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Coaching: A Map of The Territory

By Jordan Goldrich

A literature search reveals over 25,000 articles on coaching since 1977. Yet there has been no book, article or university class describing the various schools of coaching and detailing their underlying philosophies and methodologies. To use an exploration metaphor, there is no comprehensive “map of the territory.” This article is, in a sense, a “scouting report” of a partially charted new territory with the hope of contributing to the development of such a map. There will be further steps in this mapping.

Coaches use a wide range of theories and techniques to develop the “people” skills of their clients and to help them when they are “stuck.” I suggest that coaching models or “schools” can be classified into five categories by underlying change methodology. Of course, there are areas of overlap in philosophy and technique between models, and few coaches practice a “pure model.”

Psycho-therapeutic: The first model is practiced by mental health professionals such as psychologists and social workers. This model is derived from theories of human development and psycho-dynamic, behavioral and systems models.

These executive coaches are often associated with large consulting firms. They may develop a profile of the ideal leader for the specific organization. They utilize standardized and customized tests and feedback instruments to measure the gap between the ideal and actual for each executive being coached. Coaching is focused on closing gaps and achieving client goals.

This coaching differs from therapy in that the goals are driven by business or management needs. Pre- and post-tests measure effectiveness. The coach may “shadow” (observe their clients in their jobs) and establish feedback loops within the organization. They use role play and focus largely on measurable behavior change. Many have strong clinical skills and a business or consulting background.

Human potential: The Coaches Training Institute



(CTI) is the primary proponent of a second type of coaching which appears to be an evolution of the human potential movement of the 1960's and 70's. Karen Kimsey-House, a CTI founder and executive director, described the underlying philosophy of their approach called “Co-active Coaching.” They state that “People are naturally creative, resourceful and whole; we coach the whole person, we hold the client's agenda which is centered around the client's fulfillment; balance and process; each alliance (coaching contract) is custom designed.”

CTI coaches use discussion, “powerful questions”, visualization and guided imagery to facilitate the development of coaching goals. Based on their belief in the potential for “magnificence” in each human being, they are likely to challenge clients to consider goals that may appear unattainable. Clients are helped to get “unstuck” utilizing techniques that appear similar to cognitive behavioral and gestalt techniques. CTI uses a strategic planning process involving the development of measurable short and long term goals to translate this grand vision into day to day behavior.

Ontological: New Ventures West is one of the major proponents of a third type of coaching which appears to be derived from the ontological branch of the human potential movement. Webster's defines ontology as the “the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence or being as such.” These coaches believe that we each create

our own “reality” through the conversations (self-talk) that we conduct in our head. Rapid transformation of our personal lives, organizations and businesses is possible by changing these conversations.

These coaches challenge clients' world view and perception of what is possible, their reality about themselves and about others and their attachment to past “conversations” by using discussion and “powerful questions.” They describe their methodology as based on the work of Fernando Flores, Heidegger, Kant and other philosophers. The core training may be from Forum, Tony Robbins, Lifespring, Life Training, Science of Mind and other personal or spiritual development programs. Many utilize Neuro-linguistic Programming.

“Explore the philosophy of a coach with whom [you] contemplate working.”

Prescriptive: Coach U. has developed an approach to coaching they call “prescriptive.” While Coach U.’s philosophical roots are in the ontological camp, they have developed structure and techniques which combine to create exercises, tasks and experiments for clients to facilitate (forward) the client’s progress toward their goals. Coach U. coaches are more likely to “prescribe” what a client should do and to give advice.

Coach U. graduates appear (to the author) to be the most successful at penetrating both the personal and executive coaching markets. Coach U. coaches will challenge a client to set high goals. They use discussion and “powerful questions” as well. Coach U. also teaches a strategic planning process involving the development of measurable short and long term goals to translate the client’s grand vision into day to day behavior.

Mentoring: Mentoring or content coaching is the fifth school. Whitmore makes a distinction between coaching and mentoring that is useful in understanding what coaches actually do. The extent to which mentoring should be part of coaching is a topic of heated debate in the coaching field. Mentoring, says Whitmore, has its origins in the concept of apprenticeship, when “an older, more experienced individual

passed down his knowledge of how the task was done and how to operate in the commercial world.”

Today, the term mentoring is used in two ways. In the corporate world, it has come to mean a program involving assessment and ongoing coaching that is established to develop fast-track management talent. Here, I mean a relationship with the goal of passing information or “content” from coach to client over a period of time, often years.

Coaching incorporates a variety of specialties, making it difficult to define its “core competencies” or the training and certification necessary to be a competent coach. That means the customer should explore the philosophy of a coach with whom they contemplate working. Just as it makes a difference whether or not one’s therapist is Freudian, the philosophy that underlies a coach’s methods will affect how the coaching proceeds. It is best to be comfortable with the belief system on which your coaching is based. **CT**

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