

## What is Coaching?<sup>1</sup> Why Retain a Leadership Coach?

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Original December 17, 2017; Revised May 4, 2020.

*Coaching emerged in response to our inability to cope with increasing change and complexity in the social, cultural, technological, and professional domains (Brock). These changing demands impacted life, performance, and leadership. The field of coaching is unique, as it moves beyond the rational, embodies dynamic learning, engages generative language, and adopts a future orientation.*

Please note the **Glossary of Terms** on the final page of this document.

The field and profession of coaching has evolved over the last two decades—as both a methodology and a product—to fill the increasing information-action gap – the disconnect between information (or communications) and performance that produces information overload or overchoice<sup>2</sup> – that has resulted from the emerging Information Age.<sup>3</sup> This gap has widened as the information paradigm, along with its processes and systems, have become more pervasive in establishing our patterns of thought and our interpretations, perceptions, and actions.

### Shift to Being

The coaching profession emerged in the face of our complex and interconnected Information Age to bridge the information-action gap which influences our performance: between *reacting to*, *coping with* and *co-creating* situations. In this gap exists a distinctive view of being human. Do we react to, manage, or adopt change? Or are we co-creators of change?

As co-creators of change, we expand beyond knowing more to an existential awareness of *being*—or ground of being—from which we access and experience new views of reality. Fundamentally, this expands our psychological or normative view of *self* to include an ontological view of the *experience of being*.

**Nature and Function of Being.** Most psychological models relating to the self and human functioning imply that the self exists as a discrete, separate, and independent entity. However, ontological models interpret the self (being) and certain phenomena (causes, conditions) as being mutually dependent, not as a discrete, stand-alone entity. Consider the human body (part of our being) and phenomena such as the wind, sun, oceans, plants, and animals, as being mutually dependent for the vitamins and energy to breathe in and out of our cycle of life.”

Being is not merely an internal state of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, nor is it some set of identities or discrete or separate self, independent of its world and experiences. Indeed, our thoughts and

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<sup>1</sup> This paper takes a specific view of being human beyond a conventional epistemological model of knowing and knowledge to include an ontological inquiry into the nature and function of being. It then applies this model to coaching. See “TERMS” at end of this paper for details.

<sup>2</sup> *Overchoice* or choice overload is a cognitive process in which people have a difficult time making a decision, or being decisive, when faced with many options. The term was first introduced by Alvin Toffler in his 1970 book, *Future Shock*.

<sup>3</sup> This term refers to the economic base and base of our society. Technically, this shift from the Industrial Age to the Information Age has been pegged at 1968 (with the invention of the microchip), however it was popularized in the 90s with the release of the Internet into the public domain.

experience—phenomena that arise together—result from causes and conditions that interact with our world to give meaning to our existence.

This is a departure from our rational mindset and normative view, which seek discrete causes to explain our experiences rather than appreciate the interdependent nature of our role in reality.

**Being as Co-Creators.** As co-creators of our world, our experience can both reveal dimensions of our being and lead us to realize our potential with each interaction. The fact that phenomena are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent (even without discrete boundaries) means that they are “empty” of a fixed essence or solid *self*. This nature of “non-self” is both “empty” of an inherently existing self and yet “full” of all things.

At their best, coaches appreciate this *interdependent nature* of being and the generative capacity it reveals. Business philosopher Peter Koestenbaum observes the importance of this shift (Labarre 2000):

When you are stuck, you are not likely to make progress by using competence as your tool. Instead, progress requires commitment to two things. First, you need to dedicate yourself to understanding yourself better—in the philosophical sense of understanding what it means to exist as a human being in the world. Second, you need to change your habits of thought: how you think, what you value, how you work, how you connect with people, how you learn, what you expect from life, and how you manage frustration. Changing those habits means changing your way of being intelligent.

Therefore, changing “your way of being intelligent” requires expanding our perception of being. This is made possible by a shift in the following four “relationships,” which also highlight indicators of a coaching mindset and approach:

- 1) **Rational Mindset** or relationship to reality, thought, and experiences;
- 2) **Learning Focus** or relationship to growth, potential, and learning;
- 3) **Generative Language** or relationship to language, intention, and action; and
- 4) **Future Orientation** or relationship to past, present, and future.

