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Understanding implicit models that guide the coaching process

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to provide readers with a better understanding of four theory models that inform coaching practice, and to reflect on how the theoretical approach that one adopts is likely to shape one's coaching practice.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is based on the authors' combined 30 years of experience as internal and external executive coaches. Organizational examples are provided to illustrate key concepts.

Findings – The authors conclude that, although coaches tend to be eclectic in the methods that they employ, they tend to center their craft on one of four prevailing coaching models: the clinical model, the behavioral model, the systems model, and the social constructionist model. These models inform the practice and shape the approaches that OD practitioners take in directing coaching assessments and interventions.

Practical implications – This article serves as a "think piece" to help OD practitioners understand the theoretical assumptions, constraints, and caveats that are associated with each model. The authors strongly believe that having this knowledge enables practitioners to introduce a higher level of discipline and effectiveness into the coaching process.

Originality/value – This article represents a unique attempt to bridge theory and practice by encouraging readers to reflect on how each individual's practice is developed from, and informed by, a particular theory position. It represents one of the few papers that have tackled this particular management development topic.

Keywords Coaching, Individual development, Social structure

Paper type Conceptual paper

Executive coaching is commonly accepted as an activity that can support individual development and organizational effectiveness. To that end, more organizations are willing to invest in coaching for those leaders who are recognized as worth the effort. Given this growing investment and the strong impact that effective coaching can have on organizational performance, we owe our clients and their organizations an honest accounting of our backgrounds and our methods.

Understanding the theory that guides our practice

As practitioners, it is imperative that we know who we are as coaches and to be able to describe explicitly what we do with, and for, our clients. This, in turn, means thinking through the primary theoretical model that guides our actions as coaches. The authors contend that although coaches tend to be eclectic in the methods that they employ, whether or not they are aware of it they tend to center their craft around one of four



prevailing coaching models: the clinical model, the behavioral model, the systems model, and (as a more recent development) the social constructionist model.

The goal of coaching is to improve an individual's effectiveness at work in ways that are linked to the organization's business strategy. While all four models support this overarching goal, the authors believe that over time each of us tends to adopt a particular model. We base our choice on both the underlying beliefs we hold about how individual leaders change within organizational settings, and our own professional experience and personal comfort level with the assessment and intervention methods that are an integral part of each approach.

The problem occurs when we, as coaches, fail to step back and take a careful look at which one of these theory models primarily informs our practice. When we lack a clear understanding of the theory base that shapes our practice, we are less likely to adapt our practice to those shortcomings and constraints that accompany the particular model that we employ. In addition, we need to keep in mind that our clients enter into coaching armed with their own implicit models of how they expect the change process to work. If we fail to explain to our clients the theoretical assumptions that guide our work, we may find ourselves at odds with their expectations, resulting in the loss of trust, needless communication failures, and missed opportunities for making a positive impact.

Please note that none of these four models can claim supremacy. All four models offer distinctive advantages, and each represents a unique perspective on personal and organizational change. We will briefly discuss the theoretical assumptions that guide each model and the constraints and caveats that are associated with their application. Tables I-IV summarize some of the key characteristics that differentiate these four coaching models.

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Factor	Clinical model	Behavioral model	Systems model	SC model
What are the goals of coaching?	Help the client change self-perceptions and personality	Help the client change some problematic area of behavior	Help the client align personal goals and approaches with those of the organization	Help the client author new social realities how they and others experience their roles as organizational participants

Table I.
How the four models view the goals of coaching

Factor	Clinical model	Behavioral model	Systems model	SC model
Where does change come from?	From the inside; changes often extend across the workplace and personal spheres	From changing behavior; thoughts constitute another form of behavior; change is most potent when it has a limited target area	From changing interactions between the client, key "others," and the org. system; and supports and constraints within the contextual field	From changing the prevailing narrative; the way in which clients "story" themselves and are "storied" by others

Table II.
How the four models view the coaching change process

An overview of the four models

1. The clinical model

Guiding beliefs. The goal of the clinical model is to help the client gain insight into herself as a leader and individual, and to affect constructive changes in performance based on this learning. Within this model the coach works “from the inside out” to encourage honest self-disclosure and examination (Berglas, 2002). Many coaches who operate from this paradigm contend that, to be successful, the coach must discover much about the client’s personal history and investigate factors such as interpersonal relationships, the management of daily stress, and the influence of significant personality characteristics (Berglas, 2002; Williams *et al.*, 2002).

