Coaching Influences

One of the reasons that coaching is such an interesting field is that it draws from a wide range of theories, philosophies and disciplines to create a unique professional practice. Below are a few of the theories that coaching draws from, in particular Adult Learning Theory, Management Theory, Philosophy, Psychology, Consulting, Spirituality.

Consulting

In the 1960’s Edgar Schein wrote a book about process consultation\(^1\). A great deal of what he talks about is coaching. He discusses the importance of any project a consultant takes on, the outcome must be owned by the business employing the consultant. If this doesn’t occur then the project will fail. Schein outlines the importance of any consultant and manager working with a consultant, understanding their emotions, biases, values, etc. and what their reality is and how it can impact the way a situation is perceived. He believes this is the same for any ‘helper’ like service provider too. Consultation when it was first introduced was about using a viable model to work with human systems.

Process consultation is built around a concept of the helping dilemma, where a consultant or manager is faced with a choice when a situation arises. The choice is whether to give advice or help the client find the solution. Process consultation fits best in situations where people are troubled about a situation but neither knows the problem nor what kind of help they are seeking. When a situation is particularly challenging and a person feels upset, it can be a natural default to try to provide a solution for a person. Process consultation is about finding a person in the business that has the intent to improve the way things are being done. The consultant then supports the client to define diagnostic interventions that lead to the right problem solving steps. The consultant is a support person, passing on any broad insights or skills and perspectives that they think may be helpful.

Schein believes that the process consultation role applies to many life situations, parenting, relationships, management etc. He calls it his ‘general theory of helping’. (Schein, 87,p.21)

Schein’s vision for consultation and the role of helping people seems to have not always

\(^1\) Schein, Edgar H., Process Consultation, 1987, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, USA.
been followed by consultants. The trap is to offer up advice and perhaps to succumb to the pressure of solving the problem for a business rather than getting them to own it themselves. Some businesses want the solution immediately and are not willing to take the time to understand how owning the solution will bring about the result they wanted. If all consulting were done using the Process consultation approach it would look very different to what it does today. Coaching has taken up this shortfall.

Adult Learning Theory

Some of the first known life coaching sessions developed out of adult learning programs run in New York in the 1960’s. These occurred in the middle of a very exciting period of study about the way that adults learn. It seems strange now, but prior to the 1960’s the commonly held belief was that the bulk of learning occurred in childhood, with only a handful of people such as academics, continuing learning in any significant way into adulthood. Little thought had been given to whether adult learning might differ in nature from childhood learning.

During the 1960’s and 70’s a range of researchers, most notably Dr. Malcolm Knowles², began to explore the ways that adults learnt. In 1973, Knowles came up with a range of adult learning principles. These principles were initially designed to inform the way courses or classes for adults should be structured, however, each of these principles, as paraphrased below, have informed coaching as a field and, if you substitute the word, “teacher” for “coach” can easily be applied to the coaching experience.

**Principle 1:** “Adults are autonomous and self-directed. They need to be free to direct themselves. Their teachers must actively involve adult participants in the learning process and serve as facilitators …. guiding participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts.”

**Principle 2:** “Adults have accumulated a foundation of life experiences and knowledge that may include work-related activities, family responsibilities, and previous education. They need to connect learning to this knowledge/experience base. To help them do so, teachers and facilitators should draw out participants’ experience and knowledge, which is relevant to the topic. They must relate theories and concepts to the participants and recognize the value of experience in learning.”

**Principle 3:** “Adults are goal-oriented. Upon enrolling in a course, they usually know what

² [www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm](http://www.infed.org/thinkers/et-knowl.htm)
goal they want to attain. They, therefore, appreciate an educational program that is organized and has clearly defined elements. Instructors must show participants how this class will help them attain their goals."

**Principle 4:** "Adults are relevancy-oriented. They must see a reason for learning something. Learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them."

**Principle 5:** "Adults are practical, focusing on the aspects of a lesson most useful to them in their work. They may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake."

**Principle 6:** "As do all learners, adults need to be shown respect. Instructors must acknowledge the wealth of experiences that adult participants bring to the classroom. These adults should be treated as equals in experience and knowledge and allowed to voice their opinions freely."

