

SEARCHING FOR VITALITY: COACHING THROUGH THE LENSES OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND RESEARCH

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Research on adult development strongly suggests that competence and productivity do not significantly decline as a function of age. The priorities of adults do appear to change, however, as evidenced by such things as their focusing on quality rather than quantity, and their potential role as organizational leaders. Understanding the characteristics of productive members of an organization, whatever their age, can help one as a coach encourage and guide clients in new directions or toward changes in their organization that facilitate vitality. In this essay, I will summarize the literature on internal factors associated with adult development and ongoing vitality across all age groups. As an aid in understanding the possible shifts in priorities as we age, I focus, in particular, on the literature about adult development as it specifically applies to men and women working in organizations.

Adult Development and Shifting Priorities

As we grow older, our interest in, and perspectives on, various modes of productivity change. We like to do different things in our 50s and 60s from what we did in our 20s, and aspire to different goals from those of our youth (Bergquist, Greenburg, and Klaum 1993). This is the central message to be conveyed by the research on adult development: we must consider the factors that influence the productivity and vitality of our mature coaching clients.

The discovery—or invention—of adulthood and adult stages of development in the behavioral sciences is significant for it has shifted our notions about how to motivate and revitalize men and women beyond 21 years of age. We now know that people differ significantly with regard to needs and interests not only as a function of gender, race, socioeconomic level, and abilities, but also age. As we look as coaches that foster the vitality of our coaching clients, it is not surprising that we have recently looked to research and models of adult development for guidance.

While the notion of human development can be traced back almost a century to the work of Arnold van Gennep, Jose Ortega y Gasser, and Carl Jung, it gained prominence and a stable theoretical base with the work of Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) and German-born psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1902-1994). Piaget (Inhelder and Piaget 1958) identified four specific sets of cognitive competencies that must be acquired in a sequential manner as children mature and become thoughtful and successful adults, and one must successfully achieve the cognitive competencies associated with one stage of the Piagetian model before proceeding to the next stage.

A few years later, Erikson (1985) described eight stages of life, from infancy through old age. Unlike Piaget, Erikson assumed that one moves on to the next stage of development in life, regardless of one's level of success in the previous stage or stages. In the Piagetian model, unsuccessful development results in a person's being stuck at a specific stage of life. Conversely, in the Eriksonian model, one carries developmental failures forward in life, making success in each of the subsequent stages more difficult as the continuous accumulation of failures becomes more damaging and difficult to overcome.

Eriksonian Models of Adult Development

The first four of Erikson's developmental stages address the issues of infancy and childhood. The last four stages address the issues of adulthood. The fifth stage concerns primarily the formation of identity as an adult, and the building of a sense of continuity in life roles and goals, while the sixth stage focuses on the capacity to establish an intimate relationship and the formation of a loving relationship with another person. Generativity is central to the seventh stage, with midlife adults concerned with guidance of the next generation. The eighth and final stage concerns primarily the integrity of one's life experiences and the acceptance of one's own distinctive life cycle (Erikson 1982).

Nature of the life cycle

The basic Eriksonian model has undergone two major extensions and modifications over the past three decades (Gilligan 1982; Levinson 1996; Levinson et al. 1978). Like Erikson, Levinson addresses the life cycle, but his studies of the life cycle in men (Levinson et al. 1978) and women (1996) focus on the last three Eriksonian stages, specifically on the seventh stage. Within the seventh stage, Levinson concentrates on the transitions associated with the early 40s, expanding on Erikson's model by identifying both structure-building periods and structure-changing or transitional periods within specific life-cycle eras. The crises and stress associated with transitional periods are normal aspects of the developmental process and are to be differentiated from adaptive crises, which occur when a major traumatic event occurs in one's life (such as combat, illness, or abuse).

