

The Cuddle Case/A Damn Good Boss: Two Coaching Cases with Chris Iveson and Peter Szabó

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Abstract

In this contribution we present two excerpts of coaching conversations by Chris Iveson and Peter Szabó. Peter and Chris are commenting on important passages of these conversations. The transcripts are followed by an e-mail exchange between them looking at what they find unique about the other's work and answering Michael Hjerth's micro-evaluation questions on their own work. The article is introduced and summarised by Susanne Burgstaller, editor and author of the book in which the contribution first appeared (Burgstaller, 2015).

When I thought of the coaching chapter for my book "Solution Focus in Organisations", it was immediately clear to me that my very best hope would be to have contributions from both of my much-admired teachers, Chris Iveson and Peter Szabó. As so often happens in SF my very best hope came to be fulfilled in a way that went way beyond my expectations, and you are reading the result of it here. The idea of Peter and Chris commenting on each other's transcripts arose out of trying to make things as easy and interesting as possible for these two busy coaches, and the ensuing e-mail exchange, of which I was a happy witness, has been quoted by me more or less verbatim. I hope you will agree with me that the whole piece provides the reader with an instructive insight into Peter and Chris's coaching styles, which are quite different while both being totally SF, as well as into what these two master coaches value most about each other's work and about their own.

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The Cuddle Case

Chris Iveson's case, with comments by Peter Szabó

The interview takes place in a social services office where there is sufficient and continuing concern about Jasmine, the client's daughter, for her to have been on the child protection register for five years. This is approximately a nine minute sequence beginning two minutes after the start of the session in which the client has described a recent additional serious complication in her life.

IVESON: What are your best hopes from this meeting?

CLIENT: I don't know. There is such a lot to say in such a short time.

IVESON: So what are your best hopes of what it will lead to?

What an elegant way to pick up on the client's concerns of such a lot to say and at the same time so effective to guide the conversation towards the outcome rather than the whole story right from the beginning.

CLIENT: Maybe bring me and Jasmine to some more understanding about each other's feelings and thoughts. Because we don't get on and haven't since Jasmine was about 5. Jasmine's 12 now.

IVESON: So if you had more understanding between each other and were getting on better that would make this meeting worthwhile?

CLIENT: Yes. We seem to be going round and round in circles and getting nowhere. It's led to aggression – on my part – and then that goes round in a vicious circle because she will then take it out on her brother, and it just goes round and round. I am sure there are things that Jasmine doesn't like about me, and there are things I don't like about Jasmine.

- IVESON: Look, can I ask you some questions around this?
- CLIENT: Yes.
- IVESON: And then you can fill me in as we go along with whatever. If tonight, while you were asleep, a miracle happens, and this gives you and Jasmine the relationship that you gave birth to her for and you both want, but as you are asleep when the miracle happens so you don't know about it . . . how would you know . . . what is the first thing you would notice tomorrow which tells you that you and Jasmine have the relationship which is worthy of you both?
- CLIENT: Well, in the morning as soon as we wake up as you say – it's there again . . . we are in each other's faces – we have nothing nice to say to each other.
- IVESON: And tomorrow morning, what is the first thing you will notice tomorrow morning that tells you this miracle had happened?
- CLIENT: We'd need a miracle I think – yes, it would need a miracle!
- IVESON: So look – neither of us I'm sure believe that miracles are going to sort things out. It would just help us get a picture of what it is that you are aiming at.
- CLIENT: I don't know if anything can be done because there's so much damage been done that I think to myself is it ever going to be restored.
- IVESON: So if it was – what would be the first sign? – What time do you wake up tomorrow?

Solution-focused persistence at work: three times in a row Chris persists in leading the conversation towards what the client is aiming at, and since it does not seem to work, he decides to do something different: ask a factual question (time) that the client can more easily answer. And then as soon as he gets an answer, he changes back to persistently co-creating a preferred future regardless of how unimaginable it may seem to the client at first.

CLIENT: Well I am terrible at getting up, so I usually wait for Jasmine, so it's usually about half 6 or 7.

