

Coaching and Adult Development

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The following set of “animation” questions were posed at a symposium sponsored by the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO) held in Los Angeles on February 21-22, 2008. These questions concern the implications of adult development theory for the professional of coaching. They are worth pondering for anyone involved in the field of professional coaching.

Animation Questions

1. Some developmental theorists (in the tradition of Jean Piaget) believe that we move to a more advanced stage of development only after we have mastered the cognitive/affective challenges of the previous stage. Until such time as we have mastered these challenges, we remain at this less advanced stage. Other developmental theorists (in the tradition of Erik Erikson) believe that we move to new stages of development irrespective of our success at mastering the cognitive/affective challenges of the current stage. When we move to another stage, yet have not mastered the challenges of the stage from which we just moved, then we carry the burdens of this previous stage to the new stage, making it more difficult to meet the new challenges associated with the new stage. What are the implications of each of these perspectives on adult development for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
2. Some developmental theorists (such as Daniel Levinson) believe that we move through a set of developmental stages in a sequential and essentially linear manner: the developmental issues we address in our 40s and 50s differ from those we address either in our 30s or in our 60s. Other developmental theorists (such as Frederick Hudson) believe that we cycle through certain developmental challenges repeatedly in our lives, though in each cycle we approach these challenges in somewhat different ways. What are the implications of each of these perspectives on adult development for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
3. Some psychologists (in the tradition of George Vaillant) believe that we only recognize the existence of developmental stages in retrospect. At any one moment, we don't conceive of ourselves as being in a specific stage or addressing a specific set of developmental issues. Rather we are just trying to make it through the day! From the perspective of these psychologists, the themes of adult development concern not so much the way we live our lives as the ways in which we construct stories about our lives in retrospect. As a 50 year old woman or man we can tell stories about our developmental challenges as a 40 year old, but not as a 50 year old. What are the implications of this alternative perspective on adult development for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?

4. Some psychologists (in the tradition of Sanford, Csikszentmihalyi and Mezirow) propose that significant shifts and advances in development (transformational learning/"flow experiences") occur at moments when and in settings where the challenges we face are matched with the same magnitude of support. We receive this support in the same context within which we face the challenges. This support comes from other people, our community and our society. What are the implications of this perspective on adult development and learning for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
5. Some developmental theorists and researchers (in the tradition of Bernice Neugarten) believe that major developmental crises occur primarily when the challenges that a man or woman faces are not in sync with the expectations of the social system in which this person lives. The system can not or will not provide sufficient support (or offer appropriate appreciation or understanding of the challenge) because it is not geared for (does not have appropriate structures to respond to) the challenge. We see this in the challenges facing parents with dying children (our society expects the parent to die before the child) and in the challenges facing mature and accomplished women and men who decide to go back to college or graduate school (our society expects people to complete their education early in their life). What are the implications of this perspective on adult development and learning for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
6. The person who first coined the term "mid-life crisis" (Elliot Jacques) believed that this crisis occurred not during the early 40s, as many later developmental theorists and researchers claim, but rather during our late 40s or early 50s. Jacques proposed that the crisis occurs because the life changes that one should make during the early 40s have not been made: we continue to operate as a 30 something and dream of still being a "young person" though we are now a different person (physically and psychologically) in our late 40s and early 50s. Jacques suggests that the drug abuse, divorce, depression, etc. that is prevalent during the late 40s and early 50s exemplifies the mid-life crisis and this failure to adjust one's life habits and perspectives. What are the implications of this perspective on adult development and learning for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
7. Building on the work of Carl Jung and Erik Erikson, many developmental theorists believe that there is a shift among men and women in their 50s and 60s from a primary concern with personal success and career achievement to broad-based significance and societal contribution. Erikson identifies this as a shift to generativity (and suggests that the alternative is stagnation and a resentment of the success being achieved by other people – especially those who are younger). What are the implications of this perspective on shifting priorities in life for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?
8. Some developmental theorists (in the tradition of Carol Gilligan and researchers from the Stone Center) believe that the developmental issues and stages for many women (and some men) differ from those that are proposed by many other developmental theorists and researchers. For example, Gilligan suggests that the Eriksonian assumption that one must gain a clear sense of self (stage of identity formation) before establishing a successful interpersonal relationship (stage of intimacy) is not always the case; for many women (and some men) the formation of identity and establishment of a successful intimate relationship are interwoven (each enhancing the other). What are the implications of this alternative perspective on adult development for those who are engaged in organizational coaching?