

The Four Pillars and Coaching

The four pillars of NLP¹ (McDermott 2006) are: rapport, (sensory) acuity, flexibility & outcome (thinking)? What have these to do with coaching? Well, it may be interesting to investigate coaching from these perspective and see what falls out from that learning journey?

Rapport

Rapport is *'the unconscious sharing of patterns of thinking, feeling and speaking. The reason it is vital in all coaching methodologies is that when people are in rapport they respond more easily to each other'* (Linder-Pelz 2010)². Surely then, 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.

1-2-1 coaching has been differentiated³ (Lawton-Smith 2007) as *'always working from the coachee's agenda to arrive at solutions and answers which are very individual and subjective'*. It is also avered⁴ (Merlevede 2004) that *'the notion of contract refers to getting a clear outcome for the coaching or mentoring, and although essential in the coaching context, it is desirable, rather, in a mentoring one'*.

In stark contrast to the 1-2-1 coaching situation, during informal coaching (for example in managing people at work) the shared agenda is typically absent. Instead, the manager/coach may make assumptions about the willingness of the coachee to engage on a similar type of learning journey, but without an explicit and mutually agreed agenda. However, the coach (in either of these two settings, whether formal 1-2-1 or informal) will question the coachee's understanding, their thinking processes and their experiencing of their world.

If the coachee/individual is going to permit you to facilitate them on this journey, then surely there must be a significant level of rapport for that 'permission' to occur? Some people might consider rapport to be measurable - simply a set of observable behaviours. If this is so, then we will observe behavioural 'interactivity' including a demonstrable willingness in the coachee to explore thinking (as a result of questioning by their coach). The coachee may also appear to relax and to make natural movements, free from intellectual control. We can probably guess that the observable behaviours of rapport derive from higher, mutual values and these mutual values are likely to include shared trust⁵ (Bateson 1972, Dilts 1994).

¹ McDermott, I. (2006) NLP Coaching, in ed J. Passmore, Excellence in Coaching: The Industry Guide, Kogan Page Ltd, London & Philadelphia, Chapter 7.

² Linder-Pelz, S. (2010) NLP Coaching: An Evidence-based approach for coaches, leaders and individuals (p.22), London. Philadelphia & New Delhi, Kogan-Page Limited.

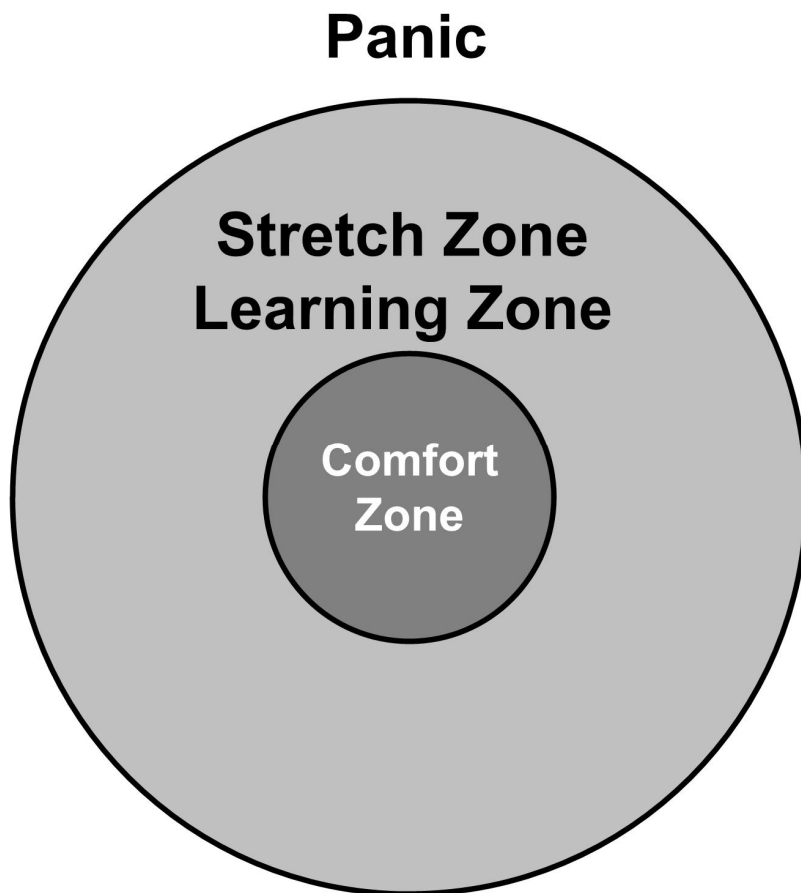
³ Lawton-Smith, C. & Cox, E. (2007) Coaching: Is it just a new name for training? International J. Evidence Based Coaching & Mentoring, (p.4) Special Issue, Summer.