IVESON: So Jasmine gets up first?

CLIENT: She's supposed to.

IVESON: So tomorrow morning the miracle has happened – what would be the first sign to you that something was different?

CLIENT: Pleasantness.

IVESON: How would you know that she was being pleasant?

CLIENT: I don't know because I have forgotten what she is like when she's pleasant, I've forgotten what I'm like. It seems we have forgotten how to be.

IVESON: OK What would be her way of being pleasant do you think? What would you notice about her at half 6, 7 o'clock? What would she say when she woke you up?

CLIENT: We don't really talk.

IVESON: After the miracle . . . how would she wake you up?

CLIENT: I don't know.

IVESON: Give us a clue.

CLIENT: Just a normal mother and daughter relationship. Normal.

IVESON: So what would it look like for you?

CLIENT: I don't know. I've forgotten what it is like. I look at . . . see other people, other families, but I think why are they like that . . . we can't be like that.

What a lovable client. She makes it so clear how incredibly difficult it must be to access what she is hoping for.

IVESON: OK How long have you known Jasmine?

CLIENT: 12 years

IVESON: 12 years – so you are the world expert on her?

CLIENT: I thought I was.

IVESON: Guess no one else will know her better . . . so how will you know . . . what will you notice . . . what will be the first sign that she's being pleasant?

What a lovable coach. Again offering a easier to answer question combined with an obvious compliment. And again with the most minimal delay he returns back to his task of building details of a possible solution.

CLIENT: Making me a cup of tea.

IVESON: So if she brought you a cup of tea . . . what would you notice about her face that told you that something was different?

CLIENT: Well, we don't smile, do we, so I suppose it would be smiles and niceness.

IVESON: If she woke you up with a cup of tea and woke you up with a smile . . .

CLIENT: That still wouldn't soften me because I have got set in my ways. Can I just say. . .you know when you carry on a thing instead of forgetting it. . .you carry on to the next day and before you know you can't change that mode. You are in a pattern.

IVESON: So this is a miracle . . . so what . . . if Jasmine comes and gives you a cup of tea with a smile . . . the miracle has happened . . . what will she notice about you that told her you had your feelings back to how you wanted them to be?

CLIENT: Just be pleasant, polite.

IVESON: So what would you be doing?

CLIENT: That's hard.

IVESON: (I know)

CLIENT: I wouldn't be getting on her, I would just be normal.

IVESON: So what will that look like when she wakes you up with a smile, what will she notice about you that told her you were feeling how you wanted to be?

CLIENT: How would I be?

IVESON: Yes. What would Jasmine notice about you as she woke you up with a smile?

CLIENT: And I was being my normal self?

IVESON: If you were how you wanted to be.

CLIENT: Irritable, nasty . . .

IVESON: No, no, after the miracle! Let me just check – I can't imagine that you are intrinsically an irritable and nasty person.

CLIENT: I am.

IVESON: Is that how you were born?

CLIENT: That's how I've become.

IVESON: Does that feel right for you?

CLIENT: No.

IVESON: So the miracle has put it right – what might she notice in the morning as she wakes you up with a smile?

Again the client is not answering the question which was asked by Chris. So he continues to ask, yet he remains respectfully alert and open to what the client says by checking for un-useful misunderstandings.

(Long pause)

CLIENT: Me being more . . . *(long pause, signs of distress)* . . . you know . . . cuddles . . . I don't do that. I can't cuddle her – and it's awful to say that.

IVESON: So you might find yourself feeling like cuddling her?

CLIENT: Yes, I'd like to be able to do that. That would make us both happy.

IVESON: How would Jasmine respond?

CLIENT: She'd be taken aback!

IVESON: And then?

CLIENT: And then she'd let me – cuddle her *(As she says this her eyes brim with tears and her voice softens)*.

IVESON: Would she like it do you think?

CLIENT: Yes.

IVESON: How would you know that she was enjoying you cuddling her?

CLIENT: Because she'd show it.

IVESON: How?

CLIENT: Just – just in the softness of her body.

