What is Coaching? Why Retain a Leadership Coach?

By Anthony V. Zampella

Coaching emerged in response to our inability to cope with increasing change and complexity in the social, cultural, technological, and professional domains.¹ 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 some terms on the last 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 that has resulted from the emerging information age. This gap has widened as the information paradigm, its processes, and its systems have become more pervasive in establishing our patterns of thought, and interpretations, perceptions, and action.

Shift to Being

In the face of our information age, the coaching profession emerged to bridge the communications-performance gap between conventional transactional communications and generative communications. The difference between these two mindsets requires a shift from knowing or transacting reality to an awareness of being—or ground of being—from which we access and experience new views of reality. Business philosopher Peter Koestenbaum observes the importance of this shift (Labarre, 2000):

“... when you’re stuck, you’re 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.”

Changing “your way of being intelligent” requires expanding capacity to increase awareness as distinct from improving skills to achieve more, or acquiring knowledge to know more:

- **Transactional communications** view language as descriptive; that is, intended to gather and transmit information to describe (map) reality from past frames of reference. The goal is to determine an accurate perception, based on analyzing evidence to better manage action and predict events.

- **Generative communications** view language as action; that is, listening and speaking create perceptions through revealing or shaping the very context in which we listen and speak. The goal is

¹ Brock, 2014, pp. 14–20
to create futures through tapping our creativity in our listening and speaking, based on the
authority of the speaker to generate action and alter context.

In the latter instance, one realizes there is no single or objective interpretation, so one becomes
responsible for developing the capacity to learn, unlearn, experiment, and reframe the moment—to
achieve a new level of understanding.

The following four “relationships” highlight indicators to a coaching mindset and approach:

1) **Rational Mindset** or relationship to thought, potential, and awareness;

2) **Learning Focus** or relationship to growth and learning;

3) **Generative Language**, or relationship to language and action; and

4) **Future Orientation** or relationship to past 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):

> 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 . . . (p. 13)

Unlike other human interventions, such as psychology, psychiatry, psychotherapy, or even consulting,
the field of coaching expands human potential beyond the limits of rational thought. Coaches
appreciate the rational process—that which 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.

**Coaching appreciates the fullness of the human condition: the potential, the rational, and the creative.**

Grounded in problem-solving, the scientific 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) 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” (p. 10).
Coaches also delight in moving beyond the rational or empirical mind. They engage the imaginative realm to design new contexts, and can engage 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’s possible. This may occur in the form of a request, an idea, the asking of bold questions, or the testing of intuition to view greater possibilities.

- **Critical point:** A coach embraces the unknown, and doesn’t 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 (terminology or nomenclature) used to describe it. A coach will learn from the client how best to coach them.

A coach will work with you to develop your capacity to tap into your 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:** The human condition is dynamic and playful—we are able to act out of wonder and curiosity to engage the imagination. Coaches are willing to engage this process and actually learn from action, rather than learning to act. This transcends linear, rational processes, which place a premium on understanding the parts before taking action.

### 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 engages better questions, and problems that diagnose better answers. They encourage self-discovery to distinguish and experience what’s missing, rather than what’s 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 your current problem or challenge; they observe the human condition by listening and questioning, and support and challenge reality to distinguish action previously unseen.

As a field, coaching ventures beyond a normative or problem-solving focus and is grounded in philosophical insight and experience. Coaching appreciates the fullness of the human condition: the potential, the rational, and the creative. Distinct from other human interventions, such as consulting, counseling, therapy, or mentoring, coaching leverages the different domains of science, art, and philosophy as follows:

- **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.

