

# The Impact of the Inner Game and Sir John Whitmore on Coaching:

A Commentary

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is a tangible rivalry between psychologist-coaches and so-called ‘non-psychologist coaches’. Let’s give the latter their own descriptor, ‘practitioner-coaches’. This tension between the psychologist-coaches and practitioner-coaches may be due to differences in their approaches. The psychologists have a tendency to ‘a priori’, science-based approaches to coaching while the practitioner-coaches come broadly from ‘a posteriori’ approaches – that is, they use many methods that are generated from practical experience. Simplistically, one might imagine that the psychologists would be thinking and analyzing with reference to proven, academic models, while the practitioner-coaches might be listening and reacting more. But life is more complicated than this.

## **ANALYSIS VERSUS INSTINCT**

Within the practitioner-coach group there is another raft of tension between people whose practice comes largely from instinct and those who (rather like the many disciples of psychology) operate from rational thoughts using a range of models. Models used by practitioner-coaches come from widely different disciplines; for example, emotional intelligence, transactional analysis and neuro-linguistic programming. A question might arise therefore whether the best coaching for most individuals is provided by the thinking analyst (whether psychologist or model-rich, practitioner-coach) or by the quietly-minded, instinctive coach.

## **QUALITY OF ATTENTION, TRUST AND THE INNER GAME**

The main advantage of the instinctive coach is that their head is not busy. Hence the quality of attention to the coachee can be expected to be significantly better than that given by coaches who are analysing what the coachee is saying with reference to their science. Better quality of attention will invariably lead to a deeper level of trust in the coachee; by itself, this trust can have a very significant impact for deeper learning. To

my mind the deepening of the trust by the person-centred coach, of any discipline, creates a platform for generative, coaching-performance. In other words, models can get in the way! And that philosophy is close to that of Tim Gallwey, father of the 'Inner Game'.

Tim Gallwey stimulated the modern world of coaching with a disciplined approach to 'keeping out of the way' of the coachee's experiential learning; their 'learning journey'. This honouring of the coachee keeps the responsibility for their learning firmly with the coachee. This is at the heart of best practice in all the practitioner-coach sector (who perform the vast majority of coaching in the market). Regrettably, the disciplines arising from this value of 'keeping out of the way' may not be as well understood or practised by all psychologist-coaches. An exception are those psychologists coming from a Gestalt background, who often find that the Gallwey model, the 'Inner Game', sits well with their professional work in which 'principles not tools'<sup>1</sup> inform the facilitation/coaching process at its extreme. That is, without any goal to inform the progress of the therapeutic experience (which is not coaching per se, as there is no goal or target which is essential to coaching).

In those coaches who have many models and methods at their disposal, many are too involved in internal processing to have adequate attention with their coachees. It appears that there may only be a minority of such coaches whose familiarity with their tool-kit is so integrated and complete, that they can 'let go' and attend deeply to the psychological states of their coachee; if you will, 'subconscious competence'.

Michael Hall, with an ongoing and creative career in the development of NLP-based models, provides numerous and often quite complicated models to trainees on his extensive coach-training programmes. If you want to see the best of his coaches however, you would be well-advised to watch Michele Duval, a former co-developer with Michael, whose ability to park her resources and stay with the coachee (in an intense and co-creational way) produces first-rate coaching as well as motivated action/success in her coachees. I suspect that the same ability to 'park resources' may apply to the best psychologist-coaches too; many others, for all their 'resources/tools' can sometimes be too highly cerebral to take exquisite care of the dynamic space and the human that should be evolving in front of them. From my perspective, the answer to the question, 'where should the coach's attention be?' is 'very predominantly with the coachee and not in mental processing'.

## **TRANSFERENCE**

Psychologist-coaches can sometimes bring vital discipline to coaching that many practitioner-coaches who have graduated from commercial training courses (of any length) may fail to provide. That is, in the area of psychological transference. All coaches would do well to understand and notice transference, whether projection towards them from their coachee or counter-projection tendencies in themselves towards their coachee.

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<sup>1</sup> Gallwey, T., International Coach Federation (ICF) Plenary lecture, 1999.

