

Making the Connection

By Leni Wildflower and Diane Brennan

We set out to write *The Handbook of Knowledge Based Coaching: From Theory to Practice* in response to a felt need among coaches and clients. The coaching profession was growing rapidly, with the number of both coaches and coach-training programs climbing every year.

In the area of coaching literature, there were numerous well-written, technically skillful books available on how to coach. In more limited supply, however, were books that explored the theoretical background of coaching. What we felt was missing from the coaching library was a book that brought these two together, covering an extensive range of disciplines and traditions and, for each, directly linking theory and practice.

Although exploring the theoretical roots of coaching requires us to look backward, it's an endeavor that will help ensure a dynamic future for the profession. As coaches and authors, it is our fervent desire that coaching continues to evolve as a profession of consequence. To accomplish this, we need ongoing research; we also need coaches to base their practice in theories and ideas that have established validity. In other words, we need them to follow an evidence-based practice.

What is an Evidence-based Practice?

Evidence-based practice grew out of the practice of medicine and has since expanded to a range of disciplines, including psychology. An evidence-based practice has three key features: First, it depends on the practitioner (in this case, the coach) using the best-available knowledge in the field. Ideally, the “best-available knowledge” is that which has been researched and tested. For coaches, such knowledge is derived from current studies in coaching and from studies in related fields. Second, evidence-based practitioners integrate researched knowledge with their own expertise and skills. And third, in evidence-based practice, skills and theory are integrated and applied in the context of the individual client—the situation she is in, her individual needs and her personal preferences.

Although coaching theory is an emerging—and promising—field of study, most scholars and practitioners of coaching are still largely reliant on knowledge gathered from a wide range of disparate fields—from the numerous schools of psychology to theories of leadership and organizational development.

How Are Theory and Practice Linked?

Theory provides both a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of human behavior. Useful frameworks for achieving this understanding include theories of humanistic psychology; cognitive-behavioral therapy; transactional analysis; theories of intelligence; neuroscience; theories of culture, gender and aging; and theories of the relationship between emotions and the body.

Theory gives you a way to approach clients within a social context, be that their work, family or social network. Applicable frameworks include theories of organizations, leadership, and team and group behavior, as well as theories of family and organizational systems.

Most coaching engagements involve some form of change. Clients might want to develop more skill in a specific area, enhance their outlook on life, or change less-than-skillful behavior patterns or attitudes. Theories of change are critical in helping with this transition. Theories of change can also support coaching for conflict management or career or personal transitions.

Increasingly, many of our clients are becoming more aware of the desire to increase their satisfaction with life—to experience more joy, more serenity, more meaning. There are any number of traditions, including self-help, personal growth concepts and spirituality, which lend insight to and increase awareness in our clients.

How is Theory Employed in a Coaching Engagement?

Theory can inform the approach you take to a coaching engagement. For example, adult development theories can help you understand what a client needs from the engagement and help you select stage-appropriate coaching tools and tasks. They can even clue you in to a client's emotional state.

Tapping into a theoretical framework can enhance the breadth and scope of your understanding of human behavior, expanding your coaching tool kit. For example, a coach who has studied theories of human behavior and change has a context for how change occurs, what visible signs support or sabotage the client, and what it takes to navigate the process.

Theories become teaching tools. For example: A client who is going through personal or professional changes might find understanding and emotional relief by studying a framework such as William Bridges' transition model and discussing its application to her situation.

As coaches, some of us seem to have an instinctive ability to draw people toward greater insight; some of us have to work at it. But we all need to understand what we do when we coach and recognize that coaching is not a profession that arrived fully formed. Rather, it has grown from a history of wisdom and study and been refined by individual practitioners and the protocols of our coaching schools.

The theories and traditions that gave rise to coaching might be thought of as the profession's prehistory—ideas developed in entirely independent fields before coaching in its modern sense was conceived of. But far from dry or academic, these explorations have the power to continually reignite our sense of coaching as a living practice.

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Leni is an Executive Coach, author and educator. She designed and delivered Fielding Graduate University's Evidence Based Coaching certificate program. She is certified to deliver the "Immunity to Change" protocol and the "Immunity to Change" coaching follow-up process. She works with leaders and managers to unlock limiting beliefs, and prepares HR managers and internal coaches for the ICF credentialing process. In her latest book, *The Hidden History of Coaching* (McGraw Hill, 2013), she pursues her interest in the theories and movements that formed the basis of coaching.

Diane is an ICF Global past president and a Leadership Development and Executive Coach and author. She works with leaders and teams in organizations on strategic thinking, navigating change and creating a learning culture. Diane uses a professional growth style of coaching with a focus on increasing individual awareness, performance and impact. Her work with teams includes challenging behaviors and beliefs to create exceptional performance and results. She is currently the dean of the Business Coaching Institute (BCI) Master Coaching Program, Helsinki, Finland. With David B. Drake and Kim Gørtz, she co-edited *The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching: Insights and Issues for a New Era* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).