

Coach maturity: An emerging concept

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Coaching sometimes seems like Keats' rainbow – the more we try to define it, dissect it, classify it and demystify it, the more we diminish it and lose its essence. One of the concerns both of us have about so much of the coaching literature is that it represents attempts to confine coaching within the partisan wrappings of a particular school, philosophy or approach. Such narrow and sometimes self-serving perspectives seem to us to be completely at odds with the essential ethos of coaching – enquiring, open, inclusive, subtle and multi-perspective. This perspective has been called 'relational coaching' by Erik de Haan and colleagues (de Haan, 2008).

At the same time, we accept and encourage the notion of quality in coaching, even though we may struggle even more in defining what that, too, means. Ingredients in a definition of quality of coaching might be posited to include:

- The delivery of intended and positive unintended outcomes. Simply delivering against the initial, presented goal is not necessarily an indicator of quality, for a number of reasons:
- The goal may be the wrong one for the client and or the organization.
- Achieving goal clarity may be the end point, not the beginning of the coaching assignment – many clients need coaching to establish what they want and why, but are self-sufficient in thinking through how they are going to achieve it.
- Even coaching at a relatively low level of competence can achieve change in the client. Simply being there and allowing the client to talk things through can be remarkably effective, where the client needs only to structure their own thinking. The primary skills required in such cases are attentive listening and knowing when to shut up!
- Depth of rapport, which may in turn relate to attentiveness, awareness of one's own values, and authenticity.
- Energy: Observation of coaches in assessment centre 'real plays' suggests that the most effective coaches create simultaneously an intense stillness and an intense energy field. The space between them and the client almost crackles! By contrast, the least effective coaches seem to drain the energy from the room. By contrast, the least effective coaches seem to suck energy from the room, dissipating energy as they flail about seeking to "plug in" to the client and his or her issues.

- A systemic approach to the coaching dynamic. The coaching context extends beyond the individual client to the human and organizational systems, in which they operate.

Observations about coaches and coaching

Our observations of many coaches in and out of action in the context of coach assessment centers suggests that it may be easier to define what does not define quality – for example:

- Having a certificate or diploma. At best this is a hygiene factor, indicating that the coach has undergone some form of training in the role. But rigorous assessment shows that many “certified” coaches are severely lacking in competence (), while many of the most effective coaches are “naturals”, who bring to the role a mixture of innate intuitiveness and reflection on experience.
- Having individual accreditation. The International Coach Federation, the Association for Coaching, the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and others (Brennan and Whybrow, 2010) have set up systems for individual accreditation. This seeks – more directly than certification – to measure something akin to maturity. However it largely shows that the coach is good enough, rather than how far on a personal journey they have travelled.
- Client satisfaction. Some clients may over-rate the efficacy of their coaches, confusing empathetic conversation (simply having someone listen to them) with transformational dialogue.
- Fee rates. We have found a variation of 15 to 1 in fees charged per hour, but no significant correlation with quality of coaching delivered.

Our reflections to reconcile the spontaneity, dynamism and variety of coaching with the need to maintain standards lead to the conclusion that simplistic classifications are likely to be divisive and of dubious validity. What’s needed is a conceptual framework that reflects the evolution of complexity in coaches’ way of thinking about themselves, their clients and the context, in which they operate.

A possible solution may lie in the context of maturity. In the sense of the development of human beings, a number of authors have proposed models of the evolution of maturity. These models broadly assume that changes in the structure of thinking about oneself and the world, with which we interact, evolve slowly and in recognisable, sequential patterns; that higher levels involve a greater degree of awareness about the individual’s environment, and greater complexity in how they interpret their environment; that evolving through one level is an essential precursor to the next; that cognitive and socio-emotional responses at earlier levels may remain open and available, even though the individual’s “centre of gravity” is at a higher level; that people evolve at different rates; and that only a small proportion of the population become centred in the highest levels of maturity. These models tend

to emphasize either cognitive-reflective processes or ego-development (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007), meaning “the development of self-identity and maturing of interpersonal relationships”. Key authors here include Torbert (1991), Wilber (2000), Cook-Greuter (2004), Beck & Cowan (1996) and Kegan (1992).