## COACHING EFFECTIVENESS

A few psychologist-researchers are also helping to measure the effectiveness of coaching using taught disciplines of best practice in statistics. Unfortunately, there is not one best-practice that relates to the journey of any single coaching session. However, bulk statistics ought to throw more light on the general efficacy of particular coaching approaches over time.

A remaining question must be ‘how good is a particular coach?’ From any discipline where I had the privilege to observe, the effectiveness of any set of coaches (operating from one single methodology) is highly variable. To help unravel this conundrum, we may be well advised then to understand more about both the skills and mind-sets of master-coaches. This knowledge may be achieved by mapping excellence as carried out by the founders of NLP, including the pioneering work of Robert Dilts.

## CATHARTIC LEARNING

Another interesting measure of coaching performance might be to map the conversations and body-clues that lead to ‘cathartic learning’ in the coachee. These episodes, in my experience as a coach and observer, are always preceded by a silent, trance-like state in which the coachee is barely breathing and the eyes are defocused<sup>3</sup>. Poor coaches from any discipline, psychologist-coach or not, never experience catharsis in their coachees, but the best ones, from any discipline or practice, do facilitate these powerful learning experiences.

## REFLECTIVE LANGUAGE

A valuable contribution that sits well with a genuine respect for the coachee’s-journey comes from the practice of Reflective Language [e.g., 1] where the words of the coachee are reflected by the coach with the dual benefit of showing that their coach is listening but oftentimes, also, by helping to maintain the coachee’s psychological ‘learning state’ achieving deeper self-reflection and learning.

## SYMBOLIC MODELING

Yet another enormous contribution to some practitioner-coaches comes from the genius of the late Dr. David Grove. David was an often enigmatic and difficult man to follow, but had an ability to work magic with his clients which remains legendary. Fortunately for us, Penny Tompkins and James Lawley [2] mapped his ‘Clean Language’ approach, enabling many coaches to use their rendition of it. This powerful and inspiring work, which they call ‘Symbolic Modeling’, is used by some practitioner-coaches in a disciplined way, as a stand-alone methodology for coaching and with profound results. Along with others, I have let their work advise the language we use in the coaching dynamic, and to great effect also.

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<sup>3</sup> These signs may include others including a slight nod of the head forwards as the muscle tone in the neck reduces. Sometimes there may be a slight sinking in the chair for the same reason. The pallor of the skin may lighten and any psychological ‘leakage’, tics and the like, are entirely absent.

## GROW

John Whitmore who has promoted GROW as a thumbnail ‘process’ for coaching has done both his tool-selection and marketing jobs well. For example, we find that where we introduce GROW, about 30% of trainees are still using the model three months following the end of their course; much higher than for any other model we have used, including my own! Of course there is no simple process in a coaching session and, in practice, a session may go back and forth through GROW. However, many coaches, particularly novice coaches, find the GROW method helpful in keeping track of where they are and where they may need to go next in order to help the coachee reach a motivated objective.

## CONCLUSION

But where is coaching going? Already we see that the vast majority of sessions are conducted by practitioner-coaches and not by psychologist-coaches. Coaching is generally an expensive intervention in one-to-one work, but we now have coaching ‘products’ where numerous coaches go into organisations on a full-day basis only and this reduces the coaching-hour rate considerably. Additionally we and others are bringing in facilitation/coaching ‘best-practice’ into the skill-range of managers as part of management and leadership development within organisations. Our work is supported by planned learning-opportunities (before, during and after the courses) to provide quite rapid culture-change. The approach also reduces perceived over- and under-managing of their staff.

It may be that the psychologist-coach could become more popular than the practitioner-coach within a few years. This could be driven by the market if it is supplied by poor coaches and or yields poor performance results. As the market is now dominated by practitioner-coaches, buyers may look to the universities for more consistent qualities. Unfortunately, the university-based sector is not certain to produce consistently great coaches either. It means that all coaching organisations do need to continue to improve standards and to measure key personal attributes of the coach, not just their technical skills. At the heart of our own best coaches are both psychological and emotional development. A university life does not appear to add any advantage to those two factors in an inquisitive and compassionate coach than life itself.

## REFERENCES

1. McLeod, A.I., The Principal Instruments of Coaching, *Anchor Point*, 2004, 17(12), 11-22.
2. Lawley, J. and Tompkins, P., *Metaphors in Mind*, Developing Company Press, London, 2000.