

Finding the real coachee: Sketch of a developmental epistemology of coaching

By Otto Laske

For IDM Cohort 7

Two Options

In thinking about -- and educating others for -- work in coaching, two main options seem to exist:

1. You can either assume that the situation the coachee is presently in has no intrinsic relationship to the coachee, so that it can be ameliorated simply by manipulating the coachee and perhaps also manipulating (re-designing) the situation. This is the assumption made by 99% of coaching programs in the world (even those thinking of themselves as being “developmental”).
2. Or you can assume that the situation the coachee is in is his or her own creation that is intrinsically related to the coachee’s present level of adult development, both social-emotional and cognitive.

The second -- dialectical -- assumption (which refuses to turn the coachee into an object of the coach’s manipulations) is that made at IDM, for which reason its coaching program is an education, not a training, program. Education is a process of “leading out of” (e-ducere), namely leading out of the naïve assumption stated under (1). The program is by necessity developmental since, if the assumption holds, there is no way to ameliorate the situation without deeply understanding why the situation shows up for the coachee *in the form it does*, which form is due to how the coachee presently makes meaning and sense of him- or herself in the world.

In plain terms, this is the crucial difference between behavioral and developmental coaching. Ultimately, whoever chooses the first and second option is also developmentally determined. The more an individual is interested in his or her own development, s(he) will tend to make assumption no. 2, above, and will probably find assumption no. (1) too shallow.

The Interdevelopmental Institute is not a “Coaching School”

IDM is not a coaching school, and still, the majority of our students are coaches. Why should that be so? Below, I am giving the reader my understanding of this paradox. The paradox seems to say that if you take yourself to be “just as a coach”, you are not honoring your broader capabilities (and these are much in focus in IDM programs).

At IDM we are developing thinkers and developers of thinkers, not coaches per se. We develop thinkers who can also be or become coaches. By thinkers we don’t only mean “people who can think”. We mean “people who have an awareness of the structure of their thinking”. These two things are different. People “who can think” are just good logical thinkers, while people in the second class actually know something about the thought forms they use in their thinking. And that makes a huge difference, not only for how to stand in the world but how you coach.

Coaching is conversation between two parties or presences, which have physical, spiritual, social-emotional, psychological, and cognitive aspects. Presence is ultimately defined by thinking, or by how thinking is embodied by a person. It is important to hold these aspects named apart as well as see them as inseparable. To do so dialectical thinking is needed.

At the Interdevelopmental Institute we care about two things:

1. measuring the aspects just mentioned
2. linking the measurement outcomes of these aspects, for the purpose of forming a holistic picture of the coaching client.

This is hard to do at present for the “physical” and “spiritual” aspects; they can only be experienced, not measured. And therefore, these aspects are in a different category from the other three – *social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological* – which form the core of CDF, the

Constructive Developmental Framework. Thus, CDF deals with what is measurable, and leaves the rest to “hand-waving” and ideology. Even so, what can be measured by CDF is huge.

Coaching based on empirical data is so far only meekly acknowledged in the coaching field, and is still rarely practiced outside of IDM. Where it is taught at universities, such as Sydney, the teaching is arbitrarily restricted to social-emotional coaching, leaving cognitive coaching – really the main opportunity for intervening with clients – out of the picture. Linking measurement outcomes of different assessments in order to arrive at a holistic notion of coaching clients is unseen and unheard of outside of IDM, to the best of my knowledge.

Linking CDF measurements

Question: How do you link measurements? Answer: In your mind.

Question: What kind of a mind does it need to be? Answer: One that links high intellect with intuition.

Question: Where are people able to do this found? Answer: Everywhere in the world, pioneers who often come to IDM singly, sometimes standing in for an entire national culture they have left behind.

Question: How is the linking of measurements practiced by students? Answer: Through interview-based **case studies** (taking a year) in which a student “goes into depth” about a single individual, for the purpose of giving assessment feedback to him or her.