As you can see, the principles that Knowles suggested needed to be present in a learning situation are almost all present in coaching. It is little wonder then that coaching is used so extensively in workplace learning programs throughout the world either on its own or following other training to ensure that sustainable change occurs.

**Experiential Learning**

Experiential learning is based on the idea that we learn through doing, or as Chinese philosopher Confucius put it: "Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I may remember. Involve me, and I will understand." In the early 1980’s, David Kolb, professor of organizational behavior at Weatherhead School of Management, developed a famous model of learning. Kolb’s theory is that learning occurs in a cycle that looks like this³:

³ David A. Kolb Personal Website: http://learningfromexperience.com/
To put this into layman’s terms, Kolb believes that adults learn by having an experience, then reflecting on that experience, coming up with new insights or ideas and then going out into the world to apply these new insights. Upon applying new insights, adults then have new experiences to learn from. In this way, learning goes on and on in an endless cycle.

Coaching shares Kolb’s assumption that the best way for the client to learn is from his or her own experiences. Coaches believe that clients are dynamic, powerful individuals capable of finding their own answers. As coaches, it is our job to ask the right questions. Coaches assist clients to reflect on and learn from their experiences. They also assist clients to apply this learning to new goals so that they can create new achievements. In fact, the coaching conversation could be seen as the “observations and reflections” step of Kolb’s Cycle of Learning and the whole coaching relationship could be seen as a learning relationship.

Learning Styles
Have you ever been to a high school reunion? If you have, you may have noticed that the people who went on to achieve success in their lives were often not necessarily the highest scholastic achievers. In fact, the history books are full of examples of high achievers who did poorly at school and hated the experience including Thomas Edison, Nelson Rockefeller, Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill and General George Patton. This is because schools have traditionally worked on the assumption that people all learn in the same way and those who couldn’t fit the pattern of the day, had no option but frustration and failure, regardless of their skills and abilities. The success of the people cited above is testament to the fact that there is no one-way of learning. We all learn differently.
As coaches we don’t ask “How smart is this person?” we ask “How is this person smart?” In 1987, Peter Honey⁴ and Alan Mumford built on the work of David Kolb by suggesting that, not only does learning occur in a cyclical fashion as Kolb suggested, but that different individuals feel more comfortable at different points of the cycle. Honey and Mumford identified four different preferences, or ways in which people prefer to learn, each related to a different stage of the learning cycle.

These preferred learning styles they called Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist. They also developed a questionnaire to help people determine which style they preferred. You can read more about Honey and Mumford’s learning styles and access the questionnaire at www.peterhoney.com but below is a short description of each learning style:

Activists
Activists like to be involved in new experiences. They are open minded and enthusiastic about new ideas but get bored with implementation. They enjoy doing things and tend to act first and consider the implications afterwards. They like working with others but tend to hog the limelight.

Activists learn best when
- Involved in new experiences, problems and opportunities
- Working with others in business games, team tasks, role-playing
- Being thrown in the deep end with a difficult task
- Chairing meetings, leading discussions

Activists learn less when:
- Listening to lectures or long explanations
- Reading, writing or thinking on their own
- Absorbing and understanding data
- Following precise instruction to the letter

Reflector
Reflector
Reflectors like to stand back and look at a situation from different perspectives. They like to collect data and think about it carefully before coming to any conclusions. They enjoy observing others and will listen to their views before offering their own.

⁴ http://www.peterhoney.com/
Reflectors learn best when:

- Observing individuals or groups at work
- They have the opportunity to review what has happened & think about what they learned
- Producing analyses and reports doing tasks without tight deadlines

Reflectors learn less when:

- Acting as leader or role-playing in front of others
- Doing things with no time to prepare
- Being thrown in at the deep end
- Being rushed or worried by deadlines

Theorists

Theorists adapt and integrate observations into complex and logically sound theories. They think problems through in a step-by-step way. They tend to be perfectionists who like to fit things into a rational scheme. They tend to be detached and analytical rather than subjective or emotive in their thinking.