## 1. Beyond a Rational Mindset

By the mid-90s, the pace of change had evolved from incremental and sequential to nonlinear with increasing complexity. The acronym VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) highlights the shift from evidence-based knowing in stable times to action-based learning in unstable times, which has created gaps in performance. In the book *Tricky Coaching: Difficult Cases in Leadership Coaching*, the authors highlight a lesson from human history (Korotov, Florent-Treacy, Kets de Vries, & Bernhardt 2012, p.13):

Although for millennia humans have sought advice about their lives from individuals in defined societal roles (shamans, counselors, religious figures, sages), and more recently from medical and paramedical professionals such as psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and psychotherapists, the world is now moving at such a rapid pace—when we can get all we want (or think we want) at the touch of a mouse—that people no longer recognize the simple need to stop and think, let alone take the time to seek advice. The increased demand for [leadership] coaching, however, undoubtedly reflects a basic human desire for communication and reflection.

Unlike other human interventions, such as psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, or even consulting, the field of coaching expands human potential beyond the limits of rational, normative thought. Coaches appreciate the rational process—one that is empirical, measurable, or observable—when providing assessments, clarifying results, and establishing facts. Getting grounded in facts is necessary as a beginning, but insufficient as an aim.

Grounded in problem solving, the scientific, empirical model offers powerful, evidence-based solutions, yet can foreclose other possibilities that require imagination, insight, or timeless wisdom about the whole of being human. In their classic essay, “Communities of Commitment: Heart of a Learning Organization,” Fred Kofman and Peter Senge (1993, p.10) pointed out how “problem solving is fundamentally different from creating. The problem solver tries to make something go away. A creator tries to bring something new into being.”

Coaches also delight in moving beyond the rational or empirical mind. They engage the imaginative realm to design new contexts, and the philosophical realm to offer rigorous inquiries and intentional practices. A coach is willing to play and experiment with new experiences in order to observe what is possible. This may occur in the form of a request, an idea, asking bold questions, or testing intuition to identify greater possibilities.

- *Critical point:* A coach embraces the unknown and does not dismiss something simply because it is not seen or understood. Indeed, much of our greatest information about human phenomena comes right from our clients and their experiences, regardless of the language (nomenclature) used to describe them. A coach will learn from the client how best to co-create with them.

A coach will work with a client to develop his or her capacity to tap into the imagination. The practical effect of this is to inspire the learner to reach beyond what is known, to accept a dynamic view of nature/reality, and to leverage uncertainty as a great source of new and innovative approaches to learning, relating, and acting.

- *Critical point:* Coaches are willing to engage this process and learn *from* action, rather than learning *to* act. This transcends linear, rational processes, which place a premium on understanding the parts before acting.

The human condition is dynamic and playful—we are able to act out of wonder and curiosity to engage the imagination. None of this is possible unless we transcend the rational mindset.

## 2. Learning Focus

Coaching operates within a paradigm of learning and co-creating, rather than diagnosing and problem solving. Coaches distinguish between an inquiry that surfaces better questions, and problems that produce better answers. They encourage self-discovery to distinguish and experience what is missing, rather than what is wrong, in any situation. This relationship to learning transcends and includes the standard accumulation of knowledge and facts.

- *Critical point:* A coach need not possess complex theories, research, or studies on every aspect of the client’s current problem or challenge. They observe the human condition by listening and questioning, and support and challenge reality to distinguish action previously unseen.

**Domains of Learning.** As a field, coaching ventures beyond a normative<sup>A</sup> or problem-solving approach, and is grounded in philosophical insight and experience. Coaching appreciates the fullness of the human condition: the empirical, experiential, and existential. Distinct from other human

interventions, such as consulting, counseling, therapy, or mentoring, coaching leverages the different domains of science, art, and philosophy as follows:<sup>4</sup>

- *Third-person or empirical learning* focuses attention on **what we learn**, on acquiring information from an “objective” or empirically-based perspective to expand knowledge. We access it through the scientific method. This third-person focus cultivates the *science* of coaching.
- *Second-person learning, or experiential learning* focuses attention on **how we learn** to experience connection and apply knowledge. We access this through mastery of technique and practice. This second-person focus cultivates the *art* of coaching.
- *First-person learning or existential learning* focuses our intention on **why we learn**, and challenges who we are as learners to expand awareness. We access this through philosophic insight and wisdom. This first-person focus cultivates the *philosophy* of coaching.

