Developmental Foundations of Coaching for Use in Distributed-Leadership in Organizations

Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM), Gloucester, MA 01930

Abstract

A brief outline of the research foundations and main benefits of integrating research in adult development, especially cognitive development, into individual and team coaching practice. Emphasis falls on connecting three dimensions of coaching work: social-emotional, psychological, and cognitive as achieved in CDF, the Constructive Developmental Framework..

Introduction

Coaching is a young discipline that is still growing, attempting to deepen and professionalize its approach to clients. Of the many kinds of research hospitable to coaching, the one theory that may be crucial for the future of professional coaching is, in my view, research in adult development over the life span (Basseches 1984; Kegan 1994, 1982; Lahey 1988; Jacques 1998). This discipline, an extension of J. Piaget's research on children, deals with how adults emotionally and cognitively unfold their potential between 25 and 100 years of age. It is a discipline wholly independent of child development research. In its present state, it is beginning to merge with theories of adult learning. However, learning and development are not the same: learning is "horizontal" (in time), while development is "vertical" (across time or longitudinal). As such, development determines a person's learning potential at a specific point in time.

Recently, the benefits of using adult-developmental insights has grown due to dramatic changes in the organizational fabric of work. Traditional leadership hierarchies have crumbled, and a distributed-leadership design thinking has emerged. These changes are significant for coaches since they have laid bare that work delivery, whether in commercial organizations or hospitals, comprises two separate, rarely linked dimensions. After Kegan & Lahey (2016), I will refer to them as 'Job 1' and 'Job 2', respectively. I will show that while coaching issues associated with Job 1 can be addressed by strictly behavioral coaching, those associated with Job 2 cannot.

The reason for this is simple. Job 1 -- tackling an assigned task -- is competence based, while Job 2 -- simultaneously safeguarding one's personal and developmental integrity by way of work delivery -- is based on one's present level of adult development, social-emotional and cognitive. For this reason, strictly behavioral coaching falls short since it does not have the tools required for addressing coachees' internal positioning toward each other and level of complex thinking both of which centrally feature in Job 2. For this reason, this author has since 2000 developed a

methodology called CDF (for 'Constructive Developmental Framework') that comprehensively addresses both the competence-based Job 1 and the capability-based Job 2 of work delivery.
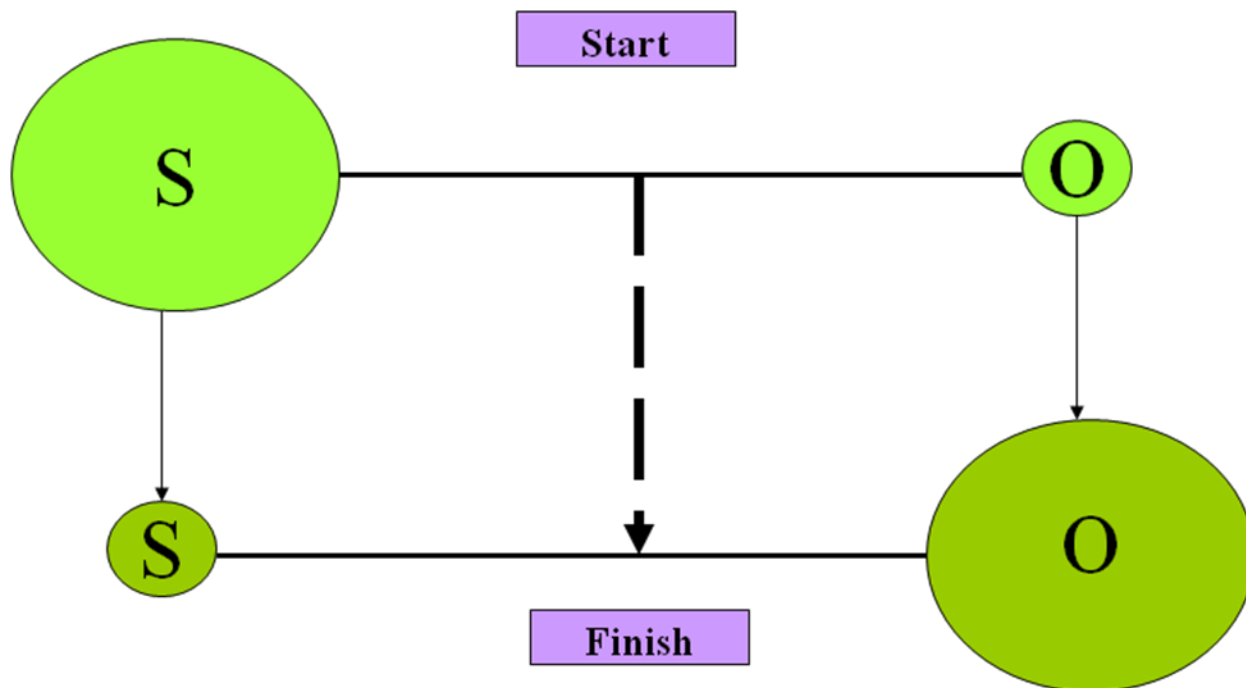
Fig. 1. Adult development originates in loss of ego-centrism (Piaget)

