

Rethinking Business Growth



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In the tenth and final article in this eco-conscious coaching series we are going to focus on growth, exploring how and when growth is useful and when and where growth can in fact become detrimental. As always, we will distil some lessons from nature.

“Humanity’s impact on the biosphere is governed by a simple formula that multiplies three crucial factors: the number of people times the stuff consumed by each person times the environmental impact of each unit of stuff.”

Paul Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*, 1968

Some of us have coached and consulted for a range of organisations of varying sizes and those who work within organisational development will be familiar with the challenges businesses face at varying stages of expansion and evolution.

From the start-up making their first hire to the mid-size SME moving into a place where a little more structure is valuable to enable communication to flow; from dispersed workers navigating virtual connections, attempting to maintain

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engagement and ensure that ‘distance’ is purely geographical, right up to large multinationals where the ‘feel’ is more one of a city than a family.

Add to this operating in a time of climate and economic crisis and never before has coaching had more potential to impact wise decision making.

Commonality between different sizes of businesses often lies in a desire and expectation for *growth as the way forwards*, with success being measured ‘primarily’ by GDP and perceived scale... but at what cost?

Historically, industrialisation led to us being able to mass produce quick and cheap products. We bought into an

idea that more and more and more was better. We accepted our manufacturing processes were dirty and detrimental, mining limited resources, for instance, and polluting the atmosphere. Weighing up the environmental consequences, we figured the small amount of damage at the scale we were previously operating at was probably worth the trade-off... Right?

Scale matters though, and whilst in the short term we experienced improved standards of living, as the population boomed and demand for material ‘things’ soared, our approach to design, manufacturing and logistics did not evolve at the same pace, exerting excessive pressure on our planet.

There is, however, hope. Whilst previous generations might well have had an extended sense of self defined by possessions, shifts in lifestyle and a digital revolution have severed some of our reliance upon physical objects. Many millennials are in fact far more likely to value and define themselves through experiences over and above ‘stuff’. So growth, it seems – at least from an individual perspective – is not necessarily about acquisition and to this end an urgent, more widespread *reframing of success* within industry is needed.

Sustainability professionals and those in the arena of conservation are advocating conversations about *optimal* levels of economic growth. Rather than chasing turnover and expansion, reviewing *all* aspects of how we do business could not only enable us to survive but even potentially thrive within times of economic crisis. Indeed, a positive offshoot of our current financial challenges is the resultant closer inquiry into how we utilise resources.... and about time too.

Reflect upon your own business practices. What changes have you made, prompted by the current economic and environmental landscape? What more can you do?

Only humans appear not to have an in-built sense of ‘enough’. I recently





heard a useful analogy that I feel could resonate with the most competitive and power-focused of clients. A lion catches and consumes enough antelope – but not more than enough. It hits an optimal level to ensure there is antelope for tomorrow and exerts just enough energy in doing so (it actually sleeps a lot). It does not waste energy or resource. In the world of big business, who doesn't want to be a lion, eh?

Our challenge as coaches is to shift perspective when it comes to our obsession with growth by asking our clients:

- How do you define growth?
- What does optimal growth look like in the current landscape?
- What are some of the many ways your business can grow?
- How do you apportion weighting to your success measures?
- Who are your growth targets for and what is the systemic impact of these targets?
- How can you add greater ecological wisdom to your operation?

I wonder how you would describe the performance measures and strategic aims of your own NLP and coaching business in terms other than finance? Taking a moment to align your own business goals to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, for instance, can be eye-opening:

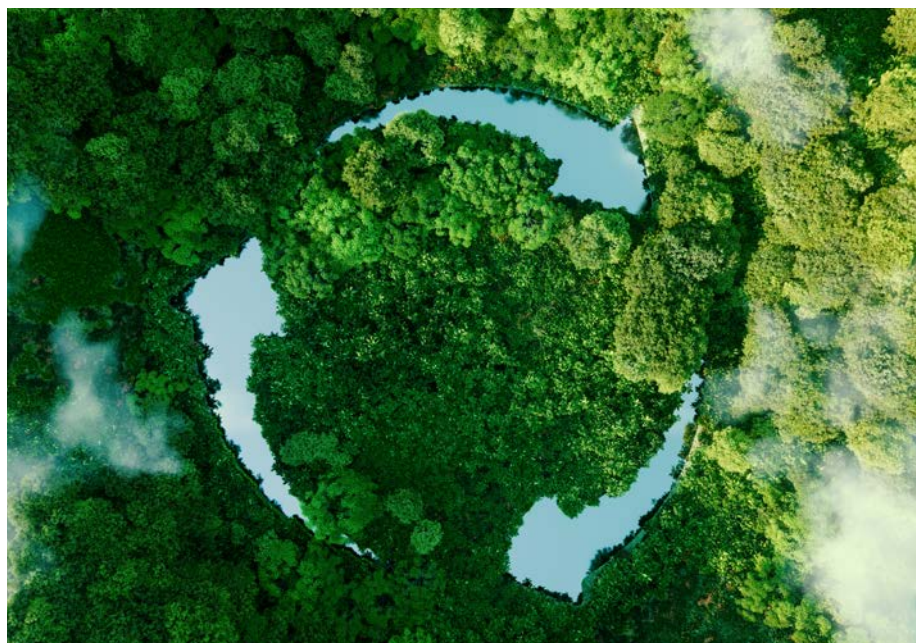
- How familiar are these to you?
- Which, if any, have direct relevance to your work?
- How do these SDGs impact you on a day-to-day basis as you go about your working life?
- How do these feature when goal setting with your clients?