⁴ Merlevede, P. & Bridoux, D. (2004) Mastering Mentoring and Coaching with Emotional Intelligence, (p.11) Crown House Publishing, Carmarthen, UK & Williston, VT.

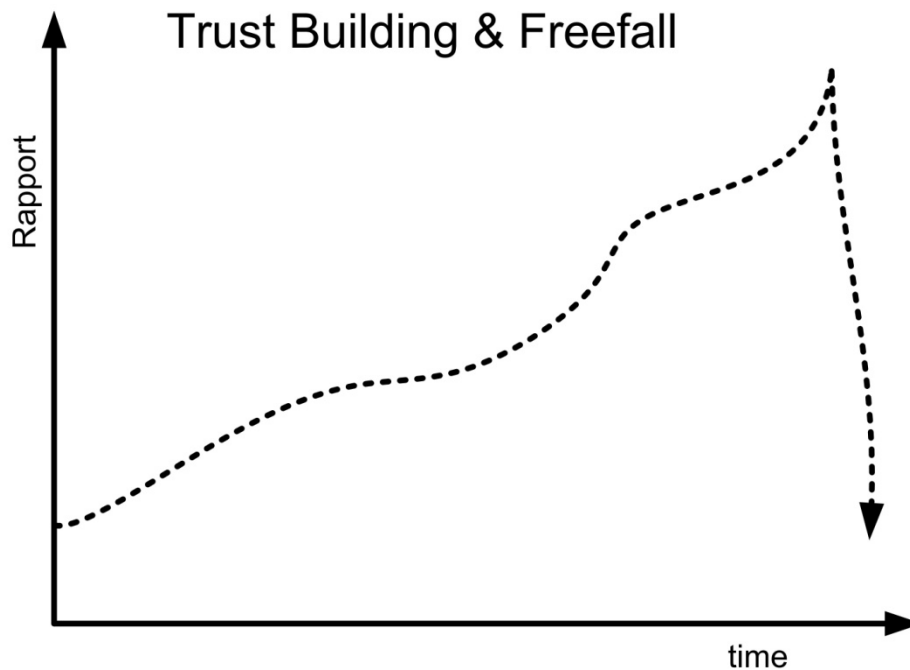
⁵ For example see: Bateson, G. (1972) Steps to an Ecology of Mind, Ballantine, New York. And, Dilts, R. (1994) Strategy of Genius, Vol. I, Paladin Press, Boulder, CO.

In practice, in informal settings, there is a dance of rapport-building that is tested by the questions posed.

The zone model⁶ (Rohnke 1995) describes the stretch or learning that occurs in human development. As coaches, we have to find the balance between the appropriate (and developing) level of stretch for the coachee. The stretch is needed in order to challenge thinking and to make the interventions worthwhile (i.e. significant for the coachee) without reaching the panic 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 a right to expect challenge to a far higher degree than the coachee can possibly self-challenge – or why bother with professional coaching anyway?



⁶ Rohnke, K. & Butler, S. (1995) Quicksilver: Adventure Games, Initiative Problems, Trust Activities and a Guide to Effective Leadership. Dubuque, IO., Kendall-Hunt Publishing.



The Trust Building figure⁷ (McLeod 2007) shows a relationship between rapport in a coaching relationship over time. The left-hand side shows a certain level of rapport in the coachee from initial contact, stemming I believe, from 'assumed' trust. This initial level of rapport must vary depending upon the initial dynamic between the coach and coachee. This dynamic will be influenced by many factors including experience and prejudice. During coaching we might expect an increasing level of rapport to be established (with time) as shown by the curve. From time to time there may be changes as the dance of rapport is supported and challenged; as the coachee moves more or less from comfort to stretch and back again. 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.

