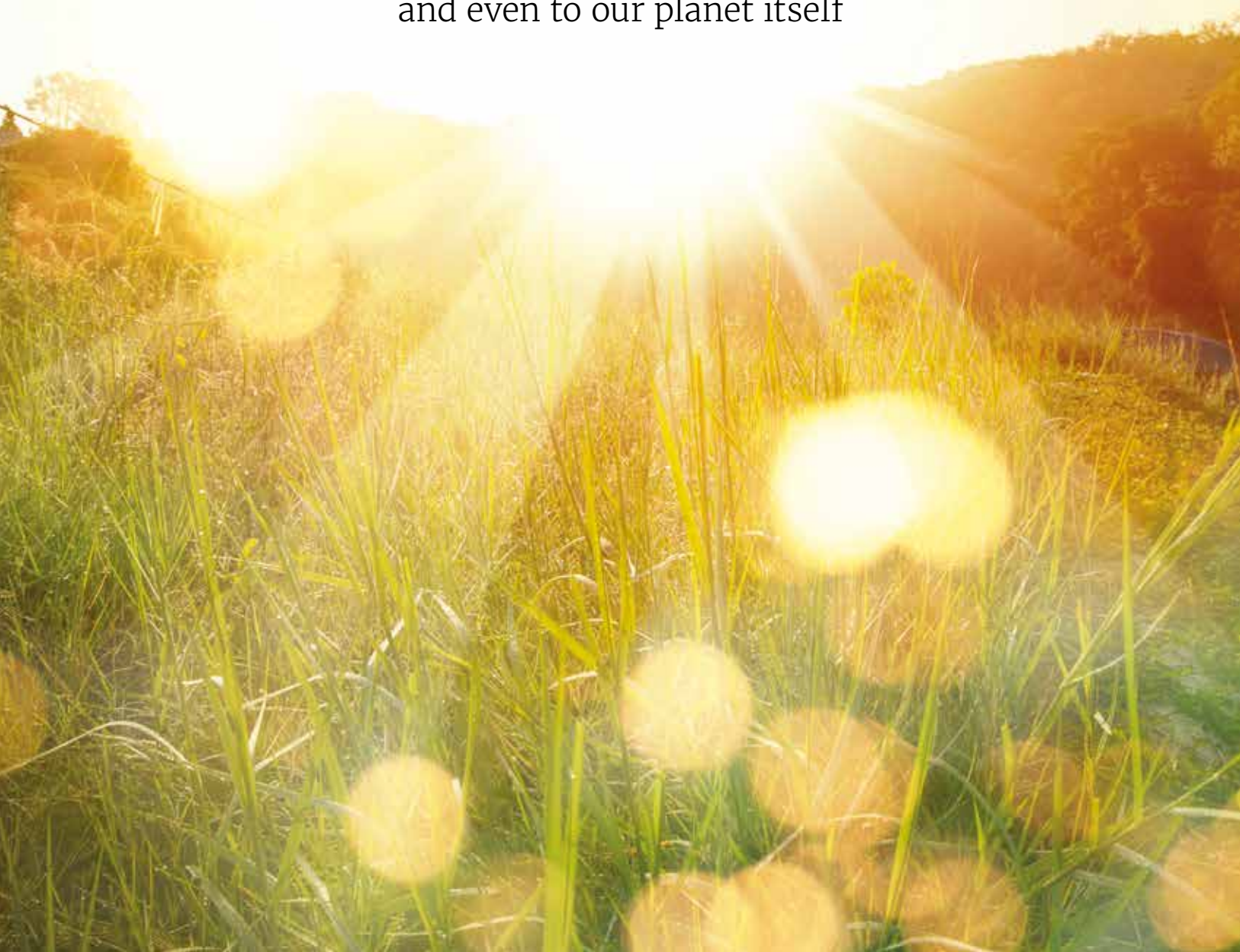


Out of office:

the magic of coaching with nature

Lesley Roberts demonstrates that the benefits of coaching outdoors can extend beyond the coach and client relationship to our organisations and communities, and even to our planet itself



As a species, we've spent considerably more time walking outdoors and hunter-gathering than we have working in offices. Today, we live in a highly demanding, technology-led society. Further to this, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to even more chair-bound virtual meetings and continued isolation and anxiety for many of us.¹ This sedentary lifestyle, coupled with the continuing rise in mental health conditions, is having a significant impact on our physical and mental wellbeing.²

Research on the psychological and cognitive effects of being outdoors has found that time in nature enhances higher-order thinking, restores attention, brings perspective and boosts creativity.³ In my experience, a session in a client's office will not be as beneficial as one conducted off-site, giving freedom from the day-to-day office pressures and constructs.