The assessment process. A central question that guides the coach’s work within this model is, “What is revealed about the underlying structure of the client’s personality that sheds light on his performance issues”? To address this question, clinically-oriented coaches tend to rely heavily on the use of psychometric instruments such as the FIRO and the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI). Such instruments are used in an attempt to better understand the client’s overall personality, and the prevailing thoughts and beliefs that guide the client’s actions. An underlying assumption is that the presented workplace issue that drew the client to coaching is related to broader issues that are usually representative of repetitive, dysfunctional patterns in the client’s life.

Caveats. Within the clinical approach the coach takes on the role of counselor and therapist. At issue here is whether some OD practitioners lack the formal psychological background to appropriately address any deep-seated emotional or personality problems that may be encountered in coaching (Hodgetts, 2002).

A related issue involves the tendency of some clinically-oriented coaches to form broad inferences about a client based on a limited sampling of behavior. Once a label such as “passive aggressive” is used to describe a person, the label may take on a life of its own, and follow a manager over the course of his career as a negative self-fulfilling prophecy (Rosenhan, 1973). In doing so, it may color the way the client is perceived by managers, team members, and other important organizational stakeholders (Eden and Shani, 1982; Eden, 1992; Livingston, 1969; Manzoni and Barsoux, 1998; Dweck, 2000). A related issue is whether the use of diagnostic labels impedes clients from being able

Table III.
How the four models view the coach’s role

Factor	Clinical model	Behavioral model	Systems model	SC model
What is the coach’s role?	Counselor and therapist	Advisor and trainer	Systems modeler	Ethnographer and narrative analyst

Table IV.
How the four models view the focus of coaching

Factor	Clinical model	Behavioral model	Systems model	SC model
What do we explore as coaches?	The underlying structure of the client’s personality	Recurring ineffective behavior	Ineffective patterns and feedback loops	The client’s story

to sustain change in their lives by framing their coaching issues in terms of aspects of self that are immutable to change (Mischel and Mendoza-Denton, 2003).

Still another issue that sometimes surfaces with the use of this approach is role confusion on the part of the client. Most people who enter into therapy assume that they have entered into a type of implicit psychological contract with the therapist, in which what they say to their therapist will be treated as privileged information. Unfortunately, this same level of confidentiality does not extend to coaches (Sherman and Freas, 2004). If coaching is paid for by the client's organization, and the client enters into coaching at the request of his manager or HR director, then the coach will have some responsibility to report back on a regular basis regarding the client's progress. At issue here is whether a protective "fire-wall" has been established between work-related issues that are closely tied to the client's performance success, and deep-seated personal issues, such as an impending divorce, that lie outside of the purview and domain of the client's organization. Even if coaches do not share such information, they may be influenced by the client's disclosure of personal information.

2. The behavioral model

Guiding beliefs. The behavioral model is predicated on the belief that coaches can best support personal change by encouraging clients to understand the impact of their behavior on themselves and others, and by looking for ways to constructively adapt their behavior to the expectations of their organizations (Skiffington and Zeus, 2003). Behaviorally-oriented coaches assume the roles of guides and trainers in assisting clients to change problematic behaviors or develop new work competencies. Consequently, these coaches employ assessment techniques such as performance appraisals, 360° feedback, and data gleaned from structured questionnaires or interviews to obtain in-depth information on targeted areas for change.

The assessment process. In contrast to clinically-focused coaches, behaviorally-oriented coaches tend to define coaching goals from the much more limited perspective of those leadership behaviors that have been targeted for change (Skiffington and Zeus, 2003). In doing so, they are guided by the question, "What changes to behavior would help the client to perform more effectively on his/her job?"

Caveats. A potential issue is whether the behavioral approach to coaching may, at times, be too directive and manipulative. After all, if the goal is to "change problematic behavior" who defines what is problematic? Given that executive coaches are often paid directly by clients' organizations, coaches must be able to balance the organization's expectations with the client's personal change goals and concerns.