The session continues but there is a definite sense that the work has already been done – that the client has ‘experienced’ herself as a loving mother. Though she reports little change at the second session, it seems to have been enough because at two subsequent case conferences no more concerns are expressed about Jasmine by the many professionals involved with this family. She has turned from an isolated, unkempt, bullied and underachieving girl to a hard working child with her fair share of friends.

The case is then closed. My only direct involvement with anybody was this and the second session.

A Damn Good Boss

Peter Szabó’s case, with comments by Chris Iveson

The interview took place as a coaching demonstration during a training session. The client wanted to deal better with her middle management position. The excerpt is a twelve minute sequence. It starts two minutes into the session after the coach had expressed his admiration for the delicate work of managers in a middle management position.

SZABÓ: I guess the most important question is, what are your best hopes for the result of this session.

CLIENT: My best hope would be I find some – not strategy, but some kind of way to support people in their striving to get better at what they do, and to support them . . . to be there. I am not gonna say cheerleader, but I can’t find another word. And try to plant a seed . . . for them to see that the new management isn’t all bad.

SZABÓ: OK.

CLIENT: And they’d feel good about their job and what they do. Yeah. Many things.

- SZABÓ: Many things, yeah, I've noticed at least three so far.
- CLIENT: Oh, yeah. But I guess mostly to make them feel good about what they do.
- SZABÓ: OK.
- CLIENT: So they can be proud.
- SZABÓ: OK. Now that was the first thing you said actually, yes, support them in becoming . . . being good and be proud. OK. And you said it is not a strategy you are looking for as a result of this session but more of a way . . . ?
- CLIENT: Yeah. How can I, . . . with my . . . can I say behaviour plant the seed . . . or what kind of signals can I send out for them to pick up, and well
- SZABÓ: Signals, behaviour, and maybe your contribution. Yeah, OK? – Hm. – I am trying to locate where you are on your way. How long have you been doing this kind of work?

In this what might be called 'contracting' phase of the session Peter has already demonstrated two key solution focused skills. The first is the way he is listening to what the client actually says rather than to an inner conversation about his interpretation of what the client is saying. This attention is evidenced by his "I've noticed three so far" which has the additional message that the client is free to answer this opening question in whatever way she likes. Her answers are far from the 'clear and concrete goals' often put forward as a requirement of effective SF coaching. Nevertheless, they are what the client has presented and Peter is right to accept them and get to work.

- CLIENT: A year.
- SZABÓ: A year? OK. And so on a scale from one to ten, and ten meaning you have found your way of

planting the seed, reinforce, make them, you know, do whatever they can do, so they feel reinforced. So that would be ten. And one would be, when you first started this kind of work in this position in-between. Where would you say you are right now?

CLIENT: I would say at 5.

SZABÓ: At five. OK. More 4.9 or more?

CLIENT: 5.1.

SZABÓ: 5.1? And there came this beautiful smile. So there seems to be a difference between a 5 and a 5.1.

Peter's next question was a surprise yet once asked it would be hard to think of better question. One of the underlying assumptions Insoo brought from her cultural heritage was that change is inevitable and constant and has its own energy and flow. As the client says "five" she is placed in this flow with a successful past behind her and an aspirational future that seems well within her reach. Peter's task as a coach then falls neatly into place: firming up her sense of past achievement and clarifying her future aspirations. Co-creating a successful past that fits with a well-defined and even more successful future. He then takes a well-judged risk and with her "5.1" the client finds herself already past the tipping point – a realisation that begins with a smile. Peter immediately picks up the energy of the smile with his next, inviting, question.

CLIENT: It is.

SZABÓ: It is a difference. Yes, I can see. Can you reveal a little bit about the difference when you are able to say, hey, I am at 5.1, and not at 5 or lower anymore?

CLIENT: Well, because I know in my heart that I am on the right way, but I really want to see faster results.

SZABÓ: OK.

CLIENT: I want to see if I can push them hard in a positive way.

SZABÓ: Yeah, OK, good. With this in mind, how might you know at the end of our session, that your best hopes are well on the way to become realised? . . . how would you know by the end of this session?

