The Liberated Coach

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This article has its origins in several complementary sources: the personal coaching experiences of both myself and my co-authors in 14 books on coaching and mentoring; the experiences of coaches, who I have supervised; and observation of coaches in real plays within coach assessment centres (robust, validated processes for evaluating the competence and "fit" of executive coaches for large-scale users of external coaches). The assessment centre approach is primarily a European and S. African phenomenon currently, but multinational companies, which have experienced it, have voiced intentions to bring it to all territories, where they have a significant spend on executive coaching.

The dangers of a limited model of coaching

When David Megginson and I wrote the first volume of Techniques in Coaching and Mentoring, we found that most of the coaches we approached to contribute chapters were reliant on a very narrow range of models and techniques. Many coaches based their practice on relatively simplistic models of a coaching conversation, such as GROW and its derivatives. Among the dangers we observed in this one-model approach was that: coaching becomes mechanistic; critical clues to the client context are missed or ignored; and, whatever may be claimed to the contrary, the client can easily become manipulated to fit the coach's agenda. This is especially true with regard to goal setting, where our researches indicate that fixing upon specific goals at the start of a relationship can sometimes be a crutch for the coach, rather than for the benefit of the coachee. This review is reinforced in discussions with practising coaches, where a common reaction to our research conclusions is that coaches are pleased to be liberated from what many regard as the tyranny of overly specific goals. In man y cases, defining a clear goal may be the outcome of coaching – at which point the client has no further need of help, knowing in their own mind what they need to do and how they will do it. This is so great!

Observing coaches in real plays at assessment centres has reinforced those concerns and convinced us that effective coaches have access to a much wider internal resource of perspective, approach and technique. One of my "favourite" ghastly examples is the coach, who corralled the client into articulating a goal, then ploughed relentlessly on into the R of GROW until the client stopped the conversation, paused and said: "Actually, my real issue is that I don't feel I have a purpose in my life any more". The coach nodded sympathetically. "That's really interesting. I wish we had time to explore that. But let's park it and focus on the issue we started with…" In his reflection notes, the coach was blissfully unaware that this might note have been an appropriate response – he had followed the model!

 Based on the introduction to Clutterbuck, D & Megginson, D, Further Techniques in Coaching and Mentoring, Butterworth Heinemann, 2009.

Process-based approaches

Some coaches we engaged with had progressed beyond a simplistic model to a process, which in theory at least allows for greater flexibility. A process I define as a structured linking of related techniques and models. For example, solutions focused coaching and clean language both add some level of theoretical rigour and expect the coach to exercise creativity in the order and structure of their approach. In practice, it can be very easy to fall back into mechanistic routines. A recent demonstration of “good practice” in solutions focus observed by one of the authors at a conference was so robotic that the session could have been conducted by a machine. (In fact, a machine would have introduced fewer body-language distractions!)

The effectiveness of a process-based approach appears to depend on two factors: the appropriateness of the approach to the specific circumstances, client and issues; and the willingness of the client to engage with the process. Many of the most effective coaches we have observed go to great pains to ensure the client is both aware of and complicit in the process applied.

Coaching within a specific theoretical framework

Other coaches again were developing their practice within a particular discipline or theoretical framework – for example, cognitive-behavioural therapy, Gestalt or NLP – which offered a range of techniques within a broad philosophy of helping and human development.

The aficionados of these philosophies or disciplines are often highly enthusiastic, but this enthusiasm may at times hide a dangerous man-trap – the implicit assumption that this philosophy, powerful as it may be, is always the best approach for every client. As with process-based approaches, our observations of coaches in real plays and under panel interview indicate that critical reflection on their own practice is a fundamental driver of effectiveness. Gosh I’m grinning this is so great – and clear!

Let me emphasise here that I am not decrying any of these approaches. All are valid ways of approaching coaching and mentoring assignments and all have – in appropriate circumstances – a track record of assisting people with major changes in their life, work and circumstances. Our concern is that all can and sometimes demonstrably do lead to a rigidity of thinking about the client and their issues; and about the role and responsibilities of the coach or mentor. The model, process, or theoretical framework drives the learning conversation, rather than the learning conversation driving the selection of tools and techniques.