The working world today

Our world today is facing major economic, environmental, political and technological change. The speed of developments in these areas affects all of our lives. Business leaders in organisations face these challenges coupled with endless internal demands. They feel overwhelmed by what is expected of them, the size of their role and the pressure to deliver results with fewer resources. And just when they feel on top of everything, along comes yet more change. It leaves our leaders struggling to find balance, being time poor and not always cash rich.

It is of little wonder that employees are at risk of burnout and/or depression and anxiety. Official figures show the number of antidepressants given to patients in England doubled between 2005 and 2015.⁴ It is clear to see why organisations are focusing on development, resilience and wellbeing to help their staff survive.

Systemic connection

One of the basic concepts of coaching outdoors is that nature itself provides a therapeutic setting. Nature offers an environment that both coach and coachee belong to, one that is not controlled by either, but is an independent and nurturing space. For 99% of our time on Earth, we lived as hunter-gatherers. No cities, no internet. Our ancestors only survived because they had an intimate connection to nature. For over 2.2 million years, survival necessitated finding sustenance and shelter, and avoiding predators. These experiences have shaped many aspects of our modern brain functions. Nature's cycles were what we lived by; for example, sleep and mood-regulating circadian rhythms became coordinated by natural light. The Earth has been here for 4.6 billion years. We are all related to the first cell on Earth; every human, plant and animal is related to that cell, which means we are all related to each other, and the natural world is our home, not the boxes we currently live and work in.

Somatic coach Richard Strozzi-Heckler talks in evolutionary terms about our 'intuitive knowing': '*Over three billion years of embodied knowledge of survival, adapting, social intelligence, co-ordinating, intuition and reciprocity live largely unused in us.*'⁵ This explains why, when coaching outdoors, clients will often describe gaining sudden insights as they tap into their own embodied, intuitive knowing.



Coach benefits

This systemic connection benefits the coach as well as their coachee or client. Many coaches describe being 'in flow' when they coach outdoors. Others describe the enhanced client connection and transformational conversations they experience. Such depth, I believe, is a result of the interplay between this natural, connected space, with a coach in flow, creating an environment that enables their client to have a deeper experience, allowing them to 'know' differently. Being in nature '...seems to foster a willingness to allow an emotional or psychological shift'.⁶ This, when coupled with trust and rapport between coach and client, leads to a different level of disclosure when compared with being indoors. Coaches also describe being outdoors as giving them an enhanced ability to do or say something they consider to be courageous, whether that be to hold the silence for much longer, try something different or ask a question they have not dared to ask before.

Coachee benefits

We can see how some of the benefits the coach experiences can lead to an enhanced coaching experience for their clients. Clients also benefit from walking side-by-side in nature, which offers ease and equality in their coaching experience: 'Being side-by-side and having both parties facing forward, sharing a

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Case study: the coach

Alex had been coaching for a few years before taking his conversation outside with a new client, Sam. They met at a local country estate once a month. Alex was curious about why he was finding this particular experience so rewarding, so he brought the question to a supervision session. The biggest insight for him was that being outdoors enabled him to relax into his coaching. He noticed that the environment really sank in for him after 10 minutes and that he was more insightful with regards to spotting his client's patterns and asking valuable questions. He felt 'in flow'. He became aware that he didn't feel the pressure to have his next question ready and that this freedom enabled him to really listen and respond to his client in a way that he didn't when coaching indoors. As his supervisor encouraged him to consider his relationship with his client Sam, Alex noticed that he had a stronger rapport and sense of connection with him, and that the level of trust between them was higher. Alex believed that this enhanced connection was one of the elements that led to the deeper, more transformational conversations they'd been having. His final reflection was that he was more spontaneous and creative, often drawing on what nature offered him as a resource. Overall, when outdoors, Alex felt he was bringing the best of himself as a coach to each session.