We can translate adult development summarily as "loss of ego-centrism", both in adults' emotional and cognitive life. When considered in terms of subject and object, the infant begins life as a huge subject without much of an object, while in late adulthood the person the infant has become experiences herself as a tiny speck in a huge universe (object) that will outlast her. This dramatic movement over each human being's lifespan is referred to as adult development.

The transformation indicated here is best seen as "vertical", across time; spanning many years. It is not simply a snapshot "change" but fundamentally affects a person's feelings, thinking, and doing. In contrast to adult development, learning and behavior are located along a horizontal axis, "in time". As individuals, we live at the intersection of both axes, as shown in Fig. 2.

Ego versus Self

When we approach coaching, whether life or executive, from this perspective, what we see is indicated in Fig. 2.
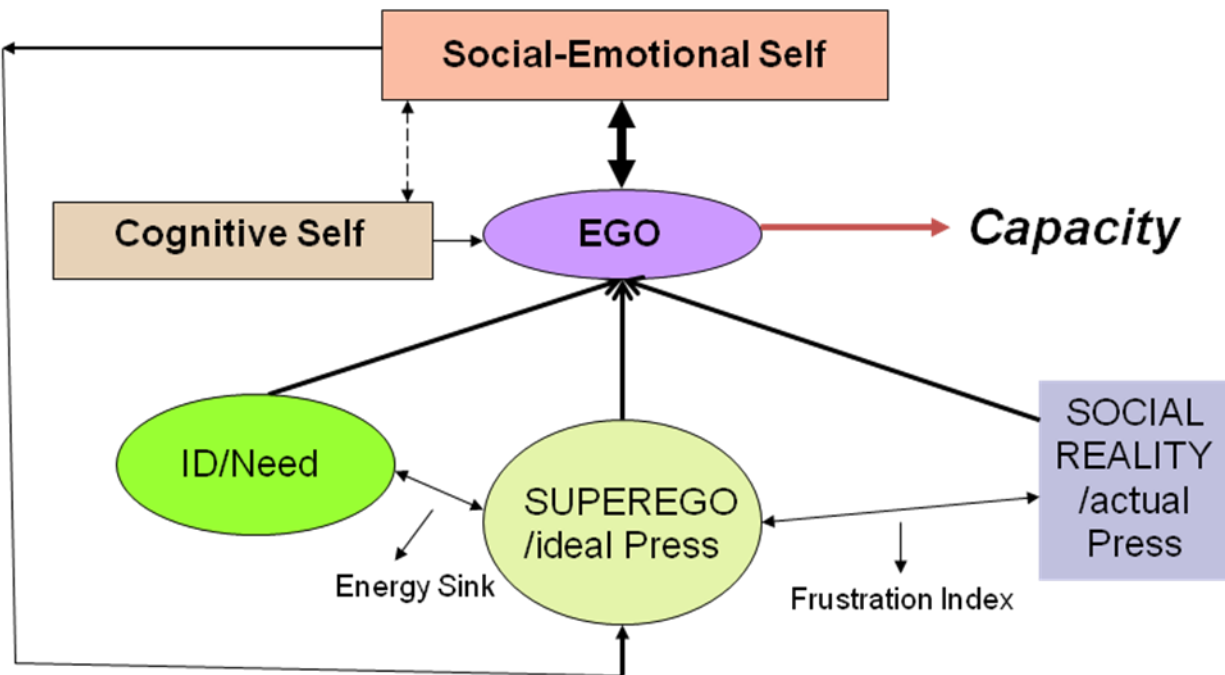
Fig. 2 Coachees' (and coaches') egoic self,
embedded in a ("vertical") social-emotional and cognitive self

Fig. 2 shows what coaches should want to know about their clients. Because if they knew it, they would eagerly want to extend their work beyond the Ego, seat of behavior, to coachees' Self, seat of what in the *Constructive Developmental Framework* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/constructive_developmental_framework) is called a person's *Frame of Reference*.

As Fig. 2 shows, Frame of Reference – "world view" -- guides how the Ego "behaves", in that it puts egoic strivings into the context of a transformational system, here called Self. This Self has two dimensions: social-emotional and cognitive.