A second caveat is that behavioral coaches may focus so exclusively on a narrow range of targeted behaviors that they fail to gather useful information on both the client's past history, and those broader organizational issues that may be affecting the client's behavior (O'Neill, 2000). Consider a leader who is referred to coaching because she continually finds herself entangled in arguments with her new manager. As a coach in this situation, it would be helpful to know whether the client displayed this type of argumentative behavior with previous managers and, if so, whether such behavior was ignored, discouraged, or even encouraged.

Finally, some clinically-oriented coaches contend that behaviorally-based coaches may define the change process in terms of helping the client adapt new behaviors,

rather than view the client's presented problem behavior as merely symptomatic of deeper, underlying psychological issues (Berglas, 2002).

3. The systems model

Guiding beliefs. The systems perspective views leaders as intricate parts of the organizational systems in which they work (O'Neill, 2000). This approach contends that coaches must first understand the organizational context in which the behavior is embedded. This perspective is represented by the defining question: "How can the client's leadership issues be understood in terms of the organizational system?"

Based on the belief that it is difficult to affect changes to leadership behavior without concurrently making changes to the surrounding system (Tobias, 1996), systems-directed coaches emphasize that the coaching change process requires the support and alignment of the client's manager and other key organizational stakeholders (O'Neill, 2000).

The assessment process. Systems coaches take on the role of systems modeler, in deciphering those effective and ineffective patterns and feedback loops that characterize the client's interactions with other organizational members and system processes. Within the systems perspective, the focal point for coaching becomes the field of social interactions in which the client is embedded. These social interactional fields (O'Neill, 2000) are often invisible to those within them, requiring the coach to surface these patterns and make them visible to the client and key stakeholders.

Systems-oriented coaches take a broader, more organizationally focused approach to the assessment process. If 360° feedback instruments are used, the coach may also review aggregate reports on many organizational leaders, to determine if certain "problem behaviors" identified for a client extend across a team, or departmental level. In the same way, system coaches employ interview protocols that go beyond gathering information about the client's performance and related leadership behavior, to include important changes that may be occurring in the organizational setting.

Another important assessment technique involves the use of graphic models to illustrate the organizational system that frames the client's behavior.

As an example, consider the case of developmental coaching, where the coaching goal is to better prepare the client for different and challenging leadership responsibilities. In this design, the coach can work with the client to construct a model that includes such elements as performance goals, reward structures, stakeholder expectations, and the leader's current behavior. The client can then be encouraged to think through the types of changes to leadership style and skills that might be required to adapt to a totally new system configuration, such as inheriting a position that involves a dedicated profit and loss (P&L) center.

Caveats. Given that it is impossible to affect changes to an entire system by changing only one isolated part of the system, one challenge that system coaches face is to get all stakeholders who represent key "system change levers" on board with the coaching process (Hodgetts, 2002; Sherman and Freas, 2004). These stakeholders typically include the client's manager and team members, but may also include selected peers, senior-level managers, and internal HR leaders.

A related challenge is getting the client's manager to understand the role that she plays in encouraging the client to change. This is a concept that some senior managers

actively resist. They often look to coaches to “fix” their people and take issue with any implications that they may be embedded in the structure of the problem.

Still another caveat is to be wary of engaging in collusion with your clients, by placing such emphasis on the role played by the external elements in an organizational system that you fail to focus on the client’s own role as a leader and change agent (O’Neill, 2000). When this happens, the client ends up feeling that their performance improvement issues are largely due to organizational inadequacies. Accordingly, it is important to keep the client focused on the pivotal role that he plays in changing those aspects of the organizational system that are impeding his performance.

A final caution involves working from an incomplete model. To this end, it is useful to develop a graphic model of the organizational system, and then continually refine and update this model based on additional feedback from the client and key stakeholders.

4. The social constructionist model

Guiding beliefs. The social constructionist model represents the newest and perhaps, most controversial, theoretical model for exploring executive coaching. From the social constructionist perspective, it is through our social interactions and the symbolic frameworks within which we interact that our social identities are constructed (Blumer, 1986; Goffman, 1959). This perspective is represented by the question, “What is the client’s story, and how does this differ from how the client has been storied by his organization?”