HUMAN INQUIRY/ DOMAIN	MINDSET/ OBSERVER	METHODOLOGY/ MODE	LEARNING/MEANS	OUTCOME
<b>Science- Empirical.</b>  <i>Knowing</i>	<b>Third-Person/ Empirical</b>  Observing: objective evidence	<i>Epistemological/ Rational</i>  Investigate to master content.	<i>Shallow learning</i> Means = replication by study and memorization.	INFORMATION. Study research to acquire and <i>expand</i> <i>knowledge</i> .
<b>Art/Action- Experiential.</b>  <i>Doing</i>	<b>Second-person/ Experiential</b>  Observing: subjective experiences	<i>Reflective/Creative</i>  Apply and connect knowledge to master process.	<i>Internalized learning</i> Means = reflection through understanding by interpretation.	KNOWLEDGE. <i>Internalize process</i> <i>and experiences</i> to <i>expand</i> <i>understanding</i> .
<b>Philosophical- Insight.</b>  <i>Being</i>	<b>First-person/ Existential</b>  Observing: intersubjective awareness	<i>Ontological/ Phenomenological.</i>  Inquiry-insight to master context.	<i>Deep learning.</i> Means = Intuition through meaning- making and challenging assumptions.	WISDOM. Challenge assumptions; adopt contemplative practices to <i>embody</i> <i>insights</i> .

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Coaches listen and observe, tapping into each of these domains to cultivate the rational (empirical), imaginative (experiential), and insightful (existential/philosophical) mind. Through observation and conversation, coaches co-create a *crucible for change*,<sup>B</sup> relevant learning to try out when one is stuck or unable to act.

Coaches do not view being trapped as a problem to fix, or an “issue” to diagnose; rather, they see it as a “hidden alternative” to discover, often from a new perspective. A coach does not help an individual understand or describe his or her barrier; they will point to action, help to reframe a situation, generate a new context, or co-create new perceptions.

<sup>4</sup> Having outlined these emerging challenges, Vicki Brock, PhD, author of the *Sourcebook of Coaching History*, has proposed two branches to coaching, philosophy and social science (Brock 2014, p.8). Much of what Brock places in the social sciences I further distinguish between science and art. Art is distinct, as it is performative and experiential, while science is empirical in nature.

- ***Critical point:*** To make a meaningful difference in your client’s life does not require that you understand his or her “problems” better. It requires the capacity, by observing and listening, to create a context in which his or her current problem can no longer grip (or trap) them in the same way.

Optimally, coaching, as a methodology and profession, is at its best when it taps into an imaginative and insightful approach to human potential that is both grounded in the empirical evidence of any situation and cultivates the potential to think and act differently.

This level of inquiry allows for coach and client to co-create change together. This would not be possible without learning as a focus.

### **3. Language as Generative**

What may most distinguish the field of coaching from other forms of human intervention is its relationship to language as generative.<sup>C</sup> Generative language cultivates the capacity for action through increased performance, enhanced relationships, and deepened trust. In this mindset, language *is* action, and coaches are trained to distinguish the properties of action inherent in language to shift attitudes, rather than to analyze evidence or develop new skills.

The profound nature of what is possible when we situate ourselves as co-creators in language alters how we act and learn, and extends the horizon of possibilities for how we lead and serve others. All speaking and listening in this domain is grounded in one’s “word”—to mean and do what you say. One’s word is the source of action and is intentional. *It cannot be spoken by those with a weak relationship to their word.* Even the responsible choice to bring *intention* to thinking and observing aligns choices and conditions that focus on attention as the source of action.

Coaches observe how we relate to situations through how we interpret action. Which situations threaten us and leave us powerless? Which situations render us free or empowered to act? A coach will reveal and create critical distinctions<sup>D</sup> (new or different interpretive lenses) in language, which can also reveal generative properties, causing new action from a distinct set of choices.