CLIENT: I would probably feel more secure in my own – what’s it called – in my ability to do such a thing.

SZABÓ: More secure in your ability. I suppose more secure at the end of the session. What might be some of the effects then? So I get a clear idea of “more secure”. What does that mean for tomorrow – probably you are going back (to work), right? OK. So if you are going back more secure, what might be some of the effects?

CLIENT: I guess people would notice that, maybe I change my posture, right? And more positive . . . maybe I say even more positive things, cheer them on more, like they are doing a real great job . . . yeah.

SZABÓ: OK. So, being more secure about this might be one of the results of the session, what else?

CLIENT: Like what they would notice?

SZABÓ: Like that, for example, yes.

CLIENT: Well I guess, my management, my boss would notice. That I am doing a great job, too.

SZABÓ: Is that a new boss or the old one?

CLIENT: The old one, the new one hasn’t arrived yet.

SZABÓ: OK. And you are already preparing the field?

CLIENT: Yes.

SZABÓ: Wow!

CLIENT: Because we need to, we need to have staff confident in what they do, or happy and proud of what they do.

SZABÓ: Before the new management arrives.

CLIENT: Yes.

SZABÓ: Well I am really impressed . . . that means that

somehow in this middle position apparently you manage to think much further than the next day . . . you know, putting out the fires that burn. You seem to have a long term perspective, long term goals that you . . . wow! OK. I am even more impressed. OK.

CLIENT: Thank you.

SZABÓ: So you said, your old boss might notice.

CLIENT: Uhm.

During this next section Peter has evoked a 'headline' description of what the client's colleagues might notice if she simply continues the progress she is already making, and then the description moves into family and friends where Peter's command of 'body' language is put to full use: she is asked to 'walk the talk' right there in the room.

SZABÓ: OK, what else might be the signs of the result of this session that tell you, yeah, I am well on the way towards my best hopes for the session?

CLIENT: Well, I think probably my friends and my family would notice as well. Maybe I am more like – I don't know – positive perhaps?

SZABÓ: It is interesting when you said that, you made this kind of (forward) movement and I started to wonder . . . now we are going to make it challenging it for the people at the camera . . . you say, being on the way includes a movement, right? I don't know whether it's going to be possible for them (pointing towards camera), but, would it be possible that you make a couple of steps and we could see how you would be on the way now and how you would like to be on the way after your best hopes. Would it be interesting to try out?

CLIENT: OK. Sure. Here I am right now.

SZABÓ: OK. Yeah.

CLIENT: And when I am on my way, I hold my head up.
SZABÓ: You hold your head up. OK. Yes. How would that make a difference for you?
CLIENT: It would boost my confidence in myself, I guess.
SZABÓ: OK. How else? – I suppose boost the confidence in yourself – what might be the effects, . . . some of the effects, . . . how might that change some of the things in your life . . . or how would that show?
CLIENT: You know, I think it would make a very big change actually.
SZABÓ: OK.
CLIENT: So, I think yeah, it would.
SZABÓ: Could you share a little bit about that very big change, share some of the effects – or I don't know, maybe it's beyond words – I don't know, would it be possible to . . .?
CLIENT: I don't know, I am striving to be . . . I wanted to do something else in my work life, and I think that this positive change could . . . maybe I send out different signals when I am like applying for management roles.
SZABÓ: So in that sense, hm. And again it pops up, your ability to see a big span not only for others and for the company and for your people but also for yourself.
CLIENT: Yes.
SZABÓ: OK. I start to get an idea about our common project. . . . There is one more curiosity left. If we take the big span of your life . . . your professional life. What's around the ten in that big span, do you have an idea where you are heading towards?
CLIENT: Well, if I am at ten, I would probably use all my capabilities in my . . . I am looking for a word. Let's rephrase. I think that if I am at number ten . . . well, I would make a damn good boss.
SZABÓ: OK, . . . sounds like a good common project.

From inviting the client to walk how she would like to walk they step very quickly to a new working of the session's purpose – a more clear, and already very realistic common project (Korman, 2014): to make a damn good boss.