As Bachkirova and Cox express it: “What is particularly important in relation to development of coaches is that each stage enriches individual capacity for reflection and effective interaction with others. Their ability to notice nuances and details of situations is increasing. The resultant self-awareness gives them a better opportunity to articulate, influence and potentially change these situations.” Otto Laske (2006, 2009), who has built in particular upon Kegan’s approaches, maintains additionally that in a coaching context the relative maturity of the coach and client are significant in the relationship dynamic. Most importantly, if the coach is less cognitively or socio-emotionally mature than the client, this is likely to have a significant and negative impact on the quality of the coaching process. Chandler and Kram (2005) make a similar point with regard to the related activity of mentoring.

Mindsets and models

Our own interpretations of coach maturity are not based on empirical research, but we hope they will stimulate such research and serve as a starting point for debate. Our model derives from observation in a variety of contexts, but particularly within coach assessment centers, where it is possible to benchmark coaches against consistent criteria, and hence to reflect on characteristics and thinking patterns exhibited by coaches of different levels of demonstrated competence. It is important to emphasise here that we are not equating maturity and competence as the same construct. However, it is reasonable to conclude that they are closely related.

The four levels are models-based, process-based, philosophy or discipline-based, and systemic eclectic. Models-based coaches are often very new to the field and seek the re-assurance of a closely defined approach that they can take into any situation they might meet. This type of coaching is characterised by mechanistic conversations, where following the model is more important than exploring the client’s world. It is about doing rather than being and tends to be about coaching to the client than coaching with the client; and about the coaching intervention, rather than the coaching relationship. The dangerous myth that a good coach can coach anyone in any situation appears to stem from this very narrow perception of coaching.

Process-based approaches allow for more flexibility. They can be considered as a structured linking of related techniques and models. The coach has a number of specific tools to use in helping the client’s thinking, but the toolbag is still relatively limited. Solutions focus, for example, assumes that the client’s immediate need is to find a solution, but in practice, many clients simply want to build a greater understanding of their situation and/or to come to terms with a problem that is inherently insoluble. Yet there are many coaching situations where the emotional

engagement between coach and client provides the most powerful resource for change.

Philosophy or discipline based mindsets tend to offer a wider still portfolio of responses to client needs, because they operate within a broad set of assumptions about helping and human development. They can still be applied mechanistically, however. What prevents them being so is the coach's ability to reflect on his or her practice, both while coaching and after each coaching session.

The fourth, most liberating mindset is the systemic eclectic. These coaches have a very wide array of ways of working and a toolkit amassed from many sources, both within coaching and from very different worlds. They have integrated this into a self-aware, personalized way of being with the client. They exhibit an intelligent, sensitive ability to select a broad approach, and within that approach, appropriate tools and techniques, which meet the particular needs of a particular client at a particular time. This relates to what Webb (2008) calls coaching for wisdom.

Observation of and discussion with a sample of systemic eclectic coaches suggests that:

- They have immense calm, because they have confidence in their ability to find the right tool if they need it
- Yet they hardly ever use tools. When they do, it is subtly and integrated almost seamlessly into the conversation. Indeed, they allow the conversation to happen, holding the client in the development of insight and steering with only the lightest, almost imperceptible touches.
- They place great importance on understanding a technique, model or process in terms of its origins within an original philosophy
- They use experimentation and reflexive learning to identify where and how a new technique, model or process fits into their philosophy and framework of helping
- They judge new techniques, models and processes on the criterion of "Will this enrich and improve the effectiveness of my potential responses to client needs?"
- They use peers and supervisors to challenge their coaching philosophy and as partners in experimenting with new approaches
- They take a systemic and holistic view of the client and the client's environment; and of the coaching relationship; and this makes them more sensitive to nuances of the situation and hence to what approaches they can employ

Table 1: A comparison of the four levels of coaching maturity in coaching conversations

Coaching approach	Style	Critical questions
Models-based	Control	How do I take them where I think they need to go? How do I adapt my technique or model to this circumstance?
Process-based	Contain	How do I give enough control to the client and still retain a purposeful conversation? What's the best way to apply my process in this instance?
Philosophy-based	Facilitate	What can I do to help the client do this for themselves? How do I contextualise the client's issue within the perspective of my philosophy or discipline?
Systemic eclectic	Enable	Are we both relaxed enough to allow the issue and the solution to emerge in whatever way they will? Do I need to apply any techniques or processes at all? If I do, what does the client context tell me about how to select from the wide choice available to me?