Another key concept is that the language we use does not just describe some underlying reality, but rather plays an active role in shaping and framing that reality (Ford, 1999). For example, what constitutes a “great leader”, an “effective team”, or a “high potential performer” varies widely depending on how these concepts have been constructed within different organizational cultures.

Another important tenet of the social constructionist perspective is that language manifests itself in the form of narrative. As Karl Weick (1996), the author of *Sensemaking in Organizations* suggests, we make sense of what happens to us in organizational settings by looking backwards and creating mental reconstructions following key events. These reconstructions take the form of narrative stories. In the telling and retelling of stories, we confirm or challenge prevailing beliefs about the roles we play in organizational life (Ford, 1999). We are affected both by the stories we construct and how, in turn, we are embedded in the stories constructed by others.

Narratives are not simple descriptions of the world, but selectively edited views of the world. As clients tell their stories, and the client’s stakeholders frame their own versions of these same stories, each party selectively highlights portions of their narratives while other information is ignored or minimized (Freedman and Combs, 1996). Through these stories we emerge, in our own eyes and in the eyes of others, as heroes or villains, central characters or marginal performers.

By helping clients understand how they selectively “frame” their experiences (Fairhurst and Sarr, 1996), coaches can help these managers author new realities about the roles they play as organizational participants and leaders. A part of this intervention extends beyond the client to help other key organizational stakeholders better understand the role that their own story constructions play in the performance issues that brought the client to coaching. This is especially important, given the key

role that these organizational stakeholders can play in developing narratives that support desired change (Hosking and Morley, 1991; Kegan and Lahey, 2001).

The assessment process. A key implication of the social constructionist perspective is that the language that a coach uses in assessment and intervention plays a powerful catalytic role in the change process. As a result, the assessment process rests almost entirely on the gathering of narrative material from clients and their stakeholders. During the assessment process coaches listen carefully to how clients tell their stories as a means of better understanding the interpretive framework that guides the clients' beliefs and actions (Freedman and Combs, 1996). The coach then interviews key stakeholders to obtain their stories regarding the client. During this process, the following questions may be used to shed light on how the client interprets past and present events, and future possibilities (Barner and Higgins, 2005):

- Tell me the story of how you first came on board with this team. What were your initial expectations and feelings? Tell me what happened that led to the present situation.
- Tell me what is going on now for you.
- How do you think that your ... (manager, team members, peers, etc.) would interpret the story that you have just told me?
- How does the story end? What do you see happening in the future for you and your team?

By presenting similar questions to other organizational stakeholders, the coach begins to understand where these stories are aligned and where they diverge. Since stories are selective reconstructions of past events, coaches also listen carefully to discern:

- The respective parts of the story that are emphasized, minimized, or completely omitted by the client or key stakeholders.
- How the storyteller constructs the sequence of events to convey her understanding of cause-and-effect, and her understanding of the role she plays in the construction of those events.

The insights gained from this review can help clients understand why they may be having difficulties in their work situations, and how the words and actions that they employ help shape their relationships with other organizational members (Ford and Ford, 2002, p. 105). In this sense, the social constructionist position for coaching is closely related to that of appreciative inquiry, in suggesting that how organizational members direct their attention and the language they select to describe their (personal or organizational) future, acts as a powerful force for driving constructive change (Cooperrider, 1990; Bushe, 1995).

Caveats. When employing the social constructionist model, coaches need to be cautious not to overlay their own interpretations over those of their clients. Doing so may cause a coach to dismiss something that the client believes is important, and thus lose the client's trust. As a result, it is important to honor the client's story and work within that framework. A related social constructionist concept is the dynamic and subjective nature of the individual's story. The coach is viewed as not dealing with a fixed point of reference, but rather with an ever-evolving story based on continuing interactions. The client will make sense of her interactions based on past patterns, and

it is imperative not to dismiss or “correct” the client’s interpretation of her leadership issues.

A second caveat is that you may inadvertently collude with your clients, by inadvertently communicating to clients that performance problems merely represent different interpretations in story construction. Avoiding collusion requires keeping clients focused on how their stories impact their roles as organizational leaders. It also involves highlighting communication breakdowns and misunderstandings that may be directly related to areas in which the client’s own leadership story differs from those that organizational stakeholders construct for the client.