The conversation lasts another 25 minutes after this initial exploration of a possible “coaching project” for this single session.

About two months later the client sent the following short note to the workshop organiser:

“The coaching was about me finding out that it is up to me to take the opportunity to be a good leader and manager. Today, I have been offered and accepted a job as Head of Department in the county council. I am convinced that the coaching has had a major part in this. It really made visible my inner competence and strengths.”

Exchange between Chris Iveson and Peter Szabó on the cases

November 22, 2013

Dear Susanne and Peter,
Here is a first response to Peter's transcript.

One of the last things Steve de Shazer said about his life's work was “All I ever did is watch Insoo work and try to figure out what she was doing”. Insoo Kim Berg, in turn, held Steve's work in the highest regard, yet to watch them was to see two entirely different approaches, both of which were totally solution focused. Peter is definitely in the Insoo mode: creating an embracing warmth, encouraging moment by moment, mixing a delicate tentativeness with an equally gentle persistence and a confidence-inducing trust that here you are with a coach who knows what he is doing.

An example of more ‘Insoo’ than ‘Steve’: Peter sets up a scale with the clear intention of building on the success he rightly assumes his client has already experienced. Offering the client the chance to fine tune the scale is a lovely idea and produces a powerful, self-energising answer which Peter uses to take the conversation into the client’s possible future. And Peter shows great subtlety here. He does not take the obvious route of working out how the client is going to motivate her staff, instead, he becomes interested in how his client might *be* when she *has* found a way to motivate her staff – how she will be in the various contexts not only of her work but also of her life outside work.

Peter uses his body as he talks and listens and he is also closely attuned to his client’s body – her smile, her movement, so it is not surprising that . . . here I want to watch the video again.

Lovely bit of work.
Chris

November 23, 2013

Dear Chris,
Yes here is the video link once again. Please let me know when it worked.

I am sitting here in amusement and reading your cuddle case over and over again, smiling and laughing out loud. Yes I know the case is not funny, and yes I know you are being very professional. What makes me laugh is your persistence and expertise in co-creating a preferred future behaviour with the client where there seems nothing to build on. Between the two of you you make “it” appear out of the blue. Very impressive.

Anyway, because I am so curious and lazy and because I prefer to ask rather than to think:

Would you be willing to answer the four Micro-Evaluation (Hjerth, 2013) questions about your own piece?

- Looking at your own contributions: what are you most satisfied with?
- What do you think the client would say was most useful to her?
- As a result of this specific experience: what do you continue to do in your work?
- If anything, what might you do differently now, given a second go at the conversation?

I might be willing to do the same also if you ask me very nicely :-)

Thanks dear Chris.
Warmly,
Peter

December 2, 2013

Thanks Peter,
Lovely session. Been watching it again today.
Here are some 'first thought' responses to your questions.

The thing I'm most satisfied with is my refusal to believe that this mother did not know the answers and I think that it is this trust in her that engages her with my persistence. There is not a single moment after I explain the miracle question that she does anything less than try really hard to find answers. This too helps keep me committed to her.

She actually said it was all a waste of time – we were all a waste of time! However, the daughter's life changed dramatically afterwards, suggesting that it was all the client's own work. It confirmed the value of both detail and persistence which has been a feature of my work ever since. However, for a number of years I missed the more important significance, which was the way these detailed descriptions provide not just a blueprint of a possible future, but an experience of that future. I had previously thought the detailed description, if it was made up of small enough steps, gave the client a sense of

possibility (not that they would perform all the actions, but would realise that a way forward was possible). I think this is still the case, but what I saw in this case and much more frequently now is that the client can have a ‘virtual’ experience of difference, creating not just a sense that it can happen, but also a sense of it already having happened.

Looking back I’d like to have been a little slower, a little less pushy with the questions, but only so I look better!

Looking forward to yours!

Warmly,

Chris

December 18, 2013

Dear Chris,

You are pointing towards a highly interesting difference here: Providing the “experience of a possible future” seems to be so much more than providing a “blueprint of a possible future”. And I agree that creating a sense that it could happen is very different from a sense of it having already happened.

