Coaching from Multiple Perspectives

Philippe Rosinski, M.S., M.C.C.

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In this article, Philippe Rosinski promotes global coaching as a broad and inclusive form of coaching, necessary for enabling sustainable and global success. Global coaches strive to seamlessly link and possibly leverage multiple perspectives. Specifically, he proposes six general perspectives, found to be particularly useful in executive coaching: Spiritual, Cultural, Political, Psychological, Managerial and Physical. Rosinski discusses how non-traditional perspectives could open additional possibilities and new growth opportunities in the case of Marie. Finally, the Möbius strip representation is suggested to emphasize our interconnected reality and the synthesis we can help to bring about.

I wondered in particular how to take advantage of new angles (notably political, cultural and spiritual), which had not been part of traditional coaching. In my experience, this leads to more creative, powerful and meaningful coaching.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

As far back as I can recall, I have always been fascinated by multiple perspectives. For example, when I studied Electrical Engineering at Stanford University, I took all my electives in the humanities (with the exception of a windsurfing class!) I had captivating classes in history, literature, sociology and philosophy as part of my Master of Science degree. I found these radically different perspectives inspiring and enriching. My fellow students instead usually preferred Computer Science, which they viewed as a more natural and practically applicable prolongation of Electrical Engineering.

Later on, this same inclination led me, as an executive coach, to introduce the concepts of global coaching and coaching from multiple perspectives. I wondered in particular how to take advantage of new angles (notably political, cultural and spiritual), which had not been part of traditional coaching. In my experience, this leads to more creative, powerful and meaningful coaching.

In my view, the executive coach’s mission is to facilitate the coachee’s journey towards high performance and high fulfillment, towards sustainable and global success, for the benefit of the coachee himself/herself and for others he/she can impact.

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

In practice, executive coaching today (still) tends to be reduced to its two traditional perspectives: psychological and managerial. These are certainly fundamental, but usually insufficient to unleash the coachee’s full potential.

However, as coaching is establishing itself as a new discipline, I am pleased to notice that many of the “scholars” who are contributing to the “institutionalization” of coaching, have adopted the view that coaching should be enriched by multiple perspectives for more relevance and impact. In 2006, two books illustrate this shift: both The Evidence Based Coaching Handbook (Stober and Grant [Eds.], 2006) and Excellence in Coaching (Passmore [Ed.], 2006) propose a diversity of approaches in coaching and exemplify the richness of adopting multiple perspectives. Linda
Page has well summarized this evolution: “There is a growing consensus that the field of coaching studies should be cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, or inter-disciplinary—that is, a hyphenated field rather than one that is ‘owned’ by any one existing academic discipline.” (Page, 2006)

Coaching, if it integrates multiple perspectives, is a powerful vehicle for enabling sustainable and global success (for oneself and for others). I use the term ‘global coaching’ to refer to this broad and inclusive form of coaching. Coaching from multiple perspectives assumes an enlarged mission for the executive coach and implies the readiness to engage in a lifelong learning journey.

I have found the general perspectives mentioned in the table below to be particularly useful.

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<td>Spirituality is an increased awareness of a connection with oneself, others, nature, with the immaterial and transcendent “divine”. It is also the ability to find meaning, derive purpose and appreciate life.</td>
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<td>In our complex, multicultural and turbulent environment, it is increasingly essential to learn how to embrace diversity, bridge cultural gaps, learn from cultural differences for more creativity, live meaningfully, act responsibly, overcome divisions and strive for unity (internally and externally).</td>
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<td>Politics is an activity that builds and maintains your power so that you can achieve your goals. Power is the ability to achieve your meaningful, important goals. Politics is a process. Power is potential and it comes from many sources. (Rostinski, 1998a)</td>
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Each general perspective includes itself multiple perspectives. The Evidence Based Coaching Handbook (Stober and Grant [Eds.], 2002) clearly illustrates, for example, how various schools, theories, and models within psychology can contribute to coaching. These include adult development, cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, and positive psychology.

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It seems that Marie is not only harsh vis-à-vis her co-workers, but also often with herself. The coach could help her develop instead a loving acceptance of herself. Sometimes, it takes hardship and a trauma to move further. The challenging situation can be reframed as an opportunity to grow on her hero’s journey (see Rosinski, 2003, part III). The coach could help Marie put her reality into perspective, and develop a sense of gratitude for the gifts of life she may currently take for granted. This attitude of appreciation will help her feel the inner calm and peacefulness that will naturally lead her to change what can be and accept what cannot.