- ***Critical point:*** Coaching will help to distinguish how language shapes action. A coach will recognize conflated meanings and perceptions and distinguish between them to create new *pathways to action*. These pathways result from a different relationship: not new skills or content, but a new context.

To operate from a generative mindset requires training in the human condition, to perceive reality through a conversational domain.<sup>E</sup> From a conversational domain, coaches honor language and conversation, as both content and context, to form and inform our reality. In essence, coaches support co-creating the human experience *in* language.

### ***The profound nature of what is possible when we situate ourselves as creators in language alters how we act and learn...***

To co-create these conversations, much of coaching operates in a first-person phenomenological<sup>F</sup> or as-lived examination. As part of an ontological<sup>G</sup> inquiry, it shapes the way we observe, interpret, and listen in a fashion similar to that of a cultural anthropologist. Our experiences shape the observer we are and how conversations unfold.

Coaches differentiate our ground of being through distinctions in language for perspective-building, to expand possibility and pathways to action.

- *Critical Point*: A coach listens and asks important questions to distinguish our background of assumptions and meaning. If, after working with a coach, the client is not in action, he or she has not experienced a coaching session.

Coaches open us to new distinctions that cultivate new perceptions, reveal choices, and empower actions that find us operating from a new level of awareness. None of that is possible without generative language.

#### **4. Future Orientation**

This fourth relationship, to future orientation, is the ultimate context for coaching and our first consideration as coaches. Recall that coaching developed to fill the growing gap resulting from the future coming at us at greater speeds. This section will tease out elements of *future* that are typically concealed in our ordinary, linear view of the unfolding events of life.

The future is where coaching and leadership intersect. Each domain deals with cultivating new futures or paradigms—altering perceptions or contexts that can impact the horizon of possibilities.

**Future from the Future.** A future-oriented context is not a linear future, happening at some point. Instead, we are dealing with future as the *context* for the *present*. Or said more precisely, the future that a person is living into is, for that person, the *context* for life in the *present*. That is, both what is so in the present, and the *possibilities* (interpretations) for dealing with what is so—as they occur for that person in the future *context*—that person is living into. A generative listening for future is key for coaches and coaching, and beyond the scope of this paper.

The possibility of a future from the future results from a distinct temporal *view* that cultivates possibilities, alters context in the present, and generates nonlinear change. Such a view resides in the province of leadership, and is a condition for leadership coaching. Coaching as a profession lacks minimal purchase during stable and predictable times.

***A coach does not help you to understand or describe your barrier—  
they will point to action, help you to reframe a situation,  
generate a new context, or co-create new perceptions.***

**Future-Past-Future.** Thus, our relationship with the future is key to coaching, especially for coaching and developing leaders. Creating futures or altering contexts require surfacing reflexive past frames that can hold us back. Indeed, this reflexive past—our *default being*—often emerge in the face of a new context or compelling future. Compelling futures and differing contexts provoke and reveal our past frames of reference, loosening their grip on us.

To co-create the future, coaches rely on the last three relationships: to employ generative language that ventures beyond rational views and embodies learning. Unlike other human interventions, which focus on the past, coaching's future orientation reveals parts of our concealed past that can constrain our views and actions.

- *Critical point*: Through observation and listening, a coach can distinguish the future sufficiently to offer distinctions in language. Distinctions reveal new possibilities and action, along with



learning and practices that can sustain a new direction.

**Future, Possibility, and Practice.** The possibility of a future from the future requires practice—specifically, the openness to see possibility in any situation. Completing the past (creating closure), allows us to remember the past without reliving or being reactivated by the past. With practice, we can *hold the present moment*. This is particularly important for leadership coaching, where being present is fundamental to listening for, coping with, and creating change.

A coach employs contemplative practices to cultivate perceptions that lead to slowing down, pausing, becoming mindful, and choosing intentionally. Clients create the structures in language and practices in life to both focus on the present and generate the future. Such practices interrupt our limiting patterns and frames of reference discovered in the presence of a compelling future.

Within a learning mindset, coaches acknowledge the past as a source of learning, without holding onto or extrapolating the future from the past. What is possible for each client offers a new context beyond rational predictions from the past.

**Past-Present-Future Arising Together.** A coach operates from a client's future and distinguishes the past in the present to loosen any constraints to engaging the current situation. When this is accomplished, we become present to an openness—a future not reflexively extrapolated from our past, but freely chosen from a possibility.

