

A pluralistic approach to coaching

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A pluralistic approach to coaching and coaching psychology is proposed, based on Cooper and McLeod's (2011) pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy. Since we live in increasing complexity, it can be assumed that there are many right ways to coaching. The pluralistic approach suggests that instead of leaving the coach responsible for choosing the right interventions for their coachees it might be better – not just to trust the coachee with the content – but to actively encourage them to co-determine the process. Setting up a feedback culture, and regular metacommunication, may make it more likely that high quality decision-making will be realised in practice. Such an approach also helps to develop the coachee's collaborative capacity, which is in high demand in work and business. A pluralistic coaching approach resonates with the current zeitgeist's values: of desiring both autonomy and belonging.

Keywords: coaching; pluralistic coaching; pluralism; shared decision-making; coachee-centred attitude; collaborative capacity; feedback culture; diversity.

Living in a digimodern society

COACHING THEORY has shifted its focus in recent years from the specific and measurable to values and reflective capacity. This is a response to rapid changes and increasing uncertainty in business and life.

Emerging new theories (e.g. Clutterbuck & David, 2013; Stelter, 2014; Western, 2012) have challenged the late 20th century's most popular coaching models (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Joseph & Bryant-Jefferies; O'Connell & Palmer, 2008; Whitmore, 2002). What is common about these theories is that they all argue for the necessity of a paradigm shift in coaching and coaching psychology, and they base their claims on the needs of a rapidly changing and super-connected globalised world. This change has been attributed to our postmodern living conditions: the decline of traditional religions and a dramatic increase in economic and technological developments (Spencer, 2001).

Postmodernism is variably interpreted but generally brings together those thinkers who share a preference for scepticism, antifoundational bias and a dislike of authority (Sim, 2001).

Gergen (1991) as a social psychologist, argues that the individual in postmodern times is overwhelmed by information, by the diversity of values, and by the multiplicity of their relationships. These have been generated by the development of communication technology, globalisation and multiculturalism. Going beyond postmodernism, Kirby (2009, 2010) argues for a new cultural paradigm, *digimodernism*, which stands for the emergence of a different logic in (digital) culture, mainly dictated by the popularisation of the internet and the digital technology revolution. Digimodernism shares many similarities with postmodernism (Kirby, 2010). However, one of the distinct characteristics of digimodernism is the change in understandings of authorship of cultural products or 'texts' (Kirby, 2009). On the web, it is not entirely clear now who is the author and who is the reader anymore, or who is the producer and who is the consumer (Kirby, 2009; Mulady, 2010). Even if people only just sequence the content they want to see, that can leave the marketer out of control when they want to advertise.

With the advent of Web 2.0 people have become technologically empowered to participate actively in marketing processes now, by sharing, commenting, liking or blogging about products, news and ideas on the internet. Consequently, some refer to this approach to marketing as ‘collaborative marketing’ (Cova & Cova, 2009, as cited in Mulady, 2010). People co-create, take part and not just consume (digital) media anymore (Mulady, 2010).

A specific example is content marketing. This field experienced rapid growth in the past few years (NewsCred, 2014). It is now recognised that people want authentic, relevant and personalised content from the marketers. NewsCred (2014), ‘thought-leaders’ in this area, quote Doug Kessler in their online white paper on content marketing strategy: ‘Traditional marketing talks at people. Content marketing talks with them.’

The world of work

Another area which has been highly affected by the rapidly changing conditions and digital revolution is the world of work. By now, cloud technology and social media platforms enable organisations to think beyond their traditional boundaries in terms of recruiting their workforce, and this makes diversity and adaptability highly valued both in the individual and in the organisation (Institute for the Future, 2011).

The Global Talent 2021 Survey (Oxford Economics, 2012) found four main categories as key areas for development for successful future human capital outcomes. These are digital skills, agile thinking skills, interpersonal and communication skills, and global operating skills.

Another large scale survey, *The Future Work Skills 2020* (Institute for the Future, 2011) also draws attention to the ability of sense making and being critical to decision making (agile thinking skills) and social intelligence to ensure effective collaboration through trusting relationships (interpersonal and communication skills). Moreover,

situational adaptivity, cross-cultural competency, using technology for communication, collaboration and managing workload (global operating skills and digital skills) were found to be very important. In the end, this survey also adds trans-disciplinarity to the list of skills in demand which is about the ability to understand other disciplines and the ability to communicate effectively across several departments.