Coaching from a spiritual perspective means facilitating unity. To help Marie become more united with herself, the coach needs to gently help Marie confront and embrace her shadow, her daemons, and her vulnerabilities. Carl Jung (for example, 1971) described how the self emerges when the ego meets the shadow. To help Marie become more united with the world, the coach could invite her to meditate on her power, right and responsibility. When culturally appropriate, I might quote the Talmud here:

Spiritual

Marie wants to learn how to inspire. Beyond coping, the spiritual perspective is a useful avenue here. To really be able to inspire others, Marie needs to come to closer contact with a deeper sense of purpose and meaning. She has to develop a strong and calm presence. This implies becoming comfortable with herself, developing an eagerness to give, to touch people, to affect them in a positive fashion.

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The coach could then challenge Marie to reflect on the legacy she wants to leave behind and determine specific actions for improving the world at her level. Replacing her current destructive communications with benevolence and respect towards colleagues would be a good start.

Cultural
Marie can benefit from learning and hopefully accepting and embracing alternative cultural ways whenever her own norms, values and beliefs have proved inadequate for addressing her challenges.

For example, several dimensions in the Cultural Orientations Framework (see Rosinski, 2003, part II) seem at play here. I mention only a few of these below.

Humility versus control. The coach can help Marie give herself the permission to do the best she can, while accepting that not everything is under her control. Marie can learn to let go and be more detached.

Indirect and hierarchical. In such a culture, Marie may not get the feedback she needs. She should not take this absence of feedback as a de facto approval of her abusive behaviors. She should instead remember that bruising people is the number one derailment factor for executives as the Center for Creative Leadership’s classical research has shown. Marie should realize the alienating impact of loss of face, which is particularly problematic in indirect cultures.

Being versus doing. The coach could challenge Marie that somewhat paradoxically more being is usually necessary to ultimately get more doing. Her goals in the being realm could include becoming more serene and developing closer interpersonal relationships. This will help her create the supportive and constructive environment necessary for sustainable high performance.

Political
The coach can help Marie to reflect and devise deliberate actions to build internal alliances (see Rosinski, 2003, chapter 7). Rather than estranging herself from her colleagues, she should realize the self-defeating impact of her competitive stance: what is the point of winning an argument at the cost of ruining relationships with potential allies? These colleagues could instead help Marie in building her business in the Asian region, thereby raising her profile and influence in the organization.

Psychological
Referring to transactional analysis (see Rosinski, 2003, appendix 1), Marie is “playing psychological games”, adopting various roles in the “dramatic triangle”, from persecutor (OK-not OK when she shouts at her direct reports) to victim (not OK-OK in her submissive attitude vis-a-vis her boss). As a priority, the coach should help Marie become assertive instead, adopting an OK-OK mindset.

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Interestingly, the cultural and spiritual perspectives can be viewed as a natural prolongation. At a deeper level, OK-OK means accepting herself and others, loving herself and others. Accepting and even embracing alternative cultural ways will bring Marie closer to other cultures while giving her an opportunity to grow and become more united.

**Managerial**

The coach could help Marie to systematically review the various projects she is engaged in, possibly discovering with her additional opportunities for increased productivity and results.

**Physical**

Marie is still fairly young (42 years old), but her body may soon no longer be able to sustain the high level of stress she has become accustomed to. Fortunately, she has apparently not suffered yet from a major health condition (and hopefully never will!). The global coach should invite Marie to take care of her body, as a way to increase her well-being and calmness, reduce her stress, and develop her resilience (which includes her ability to effectively deal with stress). She has the privilege of still being able to adopt a preventive approach rather than a remedial one necessary if the breakdown occurs. With her coach, she could set specific targets and determine activities for promoting healthy habits including fitness routines, adequate nutrition, sufficient sleep, having fun (lightness and laughter would help!), etc. Marie might benefit from a medical checkup and personalized programs with experts (e.g., physiotherapist, nutritionist).

**COACHING EXAMPLES**

I have not coached Marie, nor even met her. Nonetheless, let me illustrate how some of these multiple perspectives have informed my coaching in two recent situations, which to some extent connect to Marie’s circumstances despite clear differences.

Like Marie, a goal for one of my coachees was to become more assertive (i.e., having what transactional analysis refers to as OK-OK mindset and behaviors). In his case, this was particularly necessary for dealing with unfair criticism and conflict. Relying on cognitive and behavioral psychology, including using the coaching safe environment to practice engaging in his challenging situations through role playing, this executive notably learned to connect with anger (which he tended to mute when treated unfairly), and to give up a self-imposed and self-defeating standard of perfection. My coachee executive had no difficulty, however, when stepping back from his daily work environment, to see the big picture and take effective actions. His marathon training routine, several hours of running a week, was a source of well-being and an opportunity to calmly reflect.