If there is one overall difference we see between those practitioners, who perform well under observation, and those who do not, it is how they view their practice. The more confident, more impactful candidates are those who apply a model, a process or a discipline in ways that are liberating – both for them and for the client.

Managed eclecticism – a further step towards liberation

In the recent past, we have seen an encouraging growth of innovation in all three of these approaches. We have also observed the rise in highly confident and competent coaches of a fourth approach, which we call managed eclecticism. By this, we mean 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.

Central to this concept is that:

- The initial learning conversations provide the clues as to what approaches and frameworks may be best suited to the client
- Every learning conversation is an experiment for both the coach/ mentor and the client

A cogent argument can be made that this evolution from models to managed eclecticism is a measure of the relative maturity of a coach or mentor – of how they think and behave – similarly, for example, Kegan's[1] scale of cognitive and socio-emotional development or Tolbert's[2] scale of leadership development. This is perhaps a step too far, if only because we have no direct evidence other than from unstructured observation and anecdote. Coaching and mentoring are already riddled with far too many unevidenced assumptions!

It's important as well, we suggest, not to confuse managed eclecticism with simply gathering lots of techniques and ideas. We have found that the exemplars of managed eclecticism are careful not to collect techniques and processes in the way a jackdaw collects shiny objects. Deconstructed from the philosophies, from which they derive, techniques may become meaningless, or worse, harmful. In a presentation to the 2007 EMCC conference in Stockholm, Helena Dolny of South Africa's Standard Bank referred to a subset of coaches, who went through the company's assessment centres. These people had a lot of techniques, which they had failed to integrate or fully understand. Such coaches have also been likened to a handyman, who clouts nails with a screwdriver and fixes screws with a hammer. No consistency of process may be worse than over-rigid models and processes. The true eclectics we have encountered share a number of characteristics:

- 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 do not share a common philosophy; rather, they have developed their own philosophy – one, which continually expands and adapts, evolving as they absorb new knowledge and ideas

[1] Kegan, R (1992) The evolving self, Harvard University Press
[2] Rooke, D & Torbert, W (2005) Seven transformations of leadership, Harvard Business Review, April pp 67-76

Evolving the coaching practice

If there is a ladder of coaching maturity along the lines suggested earlier, then it is highly likely that coaches and mentors need to journey through each stage, before they are able to understand and encompass the next. Does this mean, then, that the inexperienced coach should stick to a very narrow range of tools and techniques? Our experience and observation suggests that, while trying to jump straight to the eclectic stage is unlikely to be beneficial, acquiring new techniques in response to specific experiences with clients is an important part of the maturation process. If the habits of purposeful technique acquisition and integration can be learned early on in the coaching journey, then the transition to full-fledged managed eclecticism ought to be faster and smoother.

Another observation is that many coaches pass through cycles of feeling liberated and constrained by their approach as they mature. Liberation appears to come when they understand the model, process or technique sufficiently to feel relaxed into it – when they are truly able to think fully about the client, rather than about what they are going to say next. A sense of constraint emerges as they find that there are limits to what they and the client can achieve with this approach; and from dissatisfaction may come the search for new ways to add value to the learning conversation.

Figure 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?
Managed 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?

Putting it into practice: How I apply managed eclecticism

Nearly 20 years ago, I observed nearly 80 mentors conducting sessions. I used both observers and clients to assess the quality of the mentoring conversation, in terms of utility of outcome, sense of purposefulness, degree of rapport and so on. Patterns quickly emerged. The most effective mentors began by building or re-establishing rapport with the client, and then embarked on a conversation of two halves. In the first half, they focused on understanding, both by the client and the mentor:

- Of the client's motivations and the values they were applying
- The context, in which the issue was embedded

They did this by asking questions for clarification, by looking for patterns, by challenging assumptions and encouraging the client to cut his or her own path through the fog of the issue. They were careful to use their great experience and wisdom only in ensuring that the client did not miss important perspectives. Only when the client was truly stuck, or had taken themselves into a dangerous place, did they suggest alternative ways of thinking about the issue, or refer to their own experience directly.