Consequences for coaching

What are the consequences of this perspective for coaching as a profession, both for coach and coachee (who, developmentally, "sit in the same boat").
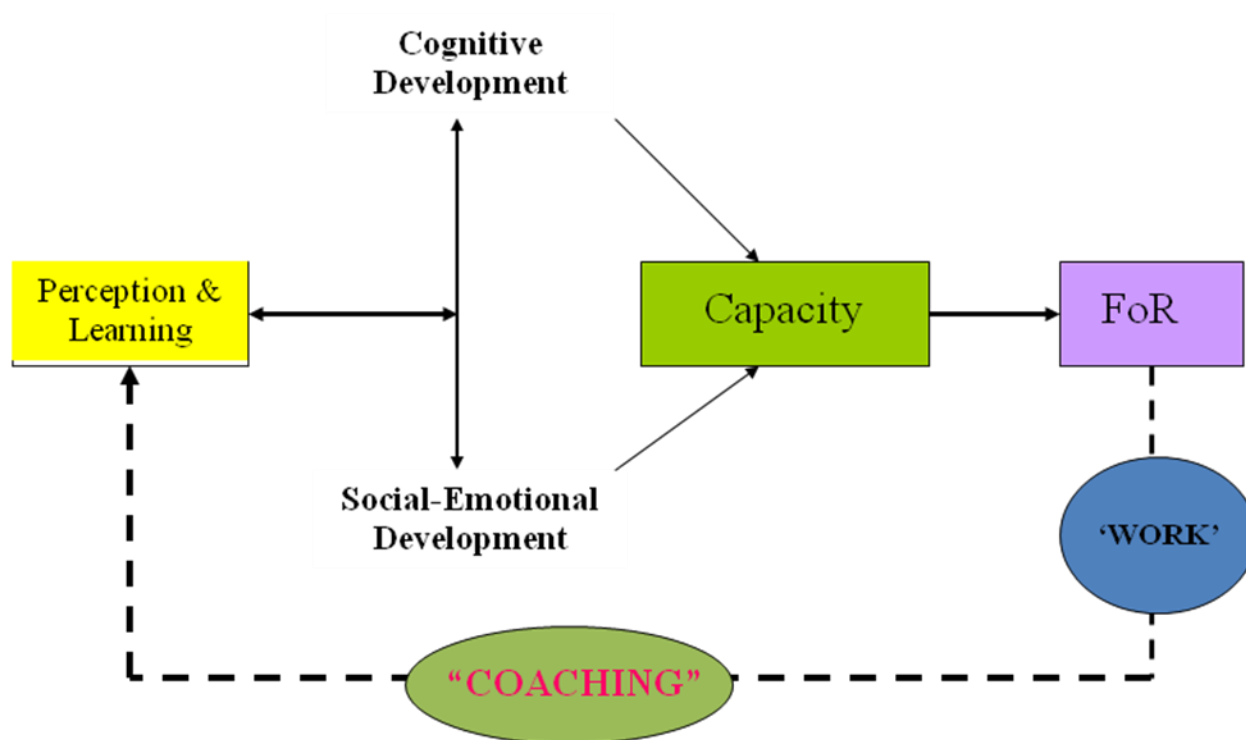
Fig. 3. Executive coaching happens at the intersection
of horizontal learning and vertical development

Fig. 3 shows how the vertical axis intersects with the horizontal one to create *Capacity*, the capability to deliver work. This is where executive coaching sets in. In a developmental perspective, coaching is not primarily focused on "changing behavior" (horizontal axis), but on "changing Frame of Reference" (vertical axis), because it is the latter that determines the former. Clearly then, coaching along the horizontal -- behavioral – axis alone is insufficient for most coachees, especially at high levels of organizational accountability (where we find executive teams and boards of directors).

Social-Emotional Adult Development

To clarify social-emotional development, consider Fig. 4, below. As seen, adults position themselves emotionally according to 5 "stages" indicating an increasingly more mature view of themselves (FoR). The developmental trajectory is characterized by the alternative focus on self and others; it reaches from the "instrumentalist" adult who uses others as her instrument to the "self-aware" adult who no longer defines herself by origin, education, profession, social rank but simply as "being human" (and thus mortal). Between each main "stage", there exist 4 intermediate stages (Lahey et al., 1988; Kegan 1982) which for a coach to be able to assess is of priceless advantage for coaching effectiveness.

