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Critical Reflection in the Coaching Process
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Abstract: The paper describes partial results from a doctoral dissertation on the use of "Critical Reflection" to facilitate change in the coaching process. Satisfactory change occurs in the coaching processes as a result of clients engaging in "Critical Reflection," with the most satisfying change expressed as a change in feelings.

Critical Reflection in the Coaching Process

Introduction

The purpose of the doctoral study was to understand the perceived role and impact of reflection by coaches and clients, and to explore the impact of reflection on the changes that clients experience during the coaching process. Coaching was defined as: a collaborative partnership between coach and client (ICF, 2007; Flaherty, 2005; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandhal, 1998), wherein the clients ultimately discover their own truths to enhance their experience and to lead a full and satisfying life (Grant, 2001; O’Connor, & Lages, 2007). Important elements facilitating the process are: reflection (Creane, 2005; Grant, 2001; Simon, 2006), self-directed learning (Cox, 2006; Grant, 2008; Wilkins 2000), and dialogue and questioning (Berman Fortgang, 2001; Creane, 2002; Flaherty, 2005).

The study was conducted by first reviewing the current literature related to the coaching profession and adult learning theory, the two domains informing its contextual framework. Pre-interview surveys and semi-structured interviews of both coaches and their clients -- inquiring in general about the entire coaching process and in particular about the role of reflection -- were conducted, analyzed, and synthesized. The information yielded by these served to clarify and to better understand the crucial role of reflection, the methods used to facilitate it and the relationships between reflection and clients’ change.

Context and Background

Coaching is a relatively new professional field that has become very popular during the past decade (AMA, 2008). Even though there are different definitions of coaching and ways to understand or categorize coaching businesses or practices, all coaching’s approaches and labels have a common denominator: the goal of achieving changes in the client with respect to questions or issues raised by either individuals or organizations that engage coaches. Depending on the coach’s beliefs and methods and also on the client’s objectives, the nature and expression of the changes will be varied and can be defined in two ways: perceptual or cognitive (“changing old habits of mind,” Meyer, 2005, p. 347), and concrete behavioral changes (Kress, 2008).

Coaching has been extensively defined as a learning process (Brock, 2008; Creane, 2002; Goode, 2007; Meyer, 2003; Wilkins, 2000, among others). Common denominators among the different methods and approaches to coaching are reflection and open communication (dialogue, and inquiry) (O’Connor, & Lages, 2007). The combined impact of these techniques or methodologies influences clients change, however, the individual importance and relative
influence on change of each of these factors -- reflection, dialogue, and inquiry -- independent of each other, has not been subject to comprehensive investigation and testing. This study used the coaching experiences related by both coaches and clients to analyze what happens during the coaching process and takes into account the variety of approaches used by different coaches.

Another domain informing the conceptual framework of this research is adult learning. Theories that explain adult learning were central to an understanding of this study’s focus. The adult learning domain provided the conceptual framework that includes the definition of coaching as a learning process in which concepts such as reflection, experience, awareness self-directed learning and dialogue are present. Through the perspective of adult learning principles the research contains descriptions of how learning is experienced by coaches and clients, and most important, how reflection -- both simple reflection and critical reflection -- influences the coaching process.

The assumption leading the research was that the coaching process, as a developmental process with change as the main goal, is individual facilitation of adult learning producing transformative learning. The results showed that reflection and more concretely critical reflection is an important factor in achieving change, determining the success of the coaching process.

**Study Design**

The study was a comparative case study where coaches and clients were interviewed answering questions related to the description of the coaching process, the role of reflection, the role of change, and the role of the client and the coach in the process. All the coaches answered a pre-interview questionnaire to determine if their understanding of coaching was aligned with the study's operational definition (a collaborative partnership between coach and client) (ICF, 2007; Flaherty, 2005; Whitworth, Kimsey-House, and Sandhal, 1998), wherein the clients ultimately discover their own truths to enhance their experience and to lead a full and satisfying life (Grant, 2001; O’Connor, & Lages, 2007)). The participant coaches provided names of clients to be interviewed. Following the coaches' leads, clients were interviewed too.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The narrative from the interviews was analyzed using different tools (manually, Atlas TI, and more) facilitating the discussion of the findings, reaching conclusions and recommendations.

**Facilitating Change in the Coaching Process**

As the main goal of the coaching process, change, is often achieved. “Change” was defined by the subjects of the study. The participants had several perspectives about change and at time, even more than one. In this study, change was perceived as a movement from one stage (entry point to the coaching process) to another (when the process reaches the desired goal). Reflection was found as one of the main factors facilitating change. Two types of change, differentiated in their nature; were found in the study: without involving "Critical Reflection", and related to "Critical Reflection".

The literature does not describe with significant clarity the differences between simple reflection and "Critical Reflection", therefore, and as seen in the study by the use of the word reflection by the participants, the word reflection implies different things. The author used, in the analysis and discussion of the findings, Mezirow's (1998) differentiation between simple reflection and critical reflection.