Case study: the coachee

Alison had been coached outdoors over six sessions, meeting her coach at a local nature reserve. What Alison loved most about having her sessions outside was the joy of being away from her laptop. She looked forward to her coaching sessions as she felt that she had permission to go and enjoy some fresh air during the working day. Often, leading up to her sessions, she felt like she'd been working at 100mph to get through her 'to do' list and she wondered if she really had time for the session; but by the end, she was always glad she'd made the effort. Everything that had seemed really pressing when at her desk seemed to dwindle in significance once she'd regained some perspective. The time away from her desk brought clarity to her thinking and prioritising. During those sessions, she realised that she put everything into context; everything that was going on in her life, not just her work. She also valued the fact that good ideas came to her when she was walking with her coach. It was as though her coaching sessions outdoors blew the cobwebs away and helped her see the wood for the trees. On returning home after the session, she always had more energy, and felt relaxed and invigorated.

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In an era of information overload and constant demands, the ability to get some rich thinking time away from the office is a valuable resource for both the coachee and their team and/or organisation

common view of the world, seems to engender a more collaborative relationship than when sat opposite each other.⁶ Furthermore, working with nature helps '...integrate the coachee's different ways of knowing – intuitive, rational, emotional and somatic intelligences'.⁷

Organisational benefits

In an era of information overload and constant demands, the ability to get some rich thinking time away from the office is a valuable resource for both the coachee and their team and/or organisation. Enhanced equality, collaboration, clarity, perspective and creativity, not to mention the obvious wellbeing benefits of coaching outdoors, offer a good deal to organisations. In a time-poor environment, where people are looking for quick results, getting to the nub of the issue quickly and making progress are highly desirable.

When researching my book,⁸ I spoke to a number of senior executives on what they perceived the organisational benefits of coaching outdoors to be. They described coaching in nature as enabling them to get to the heart of the matter very quickly, and that their coaching experiences when no longer shackled to the boardroom were more enjoyable. Some described their teams getting further and faster. Others, inspired by coaching outdoors, described taking walks with their employees, sometimes even conducting final-stage interviews outside, as they believed it helped them gain a better understanding of the real person and the chemistry between them than they would from behind a desk. The return on investment (ROI) both of money and time stack up well. Coaching outdoors offers a new way of working for faster, multifaceted results.

Planet benefits

As I write, world leaders are gathered in Egypt for the COP27 conference. The main focus of the United Nations climate change conference is on a single number – the amount of carbon in our atmosphere, in order to have a habitable planet for the human species. To prevent a rise in global temperatures of 1.5°C or less, we need to reduce carbon emissions from the burning of fossil fuels and recapture billions of tons of carbon from the air. Nature is a key ally in helping us do this. In the words of Sir David Attenborough: '*Wherever we restore the wild it will recapture carbon and help us bring back the balance to our planet.*'⁹

I propose that there are ecological benefits to taking our coaching conversations outside, based on the premise that through spending time engaging with nature in our coaching conversations, we increase our level of nature connectedness. Nature connectedness is the strength of a person's relationship with nature. This is more than simply visiting and being in nature – it is about developing a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, where both individual and environment are nourished by the contact, inherently evoking care for nature.¹⁰ A person who is in relational connection with nature is more likely to feel passionate about the environmental agenda and take personal responsibility for making pro-environmental choices.¹¹

The University of Derby has conducted some fascinating research¹² in this area, developing a 'pathways to nature connectedness framework', demonstrating that nature connectedness is increased through sensory contact with nature, having meaningful emotional experiences in nature, appreciating nature's beauty, making meaning from nature and showing passion towards natural things. Many of you reading this will recognise that coaching already offers a number of these pathways.

Considerations

While it may be tempting to rush outside with every client and for every session, there are some considerations to be aware of. Not everyone wants to go outside. Some clients may feel more secure being indoors, for a variety of reasons. Providing psychological safety¹³ is critical for all coaching sessions, but with the increased moving parts that occur when stepping outside, it becomes an even more important consideration.

Location choice is critical in coaching outdoors. Not only does the location need to offer travel options or parking, toilets are critical, as are paths wide enough to walk side-by-side. A good location will also have opportunities to lengthen and shorten walks, along with plenty of spots along the way to sit down. It also has to 'feel right' for both coach and coachee. A location that might be just right for one client may feel

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Nature is rich with stimuli, and the opportunity to connect at a somatic and soulful level, to listen to nature and our intuition, bring incredible benefits for coaching results, wellbeing and environmental connection

Sensory seasonal walk exercise

This coaching exercise, adapted from my book, incorporates some of these pathways.⁸ You can do this yourself, as well as offer it to a coachee, either as part of a session or as a pre-session exercise:

Set some time aside to take a relaxed stroll in nature, connecting fully with all your senses.