Since according to empirical research most coachees (and coaches) reside in the range from S-3 (other-dependent) to S-4 (self-authoring), it becomes important to make sure that the coach be more highly developed than the coachee. Why? If not, harm may be done to the coachee, an important element of developmental coaching ethics.
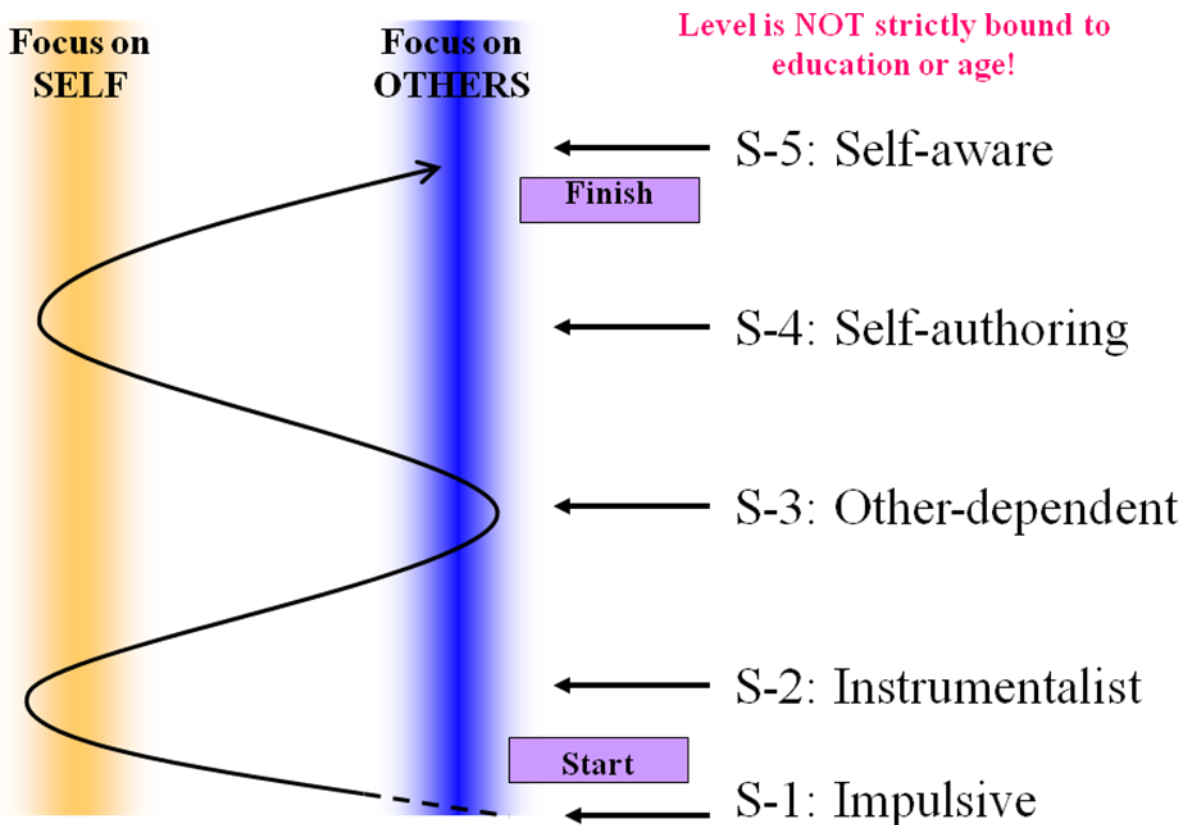

Fig. 4. Kegan stages of social-emotional development

For purposes of social-emotional coaching, we can thus distinguish three very different types of coachee:

1. The Other-Dependent individual who defines herself by the expectations of physical and/or internalized others who are needed to safeguard her own self image (65% of people).

2. The Self-Authoring individual who is secure in her own value system, respecting others but not subordinating herself to them when making decisions, even if risking rejection or death (25% of people). (M. Luther: "Here I stand, I can do no other".)

3. The Self-Transforming individual who is no longer defining herself by her origin, education, social rank, etc., but is aware of her own limitations and common humanity, and thus capable of ceding own advantages to the realization of the common good (<10% of people).