Question: Why are case studies considered the royal road to coaching at IDM? Answer: Case studies are examples of research that help the mind pull the three sets of assessments data CDF provides together, for the sake of understanding the world of a unique individual at the present time.

Focus on the coach, not the client

The answers above entail that the focus of IDM coach education is THE COACH, not the client. Why? Because “the client” is a figment of the coach’s imagination who naturally and necessarily establishes a MODEL of the client in his/her mind, and then ACTS on the model formed of the client as well as the client’s model of him- or herself (knowing the difference between them).

It is up to the client to accept the coach’s model of him or her by “understanding” assessment outcomes. Wherever this fails, it speaks to what the client presently cannot do, and tends to refine the approach taken by the coach. The coach, in turn, has his/her own cross to bear: the model s(he) is using is determined by his or her present developmental profile. As a consequence, a coach not far developed holds a poor client model, and coaches accordingly. One client and 10 coaches makes 10 different “clients”.

What does that tell the “coach training industry”? So far nothing. That industry still turns out “coaches” who believe in the separate existence of “clients”, and, since the majority developmentally stand between Kegan stages S-3 (other-dependent) and S-4 (self authoring), these coaches do not grasp the dependency of their work on their own level of adult development.

It is here that IDM education differs altogether. We are taking into account, and take very seriously, that coach and coachee share that they are both “under development”. Therefore, the socially sanctioned split between coach and client makes no sense to us, and is seen as a somewhat arrogant and ignorant, in any case an un-reflected, distinction carried in coaches’ mind.

What is an IDM-educated coach?

An IDM-educated coach is either the product of the 12-month assessment certification program or the 9-month evidence based coaching program. In the first, the coach studies all three CDF dimensions, starting with an overview; s(he) is introduced to the social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of coaching, with a focus on structured listening and interviewing. The second program is simplified (relative to the first), in that only a single dimension – social-

emotional or cognitive or psychological is studied. In both cases, dialectical thinking is part of the mix, either explicitly in the cognitive module, or else in the way coaching is taught: by a dialectical thinker.

I would say that in both cases, due to working with assessment evidence deriving from his/her own interviewing such a coach has become a THINKER, not just a DOER. This is why even if a coach educated at IDM were never to use CDF in his/her coaching work, s(he) would differ from all other coaches. Why?

Such a coach:

1. has learned structured social-emotional and/or cognitive interviewing
2. has learned how to evaluate, or “score”, transcribed interviews
3. knows that the social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological data of a client are LINKED in the client
4. has learned, and will keep learning, how to give feedback to a client in a way that assists the client (in actual coaching sessions) to demonstrate the validity of the coach’s assessment data.
5. has learned at least elementary dialectical thinking, both in studying cognitive development, and in writing a case study requiring its exercise.

This means that the IDM educated developmental coach does not directly “apply the assessment findings to the client” at all. The application of empirical findings as a basis of coaching is a stubborn fiction about IDM, and has been used to give evidence based developmental coaching a bad name. For one thing, “client data” is not a thing, it is something in the coach’s MIND. And the mind is free. So, the coach’s mind can use data – validated by way of arriving at inter-rater consensus in case study feedback sessions with students – *as s(he) sees fit*, i.e., according to her developmental level.

In this context, the metaphor that comes to mind is that of a *supervisor*. The coach becomes a supervisor of the client system as it moves within its own “internal workplace” (assessed by CDF), made up of three “Houses” or mental domains: those of task execution, work environment, and professional self (Laske, 1999) – “what do you do?; in what environment?; why?”

Entering into the depth of coaching

What is an IDM coach doing with his/her free mind?

The evidence based developmental coach is a dialectical thinker. Dialectics deals with the structure of thinking that imbues its content. Dialectics can be seen as focusing “depth first”, not, as the Integral School, “breadth first”. The three assessment dimensions of CDF are easier to handle than 7 or 8 integral lines which, given human limits of attention, lead an integral coach to stay on the surface of things and focus on actuality, not the *reality* of the coachee’s world.

