Differences and Discourses: Coaching Across Cultures

Karen Curnow, M.C.C.

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2006, 4(4), 30-39. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

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www.ijco.info

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A white female coach and a black male coachee are meeting in a restaurant for a coaching session. They are still fairly new to each other, although this is not their first meeting. In the conversation, the coachee reveals an injustice he feels he has experienced at work. When the concept of anger and indignation come up, the coachee comments, “Well, I could never express anger. It just wouldn’t be right. It would do no good anyway.”

After several questions from the coach about having access to anger, the coachee explains that the issue is really more about how to express anger. When the coach probes further, the coachee finally blurts out, “Look, I’m a black man in a public setting. I can’t afford to express my anger.” As she lets his comments sink in, the coach is suddenly aware of her “whiteness” and of a whole layer of experience her coachee had described that she had earlier missed.

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In this article, Curnow explores the impact of cultural differences on coaching. Specifically, she examines distinctions in working with international and domestic cultural differences and suggests cross-cultural coaching approaches and skills that make a difference.
prerequisite for effective cross-cultural coaching is introspective work unearthing, distinguishing, and challenging our own long-held assumptions about how the world and the people in it work. To see, reach and serve our diverse clients effectively we must first see, reach and acknowledge our own cultural foundations. Without this self-knowledge, we severely limit our effectiveness as coaches and put ourselves in danger of coaching to an ethnocentric standard that may not be in our clients’ best interests.

For life and executive coaches who often operate in very intimate and sometimes vulnerable areas of their clients’ lives, this cross-cultural coaching competency is particularly critical. But how can a coach work effectively across differences – whether international cultural differences or those differences home grown in the coach’s own country? While in my experience there are some clear distinctions between coaching across international and domestic differences (including a typically stronger emotional intensity with domestic differences), the good news is that the skills needed for cross-cultural coaching are the same.

**When are we not coaching across cultures?**

There is no avoiding this topic for successful coaches. Indeed, one could argue that we are always coaching across differences. The International Coach Federation’s core competencies include many effective cross-cultural coaching approaches, including ‘employing an open and flexible style with clients’ under its core competency ‘Coaching Presence’ and ‘unearthing with clients’ fixed ways of seeing themselves and the world’ under “Creating Awareness”, to name just two. Although some of the competencies seem written for a Western audience (and one might argue that the coaching profession itself is a Western phenomenon), the coaching competencies include enough flexibility to allow for a range of coaching styles and practices to better meet diverse clients.

Understanding and meeting our clients where they are (accepting their different experience as legitimate) is essential for our success as coaches. Barbara Walker (1997), a pioneer in diversity initiatives with her early groundbreaking work at Digital, explains:

> The work of learning to value differences comes in many forms with many dimensions. Some people think of this work primarily in terms of the victim-oppressor relationship. Others think in multicultural terms – learning about differences in cultures across the world. Of course, for some, it is dealing with inequities in the ways society treats a particular group. … I think it is all this and more – much more. It is the work of learning to value differences among people – all differences, all people...

[This] work is developmental work – personal and organizational. It is self-actualization sparked by learning about differences, across differences, and from differences. It is a focus on differences in order to learn, grow, and change. The differences among us create a marvelous context for learning. They are agents of change, learning, and relationship building.

Ignoring differences in coaching for the sake of being politically correct or because of our own discomfort can block learning – in our clients and in us. Julio Olalla, founder of the Newfield Network, speaking about his work crossing cultures in coaching, stated, “Awareness is developmental work – personal and organizational. It is self-actualization sparked by learning about differences, across differences, and from differences. It is a focus on differences in order to learn, grow, and change. The differences among us create a marvelous context for learning. They are agents of change, learning, and relationship building.

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of our incompetencies, our insufficient knowledge of cultural differences, is so important in coaching. As long as we act as if nothing is there, we are missing the point.” (J. Ollalla, personal communication, November 11, 2006) Dennis Daniel, who coaches as part of his work as a minister, adds, “It is ignoring the differences that can create problems because you are paralyzing yourself with assumptions.” (D. Daniel, personal communication, November 18, 2006)

DISCOURSES

It is very difficult to be a successful coach and not be aware of how the traditions in which we live and to which we belong, shape how we speak and act. We are historical – in our thoughts and in our actions. The sum of our thoughts, beliefs, values and traditions become our “discourses” – currents that underlie and inform our actions in seen and unseen ways at a deep level.