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Cognitive Adult Development

But there is not just one, there are two developmental-coaching dimensions.
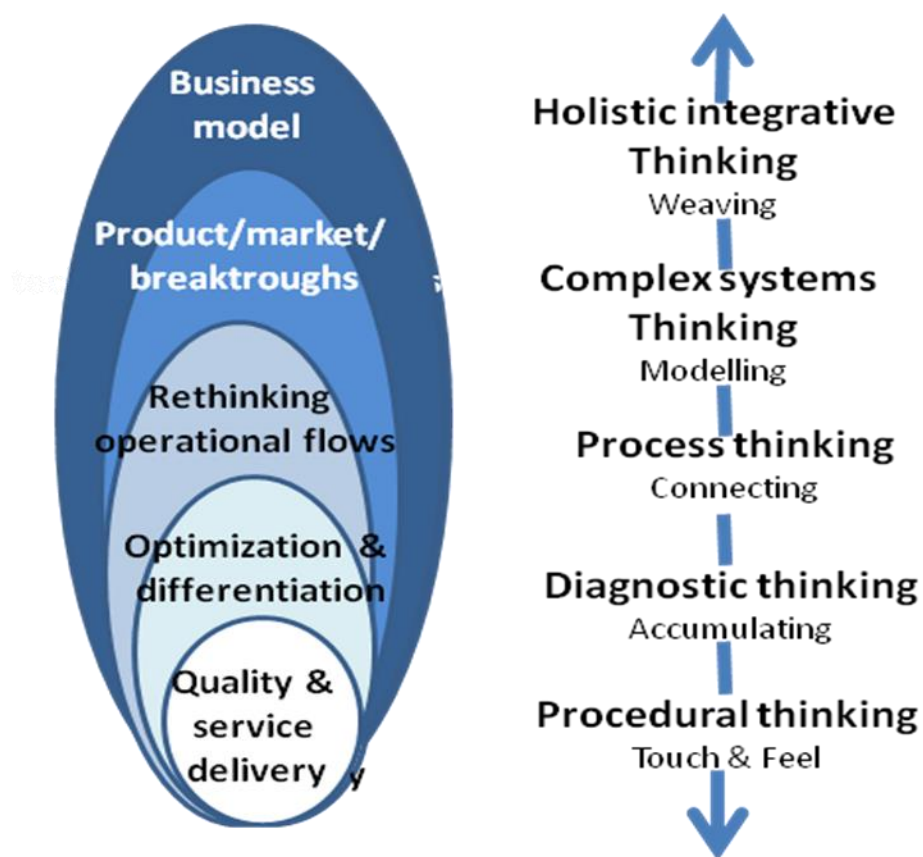

Fig. 5. Five levels of role accountability in organizations,
requiring different coaching approaches (Courtesy Jan De Visch)

In the *Constructive Developmental Framework (Laske 2008, 2005)*, social-emotional development is seen as only one side of the coin. The other side, cognitive development, is a second, intrinsically related, dimension. This cognitive aspect of developmental coaching is today vastly neglected despite the fact that it may well be the most important dimension of executive coaching in particular. The reason for this is that coaches don't practice what in CDF is called 'transformational' thinking; rather, they have remained remained strictly logical thinkers. But logical thinking cannot fathom the complexity of organizations and their teams, not can it fathom transformation (not even change).

Organizations are composed of different levels of role accountability. Each of these constitutes a different universe of discourse with its own idiosyncratic ways of thinking, as shown in Fig. 5 above. There are vast developmental differences between individuals and teams concerned with quality and service delivery (at the lowest level of the organization), compared to those who envision the future by realigning different value streams or, most challengingly, designing new business models. One cannot anticipate the future using logical thinking; transformational thinking based on higher-level thought forms is needed (Laske 2015a). Therefore, coaching is likely to fail if the coach is not knowledgeable about organizational structure and cannot conceive of it in terms of transformational thought forms.

At the higher level of work delivery, neither behavioral nor social-emotional coaching, even in combination, are sufficient for being an effective coach. What is required is cognitive-developmental coaching that helps executives to gain a clearer concept of their role and tasks, as well as a systemic approach to work with teams. Central at the upper levels of accountability is an overriding need to think holistically and systemically, with great fluidity (De Visch & Laske, 2018; De Visch 2014, 2010).

At the present time, an adequate model for executive coaching that takes adult-developmental findings into account does not seem to exist. The exception is CDF, the Constructive Developmental Framework. This framework contains the "Dialectical Thought Form Framework" (DTF) that is focused on transcending logical thinking, both in coaches and coachees. In the coach training program of the Interdevelopmental Institute (www.interdevelopmentals.org), DTF is the basis of teaching coaches a form of deep thinking here referred to as *dialectical thinking* (Laske, 2015a).

What is Transformational ('Dialectical') Thinking?

Dialectical thinking has a long tradition in philosophy but has not been adopted by organizations or coaches. It is a way of *thinking logically beyond formal logic*. Such thinking becomes developmentally possible from late adolescence onward. When properly nurtured, it develops into sophisticated ways of handling complexity – of life and work – that logical thinking cannot rival.

According to research by Basseches (1984) and Laske (2008, 2015), dialectical thinking is best conceived as based on four classes of *thought forms* – C (context), P (process), R (relationship), and T (transformation) -- as shown in Fig. 6, below, and develops in four phases, as shown in Fig. 7, below.