- ***Critical point:*** The past is neither a constraint on—nor a predictor of—one's future, but can provide an opening to new learning. What is possible in an unconstrained *future*, results from our openness, the clarity of our intentions, and the strength of our word to complete our past.

Leaders are called to generate a credible and accurate interpretation of the present, and to intentionally choose a possibility from a future, informed yet unimpeded by the past. None of that is possible without the openness and possibility of a future orientation.

## In Summary

Recall that coaching as a field emerged in response to our (in)ability to cope with increasing change (VUCA) and complexity in the social, cultural, technological, and professional domains (Brock 2014, pp.14–20). These changing demands impact our performance and leadership. Interventions are made at the level of performance, and more often for leadership development.

For leaders, coaching supports expanding leadership capacity to identify and develop emerging futures, cope with change, and increase performance. Primarily, leaders are interested in creating and sustaining contexts for change that increase capacity for achieving new levels of performance *and* excellence in the face of increasing complexity and volatile change.

- ***Critical point:*** Coaching is working when the client can view new possibilities, and act on and produce different results—even though he or she may not understand his or her problem. A coach will help the client increase awareness to handle varied situations, produce different results, and sustain practices—not produce a greater understanding of what is wrong.

Coaching has evolved over the last two decades—as both a methodology and a product—to fill the increasing information-action gap that has resulted from the emerging Information Age. By creating sustainable change and practice, coaching alters our relationship to our *rational mindset* by adopting a *future orientation* through *learning focus* that employs *generative language*.

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

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<sup>A</sup> **Normative** applies to a standard, ideal, or norm of evaluation. For human behavior, it implies an ideal model with which all observations correlate. The aim is to achieve that ideal, and deviations from that norm are observed in degrees of abnormality.

<sup>B</sup> A **crucible for change** stems from a shared understanding between the coach and client that reflects a commitment to learning, and the willingness to manage the necessary communications to cope with the changes, and the fallout of change, that can result from growth and development.

<sup>C</sup> **Generative** as it pertains to communication involves a relationship to language that creates action. It creates rather than describes situations, conditions, and contexts. Employing it cultivates a capacity for action through increased performance, enhanced relationships, and expanded trust.

<sup>D</sup> A **distinction** is a linguistic abstraction that distinguishes thought and meaning. It opens up new perceptions and possibilities for action. More than a term, concept, or vocabulary, distinctions create new perceptions, akin to a new lens in language that alters who or what we are as the observer. A definition explains the meaning of a word, providing knowledge. A distinction distinguishes a word from any background assumptions, to open it up to a different view.

<sup>E</sup> A **conversational domain** is a lens through which to view reality, in this case as interwoven conversations as a system of thoughts and experiences. Facts, actions, feelings, experiences, friends, systems, identities, and products all interlink as an interwoven web of conversations. We consume or employ interpretations to connect and sustain conversations that constitute our experience of reality. Through a conversational domain, everything says something about our lives: the car I drive, books I read, coffee I drink, my friends, family, and job, what I eat, how I tip servers ... everything. Each is sourced in, or a result of, interacting symbolic representation through speaking, actions, and listening.

<sup>F</sup> **Phenomenology** attempts to create conditions for the objective study of topics usually regarded as subjective: *consciousness and the content of conscious experiences* such as judgments, perceptions, and emotions. It seeks through systematic reflection to determine the essential properties and structures of experience. As a methodology, it examines the meaningfulness of an entity (being) as it *appears* through rigorous interpretation from a “lived-experience.” From this first-person experience, we examine how we perceive the world, others, and ourselves. A phenomenological examination accompanies an ontological inquiry. The ontology is more akin to the model and phenomenology to the methodology. For example, epistemology is a model for knowing, with the scientific methodology disclosing that which we know (see also Ontology).

<sup>G</sup> **Ontology** is the study of *that which is*, as it is (as opposed to the matter of materialism, or idealism in platonic terms). Ontological inquiry explores the nature and function of being—the *a priori* conditions of being, or the meaning and experience of being. To properly examine this question requires rigorous interpretation, to interpret and disclose it to itself (see also Phenomenology).