In ontological coaching (coaching having to do with the nature of one’s being), culture is one of the lenses we look through to understand how our coaching clients see themselves and the world. Culture reflects and reveals a world of distinctions shared by a group – fundamental declarations and values in which people live, an emotional drift that belongs to a group. For example, one cherished value of the U.S. culture is a belief that the individual is self-made (and therefore should be self-sufficient), with little connection to historical roots or to others. Not surprising given this cultural value, a popular challenge raised by U.S. clients is a recurring difficulty in asking for help. This coaching challenge may be less common in people from cultures with a stronger sense of family, tribe, or group connectedness, since the idea of self-sufficiency in the face of the enormity of life may be ludicrous or even inconceivable to them.

Cultures teach specific ways to see the world, provide internal patterned ways of interpreting what we see and experience. These cultural discourses, which emerge from a country’s history, geography, politics, and more, are running in the background, informing us in unseen ways and influencing our thoughts, choices and actions. The popular U.S. American values of individualism, competition, egalitarianism, and achievement can all be traced in part to the experience of colonists of European descent who were escaping repression and a class system. They arrived in an abundant land with a large and expansive frontier offering second chances and new opportunities. The very different history and trauma of the early experience of Americans of African descent create different discourses.

Our personal discourses may also stem from individual life experiences that are beyond our own culture and history. Anyone who has coached someone much older or much younger can attest to the impact of generations on thought patterns and actions. Gardnlesschwarz and Rowe (1994) described the various dimensions as layers of diversity – that include primary dimensions (those we are born with) and secondary dimensions (those that arrive with life experience), referring to language first used by Marilyn Loden and Judy Rosener (1991). The layers of diversity can be seen in Figure 1 below.
The challenge for us as coaches is to unveil the impact of a client’s varied discourses, both cultural and individual. To be truly of service in our coaching, we need to recognize the histories that are alive in the person in front of us when we are coaching. Does this mean we must become experts on the wide array of cultures and life experiences represented in our clients? If I haven’t had the same life experience or if my cultural discourses are decidedly different from my clients, can I really provide meaningful coaching?

On this topic, Julio Olallo is unequivocal, saying that to have an impact in our coaching across cultures, “we must be appropriate but not compromising.” (J. Olalla, personal communication, November 11, 2006) Being “appropriate” requires some knowledge of the client and sensitivity to his or her reactions during the coaching conversation. “Not compromising” requires disallowing the paralysis that can sometimes infiltrate a coaching interaction as the coach attempts to be politically correct to the point of inaction, avoiding the bold moves of powerful coaching.
In fact, difference in cultural heritage and life experience can be a benefit, enabling the coach to see cultural patterns that may be invisible to the client. In discussing the impact of his work, Olalla claims, “One of the biggest advantages I have in my life is being a foreigner – it’s not more complex than that. I can see the water you fish swim in.” (ibid.)

In a 2006 interview, Sydney Wilde and Dennis Daniel, UU ministers in Reston, Virginia, spoke of their experiences of coaching across cultures in the unique environment of a faith community. Wilde commented that she confesses early in the relationship if she doesn’t really know about the person’s culture and requests that the person teach her about it. (S. Wilde, personal communication, November 18, 2006) In teaching the coach about their discourses, clients may also become aware of habitual cultural patterns previously unseen by them. Referring to one cross-cultural relationship, Wilde admits, “I was learning every step I took. … With every step, I felt as though I was on foreign soil.” (ibid.)

Daniel referred to work he had done with Canadians and noted a surprising learning for him. “Mostly, I had to be careful not to make the assumption that we came out of the same background.” (D. Daniel, personal communication, November 18, 2006) One of the unique challenges for folks working with cultures similar to their own is the set of assumptions the coach may fall into – and the resulting points they may miss in conversation, blinded by their “knowing” the culture. Nancy Adler (2002), a writer on cross-cultural issues, suggests, “Assume difference until similarity is proven”. Daniel adds:

When working across cultures, you and the people you are working with are going to have to learn each other. Your coach is going to have to learn what you mean when you speak, just as you are going to have to learn to interpret what he or she says. Body language may be different. References will be different. Once you have established this foundation for coaching, be bold. You can paralyze yourself if you start being afraid that every thing you say will be taken wrong. … If you give permission for the other to give you ‘in-flight corrections’ during the coaching engagement, you also invite forgiveness. You’ve got to do what you do. There is a reason why that person is coming to talk with you. They looking to get something that they assess you have. (D. Daniel, personal communication, November 18, 2006)

