

Coaching at Work



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Coaches around the world rally to offer free coaching to key workers

How can we help you?

Clarity from chaos
What it feels like to nurse in a pandemic

Trauma informed
How to coach those in survival mode

AI and coaching
Leveraging tech for social change

Save the planet
Deepening leaders' climate commitment

The space between

Michelle Lucas and Charlotte Housden share their Liminal Muse Conversation Cards

What is it?

We created Liminal Muse Conversation Cards as an antidote to too much thinking. Our story goes back to 2018, when we first met at a coaching constellations workshop, in which we focused on the felt sense, body movement, emotions and creativity, moving away from thinking, a state most of us use too often because it's comfortable.

We realised we had complementary skills and wondered whether we might team up. After the workshop we explored whether photography might encourage a more creative, emotionally focused and imaginative way of working. Over a number of months we developed the pack, choosing the name because 'liminal' means the space between things – an opportunity to stop, notice and connect with the emotions and body, and 'muse', because the cards encourage reflection and 'conversations' connecting at a different level and creating a richer exchange.

How it works

The cards contain 38 of Charlotte's images – each is double sided with opposite colours and different images, such as abstracts, buildings and people. One coach said, "I really liked the variety of images and how differently they could be interpreted. I enjoyed working with them."

We tested the cards at two coaching conferences, a workshop and within our own practices. The simplest application was for arrivals and departures exercises.

After spreading them out on a flat surface we invited participants to use them to answer a question appropriate to opening (eg, *How are you arriving*

today?) or closing (eg, *What learning are you taking away?*). We prompted people to pick up and explore the cards and to notice which image(s) held appeal – we made them double-sided to avoid the "polite stand at a distance and look" that can happen with single sided cards. The key was to encourage participants to engage multiple senses and to trust their intuition, helping them stay out of their more rational mind.

Once cards were chosen we asked people to share what the image meant to them in groups or plenary. For a full description of how this works see Housden and Lucas (2020).

The cards have multiple other applications, for example picking an image to stimulate mindfulness, or one to represent a strength and one for a

weakness. We've also run groups where people select a series of cards to develop storylines, and another where coaching pairs used the cards to evoke metaphors, helping to unpick their current knotty challenges. We believe there can be wide application of the cards – the only limitation being our imagination. With this in mind we are inviting users to

"I think of photography like therapy"
Harry Gruyaert,
Belgian
photographer

Some feedback from delegates and clients using the cards for the first time

- "The cards were an immediate invitation to land in the space and connect with others through images. I was impressed with the care they'd taken designing the cards, paying attention to the size and shape"
- "The cards were thought provoking and prompted an interesting conversation that wouldn't have happened without them"
- "I really like to use images and your cards were great – super photos and nice size for the 1:1 work so we could hold several and shuffle through"
- "The session demonstrated to me how important images/imagery is in helping to release some of the most deeply rooted issues we hold within us. Using the cards allowed me to express 'baggage' I didn't even know I was holding"
- "Nice to hold, nice to look at, these cards quickly draw out insights. I noticed the shape and size – they're compact with rounded edges and a solid feel – making them easy to hold in a set of three... In the hands of a skilful coach asking insightful questions the process is productive and enjoyable"



share their uses of the cards via Charlotte's website.

We researched the benefits of working with photography and shared the evidence with delegates to take back to clients. This included other helping practitioners who use images to help clients work at a more profound level, such as PhotoTherapy and Walker Visuals. Other benefits include:

- Working with individual differences and learning styles that gravitate towards imagery and experience
- Embodied learning, kinaesthetic and haptics (how working with objects can improve learning)
- Mindfulness and neuroplasticity (working in different ways to forge new pathways in the brain and help with problem solving)
- How images can be used in metaphor and storytelling work

Our delegates reported that working with the cards helped them have much richer conversations that developed more quickly than when they used other tools.

Using the tool

These cards can be used by anyone in people development – coaches, mentors, coaching supervisors, facilitators or consultants, including:

- To support clients to be more playful or creative
- 'Unsticking' clients when other tools are no longer working
- To facilitate a client to work with metaphors
- Where a client is struggling to articulate their thinking or when words are difficult
- Encouraging clients to explore ideas and to think differently
- Group work or team building that encourages an open and expansive ways of working

THE COACH/ ADMINISTRATOR EXPERIENCE

I first experienced working with the cards in supervision with Michelle and have since found them a valuable and creative resource in my practice. Initially, I put energy into interpreting their

ambiguity, and was unsure how I could integrate them into client work, particularly with senior executives with strong thinking, rational and analytic preferences.