As we see from the Panic Zone of Rohnke, 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 a diminishing quality in the dynamic. This is illustrated on the Trust Building curve by freefall, a rapid downturn in rapport. The result of that in the coaching session 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

⁷ McLeod, A. (2007) *Self-Coaching Leadership – Simple Steps from Manager to Leader*. San Francisco and Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

before attempting to coach through any alternate thread⁸ (McLeod 2003). In other words, the mutual generation and building of trust must be attended to proactively by the coach even if the dance of rapport building is not smooth.

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

The first level of assumed rapport in a coachee may in part be patterned, as asserted above. The pattern will be based on a multifactorial set of experiences and conditioning. It may be worthwhile then to pause briefly and turn our attention to psychological patterns. Patterns, along with 'limiting beliefs' are great areas for coaches to demonstrate the advantage of professional coaching versus self-coaching. The human brain is hard-wired to develop repeatable, automatic patterns that may become unmonitored by an individual. The whole field of pattern recognition⁹ is predicated on the patterned processes of the mind leading to learned responses that are either conscious or unconscious. If a pattern is to be perceived¹⁰, or made conscious, *'then there must be someone to notice the pattern's existence'* (Lawley 2000). This perceiver may be the individual or an observer. From a coaching perspective, the coach (observer) is asking pertinent questions to help a coachee to self-awareness about their patterns.

At one level the existence of automatic patterns is enormously efficient. In contrast, when we try to 'think about how we think' (Double Loop learning¹¹, Dilts 2003), we must slow down. At another level, the predisposition to patterns is a major flaw in humans – that is, when the patterns become obsolete and dysfunctional to the individual. Coaching skills offer a unique and major service to people who may need to get conscious about such dysfunctional and dated patterns. A coach who does not attend to such challenges and does not give honest feedback may be regarded as not really doing their job.

Acuity: Insight & Intuition Checks

Sensory acuity can be expected to build upon experience and if that is so, then the process of learning can also be patterned – this learning is more or less conscious. For those wishing to use NLP approaches to getting more conscious about their acuity, I recommend Bandler¹² (1988).

Insight is regarded (Eysenck 1990) as various types of processes of conscious analysis with numerous researchers offering models in explanation. All the processes appear to involve mindful discrimination, for example: comparison, sorting or relating to the past. Peter

⁸ McLeod, A. (2003) Performance Coaching – The Handbook for Managers, H.R, Professionals and Coaches. NY and Carmarthen: Crown House Publishing.

⁹ See, for example, Eysenck, M. & Keane, M. (1990) Cognitive Psychology: A Student's Handbook, Hove, UK & Hillsdale, US., Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

¹⁰ Lawley, J. & Tompkins, P. (2000) Metaphors in Mind: Transformations Through Symbolic Modelling. (p.148) London, The Developing Company Press.

¹¹ Dilts, R. (2003) From Coach to Awakener. Capitola, CA., Meta Publications.

¹² Bandler, R. (1988) An Insider's Guide to Sub-modalities. Capitola, CA., Meta Publications.

Bluckert (2006) offers coaches a useful set of 'psychological understandings and insight' or psychological dimensions¹³ as follows:

- Recognises when unfinished situations in (coachees¹⁴) may be affecting their current performance
- Identifies patterns, themes and issues that may be being re-enacted in the past
- Distinguishes feelings, thoughts and reactions evoked by others from those deriving from self
- Can identify psychological complexity
- Has some awareness of pathology
- Can differentiate between coaching and therapeutic issues
- Identifies issues and material to bring to supervision.

Intuition (Reber, 1995) however, is '*a mode of understanding or knowing characterized as a direct and immediate and occurring without conscious thought or judgement.*' The author¹⁵ recommends the view that, intuition '*is a response to subtle cues and relationships apprehended implicitly, unconsciously.*' Intuition could be considered, as an unconscious process, to be close to 'gut feeling' (Sadler, 2007)¹⁶ in that judgements may have no explicable relationship to the world outside the coach's head.

Sensory acuity can be expected to be wildly inaccurate on occasion and hence a 'mind read' rather than based on sensory information: 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-cues¹⁷. These sometimes create mistrust and even anger in the general public¹⁸, '*I've always hated that NLP eyeball bullshit. Talk about over-analyzing everything*' and, '*That NLP eye cue shit is total bullshit.*' While there is support for eye-cues¹⁹ (Bolstad 2002), Diamantopoulous (2008) avers²⁰ that there are conceptual and methodological issues with current research. The public objections are perhaps more likely to reflect mistrust of what they may reasonably regard as intrusive and manipulative practices.

