

Promoting Change in Your Coaching Practice

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A model of adult change can provide valuable structure for your coaching engagements, bringing awareness to specific areas where blocks or resistance may be occurring and illuminating pathways for deeper exploration.

Each of us is born with a specific personality, or temperament, that will have a strong influence on our motivations and behavior patterns. Psychologists frequently refer to these as trait behaviors. Experiences we have throughout our lifetime overlay upon our temperament and bring about modifications in behavior, developing what are described as state behaviors. If we are willing, we may continue to explore our behaviors and evolve until the day we die. These behaviors and the motivations behind them are the framework from which we all operate.

Kurt Lewin, an early social psychologist, observed how groups would evolve through “unfreezing,” shifting and then “refreezing.” Individuals are no different. Business trainers Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis utilized this concept in multi-week corporate leadership development retreats they developed in the 1960s. Perhaps the most familiar and famous coaching tool emerging from these developments is David Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle, shown below.

Coaches frequently use the learning cycle to promote a shift in a client’s paradigm, values or self-identity. This tool encourages clients to observe and reflect upon specific experiences. The idea is that the reflection will help develop new concepts pertaining to that experience so that the client may form new attitudes or behaviors in future experiences. Taken a step further, organizational development and leadership development professionals have applied this concept to situations where a client’s or organization’s paradigms no longer fit and one must explore more abstract layers in their framework.

The Experiential Learning Cycle

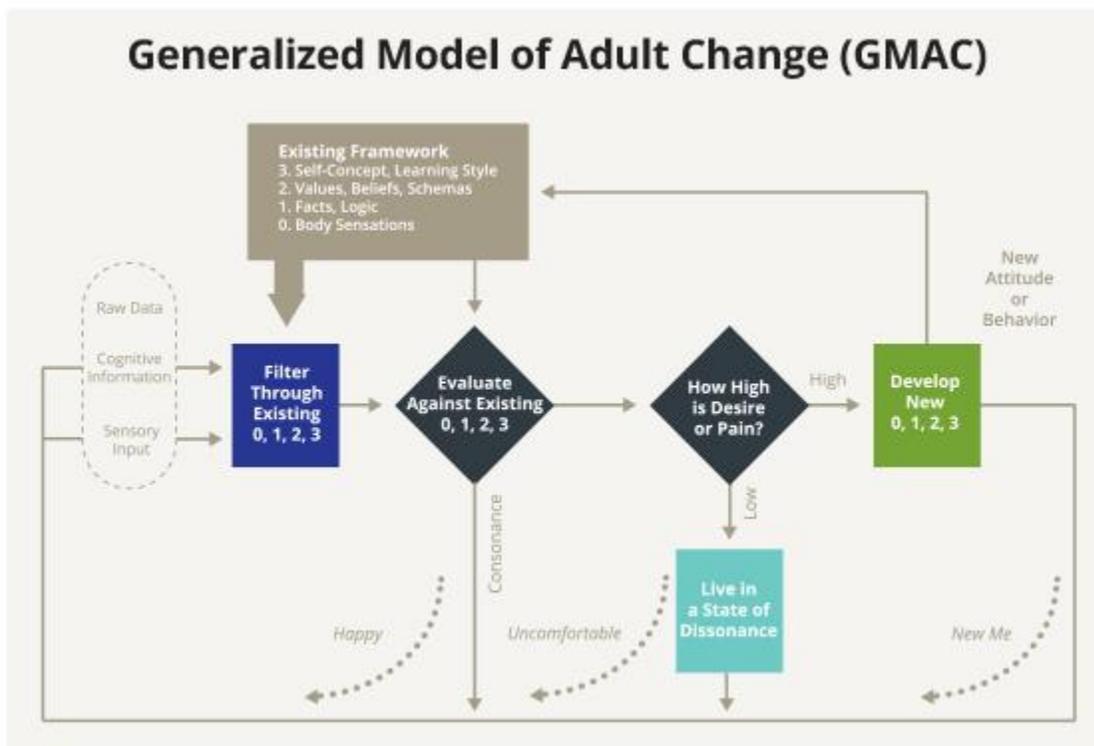


(Kolb, 1971)

Most clients feel emotions, if not in their body, then at least in their head. Emotions can often signal when something is awry and that a change is needed. We may think of this as a sort of base layer in the framework, what we call level 0. At the next level up reside the logic and facts from which we operate. For example, suppose a team leader holds the belief that all workers will inherently expend as little energy as possible. He observes his team working at what he perceives to be less than 100-percent effort despite his continued exhortations and incentives. Clearly a new model, or schema, must be developed to embrace the idea that some other force or factor may be at play. In essence, he must move up to the next level, or loop, of learning. Theorists dubbed this concept double loop learning.

Business theorist Chris Argyris collaborated with philosopher Donald Schön to take the concept of double loop learning into executive leadership development. As the executives were struggling to understand why a specific situation wasn't working out as planned, Argyris and Schön encouraged them to move up to the next level and explore new values, beliefs or schemas that may fit. Subsequent theorists probed an additional level and landed upon the idea of changing self-concept and learning style. These highest-level changes manifest themselves in profound shifts in the individual's outlook and subsequent behavior. These conceptual levels create the framework we all use as a backdrop for our daily behaviors.

We call this model the Generalized Model of Adult Change (GMAC) since it appears to have broad applicability to adult humans.



We are all constantly bombarded with information. Our framework continuously filters this barrage of information and consciously or unconsciously allows a small amount through to our conscious awareness. Once we receive the information, we then consciously or unconsciously evaluate the information against the existing framework and feel either in consonance with that information or in dissonance with it. If we're in consonance with it, then we feel happy and continue on with life. In the event that we find ourselves in dissonance with it, we make a conscious or unconscious decision as to whether or not we will do something about the situation.

As humans, we generally change because we are either running away from something painful or toward something we are seeking. If the pain we are experiencing due to this dissonance is not very high or the desire toward a new state is insufficient to bring us to action, then we may choose to just live with it and remain uncomfortable. However, if the pain or desire becomes too great, we may reflect upon the situation and attempt to develop a new attitude or behavior—a change to our existing framework. And then the cycle continues anew.

Incorporating this model into your coaching may provide insight into areas where your client is encountering obstacles and identify a path forward. As you become proficient at looking at your client's goals and progress through this lens, the process should flow with ease and fluidity.

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