What is this depth the coach is going into?

The depth is a structural depth, and lies in the interconnections between the social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological dimensions of what comes to the fore about a client through interview based assessment. Together, these three dimensions make a whole; one reflects the other. This implies that they are intrinsically linked.

I would say that this intrinsic linkage is what is foremost learned about coachees (and coaches) at IDM. To hold three assessment dimensions together in one’s mind is not typically what coaches do; and that makes all the difference. Once able to hold the three dimensions together, a coach can (roughly) predict a social-emotional profile from a cognitive one, but s(he) will not be able to predict a cognitive profile from a social-emotional one (as Loevinger, Kegan, and Cook-Greuter have tried to do, and failed to do; see Laske, volume 2, chapter 8). The coach can also get a sense of how the psychological profile may hinder the social-emotional profile to mature, and even block cognitive development. That’s in the data.

Thus, for a dialectical thinker the three dimensions named are not additive; they don’t simply accumulate. Rather, they inform each other and also critique each other. Heady stuff!

Use of CDF assessment data

I am often asked how I use the data I teach students to elicit, evaluate, and link. My answer is: I “forget them” in the coaching session. But not entirely. I am waiting for the coachee to show me the validity of the data I have assessed, thought about, given feedback on, data that is now in the background of my mind as I coach. **It is the coachee him- or herself that ultimately has to validate my qualitative data.**

I can help the coachee do this. Since I am coaching “in the houses” – domains of task, environment, and self – I always know where I am, and if the coachee loses his/her way (being all over the place), I let them know. I need the distinction between the three houses in order to be able to match what the coachee shows me – or what I can observe of the coachee – onto the assessment data in my head. For instance, I might say: “what you just described as being a present bottleneck in your work (or life), doesn’t that relate to what we found earlier when I gave you feedback on your assessment data”? In short, the assessment data has become a partner in our conversations.

What happens on account of this question? Asking such a question creates an AHA! experience in the coachee. The coachee understands that the present bottleneck we are discussing is something *real*, not just actual; it is something “in” the coachee. Coachees understand that it is the structure of their very being that we have assessed in three different ways through CDF. This shared Ahah! Experience, then, hinders both parties from thinking we could “fuss with the bottleneck behaviorally” (as a conventional coach would), by suggesting this or that external vehicle for doing away with the bottleneck. **WE HAVE TO CONFRONT IT** right here and now! And now the coach becomes a MENTOR (having been an assessor and coach previously).

There is one limit to this. It is not under my, the coach’s, control whether the coachee will ever show me the “data” I have assessed, which would allow me to map my understanding of my assessment findings onto what the coachee is showing me (demonstrating for me). S(he) may never do so, and when this is the case I, the coach, have to work even harder, since I have to “unearth” this behavioral data from my observations of the coachee in the Three Houses alone. In short, I have to work based on hypotheses, rather than validated data.

On the *real* coachee

In all of this I, the coach, am aware that I am acting on a MODEL of the coachee, and this model is empirically grounded and research-based, not simply and not totally intuitive. It is true, that while the mind digests the empirical data about the client, it does develop intuitions about the assumed *real* coachee. *This is in fact crucial, because if the coach would not meditate on the assessment data and about what it means for working with the coachee, s(he) would fail.*

Importantly, these intuitions are different from the ‘totally intuitive’ type because these intuitions spring from, and relate to, empirical grounds; they are not just ungrounded intuitions.

I would compare these intuitions to those of an artist working on an animation and studying his/her own animation preview to “see” what is going on (or is wrong) in the data upon which the animation is based. “There is this sudden lighting up at 1:25 min. into the animation, where perhaps the camera makes a sudden turn, and it should not do that, so I have to go in, find the spot, and correct it [which may be difficult to do].”