So, insight is driven by processing but cognitively advised by experience. And intuition is spontaneously arising (possibly from experiential learning, but out of conscious knowing). If both insight and intuition have both inherent weaknesses and strengths, how do we know when we are right? Whether you work logically using (conscious attention to) sensory acuity or whether you work intuitively (or both), then we all need to check our assumptions with

¹³ Bluckert, P. (2006) Psychological Dimensions of Executive Coaching. (p.96) Maidenhead, UK., Open University Press.

¹⁴ Bluckert used the term 'client' which in private practice is often used instead of the term 'coachee'; in professional coaching settings, 'client' typically means the buyer of coaching services.

¹⁵ Reber, A. (1995) Dictionary of Psychology, 2nd Edition. London, NY., Victoria, Ontario, Auckland, Penguin Books.

¹⁶ Sadler, E. (2007) Inside Intuition, Abingdon, Routledge.

¹⁷ Bandler, R. & Grinder, J. (1979) Frogs into Princes: Neuro-linguistic Programming, Boulder, CO, Real People Press.

¹⁸ <http://donaldclarkplanb.blogspot.com/2007/03/nlp-no-longer-plausibe.html/>.

¹⁹ Bolstad, R. (2002) Resolve: A New Model of Therapy, Carmarthen & NY, Crown House Publishing.

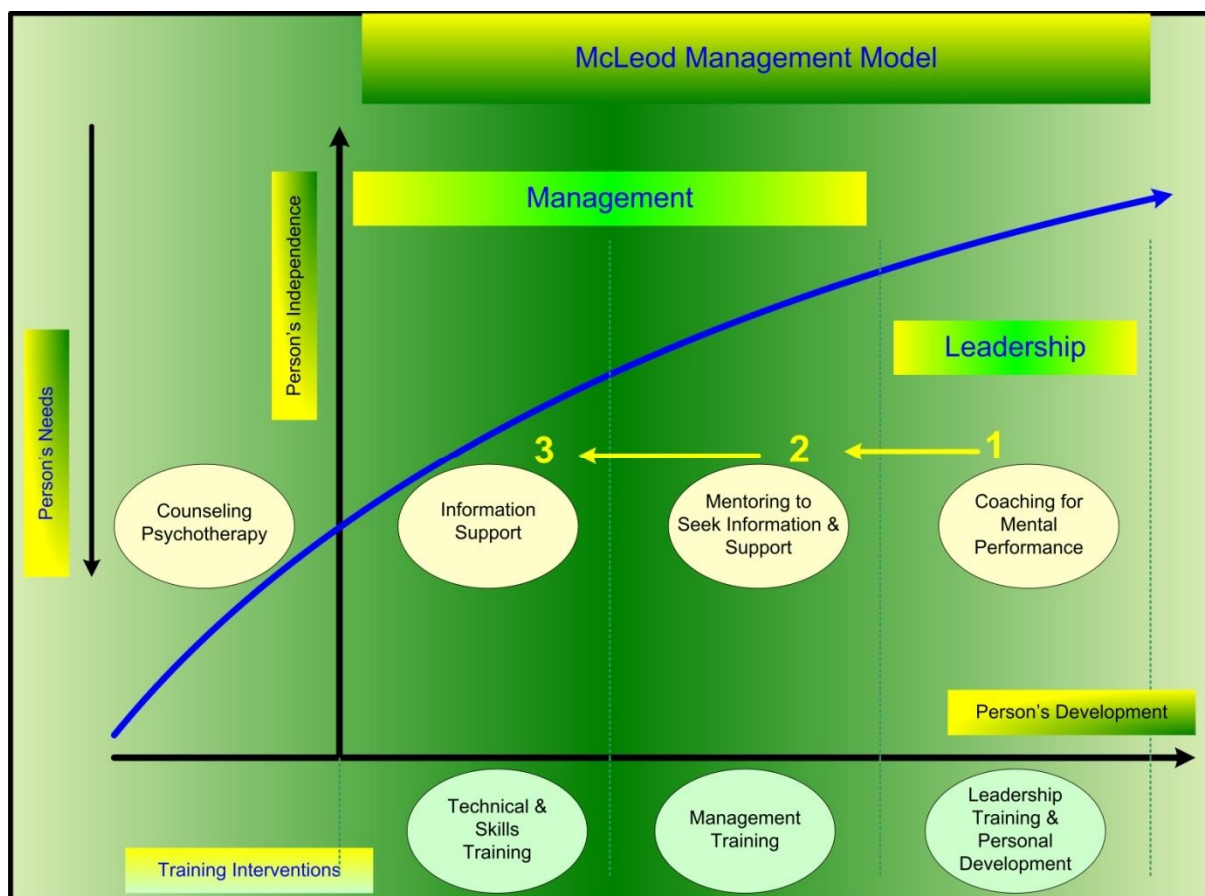
²⁰ Diamantopoulous, G., Woolley, S.I. & Spann, M. (2008) A critical Review of Past Research into the NLP Eye-accessing Cues Model, Proceedings of the NLP Research Conference, London, ANLP.

