The Coaching Library: Review of Books Related to Coaching To The Human Soul: Ontological Coaching and Deep Change Volume 1: The Linguistic Basis of Ontological Coaching By Alan Sieler

Reviewed by Chrystine Langille and John Lazar

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The Coaching Library

Review of Books Related to the Coaching Enterprise

Coaching To The Human Soul:
Ontological Coaching and Deep Change
Volume 1: The Linguistic Basis of Ontological Coaching

By Alan Sieler

Reviewed by Chrystine Langille and John Lazar

In this powerful and experiential book, Alan Sieler provides a comprehensive conceptual and practical introduction to the discipline of ontological coaching, which focuses on transformation through one’s “Way of Being”. Way of Being is distinguished as the deep, inner, “soul-based” driver of our reality and our response to life. Language, emotions and moods, and the body are reflections and manifestations of Way of Being. By understanding, integrating and shifting them in a coherent manner, we shift our Way of Being and achieve transformation of the human soul. The outcomes of this deep form of transformation are access to richer, fuller and more meaningful lives, individually and collectively, at work and at home.

The book opens with an overview of the ontological coaching model, methodologies and learning principles. It provides a comprehensive theoretical framework for the principles of coaching as a discipline and profession, and an historical perspective on the increasing need and relevance of an ontological approach to coaching as a powerful tool for coping with rapid change. As the first of three volumes, the book then explores the linguistic principles of the ontological approach in detail. “Reflective activities”, “self-coaching exercises” and examples of ontological coaching in action (consider these excerpts of case studies) bring the principles of the ontological model alive throughout the book.

Key Distinctions
Several core distinctions define and distinguish the ontological approach to coaching as presented in Sieler’s book.

Way of Being
“Way of Being” refers to the way in which we observe...
and how we, as the observer, perceive the world. Observing is an active process that shapes our “reality” and drives our choice of behavior and the range of possible results we can achieve, influencing our effectiveness in all areas of life.

Our Way of Being can be deeply and unconsciously learned and acculturated from a lifetime of experiences. As such, it can control us invisibly and silently.

**Behavior**

Way of Being is an interrelationship between language, emotions/moods and body/physiology. The language of our internal and external conversations, our moods and emotions, and the ‘inner’ systems and ‘outer’ posture of our body shape, color and constrain the world for us. We must make commensurate shifts in all three of these domains to create sustainable ontological shifts in our Way of Being and hence to change our impact in the world.

**Linguistic Distinctions**

*Language* is seen as the “fundamental human technology”, arising from a new understanding of language and communication that emerged in the twentieth century. Language consists of listening and speaking, and is fundamental in creating, not simply describing, realities in all domains of life.

*Listening* includes what we hear from others as well as the internal conversations we have with ourselves—full of interpretations about self, others and our life’s circumstances. Listening is the crucial element in communication and is essential for building trust and rapport.

*Speaking* presents and explores six distinct linguistic tools in detail. Awareness of how to use them can produce more effective conversing, relating and performing. The six tools include: *Assertions* (statements of fact); *Declarations* (authoritative statements that change circumstances and reality); *Assessments* (opinions and judgments); *Requests* (to have others do something for us); *Offers* (from us to do something for others); and *Promises* (our commitment to do things for others).

**Three Domains of the Soul**

Our soul is understood as the intersection of the above three domains. It is the core of our existence, defining who we are, what is deeply meaningful, and what is and is not possible for us (p. 10). For this reason, ontological coaching is coaching to the human soul.

**Coaching To the Human Soul**

Ontological coaching involves several philosophical and procedural practices:

- Hold the coachee as a legitimate other, supported in finding their own ‘truth’ with dignity and integrity.
- Ask for permission to share new perspectives.
- Come to a shared understanding of the coaching issue.
- Observe and distinguish how the coachee’s way of being causes disruptions in their effectiveness. Coaching can then cause a shift in the coachee’s Way of Being.
Stories, narratives and social practices provide deep meaning for individuals and organizations concerning reality and what’s possible and impossible. They are historically based, often dealing with dimensions such as religion, gender, and nationality. They are deeply ingrained, run invisibly in the background, and provide a pre-understanding of the world. Unattended, they can be major barriers to change. Attended, they can be understood, examined as a Way of Being and shifted to allow for new possibilities.

**Strengths and Challenges**

We found this book a pleasure to read for several reasons.

