Musing: On Coaching and Consulting

By Mike Jay

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MUSING
On Coaching and Consulting

BY MIKE R. JAY

First off, I want nothing I say or do to be used against me! Probably nothing I say will make a lot of difference anyway. However, as the now famous hockey player says…”It is what it is.”

Starting from there, I want to share some ideas about what I’ve learned in 20 years of professional coaching. These are the ideas I’ll cover:
• PAAR
• Actionability and Advice-giving
• RightACTION™

PAAR
PAAR is Power, Accountability, Authority and Responsibility. A diagram is available if you want a visual of the inter-linking systems; see www.leadu.info/PAAR. In the spirit of conciseness, simply put, coaches do not have a direct PAAR relationship with their clients. Consultants do. What does this mean? Essentially, before we can go any farther, we need to define coaching. At least that is what I’ve found in practice.
• Coach. A person who has no power, accountability, authority or responsibility over the outcomes of the person being coached while developing the person being coached to desired levels of efficient and effective performance now, and sustainable capability in the future.
• Person Coaching (Facilitator, Consultant, Mentor, Manager, Leader, etc.). Any person using coaching knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs), but has PAAR over the outcomes of the person being coached.

This is as simple as I can make it, and still hold very specific ideas, without restraining the field of coaching to those issues which can maintain it as a vibrant paradigm of innovation.

Now, what does it mean? If you have PAAR over the outcomes of your clients, you are not a coach, in MY definition. While coaching has been influenced from everything athletic to all things invented and called coaching, a discipline, rather than a label, has to have definitions. Yet, you don’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater either.

In order to enhance the opportunity that the field of coaching will continue to prosper, a LOT of room needs to be left open for innovation.
However, at some point, there has to be clarity around the field for it to emerge into a discipline (or profession, as some wish) that many of us practice.

There are specific reasons why as a coach you don't hold, or want, PAAR.

**• If you hold PAAR, it's difficult to remain objective.** Objectivity is a critical issue in coaching. Since we are MOST likely not going to be around the client 24/7, we are not going to be in a position to pick up the pieces—although I do find that most coaches are not hesitant to accept credit for their client’s success. If you can’t tell the truth, because you have PAAR, and your success and well-being are intertwined with the client, you've already downgraded your potential to contribute in my opinion. Leave PAAR to those in the command structure. If you find yourself being forced into PAAR, either re-contract and re-clarify roles, or use your exit strategy. You do have one, don’t you?

**• If you have PAAR, you muddy the water between your PAAR and the client’s PAAR.** If YOU are in the PAAR relationship with the client, then you are in serious trouble because you are not in the position to hire, fire, allocate resource or direct the client in their job or life. And if you do, you're most likely in more serious trouble than just having PAAR. You would have no choice but to accept accountability for any adverse outcomes the client creates at your direction, just like you would be if they were your employee or in a scope of work. Legally, this is no-person's land—land I don’t want to be in after spending the first ten years engaging in these activities as a pseudo consultant, coach, manager, etc.

**• Mostly, other-directed clients.** Since most of your clients are going to fall into the “other-directed”, interpersonal realm of development, your client is going to “naturally” be making up their identity with what you say or prescribe. Where does the coach end and the client start? And vice-versa?

What is so bad about this, you might say? Aren’t we “partners” with our clients? If you are, then be prepared to receive the benefits and the blame—including the legal requirements necessary to establish your “partnership.” I don’t know about you, but I prefer to remain free of partnerships when I have no real resources for PAAR. I also prefer to sleep at night, knowing that my clients are making their own decisions based on their own capability and their own actionable issues. Now, my intent is not to label or condescend, but to point out that as a coach, you have no business with PAAR, literally and figuratively.

**Actionability and Advice-Giving**

I've mentioned this resource before, but every coach—consultants too—should be required to read the book called *Flawed Advice and the Management Trap* by Chris Argyris. **Actionability** is what I deduce from the criteria Argyris provides in the book regarding the viability of advice for clients:

- Advice specifies the sequence of behaviors required to produce outcomes;
- Advice makes causality transparent (it reveals what causes us to get certain effects);
- Causality is embedded in advice in use and is testable in normal situations;
- Advice specifies the values or governing variables that underlie the advice.
I have paraphrased these for you, but here’s what I take from this and have learned from experience. Most people calling themselves coaches today are nothing more than poor advice-givers. Their interventions with clients, under the guise of a coach, are merely a projection of how the world works for them.

In some cases, this is a good thing because our clients want specifically what we have. However, let’s not kid ourselves about objectivity or things coach-like. We are feeding the client our worldview, for better or worse…and what’s more, we’re not consciously realizing it. So, we model the problem, rather than the solution, in many cases. Objectivity always suffers.