Ultimately, the conditions within which we function are essential to our health and survival, however we measure health. We often fail to acknowledge

that economic health is complex and interconnected; scale matters in so many ways and our businesses sit within a wider context where resources are not infinite. As NLP professionals, we are of course distinctly aware that we do not operate within a vacuum. We simply cannot continue the current level of exploitation of land, forests, water and minerals. Environmental advocacy is not niche – it is the responsibility of us all.

As you will have realised from the previous nine articles in this series, eco-

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centric coaching places the ecosphere front of mind *at all times*. Business development in the current climate from this perspective can lead to questions of:

- Expansiveness and convergence
- Complexity and simplicity
- Rigidity and fluidity

These being 'analogue qualities' we see within the natural world, the balance of each is critical for survival.

- Too much or too little complexity can result in wasted time and energy
- Excessive or limited expansiveness can create lack of clarity or inhibited creativity

- A lack of, or an abundance of rigidity can leave a business completely adrift or totally stifled during turbulent times

When working with analogue qualities, we are applying these conceptually to all aspects of solution finding and decision making and they have relevance when questioning all logical levels.

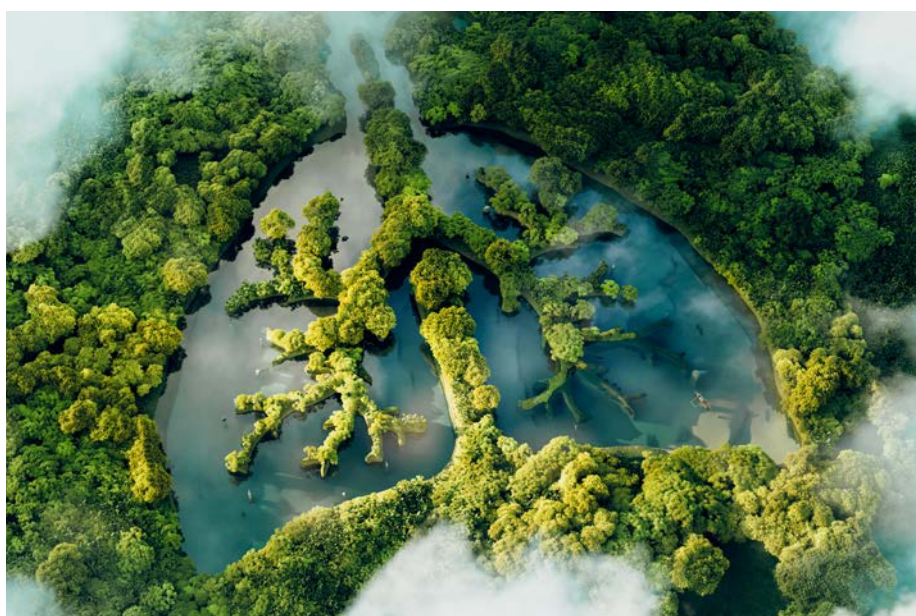
We can explore the when, where and with whom by asking if there is wisdom



to be gained from expanding or refining these fields. For example, we might reflect upon how more or less complexity can help ensure the right things are being done in the right way, by the right people, optimising resources.

As the world shifts and our aims evolve, our ideas about how business is done might need fundamentally rethinking. For some, the current financial landscape is going to prompt actions for basic survival, but if we act rashly without wisdom, the wider ripple effects could be devastating.

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Depending on the sector you are working with as a coach, and a range of organisation-specific measures, some businesses will thrive through expanding and diversifying whereas others will need to simplify and refine to create their unique value. Consider your clients and use the above analogue qualities to prompt creative insight.

Life is complex. In the past, many businesses have valued speed of production over longevity of product. The circular economy has a huge amount of insight to offer all organisations when it comes to product and service design and, as coaches, the more we can expand our climate literacy and champion biodiversity, the more likely we are to ensure we enable our clients to make decisions that won't cost the earth.

I have loved writing this series and I hope you have found it useful for your coaching practice. If I can assist you in bringing eco-centrism to your practice, you know where to find me as ANLP's envoy for ocean and environment. Look out for my new eCoherence Zone in *Rapport* – aimed at offering short insights and ideas to spark advocacy from us all.

Stay creative and remember to place the environment at the heart of your practice. ■

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