As shown in Fig. 6, each of the moments of dialectic (or classes of thought forms: C, P, R, T) makes visible to the thinker a different aspect of the world. Logical thinking is firmly ensconced in C – Context --, and cannot grasp either P, R, or T. It is only when thought forms representing these four dimensions are *coordinated* in a thinker's mental process that truly transformational

thinking emerges in middle and late adulthood. If left unschooled, such thinking never develops, to the detriment of both coach and coachee.
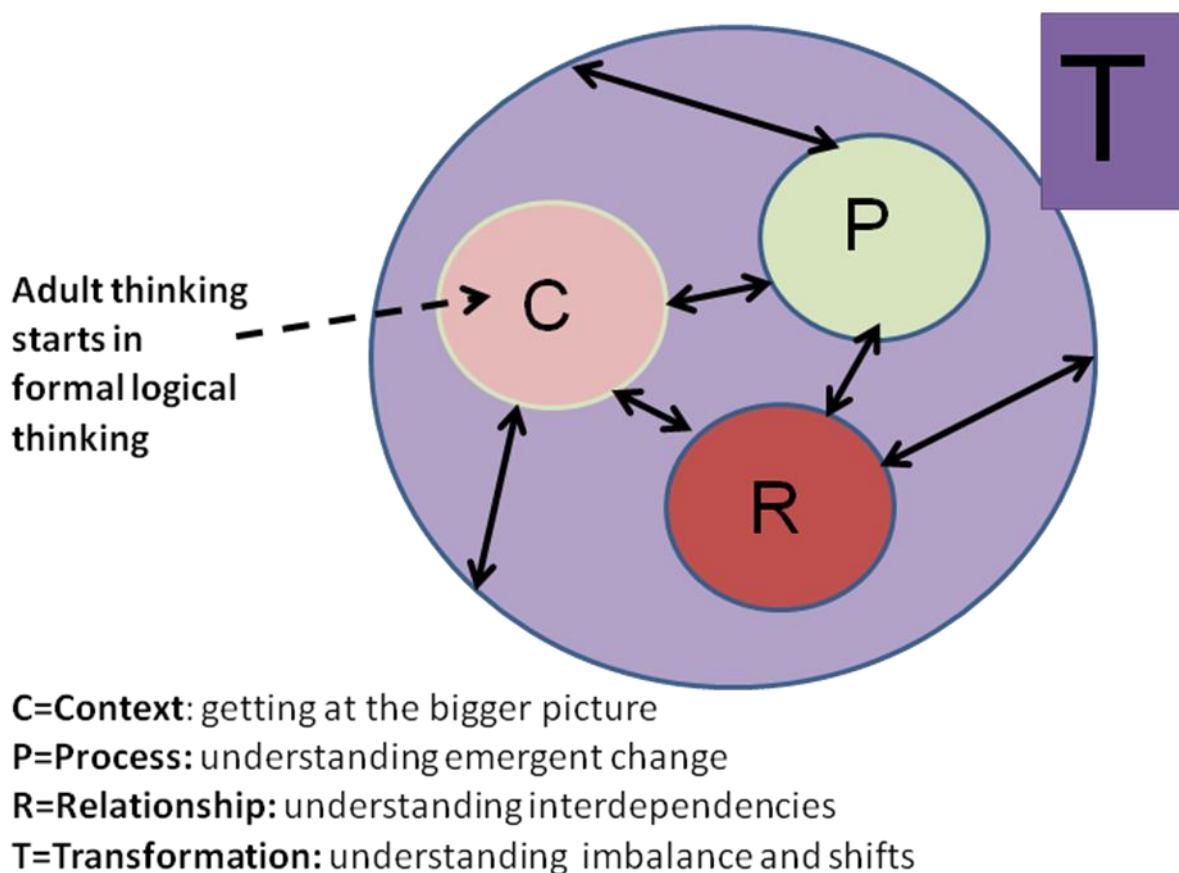

Adult thinking starts in formal logical thinking

C=Context: getting at the bigger picture
P=Process: understanding emergent change
R=Relationship: understanding interdependencies
T=Transformation: understanding imbalance and shifts

Fig. 6. The four moments of dialectic, giving rise to dialectical thought forms

To get an inkling of the need for transformational, "dialectical" thinking, imagine an executive team deliberating how to change its present business model to best the competition, increasingly consisting of small, lean, and mean organizations. (Such small organizations are without much of a legacy structure, and therefore are able to change their business model quickly and by directly responding to customers.) How far is an executive team going to get when thinking about a new business model in terms of formal logic? Not very far.

