

The Revised Balint Method: A Powerful Tool for Reflecting on Professional Coaching Practices

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A particular reflective process has been used for many years in the supervision of physicians. Originally developed and used by a psychoanalytically-trained clinician (Balint), it has been used recently among professional coaches in their work with one another in a group setting (usually 6-8 coaches). Following are the steps to be taken in conducting a Balint group (revised for use with coaches):

Step One: Identify a “protagonist” who wishes to work on a complex problem (usually interpersonal, but also can be intrapersonal, dealing with an important complex decision to be made). A complex problem is one that not only has many components but also one in which the many components are interrelated/interlocked.

Step Two: Protagonist briefly described the problem/decision being faced. This should not take more than 5 minutes. Facilitated by Balint facilitator.

Step Three: With the facilitator’s assistance, the protagonist identifies three or four aspects of his/her own perceptions of the problem (e.g. protagonist’s own attitudes about other person)—these aspects are often contradictory or at least differing in some important way (e.g. what I respect about the other person and what I don’t respect).

Step Four: When it is an interpersonal issue, the protagonist, with the facilitator’s assistance, identifies three or four aspects of what he/she believes are the perspectives held by the other person in the relationship (e.g. other person’s fears or hopes, other person’s sense of competence or incompetence, other person’s expectations or suspicions regarding the protagonist).

Step Five: With the facilitator’s assistance, the protagonist identifies other people in the Balint group who will articulate each of the perspectives identified in steps three and four. These people (called “advocates”) are NOT to “role play” the protagonist or other person, but are rather asked to articulate the specific perspective they have been assigned in a clear and compelling manner. They need not “get it right” with regard to how the protagonist actually thinks and feels about this problem. Each of the advocates will obviously add in their own assumptions, biases, perspectives, etc. – and these may or may not align with the protagonist’s own assumptions, biases, perspectives, etc. There are rich insights to be gained by the protagonist (as well as the advocate and other members of the Balint Group) whether or not the advocate for a specific perspective “gets it right.”

Step Six: The protagonist sits back and listens to the advocates talk with one another and articulate their assigned perspective in relationship to the other perspectives represented by the other advocates. This critical step in the Balint Group process, called the “Advocacy Session”, is usually scheduled for 15-20 minutes. It is important that none of the advocates dominate the conversation (all perspectives need to be heard by the protagonist). The facilitator can provide some guidance and monitoring of the interaction to ensure that everyone is heard (though it is often insightful for the protagonist to witness the way in which each advocate and each perspective is being received by the other advocates in the group: is an advocate being ignored, misunderstood, forced into an extreme position, etc.).

Step Seven: When the Advocacy Session comes to an end (stopped by the facilitator at the end of the designated period), the protagonist is asked by the facilitator to reflect on the contents and processes of the Advocacy Group. Typically, the facilitator asks the protagonist one or more of the following three questions: (1) which aspects of the content and process of this session seem to *accurately reflect* your own thoughts and feelings? (2) which aspects of the content and process of this session *seem NOT to accurately reflect* your own thoughts and feelings (where was there misalignment)? and (3) which elements of the session did you find most intriguing, surprising, insightful, bewildering, disturbing? Other participants in the Balint Group may offer their own thoughts and feelings regarding the Advocacy Session (especially if they represented

one of the perspectives). However, the focus remains on the protagonist and the insights gained by the protagonist regarding the Advocacy Session.

Step Eight: The facilitator then asks the protagonist to trace out the *implications* of what was experienced during the Advocacy Session and the subsequent conversation with the facilitator. Tentatively, what are the next steps to be taken in addressing the problem/making the decision?

Step Nine: Other members of the Balint Group (whether or not they participated in the Advocacy Group) reflect on their own insights regarding the Advocacy Session and subsequent reflections by the protagonist.

Step Ten: The Balint Group concludes with the protagonist providing a summary statement regarding what he/she will take away from the Balint Group. The facilitator might also provide his/her own insights regarding what emerged from the Balint Group session, typically expanding on the protagonist's statement to make it even more broadly applicable to participants in the Group. The session is brought to a close by the Facilitator, the protagonist being thanked for the contribution made in presenting and working with his/her challenging problem/decision.