



Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

Coaching Practice, Business Empathy and Psychology: Creating Balance

All of us come to coaching with the education, experiences and professional lenses of prior careers. How does this orientation come into play in our coaching practice? How can we create an appropriately balanced "three-legged stool" of coaching skills, business empathy and psychology in our practice? This month's column steps slightly outside of formal, traditional research practice to provide a summary of an applied research session offered at the 2nd European Coaching Psychology Conference.

Predispositions in Coaching

Presenters and researchers Marsden, Humphry, Stopford and Houlder[1] conducted a skill-based session at the conference to encourage the participants to reflect on three areas: learning edges for their continuing development as business coaches; managing boundaries; and effective presentation of their coaching practice. The presentation session began with a brief discussion of the authors' experiences in supervising coaches. They suggest that coaches' prior professional expertise influences which aspects of the client's agenda they place a focus on: business strategists tend to coach around strategy, HR people tend to coach managing or

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Researcher's Haiku

Every day, priests

*minutely examine the Law
and endlessly chant
complicated sutras.*

*Before doing that, though,
they should learn how to read
the love letters sent by the
wind and rain, the snow and
moon.*

Ikkyu(Ikkyu Sojun)

(1394-1481)

*(Readers are invited to e-mail their
researcher's haiku - original or otherwise-for
inclusion in future issues. Your feedback on
this issue is welcome, too!)*

References

[1] H. Marsden, S. Humphrey, J. Stopford and D. Holder. (2010) *Balancing business empathy and psychology in coaching practice. The Coaching Psychologist*. 6 (1). June 2010

development. To further explore these predispositions, the authors presented session participants with a brief case study and asked them to identify: (1) possible goals for the client; (2) the goals which were most within the coach's own comfort zone; (3) the goals for which the client was most likely to trust the coach. Consistent with the authors' observations in supervision, psychologists in the audience tended to prefer a focus on the individual (e.g. energy levels, relationship issues). Participants who had a background in business or consulting tended to focus on strategic issues (e.g. asking about types of analyses performed by the client's

Exploring the Implications of Preference

After asking participants to reflect and consider the past, present and desired states of their coaching careers, the authors report three patterns. First, that participants tended to overstate their developmental needs (what they lack by way of knowledge or experience) and underestimate the value of what they currently are able to offer. A second finding was that each "leg" of the model offers a map for a journey rather than being a fixed point or destination. In other words, the participants regard themselves as works in progress and the authors assess a high degree of ambition in planned personal and professional development. Third was the observation that coaches often choose to invest in developing the underdeveloped leg: those with business mastery may pursue development of coaching skills; those with mastery in psychology may invest in developing broader business knowledge. These findings raised further questions about how much knowledge/experience/skill is required for mastery and whether mastery in all three areas is necessary. Furthermore, is it possible to be a master in more than one dimension? What about establishing and maintaining boundaries across all three dimensions? There are implications of this exploration for the teaching of coaches as well, insofar as programs which focus on the coaching dimension alone may have two unfortunate consequences. The first of these is implying that coaching can be learned in isolation from and understanding of

the human psychological processes and business contexts. The second of these is that such a coaching skills focus excludes the potential contribution of coaches with significant knowledge and experience in the other two dimensions.

Conclusion

A second activity set in the session presented a profile of an organization across four stages of the lifecycle. The results are provided only briefly in the article. The authors conclude with a summary of some key principles in ensuring the best match between client demand and coach supply. They outline the various stakeholders who may be involved in the "demand" side, noting that clients choose coaches based on both "good and bad knowledge or expectations", the topic they want to address and boundaries they may set around disclosure. The authors also note the growing presence of coach brokering organizations and discuss the implications for how individual coaches present themselves to potential clients as well as to such organizations.

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