The effective mentors summarised the conversation at this point, encouraging the client to challenge the summary; then they prepared for the transition from understanding mode to solution mode. Here they always found some way to reinforce the client's self-belief to find and implement an acceptable solution. They helped the client identify and test out alternative solutions, choose between them and set personal deadlines. Finally, they encouraged the client to summarise what they had learned, what they were going to do, and the level of commitment they had to the solution they had decided upon.

If this sounds a bit like a good coaching session, it's because at the practical level developmental coaching and developmental mentoring have a great deal in common. As a model of the coaching conversation, the process described here is much less mechanistic than GROW or its derivatives. In particular, it lends itself to an eclectic approach.

Four steps in an eclectic coaching dialogue

In my own practice, I see every coaching conversation and every coaching supervision session as consisting of four parts – preparation, understanding, solutioneering and reflective debriefing – each of which may be managed eclectically. This works for me, but I don't perceive it as a template for others to follow. It's a continuing evolution. If it hasn't evolved into something slightly different, by the time this article appears, I shall be disappointed!

The preparation phase is partly about the question "Are we both ready for coaching?" (or supervision). Other questions include:

- What will help this client begin the conversation with the maximum openness to creative learning?
- How can I ensure that I am fully responsive and attentive from the moment we meet?

I have developed a range of methods that can be adapted to meet the range of personal characteristics and contexts I encounter. For example, some clients, with whom I have already developed sufficient rapport, respond well to a simple relaxation exercise that increases their attentiveness, brings down the adrenalin levels and sensitises them to their internal selves.

For others I may choose to help them wind down by asking them a question such as “What made you laugh this week?” or “Amidst all your concerns and issues, what do you feel good about?”, which helps them adopt a positive, self-efficacious mindset. For others again, I might encourage them to blurt out what they want to discuss, but then I will ask them to reflect quietly for a minute or two about what kind of conversation they would like to have with me and what kind of conversation they would subsequently like to have with themselves, as a result. The key here is sensitivity to the starting point of the individual client and a willingness to experiment with them to find the most effective way to initiate this coaching conversation.

Also important in the preparation stage is recognising the thinking the client has already done about the issue – and sometimes assisting them to do pre-meeting reflection, for example through the use of a frustration-elation log (a weekly record of events that have pleased and frustrated them). It’s very easy for a coach to jump in at the start of the conversation, with the assumption that the client has done very little thinking through, when in fact the opposite may be true.

Can you add a summary of how what you just said above embodies a managed eclectic approach – obvious perhaps, but good to make explicit – just like you do at the end of the Understanding section.

The approaches that present themselves here can be drawn from a wide range of sources. Those I recognise frequently include Gestalt, clean language, positive psychology, NLP, systems theory and a fair few I can’t quite categorise. The decision as to which approach to take is less managed than instinctive; less selected by me or by the client than by the creative space between us.

Understanding

The understanding element of the conversation is all about building mutual understanding of the issue and avoiding jumping to a solution-focus until that understanding has been achieved. The desire to find a solution can be very strong and very distracting, especially if the coach feels under pressure to demonstrate “results”. Sometimes this part of the conversation may subsume the entire session and carry on into the next. Important here, too, is not being seduced by the need for a goal – a broad sense of purpose may be enough.

In our current work on goal emergence, we define several levels of goal evolution:

- An itch (a sense that something is not right)
- A formative question (something that gives form to the itch and begins the process of articulation)
- A better question (or more often a series of them), which in turn leads to ever better questions
- A definable desired outcome, which the client can begin to work on achieving

Identifying where client is in these stages of goal definition opens up a range of different choices about the best way to proceed. Other influences on the choice of method include:

- What kind of coaching does the client need? (Skills, performance, behaviour or transformational, in Hawkins' terms.) How do they define this need?
- Do they see the issue as a problem or an opportunity, or a mixture of both?
- What thinking have they done so far? (It's so easy to blunder in with a question set that devalues or ignores the client's own reflections.)
- What do they know already about their perspectives, emotions, values and so on, in relation to this issue?

