When someone mentions International Coaching to me, the first thing that pops up for me is “meme.” Basically, a meme is a cultural gene, something that can be transmitted among people/minds as a way of explaining how the world works in the highest form and a prejudice in its lowest form. Some people like E.O. Wilson, Consilience, 1998, say it is the “prime cultural unit.” You can see a picture I created of this “unit” adapted from his work here: www.emergenics.com/meme).

Memes are all around us, especially when we begin to introduce the many flavors available in International Interactions. Being fortunate to work among many of the world’s cultures, I am continuously amazed how narrow most of are in terms of our own memescape—the composite structure of our cultural units.

My sense is that this is the area of greatest challenge for International Coaches. Coaches in general mostly project their own memes on their clients, unfortunately. In other words, our ways of doing things and seeing the world, color all of our interactions.

Actually, this is why I’m musing. Over the past 50 years, research has been conducted among cultures as it applies to the ways of being, having, doing and becoming that exist in the world. What has come from that work has been a very interesting conception framed originally around the interpretation of mature adult human personality by www.ClarEvements.com—truly a fascinating block of research leading to Don Beck and Chris Cowan’s book to summarize the principles in Spiral Dynamics, 1996.

In the short space I have, I can’t do justice to the theory either from Graves or the modern rendition by Beck and Cowan, but I can share with you a few short pieces of the theory as they relate to International Coaching. The crux of Grave’s biopsychosocial theory states that it is a double helix: life conditions vs. coping ability in a hierarchical unfolding of complexity in terms of each levels’ ability to respond to demands, each level identified as a constellation of coalescing memes called a valueMEME or ‘MEME.

Originally using a numbered system for each level, Beck and Cowan translated the numbering system into colors and voila, we see a relatively simple—yet incredibly rich—taxonomy. From Survival Beige to Tribalistic Purple on to Egocentric Red through Absolute Blue, Materialistic Orange, Humanist Green, Integral Yellow and Holistic Turquoise ‘MEMEs. No one is just one ‘MEME, nor is any culture, or organization, BUT there is a tendency for people and business to use one more than another at particular points in time.

Americans are basically moving from exiting blue (there are three stages of each ‘MEME: entering, nodal, exiting) in kind of a multilogue or dance to orange and green simultaneously, the thinkers taking the materialistic route, the feelers moving through the humanist vein. Now of course, my spiral colleagues would laugh at my oversimplification, but allow me to make the point before my words run out.

In a look at Stratified Democracy [www.emergenics.com/stratified], we find that much of the world is “different” than the US in terms of its waves of ‘MEMEs. This diversity is both an opportunity and a challenge to the International Coach in my view. Regardless of what country you call home, it is more than likely the country you coach in will be responding to differing life conditions and demands with different abilities to cope with those demands — than you!.

While there is a tendency to Americanize the world — one which you will agree with if you are in the BLUE/orange ‘MEME and disagree with at many other ‘MEME constellations — in favor of one particular worldview; not all of us U.S. citizens agree. This creates an enormous amount of tension as a backdrop in the coaching interaction. In my view, it goes much farther than merely respecting your client’s differences, but beginning to understand why those differences exist, what it might mean and how leverage can be created as memes are shared during the coaching.
Learning to get your self out of the way—memes and all—is a developmental challenge I’ll issue to the unaware. International work will amplify your ability to do so and improve the effectiveness of your coaching. So, I salute the world as you teach us about you and we learn how the world works for you.

Mike Jay

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From the Co-Executive Editor’s Desk

Books that John Lazar recommends an organizational coach read . . .


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