- What do you notice?
- What are you seeing/hearing/smelling/tasting/feeling? For example, in autumn you may smell woodsmoke, see the warm autumn colours, notice squirrels scurrying to collect nuts, hear the crunch of leaves and the crack of twigs underfoot, feel peaceful as leaves drift down around you, or in awe at the colour transformation, taste the blackberries and feel the smoothness of the conkers.
- Just take it all in.
- Immerse yourself in it.
- Allow yourself to be fully present.
- Listen with your heart, body and soul.
- Later, reflect on what you noticed. What comes up for you?

overwhelming for another. An expansive space that invites movement and a view that encourages thoughts on journeying offer wonderful enquiry potential for a client who is wanting to get unstuck and become future focused. Yet the same space could be overwhelming for a client who is already feeling fragile; they may require an enclosed space to feel more 'held'. A walled garden, for example, provides a safe environment free of surprises and with a good line of sight to the one entrance/exit and the opportunity to sit on a bench with their back to a solid brick wall.

There is also the weather to consider. During the heatwave in the summer of 2022, I had to rearrange a session due to it being 40°C, too hot even to work in the shade. I've also had to change an outdoor session to indoors due to horizontal sleet. However, in all the years I've worked outdoors, these are rare examples. This is in part due to the weather never being as bad as it seems, and also due to careful contracting, knowing my own and my clients' comfort levels in varying weather conditions, and having a good range of venues that offer weather protection.

Nature as co-facilitator

Finally, there is the huge opportunity that nature offers to be a co-facilitator in the coaching relationship. When the coach steps back, and either invites nature into the coaching relationship, or creates the space for nature to naturally participate, we suddenly find that there are three parties actively involved in the coaching relationship. In real terms, this can be as simple as offering a client a moment of reflection while looking at a beautiful view, allowing nature alone to positively support their meaningful reflection. Or it can be much more. Highly skilled coaches step back almost entirely, allowing nature to do much of the coaching. This is a journey for both coach and client. Depending on all the moving parts, a coaching relationship outdoors may simply remain at the level of taking the indoor conversation outside, while others may dive straight in, collaborating with nature at depth. Much depends on the skill of the coach, and the client's ability to connect with nature. In my experience, the relationship follows a linear journey in which the speed and destination change each time.

A client of mine recently shared the experience of his journey: *'You took me in at the shallow end and led me to the deep end'*. Our journey began by taking our indoor conversation outside, with a nod to the beautiful location we found ourselves in. We progressed with me inviting him to take moments of reflection when seated with a view out over the water. I then engaged nature transparently when I invited him to choose a tree that represented him as a leader, and together we unpacked what it was about the tree that represented his leadership. This led to our final session, where, unprompted, my client spoke about the landscape he could see before him: the yellow cornfield, the green boundary hedge and the blue sky, and how these were a metaphor for what he was currently experiencing in life. He saw, and unpacked, the metaphor himself. I said nothing: nature had become his coach.

Nature wins out

Working outdoors offers coaches an incredibly powerful way of helping clients manage some of the pressures of the working world today. Nature is rich with stimuli, and the opportunity to connect at a somatic and soulful level, to listen to nature and our intuition, bring incredible benefits for coaching results, wellbeing and environmental connection. All this is missed if we stay indoors with our phones, central heating and laptops. While it may seem simple to step outside, my experience is that people often don't. By inviting clients to do so, we are giving them the permission and catalyst they need to have a break from the constant pull of technology and meetings: to have an enriching experience in all senses, helping them unlock new potential and possibly an enhanced care for the planet. Being outdoors in nature is not new. It is about reconnecting with something we already know. It's in our DNA. Where appropriate, it would almost be difficult to argue for having coaching sessions in the office ever again. ■

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lesley Roberts has been coaching outdoors since 1999. After 16 years working in the corporate sector, she founded Brave Conversations, a leadership development business. In 2020, Lesley founded Coaching Outdoors, bringing the benefits of collaborating with nature to coaches and clients.

Lesley is an executive coach with Ashridge Business School and a registered senior practitioner with the European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC). Her executive coaching MSc research focused on how nature can support coaching, and she is the author of *Coaching Outdoors: the essential guide to partnering with nature in your coaching conversations* (2022). <https://coachingoutdoors.com>

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