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The Fifth Domain

Coaching with Identity in Mind

By Sukari Pinnock
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The primary purpose of professional coaching is to help an individual or a group surface new awareness about their behavior and impact and use that awareness to develop greater competence and enhanced performance. To do this well coaches should possess competencies that support the whole person—no matter who they are, how they identify, or what may be their worldview. Or to Anais Nin’s words, “*we do not see the world as it is, we see it as we are.*”

In a climate of recurring social distress, we began to notice a significant number of our coachees were coming to the coaching partnership exhibiting what could be described as psychological trauma. They would say things like: “I just don’t care about the promotion today. I’m so angry it’s hard for me to concentrate on that...” or “I am filled with indescribable sadness about all those lost in that nightclub massacre....” We were interested to hear each other sharing such similar coaching encounters, but not really surprised. As women of color, these expressions of anger, fear, and the sadness resonated with us. We found it easy to acknowledge the feelings being expressed by our coachees and felt capable of meeting these clients where

they were in that moment of the coaching engagement.

At the same time, we became curious about how coaches were supporting clients who reported feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and hopelessness in association with the nearly daily reports of fatal encounters with law enforcement (Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, etc.); mass shootings (Elementary school children in Sandy Hook, N.J., a Bible Study group at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in S.C., club-goers at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Police Officers in Dallas, etc.); and public policy changes in the areas of healthcare, immigration and environmental protections. In an effort to learn more, in December 2016 we surveyed 148 coaches (a sampling of our coaching associates, the majority of whom are graduates of the Georgetown Leadership Coaching program). Seventy-eight percent of those surveyed identified as Executive Coaches and over 90 percent identified themselves as Leadership Coaches. We found that 54 percent of the 82 respondents feel ill-equipped to coach around issues of identity, let alone the trauma of recent social events.

The Impact of Worldview

Coaching is designed to be a collaborative process, through which the client or coachee must feel safe to bring the various aspects of their “self,” if the engagement is to be effective. In this regard, how the coachee identifies (gender, race, age, sexual orientation, etc.), as well as their worldview, provide significant, if not vital insights for the coach to explore as the coaching partnership develops. Take, for example, this exchange between a White female coach and an African American male coachee working in a mid-sized nonprofit:

Coach: What is top of mind today?

Coachee: I’ve been feeling really sad these past few days. I really don’t even want to be at work today.

Coach: Tell me more... what is contributing to that feeling?

Coachee: It seems like every night the news is about... you know... another police shooting. I feel challenged to talk about how I’m feeling with people at work, so I just shut down.

Coach: Do you think this is related to the pattern we’ve discussed relating to self-doubt?

Coachee: No... I don’t think it’s a confidence issue. I’m just having trouble trusting that my co-workers will understand what I am feeling. People at home get why I’m feeling the way I feel.

Coach: How will you know if you can trust people unless you test it out?

Coachee: (*Silence*) I don’t think this is something I want to test... I think the stakes are too high... and well, they may just not get it.

Coach: The stakes are too high? Tell me more about this?

In the exchange above, the coach seems to be listening and trying to coach the client around his emotions. However,

she does not pick up on the emotion the client expresses at the start of the engagement—sadness—and instead pivots to a previously discussed workplace issue. The coachee offers other opportunities into a deeper conversation that may be related to his identity as an African American man, but the coach either does not recognize the possible connection or chooses to steer away from a conversation that is not strictly connected to what is happening in the workplace. For the coach, the world is likely seen as a safe and accepting place. Based on the coachee’s portion of the exchange, his worldview is decidedly different. We suspect that this *pivoting* may be occurring frequently between a coachee and a coach who hold different worldviews.

There are four commonly agreed upon coaching domains identified by “holistically-focused” accredited coach training programs (Wahl, Scriber, & Bloomfield, 2013). These domains are:

- » Cognitive
- » Emotional
- » Somatic
- » Spiritual

We propose a fifth coaching domain: the domain of Self-Identity. This domain is one that has been largely ignored in many coach training programs, as most coaching programs are influenced by Eurocentric or Western thinking and adopt the belief that if the coach is an active listener, is agile in the aforementioned domains and is present to the client’s agenda, good coaching will necessarily emerge.

We disagree. Coaching in the domain of Self-Identity helps the coach connect to the client in a way that focuses attention on what the client believes is at their core or the essence of self. It relies on the coach’s awareness of socio-demographic difference and how (or if) such differences may themselves be an appropriate subject of exploration in the coaching partnership. Attention to this domain can help a coach translate what they are hearing as the client shares emotional reactions to experiences outside the workplace. When the coach has little skill or no competency in probing within this domain, it is likely that

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the coachee will pick up on this. In these cases, the coachee may forego working at a deeper level and thus, may leave the coaching engagement feeling underserved or misunderstood.

If, in partnering with our clients, coaches intend to support increasing the coachees’ authenticity or help them leverage their uniqueness in the workplace, then it is important that coaches are able to aptly apply the proper lens through which to take in the client’s worldviews and experiences as they relate to issues of identity and workplace inclusion. A 2014 survey conducted by the International Coach Federation (ICF) revealed that four countries—Australia, Canada, the UK and the US—represent the largest *awareness ratio* (70% overall) of coaching and its benefits. This data point is particularly significant when we think about the impact of the dominant (White/Western) worldview on coach training and coach assessment. Without explicit focus on *self-identity* included in coach competencies, there is an inherent risk that identities marginal to the dominant White Western world will be disregarded in the coaching partnership.

Conclusion

We do not assert that the Domain of Self-Identity is *more* important than the more recognized Coaching Domains referenced above. Quite the opposite is true. We believe that each of the aforementioned Coaching Domains must be explored over the course of a rigorous coaching engagement if good coaching is to take place. However, how can even the most well intended coach manage the complexities of identity group dynamics if they have not acquired these skills as part of their coach training or other life experiences?

If the world is indeed different for each of us—then we must conclude that those differences matter and merit explicit attention in coach models and training programs. We encourage coaches of all disciplines to develop the skills required to navigate the domain of self-identity particularly during this current climate of social distress.

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