4 – Coaching Vertically

As coaches, we are our most important instrument. Our own experiences and perspectives can't help but shape how we see, understand, and approach our clients and their situations. For this reason, awareness of and ability to work with our own sense-making informs our coaching assessments, lines of inquiry, and capacity for empathy.

I became fiercely aware of this several years ago when I worked with a coach around career issues of my own. I shared with my coach how I found parenting to be one of the most profoundly significant experiences in my adult life.
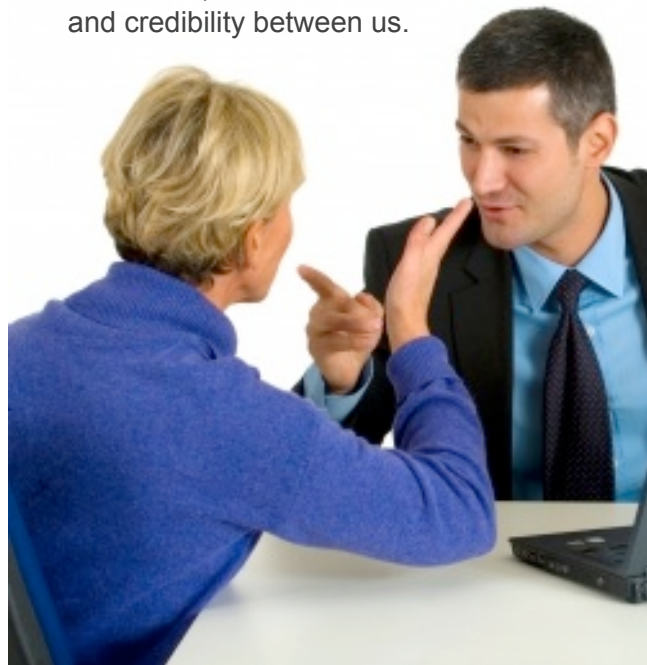
My coach responded to this reflection by asking questions about how I might explore work in the child care field given my enthusiasm for child-rearing. I was taken back by this line of inquiry.

Parenting was so much more to me than child rearing and kid care. How could my coach not have seen that? What did he hear in what I said that provided a view of parenting so different from what was true for me? I felt unseen and misjudged by his response as parenting, for me, went far beyond the mechanics of child rearing.

The coach, operating from an Expert mindset had focused on the skill and tasks needed to succeed as a parent. (For more on the Expert stage, see **article #2** in this series.) He was

encouraging me, as with strengths-based coaching, to build on what I am good at. Nothing wrong with that – except that it missed what was really going on for me. I had a deep, not fully recognized, desire to contribute to something much bigger than myself that channeled the same level of passion and commitment that came through in my parenting. He missed that entirely in his view of me.

Parenting to me was (and still is) a form of spiritual practice that I dearly wanted to continue in some way after the car-pooling stage of my life was complete. It was almost painful not to be seen for this and to instead be seen only from the coach's worldview. This feeling though invisible to my coach during our interaction, led to a breakdown in trust and credibility between us.

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Coaches also risk "over-coaching" with their clients. It is easy to assume a client is at a later stage of development and sense-making than fits with their actual stage. Coaches at the Individualist-Pluralist stage may easily embrace failure and shadow and see that both are integral to success. (For more on the Individualist-Pluralist stage, see **article #2** in this series.) Their client, however, may find it not only unnerving, but downright dangerous to do as the Individualist-Pluralist suggests and share their own failures and fears with their team in order to build trust.

Progress requires that we fully evolve into or integrate in one stage before we can transcend to the next. It is as important to develop fully in a particular stage as it is to transform into the next. Vertical Development involves both maturing in a particular stage and transitioning on to the next.

Colleagues Nick Petrie and **Digby Scott** suggest three key elements to support Vertical Development:

- Heat experiences, or experiences that are risky, scary, and push/ invite us outside our comfort zones,

- Colliding perspectives or taking on views different from our usual,

- Frameworks for understanding levels of sense making, such as the Adult Development model mentioned in article #2.

I'll offer a fourth…

- The courage, will, grace, or dumb luck that enables us to be changed by our experience.

Experience is happening all the time. How often do we let it change us, our perspectives, our sense of ourselves… and of our clients?

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Increasingly, coaching programs recognize the importance of cultivating coaches' awareness of their own sense making.

The **Maturity Assessment Profile** (MAP) instrument has long been integral to the highly regarded Georgetown Coaching Program. Graduates of that program often speak of it as one of the most transformational elements of the entire training process. The MAP is also part of several advanced coach training programs.

As one of several assessments that measure Adult Stage or where someone is on the Vertical Development path, the MAP is a sentence stem completion instrument, based on the long-established, well-validated **Washington University Sentence Stem Completion test** (WUSSCT). Susanne Cook-Greuter adapted the MAP for use with the Leadership Maturity Framework and leverages a global team of certified scorers and coaches to deliver the assessment.

The Subject Object Interview is a method developed by Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey at Harvard. It is also the basis of the Growth Edge Interview developed by Jennifer Garvey-Berger and her Cultivating Leadership colleagues. It requires a face-to-face interview of about 90 minutes that is transcribed, scored, and synthesized into a report. The interview process

itself can be a transformative experience. For more information, contact the experts at **Cultivating Leadership**.

There are also two types of 360 assessments that use a vertical lens. The **Leadership Circle** is informed by Adult Stage theory and the work of Loevenger, Cook-Greuter, Kegan, and many others. Though Vertical Development and stage language is not explicitly written into the assessment, Vertical Development theory undergirds the capacity-building emphasis of the assessment and report. It is easy to administer and is debriefed with a coach certified in the instrument.

The Leadership Agility 360 based on Bill Joiner and Stephen Josephs' book **Leadership Agility**, is directly and explicitly connected with the Adult Stage model, using the adult stage names coined by Bill Torbert. What makes this tool unique is the way it uses specific behavioral anchors to identify stage, providing the client with a clear map of behaviors they exhibit. For more information, visit the **Leadership Agility 360** website.

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Vertical Development is going through a bit of its own maturation process. Formerly contained within academic and psychological areas of research, this robust and eloquent body of work is making its way into mainstream leadership practice.

Demand for leaders who can navigate the complexity and fast-moving challenges of today's realities requires us coaches to look more expansively at what we mean by leadership transformation. Vertical Development offers a path that allows us as coaches to step beyond skill, expertise, competence, and heroics to explore greater capacities for leadership.

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Jan Rybeck, MCC, is a Partner with COPIA Coaching and Consulting. She is certified to work with several of the assessments discussed here and would be happy to explore with you what would best fit the Vertical Development needs of your leaders and organization, including how to integrate Vertical Development into a Leadership Development program with COPIA. Contact her at jrybeck@verizon.net or (571) 286-9630.

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