Promoting Change Through a
Lens of Personal History
Part 2: Schemas, or Models

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We all learn how the world works at an early age. We cry, we get fed. We smile, we get cuddled. As we begin learning in school, we develop cognitive skills and acquire knowledge of how more abstract things in the world work. We understand that when we turn the top of the steering wheel of a car to the left, the car turns to the left. We recognize that generally when we press our foot on the accelerator pedal of a car that it goes faster. These are all models which we pick up over our lifetime. In the world of psychology, we call them schemas.

Actions can be intentional or unintentional, conscious or unconscious. I believe that unless we are behaving unconsciously, we usually behave or operate from schemas. I'm sure all of you reading this have heard at least once in your life, "I don't really know why I did it, I just did it." I won't go into those unintentional or unconscious actions since they could be the topic for a completely different blog post. Instead, I want to focus on the intentional actions that come from known schemas that we may or may not be able to articulate.

Most of us usually behave or operate from these schemas. We "know" that when we press harder on the accelerator, the car goes faster. As we are learning to drive, this schema becomes automatic and we no longer think about the model; it's just programmed into our muscle memory. Nevertheless, it is based upon a schema—until we're stuck in the mud and the car no longer goes no matter what we do. We try a forward gear, a reverse gear, pressing harder on the accelerator, and still the car doesn't move. As we emerge from the vehicle and assess the situation, we quickly learn a new schema—cars won't move when bogged down in gooey stuff. Thus, the more new and different life experiences that we have the more schemas we accrete.

And so, it is with our work activities or relationships. When they fit within our known schemas, we know how to act. This is all fine and dandy until, as the previous example indicates, something changes and the existing schemas no longer work, an increasingly more common experience in our fast-paced, volatile world. In work environments, we can think of how high-potential employees are frequently given assignments in diverse areas of a business in order to broaden their experience—in essence to understand more schemas.

In order to facilitate change in coaching, an understanding of *what* needs to change is important. Creating awareness of existing schemas from the client's personal history may be a rich resource from which to draw upon, especially if behaviors derived from an existing schema are not productive. However, in the spirit of facilitating change and moving forward, it may be more important to encourage the client to explore new, more effective schemas than trying to change old ones. As the client designs actions and carries them out based upon one or more schemas,

they will understand this schema better and will be able to adjust the schema and consequent behaviors to greater effect.

Calls to Action

- What unconscious schemas have you been operating out of today?
- When have you last asked a client about the possibility of needing a new schema?
- When have you seen a client uncover a new schema and carry out actions based upon this new schema that had a profound impact on the client's life or career?

Further Reading

- Coultas, C. W., & Salas, E. (2015). Identity construction in coaching: Schemas, information processing, and goal commitment. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 67(4), 298-325.
- Engle, E. M., & Lord, R. G. (1997). Implicit theories, self-schemas, and leader-member exchange. *Academy of Management Journal*, 40(4), 988-1010.
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1977). *Causal schemata in judgments under uncertainty: Technical Report PTR-1060-77-10.*

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