During this phase of the coaching conversation, more clues to possible techniques or approaches arise as I remind myself to be mindful, through the use of questions such as:

- What is happening between us?
- What "moments of disconnect" are happening and what do these tell me?
- What is my intuition telling me?
- What would help the client best understand this situation at this moment?

How do I know what approach to use when? Occasionally I may make a deliberate, rational selection, but mostly I simply have a sense of "rightness" about what will help the client best at this specific time. Clients have compared it to a jazz duo, who somehow stay in sync with each other, though both are improvising and although I have never played jazz, I feel an instinctive empathy with this metaphor. There is a great comfort in having a sufficiently large repertoire of responses not to have to worry whether the "right" one will emerge. At times, elements of positive psychology coaching seem to align with the mood of the conversation; at others, an approach nearer to cognitive behavioural coaching may provide a deeper level of challenge, especially where there is a dissonance between the client's stated intentions and their apparent commitment to change. Clean language, transactional analysis, Gestalt experiments – maintaining an awareness of the potential of each of these approaches provides a wide canvas, from which one or more elements comes into clearer focus when it is needed.

Hawkins, P & Smith, N (2006) Coaching, Mentoring & Organizational Consultancy, McGraw-Hill, Maidenhead.

Solutioneering

During the solutioneering phase, I apply a similar set of mindfulness approaches, but this time aimed at helping the client gradually focus down and make choices. The deeper and broader the understanding gained in the previous phase, the easier the solutioneering becomes.

Critical questions for both of us include:

- What does our understanding of the issue tell us about possible sources of solutions?
- What does our mutual understanding of the client's emotions and values tell us about the criteria that will help them make choices they can feel comfortable with and commit to?
- How sustainable does the client need this solution to be?

In my kitbag of tools and approaches are some that help the client rank how important different elements of potential solutions are. For example, the "Change Balloon" requires them to imagine all the desired elements they want in, say, a new job; and to label each sandbag on a drawing of a hot air balloon as one of these elements. Next I ask them to imagine that the balloon has sprung a leak. One sandbag must go overboard – which will it be. Gradually, all but one of the sandbags is jettisoned. We now have a ranking that can be used as the starting point in considering the relative importance of factors in their overall choice.

Other tools help them become more creative in range of solutions they envisage – for example, listing solutions that didn't work before and thinking about what changes could make those solutions viable now. Yet others help them explore how they will put a solution into action – for example, role playing a difficult conversation.

Reflective debriefing

Reflective debriefing, the final stage, happens both within the meeting and subsequently. Again, it is useful to have a range of different methods, to suit different situations and clients.

For example, in the session I might use the four "I"s –

- Issues (what topics did we cover?)
- Ideas (what creative thinking occurred?)
- Insights (what did we learn?)
- Intentions (what will we do as a result of our learning dialogue?)

After the session I would also, of course, reflect on what I could usefully take to supervision. Our interviews with coaches suggest that this fourth stage of the coaching conversation is the one, where there is often the least recognition of having a range of choices. We hope in future studies to gather a wider toolkit of approaches for this stage.

How to develop an eclectic portfolio of coaching technique

Another potential area for reflection and research (the research focus alone jolts a bit with practitioner tone of article) OK is how do effective eclectic coaches accumulate their knowledge and skills? We have no solid evidence, on which to base guidance here, other than very broad brush observation. What that seems to tell us is that the managed eclectic approach comes out of:

- Wide exposure to different philosophies and perspectives of coaching and related disciplines
- Frequently trying new ideas out in the course of coaching practice, with clients as partners in learning rather than subjects of experimentation
- Individual and collective reflection on those experiments, engaging both colleagues and clients in thinking about how tools work in practice
- Cultivating a deep honesty about one's own motivations in learning and about how and why we select the new areas of knowledge we explore

Finally, I have observed in conversations with a number of truly great coaches that they all seem to share a fascination with and joy in the process of becoming eclectic. If I were to encapsulate this in my own experience, I would use the word "wonderment". I know that, should I ever lose my sense of wonderment, of excitement at what may lie behind the next door of knowledge, I should be much less of a coach than I would wish. And I would feel far less liberated in the coaching and supervision I do.