

COACHING IN BLACK AND WHITE

Dr Stanley Arumugam

Published in Jan 2015 edition of HR Future <http://www.hrfuture.net/>

Understanding the impact of racial dynamics is essential for effective coaching especially in the South African context where coaching is fast becoming a preferred approach to individual empowerment and organisational transformation. Being mindful of our history and current socio-political context we approach coaching not as a value neutral intervention but one that is sensitive to and able to hold our rich and complex contextual dynamic.

Context matters

Coaching is a helping relationship where the coach facilitates a process of self-awareness and willingness for behavioural change. It assumes the coachee is capable of and has the potential to grow and do what is required for effectiveness. At its heart coaching is a relationship of equality, mutual trust and respect.

From a Gestalt perspective, deep change is located in relationships with self and in relation to others. We are always figuring out who we are in relation to others as we move towards self-acceptance and congruence and with significant others in our world. When the coachee leaves the coaching room, they enter into the real world full of assumptions, stereotypes and prejudices. The coaching context serves as a powerful space for experimenting with relational healing and growth where the coach can model acceptance and positive regard especially across racial lines.

In the South African context we have lived through a history of systematic discrimination and active efforts to undermine and destroy the will of Blacks. The scourge of apartheid eroded not just people's livelihoods but also their psychological state as Steve Biko reminded us 'the most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed'. Coaching is in the business of mind-set change and the historical shaping of South African minds needs to be acknowledged and recognised.

In our new democracy, institutional efforts have been installed to redress some of these injustices. The 'Affirmative Action Act' and the 'Skills Development Act' have been transformative policies in changing the profile of the workplace in South Africa. Business participation and ownership has also been enabled by the 'Black Economic Empowerment Act'. Despite these strong policy measures, twenty years into democracy we are still playing catch up in the workplace, given the massive educational and rights divide of the past. Both Government and Corporate SA are faced with the skills gap between Black and White and are working hard at addressing this through diverse interventions of varying success. It's in this context that coaching is emerging as a potentially powerful process that can enable not only sustainable skills transfer but also effective management and leadership in key national institutions and corporates. What is the role of race dynamics in learning and development in the SA context?

Coaching for Empowerment

The 90's was characterised by a frenzy of skills development initiatives including technical skills training, mentoring, high potential management development programmes, accelerated leadership

programmes, management shadowing and the placement of 'token Blacks' in high visibility jobs. Given the need for changing management demographics from White to Black and the need for skills transfer, a new cadre of retired, retiring and forced to retire White male senior managers transformed to become management consultants. In reality, we have only changed the organisations racial face but still remain dependent on the expertise of a small group of people who bring not only their skills but also their values and beliefs which have an impact on organisational culture.

In the last 10 years coaching has taken off in South Africa and interestingly the same dynamics describing the 90s is playing out again. The majority of coaches in South Africa are still White— many transforming from management consultants to executive coaches actively engaged in government and corporate institutions. From a systems perspective it seems all we are doing is recycling necessary White male skills, knowledge and experience back into the workplace without seriously exploring indigenous sources. It could be argued that most business in South Africa is based on western technology and business management models which in a large part have been successful until the rude awakening in the failings of western capitalism.

Value Neutral Coaching

What values do we bring into the workplace as coaches? Coaching in the South African context should not just be a vehicle for enabling 'skills transfer' as interventions that perpetuate old patterns but should serve as an instrument of social change. I don't think we can coach in a value-neutral way in South Africa given that the dynamics of race and gender play out in many coaching conversations. We can ignore these dynamics as irrelevant or acknowledge this as part of our history and evolution and find ways to meaningfully integrate a practice that is fully authentic to the South African experience.

The coaching context invites conversation at different levels from the environment at the outer level to the middle level of skills and capability right into the soul of the coachee at the level of beliefs and identity. In South Africa our collective identities are very informed by the outer circle of the South African social environment. As coaches we find ourselves mediating deeper issues at an identity level through the lens of race and increasingly gender. A good coach strives to make the coachee psychologically safe towards enabling a trusting relationship which is a requisite for coaching effectiveness. What is the role of race in creating a sense of psychological safety in the South African coaching context? I believe our competence and integrity as coaches compels us to be aware of how race shows up in our coaching context and requires us to notice this dynamic in ways that could be helpful. As coaches, Black or White, do you notice race dynamics in your coaching context and how do you respond to it?

The psychodynamic notion of transference and counter transference is a useful lens to explore the race dynamic as a coach. Transference is an unconscious process where the coachee projects onto the coach positive or negative feelings and beliefs and behaves towards the coach accordingly. Imagine a Black coachee feeling hostile towards his White coach because of his negative experience and beliefs about White people. The White coach in turn could display counter transference by taking on a paternalistic approach of setting the coachee straight so he knows who is in charge or otherwise react with hypersensitivity and apology. Neither position is useful for the coachee.

Likewise, imagine a Black coachee coming into a conversation feeling inadequate and looking up to the White coach because his experiences of White men is coloured by his experience of authoritarian White bosses. The Black coachee could project deep admiration looking up to the coach as the expert solution-provider. This power dynamic could play out in all coaching relationships but might be especially present in the context of multi-cultural coaching. The White Coach in this case might unconsciously fulfil the coachees need by imparting lots of prescriptions and information which the coachee might well find extremely useful. However, this is perpetuating a power relation instead of challenging and moving to a new behavioural interaction which the multicultural coaching provides an excellent opportunity and space for learning.