Sadly for many, coaching based on CDF does away with the coach seeing herself as some genius intuitive guru who is able to spot a development for the client before the client does, but unable to explain how the intuition is grounded. Also, the coach’s “own little personality” is relegated to the background. That is simply what evidence based developmental coaching entails.

In all this, where is the “real” coachee, compared to the model I have composed of him or her through assessment? The *real* coachee is a synthesis of data in the mind of the evidence based coach. S(he) lives in the movements that, as a coach, I see the coachee make in his/her internal workplace, within the frame of reference that determines her present world, verbalized for

me in coaching conversations. I have to be a highly developed LISTENER to follow those verbalizations. *They express movements in thought!* But that is no problem for me. I have learned, through structural interviewing, to listen social-emotionally, cognitively, and psychologically, and I can easily switch from one to the other, link two of these ways of listening, infer from one to the other, etc. I have become a thinker, -- a thinker who happens to be coaching.

Conclusion

Even if a coach educated at IDM never uses CDF in his/her coaching work, his/her training will make them into a different coach compared to behavioral coaches using conventional procedures (those explained in handbooks). Because not only has the IDM educated coach learned to interview and communicate with a critical sense of what empirical data say, s(he) can also LISTEN to what clients say in a social-emotional, cognitive, and psychological way, and moreover can choose between these three ways of listening, to find the right one at the right time. Such a coach can further combine the three CDF dimensions in his/her listening and act upon the understanding that ensues.

Because that is all coaching is: acting upon what one understands in one's own listening at a given moment. And such an approach makes the coach truly different. One could say, perhaps, that the coach merges in herself a psychologist that assesses and a psychotherapist who uses the data flowing from the assessment. In this sense coaching, as here understood, is more complex than either psychology or psychotherapy taken by themselves, but this has barely begun to be seen.

More general reflections

From an IDM perspective I would distinguish three different types of coaching, those guided by:

1. the behavioral perspective (ICF; ICC; SCP, and others)
2. the integral perspective (Kegan, Wilber)
3. the CDF perspective.

These perspectives differ in respect to where coach education and coaching are focused.

I would see it as follows:

- The focus on "the client" as object is shared by (1) and (2) which is in sharp contrast to CDF's focus which is on the coach and his/her developmental-psychological profile. The coach/coachee split derives from a formal logical mindset, in the sense that the subject/object split – the coach is subject, the client is object – is absolute, which means (1) and (2) remain outside of dialectical thinking.
- Focusing on the client as done by (1) and (2), – assigning to him/her all kinds of knowledge, "knowing best", etc., -- overlooks the fact that what is referred to as "the coachee" or "the client" is modeled upon, (and thus relative to), the coach's present inquiring and meaning making system and assessment process.
- The contrasting perspective of (3) says that there is no "coachee" per se; there are only MODELS OF A CLIENT OR COACHEE whose use is ultimately based on the coach's own developmental profile and dialectical thinking (or lack thereof).

Consequently, the object called "the coachee" is a fiction entertained by coachee as well as coach, -- a cultural artifact that ought to be questioned and analyzed for the sake of arriving at a deeper notion of coaching. CDF permits a social-emotional and cognitive analysis of this notion, adding a psychological analysis as well. In the context of CDF, the artificial distinction between coach and coachee is relativized from the start because it is argued both coach and coachee are equally *undergoing ceaseless development*, and that this fact determines their relationship.

Thus, knowing CDF, you can find out how the coachee "constructs him- or herself", -- his/her own model of himself. As a CDF coach, you are naturally "deconstructing" the coachee's model of himself or herself, without in any way presuming to know more or better, and without any

presumption to “develop” the coachee. Developing the coachee is for those who do not know much about theories of adult development (which tell us that people are subject to, not in control of, their development). Presuming you can directly “develop” the coachee is to practice a fallacy. But you may be able, through cognitive interventions, to have an impact on a coachee’s development IN THE LONG RUN.