Observation in coach assessment centers gave us the basis for proposing an approach, which does more closely parallel other models of maturation. Areas, where mature coaches demonstrate that they have reflected deeply, include:

- a. Personal philosophy of coaching
- b. Understanding of the business context
- c. Freedom from the tyranny of the question
- d. How they use coach supervision and mentoring
- e. How they maintain professional development and integrate learning
- f. How they identify and manage boundaries
- g. Their personal journey as a coach
- h. Knowing what kind of clients and situations they work best with

- i. Understanding what makes a fully functioning individual
- j. Understanding what makes an effective organisation

Personal philosophy of coaching

Although ontology has developed specific meaning as a genre of coaching practice, in the more generic sense of coaching as “being about being”, as the mature coaches tend to reflect more deeply on the nature of the interaction between themselves and their clients. Their reflections lead them to an understanding of this interaction that goes far beyond textbook explanations of the coaching process, whether these derive from models-based, process-based or discipline-based approaches.

They integrate their learning from such sources, with reflection on their experiences with clients, to develop and articulate a unique and personal perspective of the coaching dynamic. Some parallels can be drawn here with Kegan’s stages of adult maturity (1992). Absorbing values and beliefs of others – accepted wisdom – whether consciously or unconsciously, is perhaps typical of Kegan’s level three. As they mature, coaches question these “given” beliefs and begin to develop their own, self-authored perspectives, based on their own experience and reasoning. This suggests Kegan’s level four. Some go a step further, challenging their own self-focused assumptions, embracing uncertainties and letting go of any sense of needing to exert control over the conversation. For example, they may see coaching as a process of shared meaning making, in which the client’s values and perspectives have equal validity to their own.

Understanding the business context

One of the most pernicious myths about coaching is that coaches need no contextual knowledge of the client’s world. Whether born of self-aggrandizement or a mechanistic view of coaching, this is manifestly untrue, on two counts – client safety (and hence ethicality) and efficacy. In sports coaching, it is important to know enough to ensure that the client is not led to adopt behaviors, which might be detrimental to themselves. Similarly in the business world, a coach working with top managers, who has poor knowledge of corporate governance rules, poses a risk both to the client and to him or herself.

From an efficacy perspective, the coach has to have enough contextual knowledge first to demonstrate empathy and build rapport and credibility with the client. Secondly, construct questions that stimulate significant insight.

Coach assessment observations show clearly that the most effective coaches ask questions and make supportive comments that demonstrate:

- A broad understanding of the client’s world (not necessarily of the client’s specific job role or function)

- Knowledge of the “big themes” affecting the organization and the industry

An ability to link day-to-day issues for the client with these big themes

Of course, having too close an understanding of the client’s world also has its downsides. In particular, it leads the coach instinctively to come up with their own answers and suppressing these may divert attention from listening to the client. Mature coaches work to give up a directive, “I’ve been there” approach. It seems, from observation, that the most effective coaches are often those, who have enough knowledge to contextualize questions, yet are able to maintain a deep, curious and constructive naiveté.

Freedom from the tyranny of the question

Systemic eclectic coaches give themselves permission to do less, with resultant great efficacy. In classroom experiments, we have artificially limited the number of times coaches can speak, to only once in every 10 minutes, on average. In almost all cases, coaches’ and coachees’ perception of the quality of the dialogue and, in particular, of the questions asked, is higher than under normal conditions. Our observation of systemic eclectics is that they are almost miserly with their questions, giving the client maximum time for reflection before they will nudge them gently along in their thinking.

Use of coach supervision or mentoring

Although all the major coaching professional bodies require member coaches to have some form of coach supervision or mentoring, remarkably few coaches seem to have developed a mental model that embraces supervision as a core activity in their practice. For many, it appears to be a tick the box requirement, with little proactivity and little practical relevance to their development as coaches. Peer coaching, in particular, can become a collusive, self-congratulatory activity.

We have very little evidence with regard to how coaches at different levels of maturity approach supervision, but we can posit that there might be differences in:

- How they choose their coach supervisor or mentor
- The psychological contract they have with their supervisor
- How they decide what to take to supervision
- How they prepare for supervision
- How they reflect upon supervision
- How they ensure the quality of the supervision they receive
- Their awareness of specific changes that have happened in them and their practice as a result of coach supervision.