Developmental crises may be very traumatic and demand a reevaluation of one's priorities and needs, yet without these crises and the structural changes they bring about, men and women are likely to remain caught in their current stage and will be ill prepared for addressing the age-related challenges of their next era in the life cycle. Originally, the midlife crisis was identified as the struggles of men and women in their late 40s who have never addressed the life changes inherent in their early 40s, not the normal and necessary transitions of the early 40s that are the points of "crisis." It is the failure to address midlife issues that produces the "midlife crisis" not the transitional period itself. This area is often misunderstood in the popular literature on adult development.

While Levinson built on the Eriksonian model by focusing on points of transition and, in particular, on midlife. Gilligan (1982) focused primarily on differences between men and women in their movement through the life cycle. She challenged the assumption in Erikson's model that all adults form their one identity in early adulthood prior to the formation of intimate relationships. She asserted that this assumption might be specifically applicable to males (and even more specifically to males raised in Western European or USA cultures). Gilligan noted that many women (and some men) form their identities in conjunction with their experience of becoming intimate with another person. Moreover, she argues. Erikson overemphasizes a movement toward greater individuation and the clarification and reformulation of one's own personal identity independent of the specific context within which one lives. One's identity, after all, exists within a specific context, and maturation could be considered a movement toward mutuality of care rather than greater individuation.

Implications for coaches

- (1) Is this a period of stability or change for client? Often it is a period of change between life stages. Client needs coach's support to match/balance off the challenge inherent in this transition.
- (2) Is it a period of change, then client might experience themselves being in Bill Bridge's "neutral zone" – a state of limbo in which there is an attraction back to the old (and this attraction must be honored) as well as a pull toward the new.
- (3) Coach can help client acknowledge the shifting values, interests and priorities that come with a shift in stages
- (4) Coaching questions about the four adult stages (as well as the other four): identity, intimacy, generativity, ego-integrity. All four stages are in operation (actually all eight stages) even though one stage is in the spotlight.

Piagetian Models of Adult Development

In keeping with the epistemological orientation of Piaget, most Piagetian models of adult development begin with a concept of unfolding or maturing cognitive structure, and their impact on personal and interpersonal aspects of self. Kegan (1982), for instance, offers a six-stage theory of development that traces the maturation of the construction of meaning processes in one's life, believing that human development consists of a series of stages in which one's sense of self becomes increasingly differentiated from his or her sense of the external world.

Nature of cognitive maturity

A comparable model of adult development that relies on cognitive maturation (Loevinger, Wessler, and Redmore 1970), while clearly in the Piagetian camp, questions the Piagetian assumption that each stage builds on the previous stages and is somehow superior to them. Each stage “has its weaknesses, its problems, and its paradoxes, which provide both a potential for maladjustments and a potential for growth” (Loevinger 1966, p. 200).

Loevinger also focuses on the extent to which one is able to reason and make decisions independent of other people and, in particular, the dominant frames of reference offered by the society in which a person lives. In many ways, the research and theorizing of Gilligan and her colleagues take the concerns of Loevinger one step further. Not only are “higher” stages of cognitive development not necessarily better than lower stages, they also may represent a model of development that is neither descriptive of development in all people nor necessarily an appropriate source of normative guidelines.

Implications for coaches

- (1) What the client is manifesting to the coach might not be resistance. Rather it might be that the client simply “doesn’t get it” – can’t make sense of what the coach is suggesting or asking the client to reflect on (2nd order learning required for reflection on self). The coach might try changing the language she is using, might make her conversation more concrete—using examples and metaphors, encouraging specific action steps and immediate evaluation of impact and outcomes.
- (2) Coach needs to be patient about reflective processes. The client is often not just reflecting on his own assumptive world, but also learning something about the processes of reflection.
- (3) The coach needs to consider addressing issues in their specific context rather than moving quickly to an abstract level or to generalization of the lessons learned by the client.

Conclusions

The field of adult development theory has much to teach us as professional coaches about how people continue to change, learn and develop during their entire lifetime. This change, learning and development can be assisted by skillful and knowledgeable coaching. Furthermore, concepts of adult development are particularly important to keep in mind when coaching men and women at mid-life and beyond. There may be snow on the roof but there is also fire in the hearth. Vitality is there with the skillful and knowledgeable support of a professional coach.