On the other hand, another coachee had no issue with asserting his positions. Yet, he was feeling uneasy. He was treading in a complex terrain with multiple stakeholders trying to negotiate the best possible agreements with the goal of setting up a new business venture in the most effective way. Coaching from a political perspective proved very helpful here. Still, it was not enough to increase his satisfaction and fulfillment.

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financially profitable enterprise he wanted to create was meant to serve society by making breakthrough biomedical findings available in medical treatments. He learned to connect with himself, significant others and his mission at a deeper level. On one occasion, sensing his stress, I proposed something I had never tried before in a coaching session: spending half-an-hour walking in the forest of Soignes nearby. Uniquely, this wilderness extends into parts of Brussels; you might encounter a deer if you silently walk. My coachee welcomed the invitation and, a few minutes later, we were in the forest of Soignes. He was still busy talking and, at one point, I asked him if he had noticed the beautiful surrounding. He admitted not having paid attention. I invited him to look attentively. I also suggested touching the trunk of a huge tree, focusing on feeling and internally visualizing the tree, his body, and the contact between the two.

In just a few minutes, my coachee had calmed down and felt a sense of serenity. The half-an-hour spent was quickly “regained” by his increased clarity in the last part of our coaching session for creatively addressing some of his complex challenges. He commented about the fact that nobody else was walking in the forest, despite its proximity and beauty. This short detour became for him a metaphor for stepping back, regaining perspective, noticing and appreciating. I could imagine a similar activity would be equally beneficial with Marie.

Promoting positive energy does not mean burying unpleasant emotions such as anger, fear and sadness. It does imply however the ability to express anger assertively rather than aggressively, since it is usually a more effective way. It implies choosing one’s battles and a pragmatic approach: avoiding conflict can sometimes be best. A boxer will want to first acquire additional technique, force and resistance rather than engaging in an uneven contest. Likewise, an executive might decide to gain new knowledge and build new alliances rather than fighting a battle that is likely to be lost. It could also be that the stakes are not important and the issue really not worth the requisite time and energy.

Being both in healthy contact with one’s emotions and having adequate distance from them equate to acting with a cool head and a warm heart. This exemplifies the notion of unity, which I see as a form of completion, wholeness, or globality, achieved through the synthesis of differences (psychological or cultural), and not to be confused with uniformity, a bland version in which disparities have been eliminated (Rosinski, 2003).

MOBIUS STRIP

Reflecting on my practice of coaching executives, I tried to further conceptualize the multiple perspectives notion. I wondered how to graphically best represent the relationship between the various perspectives (my former engineering background may have incidentally popped up here!). The Möbius strip then stood out.

The Möbius strip, also called the twisted cylinder (Henle, 1994), is a one-sided surface obtained by cutting a closed band into a single strip, giving one of the two ends thus produced a half twist, and then reattaching the two ends (Gray, 1997).

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The artist M.C. Escher has created famous representations of the Möbius strip, notably one with ants crawling on the one-sided surface forming a ∞ shape (which happens to symbolize infinity). Amazingly, the Möbius strip paradoxically represents unity and infinity at the same time: the Möbius strip has only one side and one edge, and ants could crawl on it forever. The mathematically inclined might want to even enhance the model by weaving fractals into the strip, thereby actually producing an edge of infinite length.

The multiple perspectives could be imagined as diverse viewpoints lying on a Möbius strip (see Figure 1 above). Of course, I do not think we can know the ultimate representation of a complex reality and I doubt a single representation even exists. Multiple representations can co-exist, each with its own merits and limitations. This Möbius strip representation is merely an attempt at highlighting certain characteristics that seem important: unity (one side and one edge) and at the same time, infinity. The one-side and one-edge property evokes the concept of unity we discussed earlier. Moreover, the ∞ shape visually combines dilatation and contraction, mirroring exploration and openness together with focus and closure, all necessary for creative coaching. Finally, the duality unity-infinity inherent to the Möbius strip is a powerful reminder for global coaches that everything is interconnected. It is an invitation to leverage diversity and foster synthesis.

REFERENCES


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I am grateful for the thoughtful editorial comments and encouragement by Dr. Katrina Burrus, M.C.C.

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