So here are my answers to the four Micro-Evaluations questions (Thanks for asking!)

What am I most satisfied with? – Probably my persistence of wanting to know more about the bigger picture of “what else” before getting into the co-creation of relevant small details of it later in the conversation.

What might have been most useful to the client? – Quite unspectacularly her own decision of asking for this coaching conversation and consequently creating for herself the time and space to already “experience” what she prepared to want in the future.

What do I do more of in consequence? – The most significant “more of” actually happened thanks to Chris’s comment of my “Insoo mode”. I am much more conscious now of my contribution to the Pygmalion Effect in my interaction with the client. (Which is very similar to your refusal to believe she

does not know the answers.) Probably that is why Insoo used to say that if you are not able to see the client in her resources you have no right to work with that person.

What would I do differently now? Probably take some time to dig into the details of the “blueprints” of desired interactions already in the beginning of the conversation.

Hmm.

I really appreciate this experience of exchange with you.

In gratitude and appreciation,

Peter

Conclusions

Even though I have seen both Chris and Peter work live many times, studying these transcripts carefully over and over again has taught me a surprising number of things – amongst them to value their work even more.

One of the many things I admire about Peter’s work – and one that also emerges in this conversation – is his ability to work “beyond words”. This manifests itself in his ease of working with what might seem disconcertingly vague formulations as well as in his use of body language and movement. He picks up on the smallest things the client is doing – a tiny gesture, a slight smile, a body movement – and utilises them masterfully in this session. This makes it easy for the clients to express themselves, especially when they seem to strain for the “right” word.

Another insight was how he manages to give that much space to the client. In a coaching with Peter you always feel that you have done 95% of the work yourself, knowing full well, of course, that without the remaining 5% (and of course it is much more) none of the outcome would have been achieved. He provides an absolutely minimal, but totally essential structure for the conversation, within which the client is able to recreate their own story freely in their own way and thus get a new mental train rolling.

I have always admired how Peter manages to be so openly

and clearly in the not-knowing position. There is absolutely not one iota of need to impress in the way he looks around and smiles, takes his time to think and consider the client's words, or to find the right formulation. There is just open appreciation, genuine admiration, maybe even wonder or awe that the client is as far as she is. This is a large part of what is so strengthening: his appreciation makes one feel ready to spurt into action and prove him right.

The last few comments could also be said about Chris Iveson. One of Chris's particular strengths is guiding conversations towards outcomes right from the beginning – and I mean from the beginning, because with Chris the beginning starts before he even sits down! At the same time he is like a “loving bulldog”: once he has asked a question: he does not give up until he has had his question answered. His belief in his client's ability to answer these questions shines through all the way while he keeps on at desired outcomes respectfully and lovingly.

I do admire and envy Chris for his ability to create the most inspiring formulations in the simplest every day words. I learnt from him not only a host of useful techniques, but also a whole new vocabulary of SF coaching language. His turns of phrase are so validating to the client (e.g. “the relationship you gave birth to her for” or “if you had your feelings back to how you wanted them to be”), while at the same time being delivered in the most natural conversational tone. This makes them even more precious – they come out as the most obvious thing to say as opposed to someone having to strain to find something nice to say.

The same linguistic skills are displayed in Chris's way of weaving compliments into his conversations: there are no clumsy or self-important observations with him, only subtle indirect compliments embedded in his questions, and it's all done with the lightest touch and the greatest apparent ease, even with a dose of his dry British humour, yet at the same time expressing an empowering belief in the client.

What makes his coaching style so powerful, I believe, is that he manages to locate the preferred future so firmly in the

mundane details of his clients' every-day lives. Morning cups of tea or coffee feature strongly in his conversations, and this "every-day-quality" somehow creates an experience that makes imagining the beginning of change feel like it is already there.

And as we know, sometimes a beginning is all it takes: it is like a dab of colour on wet watercolour paper – it spreads fast and far, dries quickly, and stays for good.

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