If your coachee is part of such an executive team, or your client is the team itself, how are you going to help team members create a breakthrough or define a new business model when exclusively focused on their "behavior" and their interpersonal process, but not on their way of thinking? You surely won't be very effective unless you can show team members, individually or together, how to size up the future they are looking into by using dialectical thought forms.

Developmental Coaching Uses Natural Developmental Resources

It is here that evidence-based developmental coaching comes in, in its two forms: social-emotional and cognitive coaching. The tools for such coaching have existed for 15 years now. Not only can the coach learn to assess the social-emotional level of coachees by structured interview (see http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/?page_id=1974), s(he) can do same for giving feedback to a coachee on the phase of dialectical thinking development s(he) is presently in (ibidem).

It would be hopeless to teach coaches and coachees dialectical thinking if adult developmental resources did not enable adults to go beyond formal logical thinking as part of the loss of ego-centrism of which I have spoken. But such resources do exist. As research has shown, dialectical thinking develops over four phases, starting in late adolescence. In each phase, a new set of thought forms (C➔P➔R➔T) becomes available to the adult until in the last phase they are all coordinated with each other, yielding high fluidity of thinking.

In DTF, phases are determined by assessment, via structured interview, in the form of a "fluidity index". The index shows the coachee's fluidity in coordinating thought forms deriving from the four moments of dialectic, -- C, P, R, T. The higher the phase, the higher dialectical-thinking fluidity.

For example, a beehive cannot be grasped by way of context thought forms alone (C) that conceive of it only as a static configuration. A beehive is a living organism determined by unceasingly emergent change (P) and characterized by dense relationships between its elements (R). It is only when thought forms of these three classes - C, P, R - are coordinated by a thinker that a full and realistic, "transformational" picture of the beehive arises (T). The same holds true for a human organization.
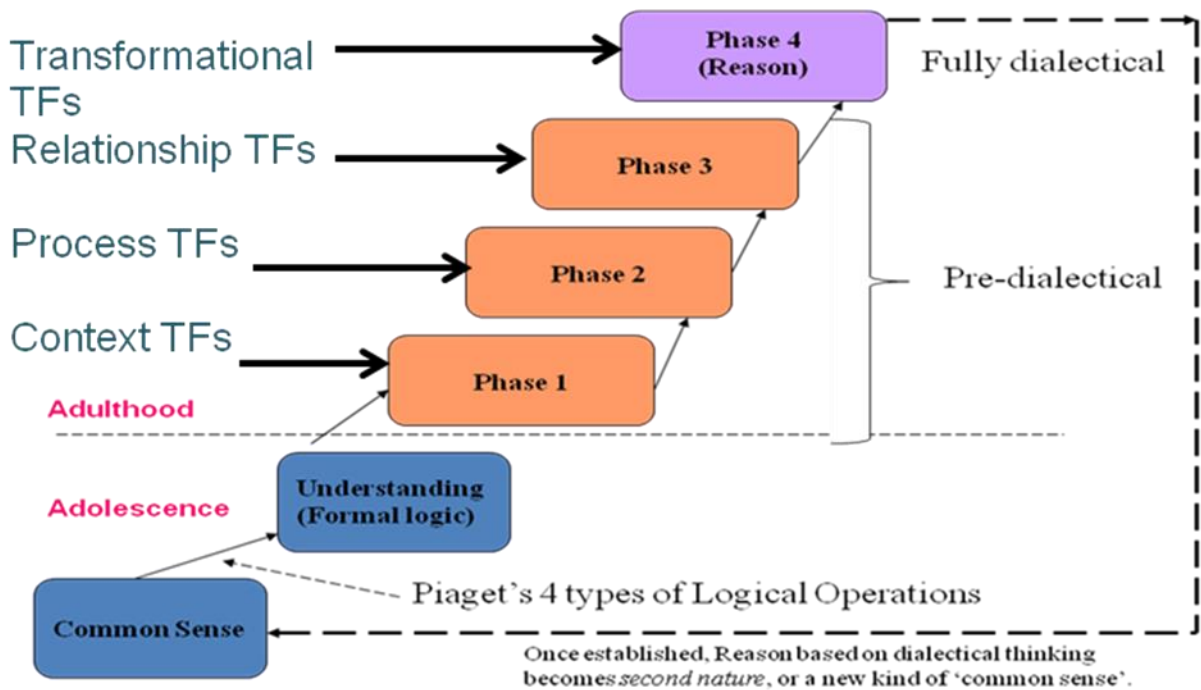
Fig. 7 Four phases of dialectical thinking development

We best think of phases of dialectic as indicating that four *very different* inquiring systems are used, each with its own peculiar questions and answers about the real world. These inquiring systems above all address the 'How', not primarily the 'What', of thinking (which is shaped by the 'How' in the first place).

