The Four Pillars and Coaching

The four pillars of NLP are: rapport, sensory acuity, flexibility & outcome thinking. What have these to do with coaching? Well, it may be interesting to investigate coaching from this perspective and see what falls out from that journey?
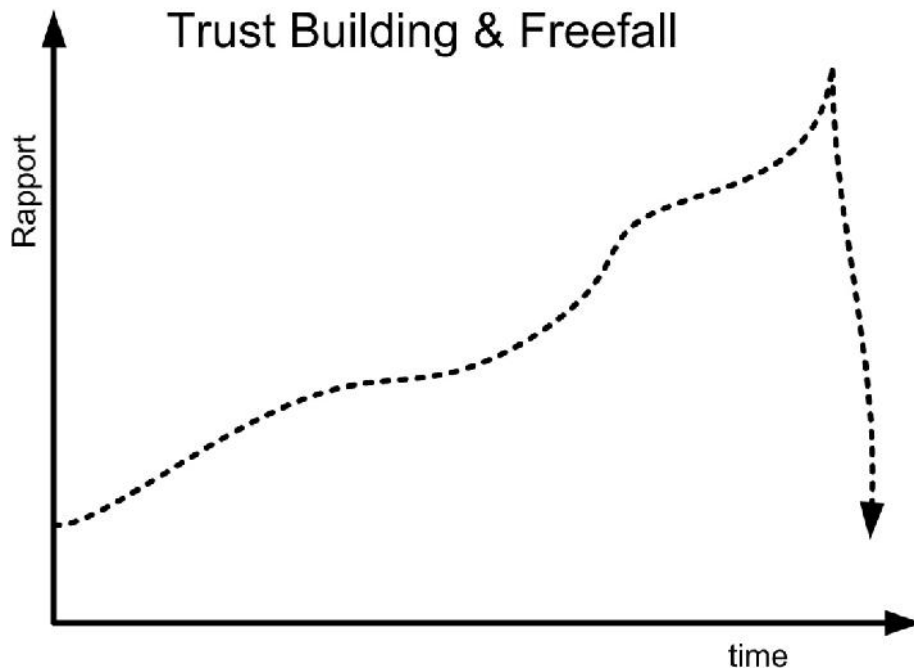
Rapport

Surely, there must be a significant level of rapport if the coachee/individual is going to engage in a coaching conversation? Let me provide some context for this.

Coaching is universally expected to have an agreed context and shared understandings when conducted in a formal setting.

In stark contrast, during informal coaching for example in managing people, these shared areas of context and understandings are typically absent - assumptions are made by the manager/coach about the willingness of the coachee to engage. This engagement (in any setting) will question the coachee's understanding, their thinking processes and their experiencing of their world. In other words, there must be a significant level of rapport if the coachee/individual is going to permit you to take them on this journey. Some people might call that required characteristic 'trust' where rapport is then considered to be a set of observable behaviours that derive from the mutual values of trust.

In practice, in informal settings, there is a dance of rapport-building that is tested by the first question that probes at a significantly deeper level.


Trust Building & Freefall

There is a danger then that trust (and the qualities of rapport) may be damaged if the shift to more challenging questions is unwelcome generally, or specifically unwelcome due to the quality of the dynamic at that time.

For a coach/manager to operate successfully, the key factors or qualities needed are sure to include their principles, the level of development of their humanity and their sensory acuity. Coaching 'tools' of course, are of tertiary importance. More about these later.

In the trust figure (McLeod 2007)[1], the left-hand side shows a certain level of 'assumed' trust in the coachee from initial contact. As a conversation progresses, we hope to gain levels of trust (especially in new relationships). This journey may be tested by the depth of questioning that takes place. Provided both parties come through those 'testing' episodes feeling better for the experience, the trust-building continues to improve. In principle, it is possible for an inappropriate intervention to seriously damage trust (freefall, please see figure) and the result of that should be obvious in the coachee, viz: at extremes, to suffusion of blood into the peripheral tissues, alternatively to the exact opposite (blanching) coupled with raised muscular tension, to angry outburst and a swift exit!

In every situation where the outcome of a challenging intervention may have wounded the quality of the dynamic, it is imperative that the coach deals with that quality of the dynamic before attempting to coach through any alternate thread[2] (McLeod, 2003). In other words, the mutual generation and building of trust must take place so that there is raised rapport. This manifests in several ways but includes the quality of communication (in the widest possible sense) within the coaching dynamic.