As a person coaching, rather than a coach, you’re safe. Let me say why. One particular principle over time has drifted to the top of the reality slurry for me. That is, “do no harm.” While many professions claim this principle, few really understand what it means in my opinion. In large part, because they don’t know themselves well enough to know that they are merely getting in the way with their own stuff. Few people I’ve observed, including myself at times, really get what it means to hold yourself at bay long enough to surface right action in the client.

RightACTION™
RightACTION is the right people, doing the right things, in the right way, at the right time, in the right space, for the right reasons to get RightRESULTS™. THIS MEANS YOU!

OK, so that may be a little harsh. Essentially, as a coach, we have fiduciary responsibilities to protect the client and to surface right action—whatever it’s called. To me, it’s MOSTLY right action to intervene with the appropriate knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). Therefore I believe that coaching is only one particular discipline that can be used as an intervention. There are probably at least a dozen more. Almost a day doesn’t go by without the mention of yet another methodology to be considered as a manner of intervention. I’ll remind you that I created a “What To Do When” flowchart indicating that until specific structure is in place, coaching is most likely not efficient—whether based on performance-related prescription, or developmentally-geared inquiry. You can find it at www.leadu.com/whattodowhen.

What does that mean? In life, when we match up, or align the most efficient method of intervention with the requirements or life conditions, it’s a good bet that we’ll have greater success and consume fewer resources, life or work. Now we can address the idea of consulting, or a person coaching—using coaching KSAs—and managing an intervention through directive, expert activity.

Consulting requires us to be experts in something. That’s why it’s called consulting, or providing a consult. This can be done MORE efficiently by an expert than by a person who is not an expert. When expertise is required, consulting is more effective. When capability over time is required, and learning is especially desired, coaching may be more efficient.

Today, most coaches I know are generalists. They could just as easily be called personal one-on-one consultant, or in some cases guides—I haven’t introduced that intervening method yet, nor will I have time in this musing. Perhaps another day.
As a generalist, it’s difficult to be an expert, although certainly a case can be made that a generalist is an expert at being a generalist to one degree or another. However, I feel it puts WAY too much pressure on coaching in general. We need to be real careful going forward regarding what constitutes a coach and coaching versus what constitutes a consultant and consulting.

One thing I try to stress to people I talk to (which sums up my entire feeling about all of this) has to do with nothing more or less than the amygdale. Huh?

Yes, the amygdale, two almond-shaped organs in our brain. Here’s the definition, taken from http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/amygdale

The amygdalae (Latin, corpus amygdaloideum, singular, amygdala, from Greek amygdale, ‘almond’) are almond-shaped groups of neurons located deep within the medial temporal lobes of the brain in complex vertebrates, including humans. Shown in research to perform a primary role in the processing and memory of emotional reactions, the amygdalae are considered part of the limbic system.

While some may think this is a reach, I am convinced that a coach clearly understands the issue of referent power. Those of us who grew up on “coaching” realize that no one has more of this kind of “respect-oriented” power than a “coach.” Coaches are revered, put on pedestals and lauded for achievements they “create.” Notice when you say “consultant,” what your neurophysiology does.

When you say coach, unless you’re one of those that has been mistreated, and are most likely never going to hire your own (solving the problem I say exists), you have a different neurophysiology reaction.

What is happening?

It’s your amygdalae, silly! Your limbic system “lowers” its shields for a coach and raises them for a consultant? Why? Referent power and respect. The same reason so many unsuspecting children are abused in relationships by people who have referent power.

Well, you say, “we’re not working with children.” With that I will agree. But just the same, we are working with people whose neurophysiology is vulnerable to suggestion, to accommodation and to direction. Going in under false pretence as a coach, when in fact, you are relying on the ability of the defensive and decision system of your client to filter out what you mean and don’t mean, is to me—doing harm.

I believe it’s very clear about how to proceed and here are my ideas:

1. Identify what’s important to your client, what their capability is and what the requirements are in the conditional environment.
2. Support the client in deciding the more efficient intervention for them under these conditions, coach them through it (this we can do well), remembering to remain objective and not indirectly manipulative.
3. Scope the intervention in a way where roles are clarified and people understand the risks.
4. Note that properly applied coaching may cause loss of job, relationship, alignment and connection to their present conditions, as much as it will provide benefits of the reverse.
5. Be clear about PAAR.
6. If you are hired to give advice, be sure it meets the criteria for giving effective advice.
7. Be objective, watch yourself—know the difference between you and the client—really!
8. Have an exit strategy clarified up front.
9. Discuss contingencies, should scenarios be created that are unexpected and unintended.
10. DO NO HARM.

There you have it. That’s as succinct as I can make it in the time and space allotted. Discussions in coaching around these topics are not frequent, nor open. Perhaps this is a beginning.

Mike Jay
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