Yet as I worked this through, I discovered that the cards prompted some transformative moments both in supervision and with my clients. Not only that, we've had great fun story telling with the pictures, stories which in themselves have stimulated new meaning making.

Working with the cards has encouraged me to take a more embodied approach for myself, and my clients alike. It helps me to be in the moment and experimenting has reminded me of the importance, and usefulness, of art that requires interpretation. When we interpret art we are perhaps interpreting ourselves.

I recognise I have a preference for thinking and logic rather than feeling and creativity. Practising with the cards reminds me that I can inhabit the opposite of my preferences and choose alternative approaches. Something I

TOOLBOX ROAD TEST

know I try to help my clients to do. Just having the cards in my bag is an invitation for me to offer clients an alternative way; helping for us to search for meaning and explore wise action, in what increasingly feels like a turbulent and uncertain business environment.

The cards have definitely helped me to stimulate new insights, new questions and new knowledge with my clients.

I am also mindful that the cards may not be appropriate in some circumstances, perhaps where a client is not in an emotionally stable place. Here we would need caution – working on the boundary, contracting effectively and ensuring a safe space has been created for us to explore together.

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Liz McGivern is a highly experienced executive coach

CLIENTS' EXPERIENCES

Liz was curious to know how the cards were received by her clients so she gathered feedback. The cards work best when there is psychological safety:

- *"I felt safe sharing with you because of the trust so it felt like a safe space and I'm surprised how much I disclosed, even to myself"*

A number of her clients commented on how the cards provided a vehicle for expressing thoughts and emotions that had previously been out of their awareness:

- *"The cards offer a vehicle for articulating underlying feelings in a context of the story I'm telling. The more I thought about it the more sense it made to me"*

- *"I realised I was stuck but now I see I have choices, I can see my reflections coming to life through the pictures. My emotions must*

have been deep down in my subconscious but the pictures have brought these feeling to my attention and help separate the facts from the feelings"

A participant at our workshop saw a similar impact when working with a client:

- *"When trying them out with a client I was struck by how easily the images shifted them from a place of stuckness and 'away from' to a place of 'towards' and curiosity. I can't wait to use them again"*

Liz noticed that the cards seemed particularly helpful for clients to access and express emotions:

- *"[The cards]...help the fluidity, the ordering of emotions versus a jumble and not being able previously to find the words to express this coherently"*

- *"Choosing the cards I did, helped me find the vocabulary to unpack my feelings." "It's amazing to be able to visualise my feelings"*

Participants at our workshops have said similar things;

- *"It gave my brain an opportunity to explore in an abstract rather than logical manner."*

- *"They made me really engage with what I was feeling. It was a bit spooky." 🌀*

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● **Charlotte Housden** is a chartered occupational psychologist, leadership development consultant and photographer

- **Michelle Lucas** is an accredited master executive coach, coaching supervisor, speaker and writer

- To buy a pack of the cards please visit: www.charlottehousden.com/cards

Reference

- M Lucas and C Housden, 'Arrivals and departures with picture cards,' in M Lucas, *101 Coaching Supervision Techniques, Approaches, Enquiries and Experiments*, Routledge, 2020

Upside

- The images provoke individual and unscripted responses
- Many people with a visual preference for information processing enjoy working with images
- We notice that Extrovert, Introvert, Sensing, Intuitive, Feeling and Perceiving Types find the cards easy to use
- Clients report that the ambiguity of the abstract images provokes deep thought
- The double-sided cards encourage clients to pick them up which gives rise to a kinaesthetic and sensory response
- Clients liked the way the cards created an opening for conversations
- The cards sparked different ideas and thought in clients

Downside

- Less visual or Judging or Thinking Types may find them more challenging. However novel situations promote neuroplasticity, so using the cards may help clients problem solve differently or gain novel insights
- While 19 cards (38 images) provides plenty of choice for individual and small group work, a second pack may be needed when working with larger groups
- Some people can become distracted working out what the abstract images are rather than their interpretation or the meaning the images evoke