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2 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. I’ve outlined this in “Coaching Learning Grid” on page 3 of this document.
• **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 third-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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Human Inquiry/Domain</th>
<th>Mindset/Observing</th>
<th>Methodology/Mode</th>
<th>Learning/Means</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Science-Empirical.</strong> Knowing</td>
<td>Third-Person/Empirical</td>
<td>Epistemological/Rational</td>
<td>Shallow learning Means = replication by study and memorization.</td>
<td>INFORMATION. Study research to acquire and expand knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Art/Mastery-Experiential.</strong> Doing</td>
<td>Second-Person/Experiential</td>
<td>Reflective/Creative</td>
<td>Deep learning Means = reflection through understanding by interpretation.</td>
<td>KNOWLEDGE. Internalize experiences to expand understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Philosophical-Insight.</strong> Being</td>
<td>First-Person/Existential</td>
<td>Ontological/Phenomenological</td>
<td>Profound learning Means = Intuition through meaning-making and challenging assumptions.</td>
<td>WISDOM. Challenge assumptions, and contemplative practices to <em>embody insights</em>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Coaches listen and observe, using each of these approaches to cultivate the rational (empirical), imaginative (artistic), and insightful (philosophical) mind. Through observation and conversation, coaches co-create a *crucible for change*,6 relevant learning to try out when you are stuck or unable to act. Coaches do not view being stuck 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 doesn’t help you understand or describe your barrier; they will point to action, help you reframe a situation, generate a new context, or co-create new perceptions.

- **Critical point:** To make a meaningful difference in your life doesn’t require understanding your “problems” better; it requires the capacity, through observing and listening, to create a context in which your current problem can no longer grip (or trap) you in the same way. It requires an imaginative and insightful approach to human potential grounded in the empirical evidence of any situation.

Optimally, coaching, as a methodology and profession, is at its best when it moves beyond rational or empirical ideas that emphasize measuring evidence, knowing facts, or acquiring skills, to expand mindsets and cultivate the potential to think and act differently, allowing for coach and client to co-create together.
3. Language as Generative

What may most distinguish the field of coaching from other human intervention is its relationship to language as generative. Generative language honors its generative properties to cultivate the capacity for action through increased performance, enhanced relationships, and expanded 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 analyze evidence or develop new skills.

The profound nature of what’s possible when we situate ourselves as creators in language alters how we act and learn and enhances our ability to serve others. All speaking and listening in this domain is grounded in your “word”—to mean and do what you say, or walk the talk—as the source of action, and is intentional. It cannot be spoken by those with a weak relationship to their word. Here, even the responsible choice to not act is a conscious choice that forwards action. Indeed, in this mindset, the ability to think, reflect, and observe at a deeper level aligns choices, focuses attention and intentions, and is the source of action.

**The profound nature of what’s possible when we situate ourselves as creators in language alters how we act and learn and enhances our ability to serve others.**

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 (new or different lenses) in language, which reveal its generative properties, causing new action from a distinct set of choices.

- **Critical point:** Coaching will help you 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. From a conversational domain, coaches honor language and conversation, as both content and context, to form and inform our reality. In essence, coaches co-create the human experience in language.

To co-create these conversations, much of coaching operates in a first-person phenomenological or as-lived examination. As part of an ontological inquiry, it shapes the way we observe, interpret, and listen to that of a cultural anthropologist. Who we are shapes the observer we are, which shapes how conversations unfold. Coaches differentiate our ground of being through distinctions in language for perspective-building, to expand possibility and pathways to action. If after working with a coach you are not in action, you did not experience a coaching session.

- **Critical Point:** A coach listens and asks important questions to distinguish thoughts and meaning, to open us to new distinctions that open new perceptions, empower greater 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. Recall that coaching developed to fill the growing gap resulting from the future coming at us at greater speeds. The future is where coaching and leaders intersect. Each deals with cultivating new futures or paradigms, or altering current perceptions or contexts that can impact the future.

The possibility of change results from a different view of the future that allows for altering context in the present. Coping with change—nonlinear, volatile, and disruptive—and its fallout is the province of leadership and the precondition for coaching. Coaching as a profession lacks any purchase during stable and predictable times.

Thus, our relationship with the future is key to coaching, especially the coaching and developing of leaders. Creating futures or altering contexts, unconstrained by the past, requires an openness to confronting items from our past that can hold us back. Indeed, our past only emerges in the face of a new context or compelling future. Compelling futures and differing viewpoints or contexts provoke our past frames of reference, loosening their grip on us.

To co-create the future, coaches rely on the previous three relationships: to venture beyond rational views, to embody learning, and to employ generative language. Unlike other human interventions, which focus on the past, coaching’s future orientation reveals pieces of our past that constrain us.