We suspect – but do not yet have evidence to support – that mature coaches would tend to have more developed, more proactive approaches to coach supervision and mentoring. Certainly, in assessment centers, more mature coaches tend to give clearer, more specific responses to all of the seven issues above. From comments by systemic eclectics, we glean a number of possible differentiators, which include:

- A sense of needing to be challenged fundamentally by supervision – and hence to choose supervisors, whose background and perspective is dissimilar to their own
- The use of more than one supervisor, to provide different perspectives and challenges – for example, one with a strong formal psychological background and one with a deeper business background
- Integration of supervision and self-supervision

Personal development

What might a mature approach towards self-development as a coach look like? Based on a small sample of systemic eclectics, they might exhibit:

- Openness to a wide spectrum of learning opportunities -- reading, exploration with peers, supervision, conferences, workshops and so on
- Self-coaching – proposing insightful questions to themselves
- Networked learning – building around them a network of peers, who bring different perspectives but a similar dedication to learning
- Engagement with research and/or development of the profession – for example, using writing as a vehicle for self-discovery

Boundaries

You don't have to be a psychologist to recognise phenomena such as projection, dependency or sociopathy. But you do need at least some understanding of psychological and behavioural processes. Assessment centres have, however, revealed some very dangerous coaches, who have little appreciation of boundaries. For example, the coach, who claimed to have done 4000 hours of coaching, but could not think of a single occasion when he had met a boundary issue!

Your personal journey as a coach

Common to all theories of maturity is a sense of progression. Inherent in the concept of wisdom is the use of reflection to raise awareness of both current and precursor states. Integral to the assessment centre design is a description of the coach's learning journey – how they make current sense of their evolution towards their current level of practice. For many, the learning journey appears to have begun and ended with a certificate or other formal recognition as a coach. Their practical experience with clients has largely reinforced the “given” knowledge, rather than inspired them to question it.

Further along the maturity spectrum, we extrapolate, coaches are able to articulate critical shifts in their awareness of themselves as coaches, of the coach-client relationship and of the coaching process. A little further along again, they are able to describe – albeit often with hesitancy – where the journey appears to be taking them. It seems that, as with other maturity models, they are aware that the centre of gravity of their maturity level is shifting and they are searching for client opportunities, insights and pivotal conversations that will assist that movement, even if their vision of where it will take them is still somewhat hazy.

Knowing who they work best with

It is arguable that all coaches are better suited to some clients and situations than others. Key factors here may be:

- Whether transfer (of knowledge/expertise) is an important dynamic in the role
- The client's perceptions (rightly or wrongly) about the importance of the coach's background and experience either inside or outside the context of coaching
- The depth of psychological/ behavioural competence required to help the client understand their issues and maintain client safety
- The perceived relative status of coach and client.

Coaches bring different kinds of life experience, and corporate buyers tend to place a higher value on coaches who have client credibility by virtue of their own experience at senior executive level. (However, assessment center data suggest that a high level of experience in management, when not accompanied by a high level of coaching maturity, represents poor value for money and may sometimes do more harm than good.)

Conception of a fully functioning person

For many coaches Rogers' (1961) conception of a fully functioning person may describe the coach's perception of what it means to be human. Many ex-executives have a much more business-like model. Whatever model one has, it is useful to articulate it, so that clients know where the coach is coming from and the coach realises that views or hints about what the client might do or aspire to, come from a position rather than appearing out of thin air.

Making the transition to a system eclectic coach

So how can and do coaches mature into systemic eclectics? One ingredient is likely to be time. Malcolm Gladwell (2008) summarises research into exceptional performance in a range of activities from business to sport and suggests that it takes 10,000 hours to achieve mastery in any field. Certainly, all the systemic eclectics we have observed have been involved with coaching – or with related disciplines – for a good many years. But putting in the hours does not automatically create mastery –

there has additionally to be an immense amount of reflection, experimentation and adaption of practice.

For systemic eclectics, we observe that the learning they acquire shows them how much more they could learn. It's like climbing a mountain – the higher you ascend, the bigger and more distant the horizon. Feeling comfortable with this diminishing perspective of one's own importance and competence relative to what might conceivably be possible, requires a great deal of personal maturity, we suspect.

If there is one characteristic of systemic eclectics, which can potentially be learned and used by coaches at any level of maturity – and can possibly speed the transition between levels – it is this ability to savour where you are, to contextualise it and to be able to look both forwards and backwards along the path. Accepting and valuing your current state may be the critical component in achieving the next level of maturity!

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Referees

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