

**What Does Your Maturity
Have to Do with that of your Client?
Some Ethics Issues in Developmental Coaching**

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Developmental Maturity Matters in Coaching

If you come to think about it, both coaches and clients are *adults* who have achieved a certain stage of maturity, both in their thinking and their emotional life. In coaching, this fact has up to now rarely been seen as significant, or else has been taken for granted. But if we consider that there are validated empirical theories of how adults mature, in their thinking and emotional intelligence, over the life span, this fact takes on greater significance.

Essentially, it means that the higher stage of maturity a coach has reached, the greater is his or her potential to help clients. Of course, this only holds to the extent that the coach has learned to recognize and take into account the client's own developmental stage. It also means that if the coach functions at a lower stage of maturity than the client, ethical issues can arise since in that case the coach may arrest or delay, and thus harm, the client's mental growth.

What is a Stage of Development?

A developmental stage is simply a specific mode of functioning in the social world that is determined by how an individual makes meaning of his/her experiences. Through semi-structured interviews, stage can be precisely assessed.

The term 'stage' entails:

- You can't go to stage X if you haven't been at stage X-1.
- Making a developmental shift to X is a *discontinuous* process,
- Learning and development differ, the former depending on available developmental potential.

Now let's work toward some examples.

With R. Kegan (1982; also Laske, 2006), we can distinguish three 'main' adult stages, 3, 4, and 5, neglecting here intermediate stages. Stages are not well predicted by either age or education. However, age is a 'boundary variable,' in that you wouldn't expect a 20-year old to be at stage 5.

Stage 3 is called "other-dependent," stage 4 "self-authoring," and stage 5 "self-aware."

At each of these, individuals have *starkly different world views*, define themselves differently, and therefore have different goals.

At stage 3, individuals define themselves by the expectations of (external and internalized) others, while those at stage 4 act from their own authentic value system.

Stage 5 individuals no longer define themselves by their personality, career, achievements, life history, or indeed any particular part of themselves. They are rather "in the flow," able to use others as midwives of their own development. So, clearly, the world – including the coaching world -- is developmentally stratified.

What the Table Says

To make what I've said about stages clearer, below you'll find a that establishes comparisons between the coach's and the client's developmental stages. Although you only have an approximate notion of the three stages, you should be able to follow the argument.

- If you are presently making meaning of your life at a stage *below* your client, you will miss much of what your client is saying since you have not learned to “listen developmentally.”
- As a consequence, you will misconstrue what you hear the client say in terms of your own present developmental stage, and this may be disorienting, or even harmful, to your client (who knows his/her developmental stage as little as you).
- What will result from this fact is an ethical situation best described as **the blind leading the blind**.
- Practically it means that the coaching relationship is likely to be counterproductive or even harmful to the client since you cannot match the client's meaning making.
- Outside of making behavioral changes (e.g., skills), you would be reinforcing the client's developmental risk. If both you and your client are at stage 3, you will unknowingly keep the client there although his/her developmental potential to go to stage 4 may be greater than your own.

You may ask yourself what the difference is between behavioral outcomes and developmental outcomes, and how they relate. The difference is easily described: behavioral outcomes represent a “snapshot” (of the past more than the present) that cannot be made the basis of predictions, while developmental outcomes, whether of social-emotional stage or cognitive potential, point to the future of the individual. (The reliance on snapshots for predictions is the cause of many derailments, as is well known.)

How the two outcomes relate is best described by saying that we can learn to view behavioral outcomes through a developmental lens. Then, rather than just *describing* outcomes, we can actually *explain* them since we know the developmental root of the outcome in question. For us as coaches that means we can arrive at interpretations of the behavior concerned that is helpful for the client if we know how to give feedback at the particular developmental stage s(he) is at.

In the summary below, rows in italics list situations of ethical concern:

Developmental Stage of Coach	Developmental Stage of Client	Predictable Coaching Outcome
S-3	S-3	Behaviorally productive dependent on client's developmental potential; no developmental shifts.
<i>S-3</i>	<i>S-4</i>	<i>Strictly behavioral changes; likelihood of developmental harm being done to the client by arresting or delaying his/ her adult development beyond S-4.</i>
<i>S-3</i>	<i>S-5</i>	<i>Same, except that harm to the client can be considerable.</i>
S-4	S-3	Behaviorally and developmentally positive depending on the client's developmental potential.
S-4	S-4	Behaviorally positive, but no developmental shift of

		client to a higher stage.
S-4	S-5	<i>Behaviorally neutral, but developmentally harmful to the client.</i>
S-5	S-3	Developmentally boosting, but behavioral effects of coaching may be transitory due to overstretching client's level of meaning making.
S-5	S-4	Developmentally mutual; behaviorally effective depending on client's developmental potential.
S-5	<i>S-5/4 or higher</i>	<i>Developmentally mutual, but fraught with developmental risk for both.</i>

Typology of coach-client relationships (Measuring Hidden Dimensions, 2006, p. 237)

Except for the last case (which is too complicated to address here), these cases are straightforward. Let's look at two short examples.

Example

Imagine your client is a Director of Sales in a global company, and expects you to clarify with her issues of company integrity in dealing with other countries that she is deeply concerned about. These issues play out in her meetings with directors from the international branches of her U.S. company.

Imagine also that you presently define yourself at stage 3, in contrast to your client, who has matured to stage 4 (although younger). Consequently, while you define yourself by peers, community, convention, your client is anchored in her own autonomous value system, able to stand back from conventions and expectations of others, and is highly reflective of her own unique self-positioning..

In this case, you may not be able to assist her, given that maturity levels differ sharply. You will necessarily misconstrue her concerns, interpreting them from your own, less developed, value system and self-concept. You may even do her harm by holding her back developmentally, and moreover may re-ignite developmental risks the client has already overcome (such as regressing to a lower stage). (See row no. 2 of the table).

Why Not Knowing the Stage of your Adult Development Can Become an Ethical Issue

As good as your intentions may be, if you don't know your developmental stage, given that the client does not know hers either, you are unbeknownst yourself in an ethical muddle. You owe it to your client to refer her to a more mature coach, not because of lack of expertise or pragmatic issues, but because you cannot guarantee not to do her harm.

However, the muddle is easy to clear up. You can opt for a developmental assessment that puts you in the picture as to how you presently make meaning of your experiences. This gives you better insight into which clients you can productively work with, and also sensitizes you to your own developmental potential.

To learn more about thinking developmentally in coaching, go to http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/?page_id=1974

Further Reading:

Kegan, R. (1982). The evolving self. Harvard University Press.

Laske, O. (2006). Measuring Hidden Dimensions

About the Author

Dr. Laske is an internationally known developmental coach and coach trainer working in English and German. He is the Founder and Director of the Interdevelopmental Institute (www.interdevelopmentals.org), where he directs an acclaimed certification programs in developmental coaching.