As people reach a new phase of dialectical thinking, a new, qualitatively different, world emerges for them. Coaching an executive who is presently in phase 2 of dialectical thinking by using nothing but formal logic is going to be counter-productive for the coachee. In fact, it would do harm because a coachee in phase 2 has already mastered the basis of thinking dialectically and gains nothing from being reduced by the coach to formal logical thinking. That is, of course, even more true for an executive in phases 3 or 4 of cognitive development.

What about coaching teams?

Most work in organizations today is done by teams. Coaching individuals to be effective team members is therefore a crucial task in executive coaching, even before focusing on team coaching itself.

Teams are typically developmentally mixed, in the sense that team members' social-emotional and cognitive levels to do not match. As a result, teams are developmentally mixed. The tensions that arise based on developmental differences play out in 'upwardly' and 'downwardly' directed

team dynamics. Coaches not familiar with and practiced in applying developmental theory simply cannot deal with upwardly or downwardly *divided* teams, meaning teams in which a more or less developed majority is pinned against a less or more developed minority. This holds both social-emotionally and cognitively, and effects both the interpersonal and task process of a team.

If we distinguish teams' interpersonal process from their task process (where the actual issues are worked on), we can say that the former is social-emotionally, the second cognitively, determined. This indicates that a team coach who is conversant with developmental theory, and who therefore can work both social-emotionally and cognitively, is more likely to be effective than a coach focused only on team members' behavior. Such a coach knows what to pay attention to and focus on, depending on the issues brought forward by the coachee that have nothing at all to do with behavior, but rather with *Frame of Reference*.

Below, a short summary of possible coaching procedures for working with teams.

Meaning Making

- Focus on team members expectations of each other and bonding/belonging:
  — Surface divergencies in values and experiences regarding the actions to be taken.
  — Protocol to handle tensions in a safe and authentic way.
  — Discuss directly the emotional connection with the emerging consensus.

Sense Making

- Focus on team members ability to grasp the biggest picture:
  — Pursue mind opening strategies.
  — Create a progressive inclusion path of the multitude of pieces/aspects of the solution, coordinating different subsolutions.
  — Taking a first step on opened up opportunities and tackling friction between what is possible and what is realisable.

Fig. 8. Coaching strategies focused on meaning making
and sense making (thinking), respectively

CONCLUSION

As detailed throughout, an entire piece is still missing from present-day professional coaching, in whatever industry or organizational and institutional environment. Most coaches do not know who their client is developmentally. Most coaches also don't know their own adult-

developmental profile and thus are unaware of the harm they can when working with a coachee more highly developed than they (despite behavioral niceties). As a result, coaches are less effective than they could be, especially in coaching individuals at high levels of organizational responsibility. They fail most miserably in developmentally divided teams (De Visch & Laske, 2018).

How to define a professional evidence-based developmental coach?

A master developmental coach, in her work with individuals and/or teams, should be able to work both social-emotionally and cognitively. She should know how to combine these two ways of working, and when and how to switch from one mode to the other. Such a coach should be able to decide when there is a need to work behaviorally and when developmental coaching is required, able to transition between the two as the coachee's situation demands.

To achieve this level of coaching expertise, a high level of continuing professional education is needed. Most "coaching schools" do not offer such education, following their own, limited behavioral (or developmental) coaching model.

At the Interdevelopmental Institute (IDM; www.interdevelopmentals.org), we certify coaches in both social-emotional and cognitive techniques and ways of working as a matter of course, introducing them also into the fabric of organizational role design. Our purpose in this is to evolve clients' Frame of Reference, knowing that behavioral change will follow once coachees reach a new developmental level.

How do coaches learn the *Constructive Developmental Framework* (CDF) on which this paper is based?

After having learned the basics of developmental theory either through internet courses or in loco workshops, coaches develop a coaching practice based on developmental tools we call social-emotional prompts and cognitive thought forms. Both derive from assessment procedures (which school developmental thinking and listening) not primarily used for formal assessment but rather informally in daily practice, as a practically lens for listening to coachees.

To sum up: in the developmental approach here presented, the focus is on changing clients' behavior indirectly, by changing their *Frame of Reference* – the way they "see" the world. Behavior is considered a *derivative* of acting on specific developmental levels, and thus as an epiphenomenon.

In short, professional coaching has a far way to go to catch up with available adult-developmental insights into how individuals deliver work and compose their lives. Surely, the firsts steps toward this goal will be taken in organizational team coaching, although such insights

are equally beneficial in life coaching as any CDF-user will tell you
(http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/?p=5186).

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