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

The possibility of an unconstrained future develops from practice; specifically, the openness to see possibility in any situation. This shift in one’s ground of being expands openness through delivering contemplative practices. By expanding openness, coaches cultivate perceptions that lead to slowing down, pausing, becoming mindful, and choosing intentionally.

A coach employs such practices to 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, not as the frame of reference from which to extrapolate the future. What’s possible for each client requires a new context beyond rational predictions from our past.

A coach operates from a client’s future and only distinguishes the past to loosen any constraints to action to engage the current situation. When this is accomplished, we become present to an openness—a future not extrapolated from our past but freely chosen from a future possibility.

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

Getting beyond the past requires practices to get in action and to hold the moment. This is particularly important for leadership coaching, where being present is fundamental to coping with and creating change.
Leaders are called to generate a credible and accurate interpretation of the present, and to intentionally choose a possibility from a different future. None of that is possible without openness to a future orientation.

**What is Leadership Coaching?**

Recall that coaching as a field emerged in response to our (in)ability to cope with increasing change (VUCA\(^3\)) 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.

Given the many applications of the coaching methodology, leadership coaching is designed specifically to *develop* individuals to relate and act with greater insight and effectiveness, with a specific focus on coping with change in an unpredictable future.

- **Critical point:** Leadership development focuses on expanding mindsets\(^4\) rather than training for skills or competencies.\(^4\) It is unique among types of coaching. It requires facility with the four relationships previously discussed, to create future, alter context, and cope with change, and to possess a keen self-awareness to better understand how individuals and groups interact (Korotov et al., 2014).

From a learning mindset, results are only part of our view for informing or clarifying intentions to alter contexts. Primarily, leaders are interested in creating and sustaining contexts for change: to increase awareness and achieve new levels of performance *and* excellence in the face of increasing complexity and volatile change.

Leaders reframe perceptions, generate commitment, and engage action from new possibilities. Coaches develop leaders as-lived through distinctions in language from which they can observe, generate action, and sustain practices to create possibilities that impact the future.

- **Critical point:** You know coaching works when you are able to act, practice, and produce different results—even though you may not acquire a greater understanding of your problem. A coach will help you to produce different results through sustainable practices, not a greater understanding of what’s wrong.

For leaders, coaching supports their expanding leadership capacity – to identify and develop emerging mindsets – by helping them become open to change, cope with and adapt to change, and evolve with change in ways that develop others for the next paradigm.

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\(^3\) 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.

\(^4\) An examination that involves identifying, expanding and cultivating mindsets deserves more attention that is possible in this space. The distinction, however, as outlined in the “terms” section at the end of this document, is key for leadership coaching and development.
Bibliography


About the author: Anthony V. Zampella is an educator, activist, leadership coach, writer, and researcher in the field of adult learning and leadership development. His work presents an eclectic fusion of Western business models, generative learning methods, language-action theory, and contemplative practices from Eastern wisdom traditions. As an Integral theorist, Tony integrates Western knowledge and Eastern wisdom and practices to examine the connections between language, listening, and learning in cultivating leadership cultures. He can be reached at www.zampellagroup.com
TERMS

A 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 capacity for action through increased performance, enhanced relationships, and expanded trust.

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

C 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.

D 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, such distinctions create new perceptions, akin to a new lens in language that alters the observer we are. A definition explains the meaning of a word, providing knowledge. A distinction distinguishes a word from any background assumptions, to open a different view.

E A conversational domain is a lens through which to view reality, in this case as conversations. 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 to experience 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, our speaking and listening.

F Phenomenology examines the meaningfulness of an entity (being) as it appears through rigorous interpretation from an “as-lived” experience. From this first-person experience, we engage an as-lived examination into 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 the methodology. For example, epistemology is a model for knowing, with the scientific methodology disclosing that which we know (see also Ontology).

G 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 what is (being)—the a priori conditions of being, or the meaning of being. To properly examine this question requires rigorous interpretation, to interpret and disclose it to itself (see also Phenomenology).

H Mindset is used here to define attitude, not aptitude. Mindsets reveal the lens or awareness we employ to view the world. It includes our views, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and our capacity – in this case our capacity to lead, adapt, and cope with change. Mindsets are different from skillsets and competencies, which focus on aptitude or our proficiency to use tools or techniques efficiently and effectively.