

Eclectic Coaching and the Dangers of a One-Model Approach

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One of the most liberating moments for me as a coach was getting to the place of choosing a style and approach to coaching that aligns with who I am. At the end of the day, the coach has only their personhood to share with the other in an enabling journey. It's more than tools, techniques and models. The key coaching question is, "how can I be fully present to my coachee on their journey?"

Recently I took up the generous offer of Henley Business School bursary to join their Professional Certificate in Coaching. I have coached and counselled for many years, having trained as a psychologist, consulted and worked in organisation development. Over all that time I did not brand myself as a coach. As I stepped into a new organisational role which had a substantial aspect of coaching, I felt the need to refresh my professional competence in what is a massive, burgeoning new discipline or market, depending on your perspective.

One of my big anxieties was my lack of knowledge and 'certification' in all of the new coaching methods. If you Google the net, you can be easily overwhelmed by the hundreds of methodologies, tools and techniques, each claiming to be the holy grail of coaching practice. I felt quite out of the scene in this regard joining the programme with a slight trepidation of being straightjacketed into the 'Henley way of coaching'.

Refreshingly our facilitators, Prof Patricia Bosson and Denis Sartin took us on an inside-out journey as coaches; understanding human dynamics, our biases in how we observe the world and what it teaches us about us in the coaching role. Through the programme we had exposure to various, alternative coaching models and practices, not anytime being told that this or that is the right or the only way. My biggest take-away was the freedom and permission to develop a coaching practice that is integrated with my values, knowledge, skills and experience, whilst still maintaining the highest standards of professional competence.

This is what is considered an 'eclectic approach'. I first came across this approach as a young student psychologist. After spending an entire year learning multiple therapies from client centred to gestalt to transactional analysis to psychodynamic and the list went on, I left the masters programme with a toolkit of therapies, each proven and valid in their own right. How do you assess which therapy is best for which client? As a young psychologist I ritually followed the different therapeutic modalities which made sense to me and seemed to have value for my clients. With time I started experimenting with different approaches starting from where the client was in their journey and using tools, techniques and insights from different therapeutic modalities that would serve the clients journey.

As I gained confidence in my role as an enabler and partner to my client's development and growth, I became less attached to the label of my therapeutic modality. Over time I learned that counselling and therapy is not about me but it is about my client. It's only as an expert and specialist that I depend wholly on my toolbox of fancy gadgets which can quickly become a straightjacket my client

needs to fit into. This can lead me into the danger of ritualistically following the coaching and I feel job well done when my client ends up speaking the same language as me!

This is my unease with the many new coaching programmes which have captured an obvious gap in the market. Many coaching companies teach their coaches, sometimes in a crash course a set of tools and techniques which become *the* branded way of coaching. These coaches struggle to work effectively and confidently outside this branded approach and inevitably make disciples of their coachees in that particular brand of coaching.

What is essential in my view is a solid grounding in behavioural understanding. I'm not advocating all coaches become psychologists but at least to have a fundamental grasp of human behaviour so that any model or approach is contextualised and understood as a small part of making sense of human complexity. If all you have is a hammer, then everything becomes a nail. If all you have is a template, then that becomes the lens of the world, people and growth. Even the most experienced therapists will acknowledge that they are often stumped with the mystery of human behaviour. This is a good place to be as a coach, where we regard each of our coachees as people created in the image of God, on a journey, into which they have invited us to join them. We serve our coachees not our brand.

Professor David Clutterbuck in his article, 'The Liberated Coach' who has co-authored 14 coaching books and has trained coaches over many years observes that there is a danger in a one-model-approach to coaching. He has seen how coaching can become mechanistic; critical cues to the client context are missed or ignored and the client can easily become manipulated to fit the coach's agenda. He observes how many coaches religiously follow the simplistic GROW model and are unable or unaware of what is happening in the life of the coachee at that present time. Clutterbuck makes a useful comparison of four levels of coaching maturity in coaching conversations, described as follows:

Coaching approach	Style	Critical Questions
Models-based	Control	How do I take them where I think they need to go?
Process-based	Contain	How do I give enough control to the client and still retain a purposeful conversation?
Philosophy-based	Facilitate	How do I contextualise the clients issue within the perspective of my philosophy or discipline?
Managed-eclectic	Enable	Are we both relaxed enough to allow the issue and the solution to emerge in whatever way they will? Do I need to apply any techniques or processes at all?

Becoming a mature coach is a journey, where there is less reliance on tools and techniques and more confidence in being in the moment with the coachee, fully present in the service of a fellow human being. The eclectic approach to coaching is not mix and match or fruit salad; it is thoughtful, integrated and systemic in nature. At the end of the day, studies show that the major indicator of therapeutic effectiveness is not how smart the therapist/coach is or their fancy set of tools and techniques. The relationship of mutual respect, unconditional regard and commitment to bringing out the best in the other is what makes the biggest difference.

Why has coaching zoomed ahead of psychotherapy and refreshingly so? It's because it started off as being accessible, not elitist and offering people especially in the workplace with a much needed space for positive conversation focused on growth and the future. Coaching is goal directed, generally shorter than therapy, is less stigmatised and has opened up a deeper appreciation of attitudes and behavioural skills as the competitive advantage for organisations. One-model approaches entrench an expert – patient approach which competent coaches must guard against.