Ouch!

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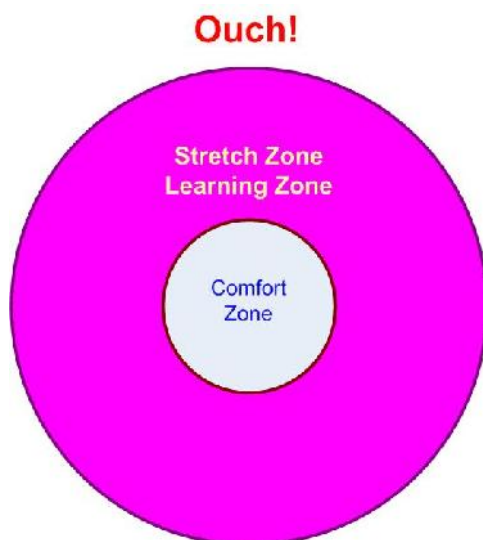
[1] McLeod, A. (2007) Self-Coaching Leadership – Simple Steps from Manager to Leader. San Francisco and Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
[2] McLeod, A. (2003) Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, H.R, Professionals and Coaches. NY and Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

As coaches, we have to find the balance between the appropriate (and developing) level of stretch for the coachee. This stretch is to challenge thinking and make the interventions worthwhile (significant for the coachee) without reaching the freefall situation. In practice, in the UK anyway, we find that many coaches are if anything, rather tame when it comes to challenging their coachee. Does that matter? Unless it is a professional engagement, then probably it does not matter. In a professional 1-2-1 setting though, coachees have right to expect to be challenged to a far higher degree than the coachee can possibly challenge themselves – or why bother with professional coaching anyway?

It is worth pausing to briefly think about patterns. These, along with 'limiting beliefs' are great areas for coaches to demonstrate the advantage of professional coaching versus self-coaching. Our brains are hard-wired to develop repeatable, automatic patterns that become unmonitored by the individual. At one level this is enormously efficient. At another, the predisposition to patterns is a major flaw in humans (when the patterns become obsolete and dysfunctional to the coachee).

Acuity & Intuition Checks

Sensory acuity builds upon experience and so the same hard-wired process of developing unmonitored patterns, leads coaches to develop higher levels of intuition. These two, sensory acuity and intuition, are issues with inherent weaknesses and strengths.

Sensory acuity can be wildly inaccurate; crossed arms can mean 'I am cold', or 'my bladder is full' rather than, 'I found that question rather challenging thank you!' And please, do not start me on eye-cues – these are widely disliked by the public and often create barriers to the acceptance of NLP principles.

Intuition is close to fantasy in that both lead to judgements that may have no relationship to the world outside the coach's head. So, whether you work logically using (conscious attention to) sensory acuity or whether you work intuitively (or both), we all need to check our assumptions with the coachee before developing a new thread of interventions.

Flexibility

The management model shown (McLeod 2007) gives a relationship between an individual's 'independence' (in respect to their manager/coach; (y-axis)) and their personal level of development as an individual (x-axis). As the individual progresses (within any context) their needs for being 'managed' reduces over time.

What we have seen in establishing coaching cultures in organisations, is that managers can shift their style, in the majority of working situations, to one that is weighted towards the right-hand side of the curve. In other words, the manager/coach can, invariably, use facilitation/coaching interventions with most of the people most of the time, unless the situation is urgent. If an individual/coachee has not enough experience, knowledge or context to understand the coaching question (kindly see the figure) then the manager moves from 1. (Facilitation/coaching/leadership) to 2.(Mentoring) and so offers some ideas,