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Even without specific knowledge of a coachee’s culture, exploring with our coachee the impact of their discourses can yield tremendous results in our coaching – whether we are coaching an executive struggling with leadership presence or an individual rethinking his or her life direction. When we support individuals in uncovering their discourses and their impact, we invite them to increase their self-awareness, reflect on what they are noticing, develop insight about the newly recognized patterns, and exercise greater choice of action as they strive to accomplish their goals. The end result is that clients will have their discourses rather than their discourses having them. Questions we might ask include: Where do you belong? What history speaks when you open your

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mouth? What world do you see when you open your eyes? How did you get to see the world that way?

STEREOTYPES

Cultural discourses influence people but don’t define them. There is a difference between having cultural conversations and devolving into stereotyping. If I stereotype a group, I am completely unwilling to observe differences and am blocked in my ability to understand individuals within that group because I already “know” them. But allowing for cultural conversations – respecting and discovering the coachee’s discourses that have had greatest impact – is to consider and value the discourses in order to listen better, not to frame the person. Just as acknowledging our cultural starting point is important, so too is recognizing the stereotypes that exist in us and in society. Dismantling societal stereotypes requires social justice work that goes beyond coaching. Still, coaching can make a meaningful contribution, as it provides a safe conversational space in which people can speak without being wrong, an opportunity to move from blame to forgiveness. The work of dismantling personal stereotypes is lifelong and requires that we be in conversation and in relationship with people whom we may tend to categorize negatively. Even after years of facilitating diversity dialogue groups and doing diversity coaching with a wide variety of people and organizations, I still find my own biases and stereotypes emerging in sometimes surprising ways. When they influence my coaching, my unacknowledged stereotypes prevent me from being fully present or fully seeing my client. Recognizing my own stereotypes enables me to begin to break them down.

Our coachees are also influenced by their stereotypes. I am very aware that my coaching clients may initially assess me according to a stereotype of white woman and that the stereotyped image may influence their willingness to share and trust me and the coaching experience. Knowing this possibility exists enables us as learning partners to speak with ease about it (rather than walking on eggshells) and to address it directly.

We also cannot afford to be naïve in our coaching about the impact of systemic bias, micro-inequities, and prejudice in its many forms. Being blind to -isms such as racism, sexism, able-ism, and heterosexism, creates barriers with many of our coaching clients. Our blindness can condemn us to superficial conversations about issues of great consequence for our clients, and, thus, to superficial coaching.

AN ASSIMILATION CONUNDRUM – HELPING OR HURTING?
One of the ethical dilemmas we face in coaching across cultures is the standard we hold for worthy coaching outcomes. Frank Ball, program director in Georgetown University’s coaching program, told of a series of foreign-born clients he had several years ago. (F. Ball, personal communication, November 6, 2006) He noticed some similarities in his clients. They had each enjoyed some success in their international organizations and wanted to continue their success here in the U.S., welcoming coaching in support of that goal. Interestingly, they were sent to coaching, not because their business results weren’t stellar, but for “stylistic” reasons. Their employers complained that they didn’t “look” like leaders, that they didn’t control meetings the way they were expected to, that they didn’t drive
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approaches that make a difference

What then is needed to coach effectively across cultures? In my experience and that of others in the area, the competencies of coaching across cultures include conversational competence, intercultural awareness, and personal awareness. The International Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research (SIETAR) offers a list of intercultural relationship-building competencies in a diverse workplace that provides a good starting point. Based on their work with multinational organizations, the following essential skills were identified, listed in order of importance:

- To be aware of one’s own culture.
- To practice empathy with others.
- To respect other cultures.
- To learn from interacting.
- To be non-judgmental.
- To be aware of stereotypes.
- To be able to communicate well.

Ball was asked to coach them to a U.S. American cultural model of leadership. In his coaching, he and his clients talked about typical American meeting behaviors, such as being more demonstrative, interrupting others more, slapping a paper on the table to draw attention to yourself and your point. Some of his clients enjoyed learning the new “game,” enjoyed realizing that all they had to do was clear their throat, push up their sleeves, and slide their chair forward to get attention and be seen as a credible authority. With Ball’s coachees, the absence of generally-accepted mannerisms prevented the brilliance of their work from being truly appreciated. One could argue then that the reduction of visual interference allowed them to be seen. When training expatriates to be successful in foreign countries, workshops almost always include something about learning the local cultural and business behavior norms, so this approach seems to have some merit.

