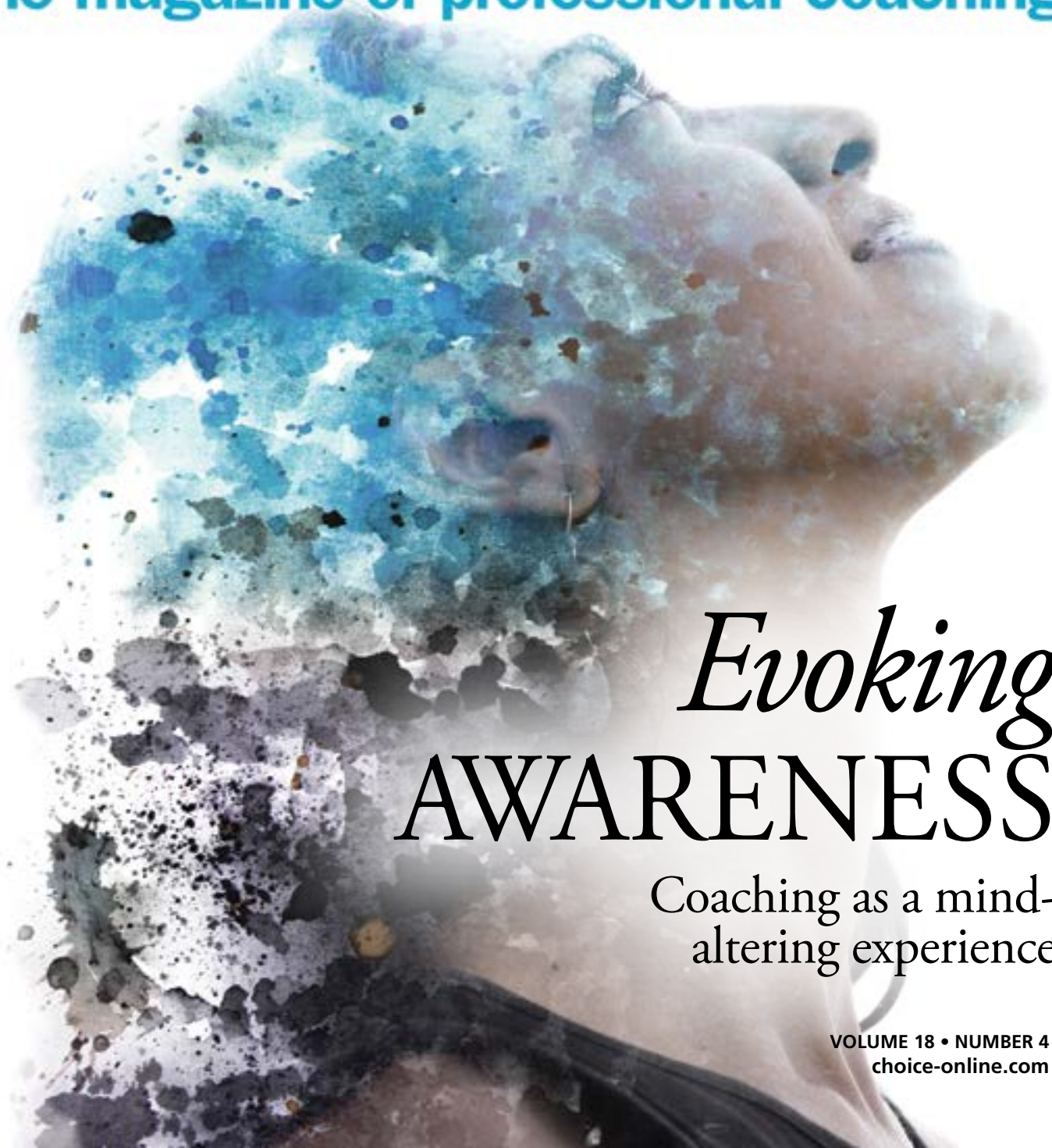


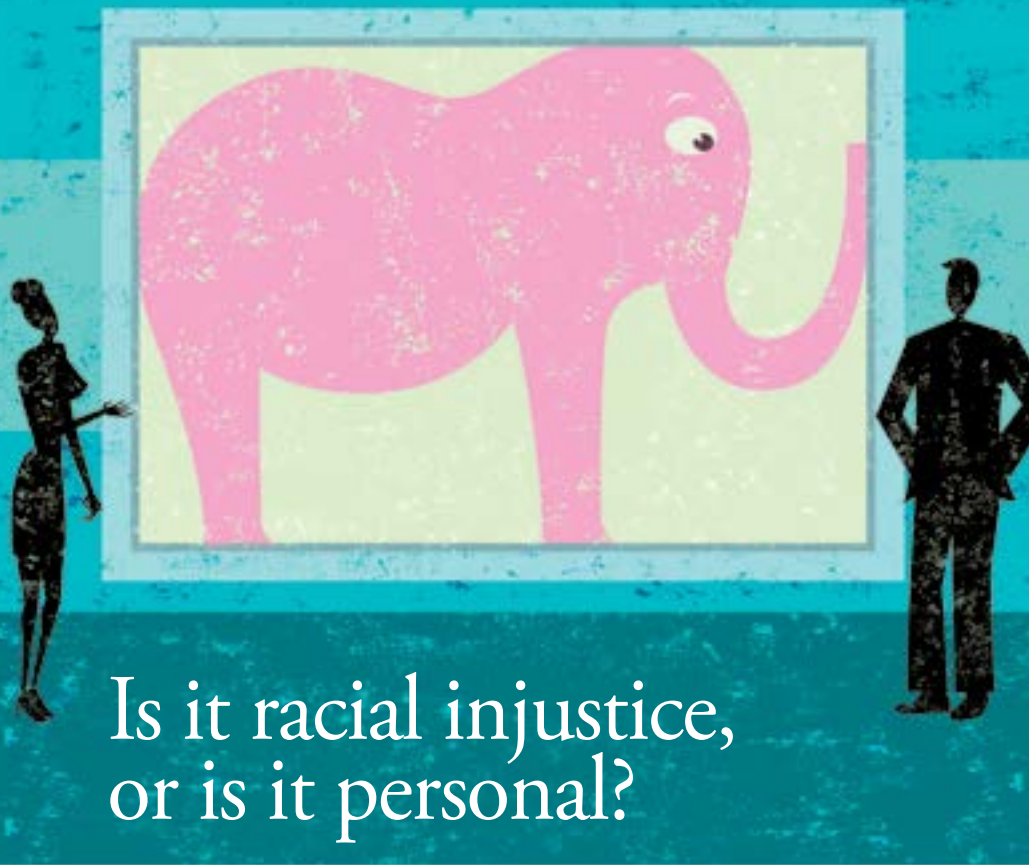
choice

the magazine of professional coaching



Evoking AWARENESS

Coaching as a mind-
altering experience



Is it racial injustice, or is it personal?

THE SITUATION

“I’ve been hired to coach an executive who is African American and in a crucial position in a large tech firm. His female director is white. She sees the tension in his department and attributes it to a lack of leadership. He says it’s because he deals with bias and racism, resulting in a lack of respect and commitment to performance. The director isn’t buying it. How do I navigate this sensitive and important issue given what’s currently happening in societies around the world?”

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

By Craig Carr, BCC, PCC, CPCC

This scenario reveals prejudice working on an organizational system, so here’s how I would approach it as a coach: expose the hidden, acknowledge the unspoken, and express the rawness and vulnerability that wants a voice.

Help create a path forward for the individuals who want to become healthy and be leaders in the organization. This company has some work to do, and if they don’t do it here, they’ll be doing it at another time with the stakes raised even higher. That’s how a system rolls.

And you’re right about the times we’re living. Norms are toppling, and fear and anger are close to the surface. People are “canceling” each other left and right, often without knowing what they want. It’s a minefield, but an exciting one if you have the grit and spirit for it. You could

say the good news about this situation is, “Thank goodness, this is coming out of the shadows and into the fresh air!” There is truth spoken. But lies, too, which makes your intention to sort through it admirable.

Paradoxically, though, I believe your first step is to let go of the idea that you are there to oversee working things out. Sometimes, it is the coach’s job to take charge of sorting, but in this case, that’s more likely to set you up for failure.

Instead, I suggest you frame the problem as definitely beyond any one individual, and even beyond the history of the organization itself. As you know, bias has a way of finding evidence for a viewpoint, so your job is NOT to believe any single narrative that wants to be in your face, posturing as The Truth. If you let that happen, you ostensibly become a part of the systemic dysfunction, and no

one can grow when the coach gets lost in the forest with everyone else.