examples (i.e. context) to help. If these still produce psychological inertia, the manager moves to 3. (Information/support).
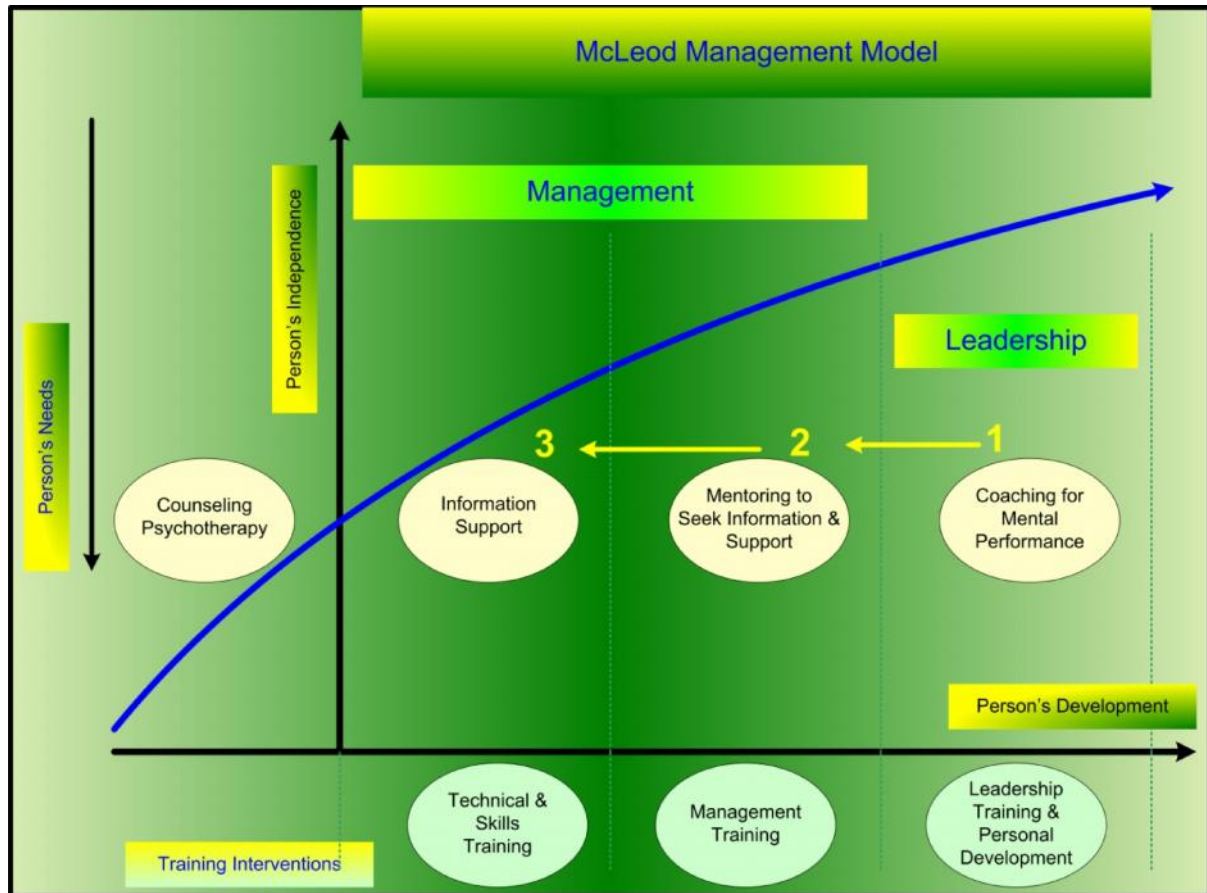
Here then, is a model for coaching & leadership that suggests that as managers and coaches we are mostly better to operate with people on the basis that they are more able than we gave them credit for up until now. In organisations, those coaching behaviours lead to cultures that develop their people faster - we know that (McLeod 2010)[3], having taken 360° measures of observable behaviours/performance both before and after these learning journeys towards the 'Coaching Organisation'. The other great advantage of this technology, is that managers who are training with coaching-skills, get to use those skills from minute one of every day – they then up-skill faster than their colleagues who are looking back over their day to gauge where they might have used coaching interventions (if they had thought of it at the time)!

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[3] McLeod, A. & Jenkins, W. (2010) 'A 360 Model for measuring the impact of training on managers' The Training Journal, July, pp. tba.

This process of moving from coaching, mentoring and support (which can include direction of course) requires flexibility and this is the same flexibility that is needed by professional 1-2-1 coaches to suit the needs of their coachees in the moment.

There are many other needs for flexibility in coaching as well as the above example where they must move fluidly between coaching, mentoring and information/support. One of the most important of these is the need to move from:

- questions that generate quick, logic thinking and responses,

to:
- challenging questions that create self-reflective experiences where the coachee is silent, and where the psychological and emotional journey/experience is almost all that is conscious, and where bodily physiology is otherwise slowed down.