SO WHAT REMAINS OF COACHING, AND OF THE CLIENT-CENTERED FICTION OF WHO IS THE COACHEE, centering on his “goals”, “behavior”, or “self knowledge”?

Simply that you, the coach, work with what you manage to understand from your listening to the coachee, about his/her “goals” etc., *in light of what you know about him or her by way of assessment*. In so doing, you, the coach, simultaneously honor the coachee and deconstruct his/her model of him- or herself. The requirement is to become an OBSERVER OF THE COACHEE IN THE HOUSES or mental domains of functioning (also referred to as the coachee’s internal workplace). In different work domains (task, environment, self) the coachee may model herself differently and more or less incompletely, and this is something you, the coach, need to understand, You need to function as supervisor in the Houses.

You are therefore the guardian of an optimally realistic view a coachee can hold of him- or herself. You can serve that function because you are not focused on the fiction of the coachee as a “client” object. As a dialectical thinker, you can do better than presuming that the coachee is outside of you or that you are outside of the coachee. You are not! You need to possess full awareness that you are coaching based on a developmental model (as best you can), which makes it unlikely that you will mistake the model for the real coachee. Rather for you, **the “coachee” becomes an integral part of your relationship with yourself (wherever you may be developmentally)**, and there is no way for you to cut the coachee out of this relationship. In fact, this relationship to yourself is greatly strengthened by your knowing CDF because in studying it you have become “construct-aware” of your own thinking.

It would seem that at this point conventional coach theory collapses, or at least is in free fall.

Inclusion of Dialectical Thinking in Coaching

It is in the context of trying to find the real coachee that the value of dialectical thinking becomes clear as an addition to knowing coachees social-emotionally and psychologically. Dialectical thinking is a tool for seeing the world in general, and the tripartite developmental profile of a coachee in particular, as a HOLON, -- an organized whole in which different but inseparable dimensions are merged with each other (without losing their distinctness).

This holon does not arise out of nowhere and by itself. Rather, when it comes into view, it has been prepared by a number of mental processes of the coach, which include:

- the CDF assessment interviews
- the analysis of the assessment findings
- the writing of a report on the findings
- the feedback of findings given to the coachee
- and subsequent observations of the coachee by a coach who is trying to validate assessment data in what is going on in coaching sessions.

This complex whole of “the coachee” cannot be fathomed by formal logical nor by intuitive thinking, nor the two combined. To understand this whole requires schooled dialectical thinking. In such thinking, the task of the coach’s *Inquiring System* is to fathom the depth of the “coachee”, which requires at least four abilities:

1. to hear the holon in motion in the coachee’s speech
2. to understand the coachee’s presence in the world as self-generated through thought
3. to evaluate the three CDF dimensions in their relationship to each other and dependency on each other “in” the coachee

4. to pull (1) to (3) TOGETHER – in order to arrive at a sense of “who is the coachee presently, in his/her speaking to me?”, or more abstractly: “what is her frame of reference” that it is my task as a coach to change?”.

In professional practice, this amounts to asking yourself: where does the coachee actually show up for me in the model I have of him or her, such that I can INTERVENE with one of the dialectical thought forms at my disposal?

Redeeming Feature of Coaching Handbooks

Above, I have been critical of handbooks. There is a redeeming feature to the many many handbooks of coaching that now abound. All that they say about the coachee equally applies to the coach. Therefore, these handbooks should be read as an incomplete behavioral guide only.

The professional divide between coach and coachee that is assumed to exist in the handbooks is based on unquestioned social role divisions typical of formal logical thinking. It is a shallow divide which hides the real essence of coaching as well as of the coachee and, what is more, does so without disturbing the good conscience of coaches. **As long as this divide is maintained in coach training and coaching practice, professional coaching has not arrived on the scene.**

For details on the IDM coaching programs, see <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/assessment-certification.php> and <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org/pp-evidence-based-coaching-program.php>, respectively.

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