Hawkins (2012), a leading advocate of coaching cultures in organisations, argues that companies for the future should practice high critique and high support at work and at business. This means it is necessary to develop people’s ability to challenge and collaborate, and this will help to deal with economic and environmental challenges they possibly face when aiming towards continuous development and sustainability in their organisations.

A pluralistic approach to coaching

A new approach to coaching that may suit this postmodern, digimodern era is a pluralistic one. This is not a set of techniques but a commitment in practice to deeply value the coachee’s needs, which can be achieved by encouraging him or her to actively participate in the management of the coaching process. Through this, the coachee is not only working towards their goals, but also stretching his or her collaborative and challenging capacity. These are skills they potentially can transfer to other areas of work and life.

Pluralism in terms of religion and culture is more than diversity, tolerance, relativism and listening of the other. Diana L. Eck (2006), who is the head of The Pluralism Project at Harvard University describes pluralism as:

- ...the energetic engagement with diversity...
- ...the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference...
- ...the encounter of commitments...
- ...based on dialogue...

Transferring these principles into coaching could certainly be useful if we consider the skills, discussed above, that are currently in demand in the workplace, and for the future. But how can we bring them into practice?

Pluralistic psychotherapy and counselling, developed by Cooper and McLeod (2011) in the UK, is based on a postmodern and poststructuralist philosophy. At its heart is also an ethical perspective which builds on humanistic and existential philosophy, where the 'Other' is deeply valued and respected.

Two basic principles of the pluralistic approach to counselling and psychotherapy have been articulated as follows:

1. Lots of different things can be helpful to clients.
2. If we want to know what is most likely to help clients, we should talk to them about it. (Cooper & McLeod, 2011, p.24)

Pluralistic practice draws on a wide variety of approaches, but moves beyond eclectic and integrative practices. It is centred around a collaborative dialogue between client and practitioner. In this respect, it does not simply rely on what the practitioner intuitively assumes will or might be good for a client (Cooper & McLeod, 2011).

In pluralistic counselling and psychotherapy, clients are actively encouraged to be involved in the decision making process about what kind of interventions they think would do the best for them. The practitioner is not expected to deliver whatever the client says but rather expected to be ready to discuss and negotiate with their client about what would be most likely to serve them.

Metatherapeutic communication is the process of communication about the therapeutic process, itself, through which a feedback culture and collaborative practice can be realised (Cooper & McLeod, 2011). Cooper et al. (2016) also argue that metatherapeutic communication can serve a therapeutic function: increasing the client's interpersonal relating, ability to dialogue, assertiveness, and reflective functioning.

It has the capacity, they argue, to build self-confidence by involving the client in decisions as an equal person in the room.

Is there a case, then, for 'metacoaching communication', when coach and coachee would communicate about what is happening in the coaching session? Currently, Ely et al. (2010) found that executive coaches tend to ask for feedback on an ad hoc, rather than systematic, basis. This might suggest that client satisfaction and process is not monitored well at the moment in coaching, and coaches may not engage regularly in metacoaching communication with their clients.

A pluralistic framework for coaching

Cooper and McLeod's (2011) framework for pluralistic therapy might fit coaching well. In this framework, the client's own *goals* are considered to anchor the process (both goals for the therapeutic process and goals for life). This provides the basis to talk about the *tasks* to be undertaken (i.e. what macro-level areas of thinking or behaviour to focus on to achieve the coachee's goals). The *methods* of completing the tasks are then considered (i.e. the specific activities of coach and coachee at the micro level). Figure 1 shows a possible way to adapt the pluralistic framework to coaching.

Talking through the goals, methods and tasks with the coachee can help the coach to practice in a coachee-centred way, enhance the supervisory alliance, and encourage metacommunication such that coach and coachee can reach high quality decisions.

Practical steps to develop the coachee's collaborative capacity

Based on Cooper and McLeod's (2011) work, the following steps can be suggested in pluralistic coaching practice:

- Provide information about coaching prior to the first meeting, so the coachee will know what to expect in the session. This can be supported by a brochure, telephone call, or email about the approach.

Figure 1: A pluralistic framework for coaching.