In this trance-like state, the coachee does not move, breathing is slow and shallow, eyes are middle-distance focussed (for minimal external, visual stimulation). From this space, the most cathartic coaching experiences may arise. By cathartic, we mean major leaps of understanding, perception and motivation (or all three)!

There are a myriad of skills that help achieve and maintain these states including 'clean language[4]' , reflective language (McLeod 2003) and more advanced examples such as 'trailing-off', but more about these and others, another time!

Outcome Thinking

Professional coaching is always framed by goals/targets. What the coach observes are issues and/or goals and these are then translated by the coachee into achievable, sustainable, learning opportunities. A good coach then, is not just coaching single issues and goals, but they are helping the coachee to embed and contextualize their learning to be applied in different upcoming scenarios[5]; hence the word 'sustainable'. From a semantic standpoint, it may be useful to reframe the possibility for drilling down and making distinctions between goal/target and outcomes.

In coaching, the coachee's objectives are often framed by one or more outcomes derived from value-judgements and values (most typically). Their declared target or goal may, however, align or clash with that. (I take the point that the target/goal may also be described as an outcome, but for clarity, am making a temporary distinction).

Let me give the example of an individual in career-coaching who declared an intention to be a helicopter pilot in the paramedic sector. When we looked at outcomes more roundly, these included a desire to work with others in teams and to socialize with colleagues. The individual also wished to work in a certain geographical area due to commitments to his sport and his team. Having researched opportunities for pilots in the area, he found that the pilots generally had very little interaction with on-call medics at all and so his outcomes would be unlikely to be met or in his span of control.

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[4] For example, see Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P. (2000) Metaphors in Mind. London: Developing Company Press.
[5] Future pacing

Skills

I started this article averring that key qualities of the performance coach include principles, developed humanity and sensory acuity. I also rely massively on intuition but I am doubtful whether this is necessary to coach to a high standard of effectiveness. I also stated that these three key qualities are more important that tools and this supports and extends the view[6] of coaching's granddad, Tim Gallwey (2002).

We know many managers who are superb coaches without any formal training in coaching or facilitation skills. Yes, a number of traits can be identified in their work, but many of thse managers often have no discernable toolkit from any discipline that I am familiar with (including EI, TA, Gestalt, counselling etc). In other words, their coaching brilliance arises from their inherent nature as developed, caring, adult humans.

One of the other insights about differentiators of great coaches compared to the rest of the coaching community is the quality of questioning. One feature stands out and I am grateful to James Lawley[7] (2009) for looking at master-class video and identifying this quality: as he says, from modelling any number of coaches, the master-coach was consistently very different from all the others modelled in the quality of questioning. And the quality? That, every question was posed for the benefit of the coachee and not for the coach. This offers all coaches and managers a novel and key learning about top-level coaching where we can all grow and improve what we do be reframing the purpose of our questioning.

Conclusion

Any perspective on coaching raises useful calibration and context and NLP is no exception. The four pillars of NLP are all necessary adjuncts to best practice in coaching whether NLP trained or not, but care needs to be taken in the understanding of rapport. Good coaches will be risking trust in the dynamic by inviting the coachee to new levels of stretch. In that journey, the quality of rapport may by temporarily risked and in any case, whatever the outcome of that intervention, the coach must be prepared to deal with issues in the dynamic before returning to other coaching threads.

<Bio>

Angus McLeod is Visiting Professor of Coaching at Birmingham City University Business School and author of many papers & books on coaching, NLP and leadership. Books include, Performance Coaching and Me, Myself, My Team (both Crown House), Self-coaching Leadership (John Wiley) and Performance Coaching Toolkit (McGraw-Hill/OU, 2010). He designed both (distance-learning) performance coaching diploma courses at Newcastle College with over 15,000 students to date. He researches and supervises academic research in the UK. Angus McLeod facilitates master-classes in coaching, trains managers and coaches 1-2-1 internationally.

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[6] Gallwey, W.T. (1999) ICF plenary lecture.
[7] Lawley, J. (2009) private communication.

Angus McLeod Associates
Angus McLeod Associates offers and trains coaches. The company trains managers in the use of coaching skills to use in their day-to-day managing styles. The website provides a significant resource for free information for managers, leaders and coaches as well as free newsletters and access to a library of videos.

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