

Title of the paper:

“Exploring Meaning in Coaching”

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Systems-psychodynamic coaching, CMM: coordinated management of meaning, PRO: Person, Role, Organisation, meaning-making in coaching

Abstract:

This paper links to the theme of 2008 ISPSO symposium by examining the role that meaning can play in the coaching process.

Many established coaching approaches that rely on the so called “tools-in-the-tool-box- idea” of coaching tend to do away with meaning, focusing instead on the actual techniques and mechanics of goal-attainment and on the targeted behavioural changes. This paper argues that behavioural changes, or any psychological change, as an agreed aim of coaching, cannot be successfully delivered without a recourse to meaning-making. Furthermore, that the “tools-in- the-tool-box” idea does not have a place in systems-psychodynamic coaching as it is an integrated approach.

In 2006 V. Z. Roberts and M. Jarett (Ref 1) proposed a new typology of coaching approaches. All existing schools of coaching fit easily into the proposed two-by-two table that is intersected by a horizontal and a vertical axis. The horizontal axis identifies the client either as *an individual* or *an organisation*. The vertical axis expects the results of the coaching process to be delivered as either *outputs* or *as insights*. Further distinction between schools of coaching can be made in that some schools privilege the goal-attainment over meaning-making and some privilege the meaning-making over goal attainment. This does not mean that schools of coaching, including

systems-psychodynamic coaching approach, that focus on meaning-making cannot also deliver on the attainment of goals. This outcome, however, is reached via a much deeper, more complex enquiry that requires a different engagement between the client, the coach and the organization (Ref 2 and Ref 3).

The paper further examines the nature of the overlap zones in the classical concept of the P/R/O: The Person, The Role and the Organisation, so central to the system-psychodynamic coaching approach. The main hypothesis of the paper is that clients come for coaching with various dilemmas but only some part of the dilemma belongs to the Person, the other parts are distributed between the Role and the Organisation, yet all are experienced by the client as personal. These dilemmas are also being mediated differently by the different nature of the overlap that can be conceptualised to exist when the P/R/O meet. Case studies will illustrate this hypothesis and will examine the nature of the overlap between these three elements. It is proposed that these three overlaps can be called: Valency, Fit and Mirroring. The Valency connects the Person to the Role, the Fit connects the Role to the Organisation, and the Mirroring connects the Person to the Organisation. Collectively, they make the dilemma feel personal and, at times, deeply confusing. The coach addresses this personalised confusion by examining with the client the central overlap zone where the three elements of the P/R/O meet. The author proposes that this overlap be called the Zone of Meaning-Making. This zone then becomes the main focus of systems-psychodynamic coaching.

The concept of CMM, Coordinated Management of Meaning (Ref 4) is used to guide this process of meaning-making based on the exploration of scripts and stories brought by real coaching clients that collectively connect the person in role to the organisation and also to the wider socio-economic environment in which the business operates. Case studies will be used to illustrate this exploration in action.

Finally, based on an earlier idea (Ref.5), the paper will briefly illustrate the differences between diverse professional activities such as coaching, psychotherapy, career counselling, remedial coaching, executive search and others, depending on the relative size of the P/R/O elements and the interaction therein. Each activity will be illustrated visually and with a short vignette to bring the idea to life.

As this is still “work in progress”, it is hoped that the ensuing discussion will help to shape these ideas further.

References

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