Step one involves slowing things down and getting out of the way. Step two is an appeal to the truth that the organization has a more significant culture and systemic problem than they may suspect. If they don’t go there – if that seems too hard or too big to tackle – and you still choose to coach this executive, help him to get clear why he would stay and what that would be like. Unless he’s ready to be in fight mode, and possibly become a martyr, going elsewhere could be his better choice.

Lastly, there’s one big thing to deduce from the words, “The director isn’t buying it.” She doesn’t need to buy into his story that he is a victim of bias and racism. It is necessary, to buy into acknowledging that the organization has a race issue it wants to put in the past for good.

By Suzi Pomerantz, MT, MCC

Is the primary client the executive, the director, the organization, or all three? Let's assume it's all three. Yes, there are undercurrents of rising awareness of racial injustice, systemic racism and white privilege that may be influencing this situation, but begin with the specific relationships. First, seek to clarify:

- From whom is he experiencing "bias, racism, lack of respect, and lack of commitment to performance"? Is it from his team, or does that refer to his boss or other departments in the firm?
- What is the nature of the relationships he holds with whomever is being observed to demonstrate these behaviors?
- What is the executive's relationship with his boss? What is her relationship with him?
- How is his relationship with his direct reports?
- How about the relationship between his

department and other departments in the firm?

- What is his relationship with the larger firm-wide culture?
- When the director expresses that the root cause of the tension she sees in his department is due to lack of leadership, what does she mean by that? What observable, measurable, or otherwise definitive or quantifiable data is she referencing as "lack of leadership"? Leadership is a very broad term and many people mean different things by it.

Next, support direct communication. Get them together in a meeting so he can ask his boss to delineate the observed behaviors she'd like to see, as well as the behaviors she is attributing to leadership that she is not seeing. What does she think is causing the tension she observes?

Specificity will make a difference here. Ask what her expectations are, as quantifiably as possible. What will she need to see, by when, and how will she know if

he's successful? Likewise, the executive should express his experience in detail; let her know what he deals with that he is experiencing as racism, lack of respect, and lack of commitment to performance. What observable, quantifiable behaviors, actions, or comments is he seeing, and from whom? The coaching is different if these behaviors are observed in his direct reports versus from peers or from his boss.

Finally, explore what is the root of the breakdown in trust between the director and the executive. You said she "isn't buying it," which indicates she thinks the executive is lying, exaggerating, mistaken, or being dramatic. Is there any documented history of these behaviors on his part, or is there a pattern of mistrust on her part?

True, it may very well be about racial injustice, or hidden biases, unconscious systemic racism, or stereotyping. However, it may not be about those things, and we can't jump to race as the issue without first unpacking the relationship dynamics.

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®, CEC

We live in a world many people continue to interpret through their own personal, biased, and limited lens. In this case, the director's narrow view may be through her white, female lens. She may be dismissing his assertions because she has no idea what to do about them.

Your client's beliefs of why he is unable to be effective must not be minimized or ignored. Bias and racism have become buzz words, yet recognized as real and limiting factors in a person of color's growth in many organizations. Does that speak to all the reasons for his lack of success? The answer to that question is unknown. But steps need to be taken at the company's highest levels to have the race conversation, which will make people uncomfortable.

Clear policies must exist which address bias and racism. If people of color are not at the highest leadership levels, and if microag-

gressions have been mentioned before but ignored, this is additional evidence that it is time for a difficult conversation.

Coaching is needed now more than ever to facilitate these conversations. Your client cannot educate his director nor his staff about bias and race by himself. But he should be a part of the more meaningful conversation within the company. People who are affected by an issue need a seat at the table.

Action for your client may include encouraging the highest levels of leadership (not just the HR department) of the company to have the race conversation, not to accuse, but to inform and educate. None of us can understand what it means to be 'the

other,' whether that 'other' label is based on race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, or creed. We must seek to understand rather than be understood.

If I were his coach, I would hold the space and allow him to speak his truth and not argue it. Then, I would work with him to prepare a presentation for the leadership team to outline the racism and bias issues and have him offer to begin a collaborative discussion within the company. If the company is not willing to take this on now, they will be left behind by those who know the time is now, and he will find a new place to take his leadership.

As a coach, look beyond what is presented and seek to solve the underlying issue. •

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don't have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to: submissions@choice-online.com and put "sticky situations" in the subject line.