The study related differently to the subjects expressions of reflection. The main difference was based on "Does not imply making an assessment of what is being reflected upon,
a distinction that separated it from critical reflection" (p. 186). Therefore, simple reflection was used when the subjects described reflecting without any type of assessment, analysis or challenge of the element reflected upon. "Critical Reflection" was used when the subjects expressed engaging in reflection by assessing, analyzing or challenging the element reflected upon (McPherson, 2002; Mezirow, 1998).

**Main Findings**

Change was facilitated by simple reflection and described as the result of a concrete action. This action usually was a reaction to the coach's suggestions or an intent to find a solution following the prescription of possible actions, obtained by brainstorming or the coach's advice.

The study concentrates on change produced by "Critical Reflection". This type of change was described as part of the coaching process, by all the participants. Change was not only achieved directly by reflection. However, often, actions that conduct to achieving change were conceptualized thanks to a "Critical Reflection" process. Therefore, the main outcome of the coaching process was described as change expressed by an action that was produced as consequence of "Critical Reflection" on the theme in discussion. A second description of change was expressed by the participants as reaching a different point of view or frame of reference in a powerful and meaningful way, that also generates a new feeling which does not require the execution of any concrete or tangible action.

These important finding is aligned with the principles of Transformative Learning theory (Cranton, 1994, 2002; Meyers, 2003, 2005, Mezirow, 2000) describing the client's change as a transformation of their mind perspectives, providing them with a different way to view the world. What the finding adds to the theory is that the new perspective is that it also generates a new feeling. It is not only a conceptual or cognitive new perspective, it is also a new feeling related to the way of being of the client.

Heron's writings (cited by Kasl & Yorks, 2002), help understand in some extend the finding, since his theory defines a integrated and holistic way of making meaning that includes actions, cognition and feelings.

The relevance of this finding introduces a factor that helps recognize transformation. When a client experiences a transformative change, they will describe having a different feeling.

The concept "Authenticity" was identified in the narrative and was found related to the conditions for the facilitations of "Critical Reflection". This finding is align with Cranton's (2003, 2004, 2006), Brookfield (2006) and Tennant (2005), that argue that for the adult educator to have authenticity make a better facilitator of critical reflection.

**Summary and Recommendations**

Coaching as a relative new and fast growing profession, is still in need of developing the theoretical underpinning of practice or a theoretical evidence-based approach (Brock, 2008; Grant, 2003; Griffiths, 2008; Meyers, 2005; Stober & Grant, 2006). Adult learning theories and particularly Transformative Learning include elements that inform coaching practices. Coaching has as main goal to achieve change in the client. This change should be the one that provides the client with a better life or with possibilities to achieve desired outcomes in their life.

This study sought to understand the way clients achieve the desired change. The findings showed that change was mostly perceived in relation to engaging in a process of "Critical Reflection". By engaging in "Critical Reflection" the clients arrived to a clear awareness of what to do next, doing it and achieving the change. In addition, a second result of engaging in "Critical
Reflection" was to achieve a change in their mind perspective that by itself determined a satisfying change for the client. The new mind perspective or point of view was expressed along to a new feeling.

Coaches that knew how to facilitate "Critical Reflection" helped their clients to achieve significant change. From the client side, those who were willing to critically reflect came up with significant outcomes.

It is clear that Transformative Learning theory can be considered as underpinning the coaching practice. More connections as well as studies need to be conducted connecting coaching practices with transformative learning. One point that was not covered deeply by the study was the difference between critical reflection and critical self-reflection as facilitators of change. The study found expressions of both being present in the participants' narrative, however there was not enough data to understand and identify the different impact of each of these two "Critical Reflections". What is clear from the study is the importance of using with property the concept reflection (or simple reflection) different from "Critical Reflection." The study shows that the coaching process uses "Critical Reflection" as an integral part of it. Therefore, the connection between the coaching profession and the adult learning field would benefit both fields.

Further study to understand in which cases which "Critical Reflection" facilitates what type of change is needed. Understanding this relationship will help coaches increase the amount of tools that they have in order to achieve successful coaching processes. At the same time, the coaching fields will benefit from having a field of application and research of theories of adult learning.

A second recommendation is based on the discussion related to authenticity and is connected with a better understanding of critical reflection and critical self-reflection. Most of the literature about Authenticity focuses on the educator's authenticity, however not much is written about the authenticity of the learner. In the coaching process, since the process is defined as a collaborative partnership, both coach and client can benefit by acting from an authentic being. The author believes that there is a connection between the level of authenticity of each one of the participants and the quality of the change, which is also related to engaging in critical reflection or in critical self-reflection. Since critical self-reflection focuses on the inner self (subjective reframing), the client needs to be authentic in order to allow the change to happen. In addition, engaging in critical reflection, demands authenticity. However, there should be a difference in the nature of the change or the level of authenticity. Otherwise, there would not be difference between critical reflection and critical self-reflection. Based on these assumptions the author recommends to conduct further research focusing on the effect of using either critical reflection or critical self-reflection, and its relationship with the client and coach's authenticity.

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