Coaching the Past-Present and Future

Recently, the racial intolerance prevalent in the USA recently surfaced dramatically in the police killing of two Black men. The USA is a country that projects an image of equality and justice for all, irrespective of race and religion which is not necessarily the experience of minorities. Historically, the USA has been at the forefront of multicultural counselling and yet still remains plagued by underlying racism.

Coaching requires us to confront painful memories which might be obstacles in the way of coachees moving towards success and effectiveness. It doesn't help to get coachees to forget or dismiss negative historical memory; instead we can encourage coachees to remember and to reflect on what could be new and different as they journey forward. The adage 'forget the past - get on with the future' is insensitive and unhelpful. We need to encourage our coachees to confront their past experiences of racism because it is often the unspoken place of their 'stuckness'. We need to be bold as coaches to not assume the status quo or pretend we live in racial utopia. How can we engage in a constructive way that is both supportive and challenging; in ways that confront brutal facts and also allows for compassion and catharsis?

Coaching Cases in Context

Here's a range of coaching cases that illustrate race dynamic in a South African coaching context. How would you respond as a coach?

1) How do we coach a young White male who is feeling that there is no future for him in the workplace, that his worth is defined by his colour? How do we help him navigate a career development discussion?

2) What about a smart young Black woman that is struggling to deal with the patriarchy of her Black 'affirmative action' appointed manager? How do we meaningfully navigate not only race but gender and also understand the nuances of patriarchy that shows itself differently for Blacks and Whites.

3) How do we coach a near retired White man with immense experience and technical capacity who is now asked to skills transfer to a group of young Black engineers who have a different generational work ethic? How do we deal with race and generational identities?

4) How do we coach a new Black manager - respected engineer - that has struggled to move through the ranks over the years, who is now thrust into managing a diverse range of 'born frees'?

How do we deal with transitional issues from technical to managerial leadership layered by his experience of career mobility in a discriminatory environment?

5) How do we coach a mid-career Indian or Coloured manager who feels they were discriminated against in the past and now don't feel 'Black' enough in the new workplace? How would you deal with this as 'born free' coach who did not experience the harshness of discrimination?

6) What if you are a White or Black internal company coach and you recognise that your coachee doesn't want to be coached by you because of your race?

7) How will you coach a Black female leader feeling like she has to shift cultural behaviour and communication styles from home to the workplace-experiencing the need to adopt assertive styles at work and more passive at home?

8) White leaders can sometimes experience a difficulty in carefully navigating, with high levels of trepidation in dealing with cases such as: a) how to handle promotional merit between black and white members of staff and b) conflict and grievances between the two, fearing that if they show any bias to the white staff that they will be judged as being racist.

9) How would you supervise a coach who says this: "From personal experience, it's the double edge sword of being a Black woman and a coach? Or should I rather say the source of information and experience. What I mean by this is that in South Africa our education system, even in the private schools is still made up of majority White teachers, just like it was more than 20 years ago. It is always interesting for me when I enter a room as a facilitator and there are white males, that I am undermined firstly because I am Black and secondly that I am a woman. There is a constant challenge of can she impart knowledge to us? So as Black female coach the pressure is on if you are coaching a White male.

10) How do we navigate the business of coaching when lines are drawn according to race? Here's what a Black coach in practice described: "I have been approached by organisations that told me that they are looking only for Black coaches, as their employees are Black and that they have a need to be coached by someone Black, no more White coaches." What about organisations that actively screen out Black coaches – what will you do as a White coach if you become aware of this?

Multicultural Coaching with Sensitivity to Race

There is a lot of research and guidance on multicultural counselling over the years. Coaching professionals can draw from this established work as we navigate the realities of multicultural coaching in the SA context. Some strategies that coaches could use in being more competent in this dimension of their work could include:

1. **Supervision.** Sensitivity around race has been a common issue that comes up in coach supervision experience. Supervision is a safe space to explore how race, gender, discrimination experiences play out in coaching. Coaches can reflect on how comfortable they are dealing with race in coaching; whether the issue is avoided, dismissed or confronted and how. Supervision is a great space to notice what racial experiences in the SA context evoke in both coach and coachee. How do we display sufficient empathy with our damaging historic past and still hold hope in the democratic transformation that is being worked out in the lives of both coaches and coachees.

2. **Multicultural competence:** When Affirmative Action was introduced in the early 90's most SA organisations embarked on diversity training and multicultural sensitisation. This was useful in opening up the space for dialogue between Africans, Whites, Coloureds and Indian people. Many organisations have assumed there is no need for diversity awareness now that we are well on our way into the new SA, which is a real pity because we still have work to be done. Coaches should invest in developing their multicultural competence with specific reference to race and coaching in SA. There is value in Black and White peer mentoring and/or the willingness to actively expand the racial profile of coaching clients.
3. **Social justice and empowerment:** Coaching in South Africa will not be relevant if it remain a benefit that can be accessed by a privileged few. Coaches are encouraged to consider their coaching mission and vision in the context of transforming South Africa through impacting the lives of individuals and teams – both Black and White – at all levels of organisation and especially for Black youth that need to break through the structural and psychological barriers. The choice to use coaching as an enabler to empowerment and not a perpetuating of a western capitalist mind-set is a professional and personal commitment that comes from honest self-reflection.

As I write this article I am aware that I bring my personal history and experience of racial discrimination as an Indian male starting my work life in the early nineties when workplace transformation was high on the agenda. I have seen the limited impact of well-intentioned training and development that is not contextually relevant. Now as coaching becomes a sought after development intervention I hope we as coaches will have the courage to deal with systemic issues like racial discrimination and identity as agents of transformational change, especially in our unique multicultural coaching context.

END