A final cautionary note is that coaching is about helping individuals achieve and meet organizational expectations. This requires the coach to be diligent about blending the elements of the client’s story with the pragmatics of the organization’s desired performance outcomes. Your work with the client should focus on ways she can achieve expected performance results.

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Applying the four models to a hypothetical coaching situation

As a means of comparing these four models, let us consider how the same hypothetical coaching case might be reframed and reinterpreted through these four theoretical lenses. For our example, let us take Bill, a department sales director for a US-based pharmaceutical company who was recruited six months ago from a rival company to head up all sales operations on the East Coast. While Bill’s sales strategy is excellent, since coming on board he has continually found himself enmeshed in conflicts with his direct reports. As a result, his manager has decided to attempt to try to head off additional problems by encouraging Bill to work with an external coach. Here are the types of assessment summaries that might be provided by four different coaches, as representative of these four coaching theories.

Clinical coach

Bill has an aggressive personality, as revealed in a strong need to control and dominate others. Extensive interviews with Bill suggest that this need to control may represent a character flaw that occasionally spills out into Bill’s family life. There is a question of whether this masks a deeper layer of personal insecurity, which becomes easy to understand given the anxiety of having to prove himself within a totally new company and leadership role. Bill needs to learn to feel more comfortable with himself as a person and leader, and to understand how this strong need for control is adversely affecting his work and personal life.

Behavioral coach

Bill needs to control his angry outbursts, particularly in two situations:

- (1) group settings in which he is giving critical feedback to his direct reports; and
- (2) situations in which he strongly disagrees with his direct reports.

During coaching, Bill will be provided with opportunities to engage in role-play and structured practice. Through these techniques he will learn to substitute these dysfunctional behaviors for more effective leadership behaviors. In addition, the coach will be working with Bill on a prompting system that he can alert himself to the onset of conflicts, and take steps to immediately disengage from these situations.

Systems coach

Bill has become trapped in a negative feedback loop, in which he tends to respond to tough performance targets by increasing his control and dominance. Others react to this pressure by withdrawing and passively circumventing his control. He, in turn, responds by exerting additional control, leading to a damaging cycle. Important systems constraints include the need to adjust to a different work culture – one that does not reward overly aggressive and competitive behavior – and attempting to manage the ambivalent goals of quickly turning around team performance and recalibrating performance expectations, while at the same time obtaining the support and approval of a new work team.

Social constructionist coach

Bill's story is that he was brought into the company to be a strong change agent and drive performance. He describes his initial entry into the company as a heroic saga in which he was willing to "step out on a limb to tackle some tough performance challenges". The performers in his group however, did not give him their support. When he pushed them to perform they "hid back in their comfort zones" and circumvented him to speak to his manager. He describes a series of frustrating encounters with his direct reports in which they "failed to be accountable" and "left him out in the storm". Rather than support his efforts to ramp up performance, his manager "left him to sort it out".

His direct reports tell a different story. They use metaphors that speak of destructive, chaotic change. The talk of him "blowing in like a tornado" and "relentlessly driving them right from the start". They describe him as pushing away their efforts to help and insisting on "forging ahead on his own".

Both stories contain the similar elements of Bill being storied as a strong, independent leader who entered his new organization with a strong agenda to drive change. These storylines differ in how they view Bill's role as a change agent. Bill stories himself as a misunderstood hero who forges ahead on his own, despite a lack of support. For his team, the story becomes one of a manager who drives his own personal change agenda and who pushes away others' attempts to help.

Locating yourself on the map

In the short space of this article it is impossible for the authors to do justice to these four approaches to executive coaching. Certainly, arguments could be made for the fact that we have not taken the time to clearly delineate the many ways that each of these four approaches can be differentiated, nor have we fully articulated the conditions that need to be in place before a given approach can be implemented.

Hopefully, however, we have created a starting place for discussing these four approaches under the general assumption that, as OD professionals and scholar-practitioners, it is critical for us to think through the theoretical assumptions that inform our practice. To that end, we believe that to the degree that we can effectively "locate ourselves on the map" and delineate those guiding beliefs that influence how we choose to engage with our clients, we increase our effectiveness as coaches and help insure that we meet our clients' expectations.

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