Theorists learn best when:

- They are put in complex situations where they have to use their skills and knowledge
- They are in structured situations with clear purpose
- They are offered interesting ideas or concepts even though they are not immediately relevant
- They have the chance to question and probe ideas behind things

Theorists learn less when:

- They have to participate in situations which emphasize emotion and feelings
- The activity is unstructured or briefing is poor
- They have to do things without knowing the principles or concepts involved
- They feel they're out of tune with the other participants e.g. with people of very different learning styles

Pragmatists

Pragmatists are keen to try things out. They want concepts that can be applied to their job.
They tend to be impatient with lengthy discussions and are practical and down to earth.

**Pragmatists learn best when:**
- There is an obvious link between the topic and job
- They have the chance to try out techniques with feedback e.g. role-playing
- They are shown techniques with obvious advantages e.g. saving time
- They are shown a model they can copy e.g. a film or a respected boss

**Pragmatists learn less when:**
- There is no obvious or immediate benefit that they can recognize
- There is no practice or guidelines on how to do it
- There is no apparent pay back to the learning e.g. shorter meetings
- The event or learning is ‘all theory’ (Lieb, 2006)

Learning styles theory had an immediate impact on a range of fields. Educationalists realized that catering to different learning styles could dramatically improve the academic results of learners. Employers realized that they could leverage greater performance from employees with carefully targeted professional development. Managers realized that by carefully matching people with complementary learning styles, they could form high functioning teams and become learning organizations. Consultants began to include information about learning styles in the products and services that they provided to organizations.

Along with these fields, theories about learning styles have influenced coaching. Many coaches use learning styles instruments with their clients (and for themselves) and encourage their clients to use their natural style to leverage greater learning. Honey and Mumford’s is one of the best known but it is not the only one. Other well-known instruments are Bernice McCarthy’s 4Mat system\(^5\) and the Gregory Mind-Styles Delineator. In addition, many instruments for measuring personality type such as the Myer-Briggs Personality Type Indicator and Enneagram Type Indicator also include information on the preferred learning styles of various personality types.

**Psychology**

The field of psychology is extremely broad and coaching shares a number of its theories.

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\(^5\) [http://www.aboutlearning.com/about-us](http://www.aboutlearning.com/about-us)
Coaching derives its name from the field of Sports coaching and has many things in common with the corresponding discipline of sports psychology. Both sports psychology and coaching involve:

1. Developing and maintaining a vision
2. Encouraging a client to focus forward
3. Being aware of and building on natural abilities
4. Working towards a “personal best” performance
5. Challenging beliefs that prevent peak performance

Perhaps the closest “cousin” to coaching in the “psychology family” is cognitive therapy. This school of psychological theory (and practice) works on the principle that the way we act is a result of the way we feel, which is, in turn, a result of the way we think. Cognitive Therapy differs from other psychological practices in that it spends less time focusing on how people originally developed the thought systems that lead to their current negative behavior, (usually early childhood experiences), and more time focusing on what those thought systems are and on ways that adults can retrain themselves into new, more functional thoughts and behavior in the future.

Coaching also shares the theory that the way people behave is a result of the way they think. The coaching concepts of underlying beliefs, reframing perspectives, visualization, intent and creation all share a philosophical basis with cognitive therapy. Although cognitive therapy aims to help dysfunctional people become more functional, much of the theory can be applied to the coaching goal of helping a functional person reach high levels of performance, happiness and success.

**Positive psychology** is an emerging field of psychology and one with a very close relationship with coaching. The basic premise of the positive psychology movement is that the field of psychology has focused most of its attention on unhappiness, or, in other words, the detection and treatment of dysfunction in human beings.

The aim of positive psychology is to apply psychological research methods to the study of “function” in human beings by posing questions such as: “What makes one person happier than another?”, “Does setting and achieving goals increase our happiness?”, “Are some people just naturally happy?”, and “Can those who are not naturally hopeful and optimistic make themselves more so?”
The results of these studies in the positive psychology field have informed the practice of many coaches. For example, coaching recognizes that developing “gratitude” greatly leverages the amount of happiness that clients gain from their achievement of goals. Coaching is also based on the theory, proven by positive psychology researchers in trials, that goals based on a person’s “core values” are much more likely to be achieved, are more sustainable over time and will result in greater joy in life. Coaching also works from the principle, shared by positive psychologists, that even very small incremental increases in happiness across key areas can lead to a greatly enhanced overall sense of well-being.

