



## Currents in Coaching Research Newsletter

### The Implicit Models that Guide the Coaching Process

This month's column veers slightly away from my usual focus on experimental or theory-driven research to take a look at a "think piece" directed at helping coaching practitioners better understand the models and principles which underpin their practice. In *Understanding Implicit Models that Guide the Coaching Process*, authors Barner and Higgins lay out four specific models which they propose "inform the practice and shape the approaches that OD practitioners take in directing coaching assessments and interventions." (p.148)

Within a coaching engagement, the coach's perspective or mental model frames how they interpret the client and the coaching context. The mental model acts as a lens for the information obtained through assessments, client input and other data sources such as performance reviews and 360 surveys. The interpretation guides how the coach chooses to proceed in a coaching engagement. These mental models are based on a set of beliefs which the coach holds about individuals, organizations and the change process. They are further influenced by the coach's own experiences, knowledge base and comfort level with various assessment tools and coaching interventions. Thus, it is useful for coaches to become aware of their own mental models to better understand the circumstances to which they are best suited and also to become aware of possible limitations or biases.

Barner and Higgins offer four models: a clinical model, a behavioral model, a systems model and a social constructionist model. For each of these, the authors provide a comparison and contrast on four key factors: the goals of coaching, the coaching change process, the coach's role and the focus of coaching (i.e. what coaches explore). Within each model, the authors summarize three key aspects: guiding beliefs, the assessment process and caveats or limitations.

The guiding beliefs of the clinical model encourage the coach to effect change "from the inside out" by encouraging the client to engage in honest self disclosure and examination. The goal of coaching in this model is to promote client insight and performance shifts based on the insights. Coaches working from this model seek to understand a client's personal history, interpersonal relationship patterns, stress management and personality characteristics. Assessment tools used in this model rely heavily on clinically oriented instruments measuring personality, traits and thinking patterns such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator, the FIRO-B and similar instruments.

The authors suggest three possible pitfalls in operating from the clinical model. The first is a concern about the coach's qualifications and the knowledge base necessary to understand deep-seated emotional or personality problems. The second is a tendency to rely on a limited sampling of behavior to support broad conclusions about the client's traits and patterns, or to overextend the application of a diagnostic label and preclude the possibility of change. A third concern about this model is the potential for role confusion on the part of the client. A coaching agreement must clearly articulate matters of confidentiality and any appropriate boundaries between personal and job performance issues.

The second model presented in the article is the behavioral model. The coaching focus within this model is facilitating the client's understanding of the impact of their behaviors and assisting clients to change those behaviors to the organization's standards and expectations. Within the model, the coach may take a trainer role as well as being a learning facilitator. The assessment process includes feedback from 360 processes, performance appraisals and structured questionnaires and interviews directed at determining appropriate areas for behavioral change. Behavioral change is examined in the context of improved job performance.

The authors offer three caveats for coaches working within this model. The first is ensuring that coaches find the proper balance between effecting the behavioral changes desired by the organization and the client's personal change goals and needs. This also points to ensuring that the coaches not become overly directive in the establishment of coaching goals. The second concern is that a narrow focus on changing targeted behaviors may limit the coach's ability to perceive other relevant aspects of the client, such as patterns or client history, or organizational issues which contribute to sustaining the problem behaviors. The third caveat is related to the narrow-focus concern in that a focus on changing present behaviors may overlook the

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### Researcher's Haiku

Daffodils spring up  
Like sunny yellow questions.  
Tell me- is it spring?

(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

Robert Barner and Julie Higgins. *Understanding Implicit Models that Guide the Coaching Process*. *Journal of Management Development*, v. 26, no. 2, 2007, pp. 148-158.

possibility that those behaviors manifestations of an underlying psychological disorder.

The systems model requires coaches to view the client in the context of the organizational system. Coaches working within this model seek to engender buy-in and support of the client's manager and other relevant stakeholders, thus changing the organization while working with the individual client. Assessments used in this model include systems modeling, assessments of organizational culture, analysis of rewards structures and other systemic aspects.

There are four potential pitfalls for coaches working from a systems model. The first is the challenge of getting all of the system stakeholders on board. The second is getting the client's manager to buy into the role of a support agent when she/he may be a part of the problem. The third is the possibility that coaches may inadvertently collude with clients by putting emphasis on the organizational aspects of the client's performance issue. The final challenge arises in observing that organizational systems are dynamic and constantly changing. Thus it is difficult for the coach to maintain a comprehensive and updated model of the organizational system and coaching context.

The authors note that the final model, social-constructionist, is recent and the "most controversial". Within this framework, the coach places the focus on the client's story, with attention to language and how the client constructs experiences. A key concept is that "narratives are not simple descriptions of the world, but selectively edited views of the world." (p. 153). Coaches within this model help their clients to articulate their stories of themselves and others as heroes, villains, victims, central characters or marginal performers. By helping the client to shift frames, the coach assists the client to "re-story" themselves and their work experiences. Assessment involves deep listening to the client's stories and the use of probing questions to surface assumptions, beliefs and interpretations.

The potential pitfalls include the coach's tendency to interpret the client's story through his own lens, thus missing the client's perspective. The possibility of collusion with the client arises in staying outside the story and suggesting that the client's performance problems are simply a different interpretation of an experience. A third caution requires the coach to keep the organizational needs and goals in mind and maintain a focus on the story as it relates to the client's work performance.

The essay ends with a brief case study to which each of the four models is applied and a few words about the limits of the essay. Barner and Higgins encourage coaches to "locate ourselves on the map", a position which I strongly endorse.

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