the coachee before developing a new thread of interventions. Only in that way can we be sure to be right.

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, 'coaching behaviours' lead to cultures that develop their people faster - we know that (McLeod 2010)²¹, 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 practicing with new 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)!

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 coaches, in the moment.

There are many other needs for flexibility in coaching where the coach must move fluidly between coaching, mentoring and information/support. One of the most interesting and productive of these is the advanced skill of moving 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). David Grove said of trance²², '*trance is often the prerequisite in finding the answer*' and, '*clients alter their state in going somewhere to get that answer. That somewhere, is where we want to leave them...*'. These advanced coaching skills are not essential to high-quality coaching. Indeed, Grove considered trance states inessential to the use of Clean Language, but the ability to induce these productive states demarks the difference between large 'C' and small 'c' coaches²³.

There are a myriad of skills that help achieve and maintain these trance states including 'clean language'²⁴, reflective language (McLeod 2003) and more advanced examples such as 'trailing-off', but more about these and others, another time!

²¹ McLeod, A. & Jenkins, W. (2010) 'Doing the Rounds: A 360 Model for measuring the impact of training on managers' The Training Journal, July. <http://www.trainingjournal.co.uk/feature/2010-07-01-doing-the-rounds/>.

²² Reported by Lawley & Tompkins (2003; p. 81).

²³ Coined by Dilts, 2003 (p.xiii).

²⁴ Invented by David Grove and elegantly modelled by Lawley and Tompkins (Lawley 2000).

Outcome Thinking

Professional coaching is always framed by goals/targets and, '*emphasizes generative change, concentrating on defining and achieving specific goals*' (Dilts 2003). Dilts also highlights the essential 'double-loop' learning which he describes as simultaneous outcomes of both learning 'what to do' and 'how to do it'.

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 scenarios²⁵; hence the word 'sustainable'.

From a semantic standpoint, it may be useful to make distinctions between goal/target and outcomes. In coaching, the coachee's main target or goal is often framed by one or more other outcomes derived from value-judgements and values (most typically). Their declared target or goal may, however, align or clash with those outcomes. (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 (target/goal) to be a helicopter pilot in the paramedic sector. When the other outcomes were looked at more roundly, these included a desire in the coachee 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. 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, nor within his span of control.

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 than tools and this supports and extends the view²⁶ of coaching's granddad, Tim Gallwey (2002).

We know many managers who are superb coaches without any formal training in coaching, NLP or facilitation skills. Yes, a number of traits can be identified in their work, but many of these 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 Lawley²⁷ (2009) for modelling from master-class videos and hence identifying this

²⁵ Future pacing

²⁶ Gallwey, W.T. (1999) ICF plenary lecture.

²⁷ Lawley, J. (2009) private communication.

quality: as he says, from modelling any number of coaches, the master-coach was consistently very different from all the others that he modelled in the quality of the questioning. And that quality? That, every question was posed wholly for the benefit of the coachee. This insight offers all coaches and managers a new and key learning about top-level coaching. We can all grow and improve what we do as managers and coaches by reframing the purpose of our questioning and making sure that these are for the enlightenment of the coachee and not for ourselves.

Conclusion

Any perspective on coaching raises useful calibration and context - 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 rapport and developing trust in the dynamic by inviting the coachee to new levels of stretch. In that journey, the quality of rapport may be 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.

We can use insights arising from acuity including intuition but are advised always to check with the coachee that our assumptions are useful to them.

There are key differentiators between coaches and great coaches. One of these is the ability to take coachees to productive trance states from where cathartic leaps of learning can occur. Another key differentiator lies in questioning, where the great coach is asking questions only for the enlightenment of the coachee and not to inform themselves.

<Bio>

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