Management Theory

The terms “executive coaching” and “business coaching” began to be used in leadership development programs during the 1980’s. Although the term “coaching” was not used earlier than this, coaching shares a theoretical basis with management theories that appeared as early as the 1960’s, including a major one called Theory X and Theory Y.

In the 1960’s Douglas McGregor at the MIT Sloan School of Management described two very different attitudes toward workforce motivation. McGregor felt that companies followed either one or the other approach.

The Theory X view assumes that employees are inherently lazy and will avoid work if they can. Because of this, workers need to be closely supervised and comprehensive systems of controls developed. A hierarchical structure is needed with narrow span of control at each level. According to this theory, employees will show little ambition without an enticing incentive program and will avoid responsibility whenever they can.

A Theory X manager believes that his or her employees do not really want to work, that they would rather avoid responsibility and that it is the manager’s job to structure the work and energize the employee. The result of this line of thought is that Theory X managers naturally adopt a more authoritarian style based on the threat of punishment.

The Theory Y view assumes that employees are self-motivated, anxious to accept greater responsibility, and exercise self-control and self-direction. It is believed that on the whole, employees enjoy their mental and physical work duties. It is also believed that if given the chance employees have the desire to be creative and forward thinking in the workplace. There is a chance for greater productivity by trusting employees to perform at the best of their abilities.
A Theory Y manager believes that, given the right conditions, most people will want to do well at work and that there is a pool of unused creativity in the workforce. They believe that the satisfaction of doing a good job is a strong motivation in and of itself. Rather than trying to control, a Theory Y manager will try to remove the barriers that prevent workers from fully actualizing themselves.

Coaching shares the view of employees outlined by McGregor’s Theory Y and most organizations that employ corporate or executive coaches would also share this view. More recently, as organizations have moved into the so called “information age”, the Theory Y view of human performance has become even dominant in management theory. New technology and globalization have led to people having access to huge amounts of information at precisely the time that they need it. Whole countries are shifting from growing and producing “things” to providing knowledge and services and becoming so-called “knowledge economies”. For the first time in history, managers can no longer be assumed to know more about the business than their staff. Suddenly knowledge sharing, creativity and lateral thinking are becoming key competencies in every level of a business.

In these new knowledge rich environments, Theory X management simply will not work. Managers can’t possibly understand the details of the work performed by all of their direct reports all of the time. Managers can’t put in place structures to monitor things like “creativity” or “commitment to excellence”. Most management theory today is based on Theory Y notions such as trusting staff, leading by example, modeling ethical behavior, encouraging new ways of looking at challenges, and providing a happy and supportive workplace culture. Coaching shares many of these ideas. Coaches trust that clients want to solve the problems of their lives and their work. Coaches encourage reflection on values and ethics. Coaches model ethical behavior and lead by example.

**Spirituality**

Spirituality is a very broad and undefined area of study and interest, which stems back to the late 19th century when philosophers such as Nietzsche began to question blind obedience to all aspects of mainstream religion, while at the same time recognizing the valuable role that religious worship played in everyday life. Basically people who consider themselves spiritual have a belief in and a desire to be attuned to a higher being, entity or energy. While many people pursue spirituality within organized religion, spirituality differs from most major religions in that it considers the spiritual path to be a personal journey to be achieved.
through reflection, meditation, prayer or other similar practices, rather than by submitting to a set of rules proscribed by any one religion. In fact, most proponents of spirituality consider all religions to have useful ideas and practices, which are helpful in achieving a personal connection with the Divine, but that no one religion “knows it all”.

Spirituality studies are broad in nature but have a basic belief set.

This belief set includes:

1. A search for meaning in everyday events. A feeling that life has a purpose and that even small events have meaning and significance.
2. A commitment to values. A desire to build ones life around a set of beliefs, standards and ethics that one cherishes.
3. The pursuit of “Transcendence”. A desire to experience greater awareness of, and appreciation of a “transcendent dimension” to life beyond self.
5. A commitment to “Becoming”. The belief that life unfolds in front of us, & that, through reflection and experience, we can develop a sense of who we are & how one knows.