- Establish a feedback culture from the beginning by reminders to the coachee that the coach is interested in his or her ideas, preferences and feedback.
- Explain the different options that are available to coachees, and what these would actually mean in practice. Provide evidence, where available, on the typical outcomes of particular ways of working.
- Engage in metacoaching communication with the coachee about the process of coaching itself. Review goals, methods and tasks on an ongoing basis. This may be particularly helpful if coach or coachee are uncertain about what is going on in the coaching, or if there is a rupture in the coaching relationship.
- Actively invite discussion on all aspects of the coaching work, from duration, through payment, to possible involvement in research. This discussion can prove particularly interesting as the digital age offers a range of non-traditional ways for interaction, such as instant messaging or even communicating with pictures.
- Adapt the style of relating to the coachee's needs and preferences. Different people have different needs and this can mean to adapt to at what level a coachee wants to collaborate.
- Use outcome forms (for instance, a goal assessment form) to monitor progress in a way that fits the coachee. This can help to keep the process of coaching on track.
- Use process measures to facilitate conversation about preferences and the process itself. The pluralistic therapy personalisation form can be a helpful guide, though it still needs to be tested for coaching. (The therapy and supervision versions can be found at www.pluralistictherapy.com.)

Early research into coaches' perception of pluralism

In a qualitative study with six experienced female coaches, Pendle (2014) explored the potential of the pluralistic approach in coaching. It was found that the participants saw pluralism as offering benefits to coaches

mainly in terms of providing a greater structure to organise their knowledge and practice and an enriched sense of professional identity. Participants seemed to have few issues with blending different coaching approaches in their practices. However, it was evident that most of them found it more difficult to grasp, and apply, the philosophical foundation of the pluralistic approach. They also struggled to realise close collaboration during the coaching process with their coachees. In this respect, they found it easy to think about pluralism (for instance, 'I love the idea of the collaborative approach, it's very much the ethos of how I see coaching', Pendle, 2014, p.16); but tended to think differently in practice.

Conclusion

Are you talking *at*, or talking *with*, your coachees? Do you think coaches intuitively know what is good for their coachees? How far are you willing to go to share responsibility with your coachee in designing the coaching process?

This article invited the readers to think critically about coaching practice: global economy, super-connectedness and digital revolutions that transform everyday and working life. The coaching profession has already started questioning the traditional approaches to coaching, which tend to offer easy and quick problem solving or solution finding with measurable and predictable outcomes.

While there are many good ways to practise coaching, coaches tend to be expected to take responsibility for selecting interventions and managing the process (Passmore, 2014). By contrast, the counselling and wider health care field has started to consider – and apply – shared decision-making, which involves the client actively in figuring out how to approach his or her issues.

While all coaches say they 'collaborate' or work in a 'partnership' with their clients or coachees and there is a 'feedback culture' in the sessions, there is little evidence that they

really have one (Ely et al., 2010). Preliminary research about a pluralistic approach indicates that coaches found the idea of collaboration inspiring, but struggled to practice in a truly collaborative manner (Pendle, 2014).

The pluralistic approach, and its strategies, may be helpful for coaches for this reason. With the pluralistic framework, they can organise their practice and work with coachees in a more collaborative way.

Cooper and McLeod (2011) differentiate between a pluralistic perspective and pluralistic practice. In this respect, practitioners with a specific coaching approach still can have a pluralistic view. This means they adapt their work to individual needs as much as possible, recognise their limitations, and strive to make informed referrals where appropriate.

Many work skills, in demand for the foreseeable future, could be developed by a collaborative type of coaching. For the development of interpersonal and communication skills – such as co-creativity and brainstorming, relationship building, teaming and collaboration – pluralistic coaching might be especially able to contribute.

From the global operating skills, a pluralistic approach to coaching has the potential to support the development of cultural sensitivity, and the ability to manage diverse employees through the promotion of its humanistic and progressive values.

Using a pluralistic framework can also help to identify micro practices in coaching and help to design research into coaching effectiveness. Future research, for instance, could look into how satisfied coachees really are with coaching and whether a pluralistic approach would be useful. It would be also interesting to explore whether coachees feel comfortable to give feedback to their coaches, and what might inhibit or facilitate this process. Comparative and observational studies could also examine whether those who participated in pluralistic coaching develop better collaborative skills.

People have access to information on the internet, and they can take control of what is happening with them in the digital world. However, the line between the digital and real world is increasingly blurred. It will be interesting to see whether coaching will be able to meet the needs of those people: who both want to experience agency in their lives, but also a sense of belongingness.

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