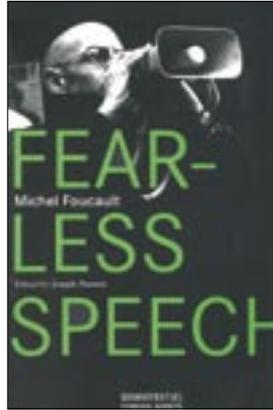


part ten

Why it's in the library

The last works of the great French philosopher Michel Foucault were devoted to the 'care of the self': how it became an issue for individuals and society, and what types of care were proposed.

As an introduction to his ideas, I have chosen his 1983 University of California lecture cycle, edited and published as *Fearless Speech*.



Introducing the work

Fearless Speech is all about the ancient Greek concept of *parrhesia* – 'speaking fearlessly'.

The Greeks were interested in the ways kings handled their 'coaches'. Was a king able to join in the game of *parrhesia*? How did he react when his advisers spoke fearlessly? A king could be called a tyrant if he punished his advisers for it, while a good king tolerated everything said to him by an adviser speaking fearlessly.

Foucault talks about a sort of 'parrhesiastic contract', which still embodies the essence of executive coaching today: the sovereign, the one who has power but lacks insight, addresses himself to the person who has insight, but lacks power, saying: 'If you tell me the truth, no matter what it turns out to be, you will be rewarded.'

A personal reading

In modern coaching practice, fearless speech heightens the anxiety of the client, who may struggle to lay himself bare. Equally, *parrhesia* is about the anxiety of *being* a coach: the coach knows he is going to have to probe deeply to uncover hidden assumptions and motives, and to move the client on.

A good coach does not take the client just at face value. He looks at issues, stories and situations from multiple perspectives, and

with an eye for new and meaningful interpretations.

As Foucault demonstrates, fearless speech engages the client in a new relationship, thereby bringing the coach into a new relationship with the client and also into a special relationship with himself.

Fearlessness takes precedence over propriety and etiquette, so it is perhaps not for all coaches, and

needs to be handled with care. It is a major decision for a coach to speak fearlessly.

The fearless coach gives the client complete autonomy: in other words, puts him in charge of the consulting relationship. Client dependency is meaningless in this context.

Why I think it's inspirational

One of the most common impediments to executive coaching is self-love, as is beautifully illustrated in *Fearless Speech*. It makes leaders self-confident and ambitious, but it can also stand in the way of really knowing themselves 'warts and all'. I often find myself preparing the ground for fearless speech, by trying to build a sound relational basis with the help of two of Carl Rogers' 'core conditions': congruence and unconditional warmth.

On a more specific note, the concept of *parrhesia* is at the very root of a most interesting form of coaching, sometimes called paradoxical or provocative coaching. This is particularly helpful when the coach feels manipulated by the client, or when the client seems to find it hard to learn. It takes on and even amplifies defences, by hurting the coachee's pride and mobilising irritation and resistance. Provocative coaching obeys similar rules and demonstrates similar interventions to *parrhesia* as practised by the ancient Cynics, which Foucault explores. ■

GOACHING ON THE COUCH

**Erik de Haan looks
at Michel Foucault's
*Fearless Speech***

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