**Strengths**

Sieler delivers depth, breadth, and integration around the principles of the model itself:

- Way of Being is a deeper, more soul-based driver than behavior.
- Observing one’s observer is essential to shifting one’s Way of Being.
- Way of Being is accessed through the integration of language, moods/emotions and body.

There is rigor and breadth in the historical and theoretical framework offered as context for this model. In fact they provide support for the discipline of coaching in general and the kinds of existential (issues of meaning) and behavioral phenomena that coaching is uniquely suited to impact.

There are numerous “coaching in action” examples (practical applications of discussed concepts) scattered throughout the book. The impact of this on us was an experience of validation, personal relevance and deeper understanding.

For coaches, the breadth and depth of linguistic distinctions offered in Volume 1 opens up worlds to explore, appreciate and master. We see an opportunity to use and be influenced by these distinctions to create broad-based shifts and powerful new realities.

The model incorporates yet extends beyond language as the defining dimension to understand human beings and how they can intervene on their own behalf. The added dimensions of moods/emotions and the body provide greater scope and perspective, more points of leverage, and access to intuitive and non-rational ways of causing change and transformation.

**Challenges**

I (Chryistine) believe, based on my Eastern teachings in energy, meditation, breathwork and yoga, that the model presented in Volume 1 can be powerfully extended and deepened as one that coaches to the human soul. My suggestions are offered without the knowledge of what will be covered in Volumes 2 and 3.

Sieler refers to the soul as “interior energy … the life force of our existence…physical, mental, emotional and spiritual.” The addition I offer is to incorporate and work with the system of life force energy (prana or chi) that encircles and flows through each cell of the body, by way of the breath. This life energy flows through a central channel that moves up the spine and out the top of the head.

Seven powerful energy centres or chakras, governing various dimensions of “being” associated with body, mind and spirit, are located along this channel. Working directly with them to open and balance them, we access the domains included in the ontological model, as well as the domains of intuition and the “stillpoint” or centre of deep bliss inside us that represents unity.
with universal spirit. Carl Jung likened the chakra system, which he studied throughout his life, to a way of developing consciousness from a place of inner being and wholeness. The tools of breathwork, imagery - including visualization, body movement and relaxation help us access all these domains. By incorporating this knowledge, we can use these tools more synergistically, comprehensively and powerfully.

**Recommendation**

We highly recommend this book to both novice and experienced coaches. It is an introduction to the most complete model of coaching to the ‘whole person’ we have discovered to date. Alan Sieler has written the book from a place of deep personal passion and experience, which shows in the breadth and depth of insight offered in the descriptions of the model, the coaching examples and the self-coaching exercises. The grounded, thoughtful and extensive treatment Sieler gave language in Volume 1 promises a rich perspective on moods/emotions and body learning in Volume 2, and on the artistry of coaching in Volume 3. We can’t wait! By the way, Volume 1 is available through the Newfield Network at www.newfieldnetwork.com.

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**About the Reviewers**

Chrystine Langille, MBA, CPCC  
Email: Break_out@sympatico.ca  
Phone: (905) 770-8022

Chrystine Langille is an executive coach, strategic business consultant and practicing instructor of yoga, pilates, Nia holistic fitness and personal training. She is founder and CEO of her company, BreakOut! Coaching & Consulting Inc. She coaches high achieving executives and teams to break-through results by working with the whole person – body, mind and spirit – using the tools of language, emotion, body movement, breathwork, imagery, energy and relaxation.

John Lazar, MA, MCC  
Email: jblcoach@lazarconsulting.com  
Phone: (708) 771-9176  
www.lazarconsulting.com

John Lazar is an executive coach and management consultant. He is founder and President of his company, John B. Lazar & Associates, Inc. In his business, he coaches leaders and teams to greater levels of results, success and personal satisfaction. He also consults on issues of organizational alignment and effectiveness.

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**Themes for 2004 IJCO Issues**

**Issue Three: August**

The Ethics of Coaching

**Issue Four: November**

Open Forum

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**The IJCO Logo: What Does It Represent?**

The co-executive editors of IJCO have been asked about the logo that adorns all covers of the journal as well as subscription forms, policy statements, etc. This logo comes from a much larger work of art—a statue called Kabala—that was created by Julian Harr. The logo represents two birds (vision), two hands (support) or two flames (energy). We think that vision, support and energy are three of the key ingredients in effective organizational coaching practices. What do you think? Let us know.

- Bill Bergquist and John Lazar
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