideal partner through here?” the first fence, “and here?” the second. “And are you clear that you’d know when would be the right time to let them through here?” An emphatic nod.

“So how does that feel?”

“It’s good – I have more space, I feel more in control.”

“Wonderful. Just one more thing.” A little thought had occurred to me. “Having this is really good and I wonder what happens to the people you work with?”

“They’re over there . . .” Leanne pointed ten metres or more off to her left.

“That may be a bit far, given the kind of work that you do. How would it be if we had this special area here to your left where there is a very secure fence that can let people really close to you but just when you allow it and only in a work context?” Leanne looks left and nods.

“Is there anything else you need right now?”

“No I don’t think so, thank you.”

Leanne said little more to me that day. I do know that several weeks later she chose to use her maiden name again.

In this piece of work Leanne and I are using her ‘Social Panorama’ to explore and change relationships with other people and to set more useful boundaries for her.

Social Panoramas were brought into NLP by Lucas Derks drawing on the ‘Constellations’ work of Bert Hellinger. The two are not the same. The insight of the Social Panorama is that – in the same way that we have to have some internal representation of time -- so we must have an

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internal representation of relationship so we know how we are supposed to relate to people.

I have confirmed Derks' finding that relationships are mapped into the space around us. The sub-modalities – the way we tell the difference – are mainly in their distance, the direction they are facing, and their relative height.

Notice that I didn't prepare Leanne in any way; I just asked here where all the people in her life were. This requires her to make a mental scan to locate them all. We only worked with a handful in this instance. It's important to know that everyone is there somewhere – even the people that she doesn't know. They may just be a distant grey line far off, or even invisible, but they are there.

We made a few simple shifts. Moving her best friend to a closer and more supportive place (typically just behind you is a good supportive place); the 'ex' further back (partners are usually alongside); her father to a separate location (otherwise it can get confusing). All of this is done in a frame of experiment – I fully hope that later she tried out some other locations for these and other people in her life.

The Social Panorama is an ideal tool for testing and working with boundaries. Sometimes they are too close; sometimes too far, sometimes there are none, sometimes there is only one. They are only imaginary lines in the sand but they can make an enormous difference to how we relate to people. In Leanne's case it was pretty unlikely that her future partner would ever get near enough to know her well whilst she only had the one all-purpose boundary. Having a more intimate, yet still safe, space inside that will allow for a closer relationship to develop when the time is right.

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Bob spent many years in industry as a finance director, strategist and change manager; in the early 1990s he made his own transition into the world of personal and organisational development. He holds a Master Practitioner certificate in NLP, a postgraduate diploma in psychology and a Masters degree in Organisational Consulting.

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