The growth of spirituality as a set of theories and practices can certainly be seen as a response to increased religious freedom throughout the world. However, it is also influenced by factors such as increased global communication and, in particular, the amount of knowledge that people have about the spiritual practices of diverse groups of people around the world, particularly indigenous peoples. Some people have also suggested that it is a reaction to the excessive materialism and consumerism of the post World War 2 era which has lead to increased rates of depression and mental illness in many countries as well as environmental disasters such as global warming. The Spirituality movement poses the question: “Why are we so unhappy when we are supposedly so wealthy?” And comes up with the answer that “there must be a greater purpose to life.”

Coaching has much in common with the spirituality movement. Firstly, it also has a strong focus on values. Coaches believe that goals built upon our values are more sustainable and bring greater joy. Coaching is also aimed at bringing “balance” into life. There is a saying amongst business coaches that “after the first three sessions, its all personal coaching”. What this means is that human beings are whole, connected entities. It is impossible to just
focus on business goals without exploring the full human experience of relationships, beliefs and emotions. Coaching shares the belief that financial and business success alone will not bring sustained happiness, although these may be important parts of a whole picture. Finally, coaching is based on a belief in the power of an emotional connection between two human beings, the coach and the client. It shares the belief of most spiritual practitioners that people bring energy with them and that when a coach and client are open to the connection of this energy, powerful transformation is possible.

Philosophy

Philosophy also plays a large role in coaching. Philosophy is the study of general and fundamental problems concerning matters such as existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind and language. It follows a critical, systematic approach to thinking using rational argument. There are many branches of philosophy ranging from political, ethical, aesthetical, metaphysical, epistemological, logical, and philosophy of mind, language and religion. In addition to these branches of philosophy, there is also western and eastern philosophy. Philosophy is incredibly broad but the teachings from this area have gone on to impact the role of coaching from both western and eastern philosophies.

Coaching

Each of us brings with us skills, knowledge and understanding from other fields and disciplines. We may not have the theoretical language that comes with these bodies of knowledge and we may not be intimately familiar with their history, but we share in them nonetheless.

If you have a strong foundation in a particular field you may choose to utilize this to create a niche in your coaching. For example, many people who were previously Cognitive Psychologists apply these skills in a niche-coaching field called Cognitive Coaching. Some people who are well grounded in management theory choose to focus on corporate or executive coaching as this added knowledge base gives them credibility when dealing with companies. Some people with a background or interest in training or adult learning offer packages of corporate training followed by coaching. Whichever field you come from, there will be transferable skills and knowledge that you can use in your coaching.

As coaching becomes more popular it will be tempting for one discipline or another to try to “stake a claim” for coaching and to dismiss the contributions of other areas to the unique
field of coaching. Evidence of this is already emerging, with some newspaper and magazine reports on coaching, struggling to find a “fit” for this emerging discipline and lumping it into one or other of the areas or disparaging it altogether. In order for the field of coaching to come through these debates as a strengthened and unified professional body, a number of things need to occur.

Firstly, the coaching field needs to maintain its own internal rigor and professionalism through building and supporting professional bodies and by adherence to professional standards. We need to ensure that our professional bodies have a zero tolerance approach to unethical practices. Secondly, as coaches, we must be willing to discuss and debate with a spirit of abundance and generosity, which supports and empowers new and more experienced coaches.

Finally, we should be proud of the uniqueness of our field and respect the various contributions that researchers, thinkers and practitioners have brought from a wide range of backgrounds.

Reflection

1. Which of the adult learning principles are most relevant to coaching?
2. What makes coaching a learning activity?
3. Have you ever used a learning styles indicator instrument?
4. Which one and how useful was it?
5. What contributions do you think Psychology has made to the field of coaching?
6. Why is Positive Psychology such an interesting area of study for coaches?
7. Why would a Theory X view of management be incompatible with coaching?
8. How important is spirituality to coaching?
9. What knowledge and skills do you bring from your previous life and work to the field of coaching?
10. What is the difference between consultation and coaching?
11. What aspects or theories of philosophy influence your coaching?