But, where do we draw the line? Do we really want to be coaching people to become better at someone else’s game or invite them to assimilate to the current standard? On hearing this story, Sydney Wilde took the experience out of the multinational context of Ball’s coachees and pondered how those behaviors could possibly be impactful here in the U.S. when used by a woman or person of color for whom other stereotypes and expectations may be prevalent. She commented, “The same methods from an African American man or from a woman would be interpreted very differently here.” (S. Wilde, personal communication, November 18, 2006) Dennis Daniel (D. Daniel, personal communication, November 18, 2006) said he might be tempted to ask, “How would you do this in your culture?” and honestly acknowledge how those foreign culture behaviors come across to him from his U.S. American cultural perspective. He then proposed asking, “Can we find another way that is still an authentic expression for you that works in both cultures?” Daniel admitted that this was a longer approach and would likely entail a lot of trial and error. Ethically and practically, there seems to be no easy solution to this conundrum.

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The sensitive work of coaching across differences demands more of coaches, including the following.

**Be Willing to Learn and Open to Being Surprised - Learn about Your Own Discourses and Their Impact on Your Coaching**

Consider receiving coaching yourself to uncover the discourses that have arisen from your own culture, history, and life experiences. Read and dialogue with others about the mix of discourses that are present for you. The more you uncover for yourself, the more powerful a coach you can be for others. For a concentrated and immediate lesson about your own and other cultures, travel to foreign countries. In his classic book, On Becoming a Leader, Warren Bennis (2003) says, "Travel is another kind of learning. All the clichés about it are true. It does broaden. It is revelatory. It changes your perspective immediately, because it requires new and different responses from you..." Coaches who have spent time in foreign countries often share a perspective that seems at once important and obvious: that our culture constantly speaks to us.

**Create a Context of Deep Caring and Openness**

Recognize with your clients that which is common to all of us – that we are each different observers, seeing the world the way we are rather than the way it is. Once that foundation is in place, we can move into a coaching relationship in which our clients can explore their concerns with freedom and ease without shying away from powerful and sometimes transformational conversations about discourses, stereotypes, and biases. Julio Olalla emphasizes the importance of this context-setting: "I take into account the differences, but there is also something profoundly universal in this work. I trust that the power of truly caring works in all cultures." (J. Olalla, personal communication, November 11, 2006)

**Gain Mileage – Read and Dialogue with a Mood of Curiosity**

To become aware of your own historical and cultural blind spots, read writers who have a different world view than you do. Engage in dialogues with people who are different from you and move with a mood of curiosity rather than judgment. Nothing can replace experience. The more experiences we have with a broad range of people from a variety of cultures, the greater the chances that we can remove our cultural blinders, avoid stereotyping, and meet our clients with compassion and greater awareness.

**Admit Your Ignorance, Then Move Boldly**

Admit any lack of knowledge you may have about your client’s discourses and heritage, let them know you are willing to learn, be willing to accept feedback as it comes, then do your work.

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Engage with Your Client as a Learning Partner

Ask questions such as, “How would you do this in your culture?” and integrate your client’s response into your thinking and responding. Share honestly how your client’s behaviors are influencing you (and others, if you have gotten feedback through others from a 360 or a meeting with the client’s supervisor). Invite your client to educate you on their culture and background so you can better serve them. Remember, your clients are adjusting to you, too, so be patient as you work out the rhythms of your coaching relationship.

CONCLUSION

Coaching across differences is more than just another coaching engagement and more than coaching someone with an interesting name. In the service of others, masterful coaches are attentive to their own discourses, to the cultural and historical patterns that are alive in their clients, and to the learning that can occur for both. The developmental opportunity is before us. As Frank Ball advised, “I don’t think you can coach anyone without being changed by the experience. If we are even more conscious and thoughtful about our work in coaching across differences, we have an even better opportunity for deep learning – for them and for us.” (F Ball, personal communication, November 6, 2006)

REFERENCES


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Phone: 703-453-6050
Email: ci@compass-international.com

Managing Director of Compass International, Karen Curnow is an executive coach specializing in diversity and leadership issues in the workplace, and national program manager for the Newfield Network-USA. Karen has lived and worked in Paris, Istanbul, Nairobi, Vienna, and various locations in the USA. Karen has also done extensive diversity work in the United States.

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