Musings: Coaching and the Unconscious

Mike Jay

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2009 7(3),88-101. 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.
Musings: Coaching and the Unconscious

Mike Jay

In this Muse, the author points to the unconscious processes and priorities (of the coach) as influencing the work that gets done, whether or not this is recognized and acknowledged. Coaches can frame and set intentions for one’s unconscious to work on and solve/resolve issues ‘off-line,’ providing access to ‘just-in-time’ responses in context.

First off, isn’t this a great topic to muse about? When Bill asked me to contribute, I could only smile because above all, coaching and the unconscious are particularly interesting to me—especially since I spend so much of my time there.

I wish I could do an in-depth exposé on this, but my attention span is about that of a flea these days. I guess for the purpose of this muse, I’d like to focus on my pet peeve around unconscious coaching, and give you one insight I have as a dominant extraverted intuitive—ENTP.

Let’s begin with the peeve.

In coaching today, there is a widespread notion that you coach someone to some state, either their desired state, or your desired state. I have to say, the latter is more prevalent. Coaches unconsciously are merely in the business to get their needs met, both intrinsically and extrinsically without even realizing that’s what’s happening.

It’s my pet peeve, as I’ve seen so many coaches taking credit for client successes. I read about this person was coached by this person to do x, y and z, and it was because of the “coaching” and not that the client sorted through a million or so contingencies operating in the world at the time. This is laughable and leads right into the center of my discord.

Coaches need to get in touch with what is driving them unconsciously before they even start to consider fooling around with clients. I see so many clients today who are in the trance of the coach and who are completely unable to function without their support and “coaching.”

Let me dive into this generality right quick before you wrinkle up like a prune reading this muse.
Here’s what I mean by not being in touch with your unconscious needs. All of us have a program written into our wetware that is basically a motivational set of scripts. In other words, this program and I’m oversimplifying for the sake of metaphor, is running us. It’s why some of us like to talk; others listen, some like the outdoors, some stay curled up with a book. To be fair, it’s not about right or wrong; the programming just is. And what’s more, it’s real tough to change and what’s even crazier, why would you want to change who you are?

Now, before any of you nurturists distort your minds too much, nurture and the environment play a huge role in how this programming manifests in reality and that’s where the coaching juice is, so to speak. Understanding this “unconscious” or even “pre-conscious” wiring is critical to know where you stop and start, and where the client begins and ends….

When you work with someone in coaching, do you know what meaning made is from you, and what is from them, and can you see how the two meld together to form a composite interaction that can’t be maintained when you’re not there? This is a big one. Let me say it a different way.

We all function more complexly with support. I call this scaffolding. Like a building you are repairing or building, you first attach it to a scaffold until it is supported by its own strength. So a coach scaffolds a client to work at a higher level of function with support. Yet, the coach is only there for a brief period and in Lewin’s field theory we know that until you get that new state frozen, it just goes right back to where it was when you unfroze it, in the moment, fooling you into thinking assimilation and use is occurring.

Once the person is under tension again, their “muscle memory” springs them right back to where they are, not where they are going, in all but the rarest of cases.

Ok, here’s another way to look at it. Unconsciously, we (everyone) are seeking to get our needs met. In coaching, this is usually grounded in service, helping, influencing, or having control over others—yes, you coaches are pretty controlling in terms of your own needs, or you would leave people alone. [Smile] So, here we have this whole cadre of people out there “coaching” who unconsciously are just getting their own personal needs met and the person being coached is nothing more than a vehicle for those drivers.

Coaching and the Unconscious?

Well, let’s just say, that today, as I’ve seen it around the world, coaching is unconscious, because people don’t have a clue about what their inborn needs are; they are merely exercising their own personal right to the pursuit of happiness through others. And it’s
rampant in coaching. I hate going to coaching conferences (yes, I attended the first organized one in Houston in 1996; there were 174 of us there). I can't wait to get away from coaches; they are always trying to coach everything in sight, *unconsciously* serving their own neediness. Ugh. Nothing worse than an unconscious coach!

It took me a long time to learn that coaching is not about the unconscious needs you are serving, but about stepping back and allowing the client to expose their own meaning making. It's about helping them understand what's most important—and usually, it's their own needs. Especially their *least* conscious needs, the ones that "have" them.

This embeddedness is the root of subject-object work done by the Keganites (Harvard) and to me is one of the most helpful things a person can engage in *consciously*—to discover the unconscious nature of what has us, and begin to disembed and form relationships with these unconscious bindings. And as a word of caution, you don't want to do this to change them. You want to do this to move into choice as to when they are going to be most useful in their unconscious form, or whether or not you need to move into attention consciously. But that's a whole other muse or two, because we have enough free will to think we have free will and that's it; kind of a cosmic koan of sorts.

Moving on…?

Ok, now that we know coaches are basically *as* unconscious as their clients, I want to move on to a tip that I found for myself that has to do with the unconscious and coaching. This technique you can apply to yourself. In other words, you can coach yourself using this tip. Yes, you heard me, coach yourself unconsciously, a far cry from what I've been discussing, but I promised two things and here's the second.

Use your unconscious mind to solve problems unconsciously.

In general, and of course with a huge oversimplification, here's how this works. We operate largely unconsciously. And because we do so, most of our great stuff is in there. Our conscious world is so limited and so distorted today by everything from too much information and over-stimulus to the dastardly needs of our daily bread. I'm surprised you're still reading this!

But simply, here's what works for me. You can try it to see if it might work for you. What I do is realize that most of me is not here, it's actually nowhere. It's part of a quantum mechanical field that operates outside my consciousness. With that mumbo jumbo being said, there's a whole world we can tap into with intention. To some it will come as an intuitive world, with others it will come as more of a sensory experience. In either case, the unconscious is there to serve you, and basically for most people, it's the other way around, you are serving your unconscious. You are nothing more, unless you've
done some real work around this, nothing more than a vessel for your unconscious.

A number of years ago, I recognized that I could turn the tide on this unconscious wonder and make it start serving me, instead of me just serving it over time.

It works like this.

Frame the issue you want your unconscious to work on well. In other words, frame up what you need, when you need it, but allow some time for your unconscious to do the work. For perceptive people (dominant perceivers in Myers-Briggs/Jung), this is a little bit easier as they are pressure prompted, so you can toss this well-formed intention into your unconscious mind and it will pop up ready when the external pressure is high enough. The problem for perpectives (those who are Ps—generally in Myers-Briggs) is they don’t frame it well enough to get more than mumbo jumbo back, which they have to pick the nuts out of the pudding to find. And the issue for the Js (dominant judging types in Myers-Briggs/Jung) is they don’t allow the unconscious to cook the stuff long enough. They want it now, they need to decide and move on!

Somewhere there is a happy and more beneficial medium where you send a well-framed— I want this answer, or idea, or innovation, by when and in what form—to your unconscious and then leave the unconscious kitchen to do the cooking.

So, there you have it, coaching and the unconscious: two different angles of information hopefully of some benefit, or at least as much as I got writing them down for you.

Muse Off.
Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

*IJCO* The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations™ is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc.™ (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, www.pcpionline.com, to view and purchase our growing line of products.

For advertising, marketing and operations inquiries, please contact John Lazar, *IJCO*™ Co-Executive Editor, at john@ijco.info. If you have an article you would like to submit for peer review consideration, please email to the *IJCO* Office Manager at officemanager@ijco.info. If you have other administrative questions, please refer them to our *IJCO* Office Manager at officemanager@ijco.info.

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

*Journal information:*
www.ijco.info

*Purchases:*
www.pcpionline.com