

Meyler
Campbell | 20
Celebrating 20 years

20 FOR 20

Voices from the
Meyler Campbell Community

MC20

Sheldon Daniel, "Coaching as a process and a social engagement: a preliminary hypothesis on the role of difference in coaching"

Coaching as a process and a social engagement: a preliminary hypothesis on the role of difference in coaching

Sheldon Daniel

The issues of gender and race are quite alive in the contemporary cultural and intellectual space. The reasons for this are debated but the rise of nativist political agendas on the backs of “austerity backlash” (e.g., Donald Trump, Brexit) across the globe and ‘minority’ activist movements (e.g., #metoo, Black Lives Matter) have brought gender and race to the fore of the social and political debate. It is unclear how this impacts the discussion on business. Issues of the role of women in business have a higher profile as demonstrated by the recent submission of pay gaps data at a firm level.¹ This gives visibility to the problem although the “solution” is less clear. For the matter of race, there is less visibility, but the gap is just as real. In research focused on FTSE 100 companies, around 12.5% of the UK population are Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) – yet they hold just 6% of top management positions.² Ethnic diversity within the private and public sector in the UK remains a significant issue.

Given that the social issues of gender and race are gaining prominence within the business sector in the UK, and the challenge this represents, it is essential to ask how coaching is impacted by this broader discussion of “difference.” It is appropriate for the immediate response by the coaching professionals to be that if the “process” of coaching is rigorously followed then this question has limited relevance. In this case, the client is considered supremely resourceful, and the coach assumed to be non-judgmental and non-directive - but still challenging and supportive - exhibiting curiosity through insightful questioning to help the client achieve clarity. There is little room for difference to “intrude” in this formulation.

In such a response, the focus is on the “process” or the method of coaching. However, Page and Haan, in their broad survey of the state of research focused on coaching effectiveness, found that “the strength of the coaching relationship or working alliance between client and coach is the most powerful predictor of coaching outcomes. Spending time building a strong relationship with a client is critical for successful and effective coaching, and it is perceived this way by both coach and client alike.”³ (Page & Haan, 2014).

However, if the relational element is so essential, we then need to acknowledge the “social” component of the coaching engagement. With this acknowledgment, it is critical to, therefore, establish the extent to which – and how – social differences between the coach and the client might impact the coaching relationship.

The scope of a discussion on this issue is vast, but in this short essay, I will attempt to introduce how I see “difference” impacting the process and relationship of coaching.

Before proceeding, I would like to clarify the terminology of difference as used for this essay. Difference between a coach and client refers to many dimensions. Gender, race, nationality, regional/national difference, industry experience, sexuality, social background and physical

¹ For example, see Topping, Alexandra, Barr, Caelainn and Duncan, Pamela 2018. ‘Gender pay gap figures reveal eight in 10 UK firms pay men more’, *The Guardian*, [online] 4 April 2018.

² Beech, PNH, Cornelius, N, Gordon, LJ, Healy, G, Ogbonna, E, Sanghera, GS, Umeh, C & Woodman, P 2017, ‘Delivering diversity: Race and ethnicity in the management pipeline’, British Academy of Management and Chartered Management Institute, London.

³ Page, N., & De Haan (2014) ‘Does executive coaching work?’ *The Psychologist*, 27, 582–587.

abilities. We will assume (and it is a simplistic assumption) that the greater number of these dimensions that the coach and the client differ on, then the greater the degree of difference between both.

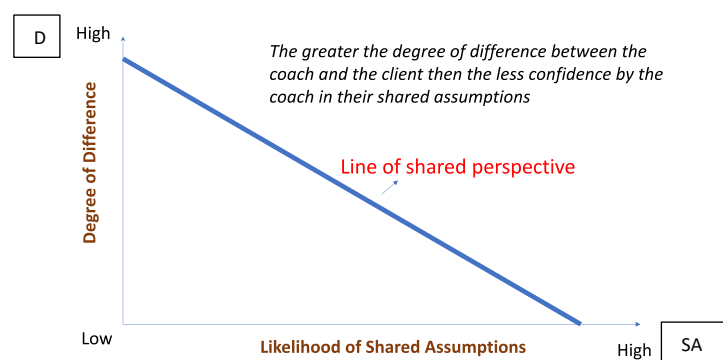
So how does “difference” get transmitted in the coaching relationship? I will use as a theoretical basis (again in a very rough way), the frame for understanding how, as humans, we relate to people as put forward by Professor Geoff Bird in a presentation to the Meyler Campbell Faculty development day.⁴ In his talk, he highlighted the propensity of our brain to make *predictions* quickly about what it **will** see, hear, think and feel. Professor Bird then asserted that because of this propensity, we mainly experience what we “expect the world to be” (predictions) rather than conduct the costly (from a brain perspective) task of constantly undertaking the rational analysis of environmental information to make sense of the world. While we regularly make these predictions (snap judgments), we are bad at doing it. However, we believe that we are good at predictions and as a result, we tend not easily to see evidence to contradict our prediction. We have to assume that these predictions are in part shaped by our experience of the world as well as our “natural” neurological predispositions. In relating this to coaching, according to Bird, the task is to work with the client to erode the confidence that they have in their predictions they make of the world.

However, there is another aspect in which this relates to coaching. Since, by Professor Bird’s logic, coaches – like all humans - will be making “predictions” of the motivations, intentions and even potential of the client - and this will be a function of the coach’s background. It is in the predictions that we make as coaches, that makes “difference” a relevant area of consideration for the effectiveness of the coaching process.⁵

The chart (Figure 1) below attempts to map the relationship between difference and the coaching process. Specifically, it suggests the nature of the algebraic relationship between the degree of difference between the coach and client (D) and the likelihood of shared assumptions (SA). In this relationship, the “line of shared perspective” illustrates the inverse relationship between D and SA – the greater the difference, the less likely that there will be shared assumptions – and the difference in emphasis on the “process” and “relationship” of coaching.

Figure 1: Coaching and Difference: The Line of Shared Perspective

Difference in coaching: Confidence in shared views



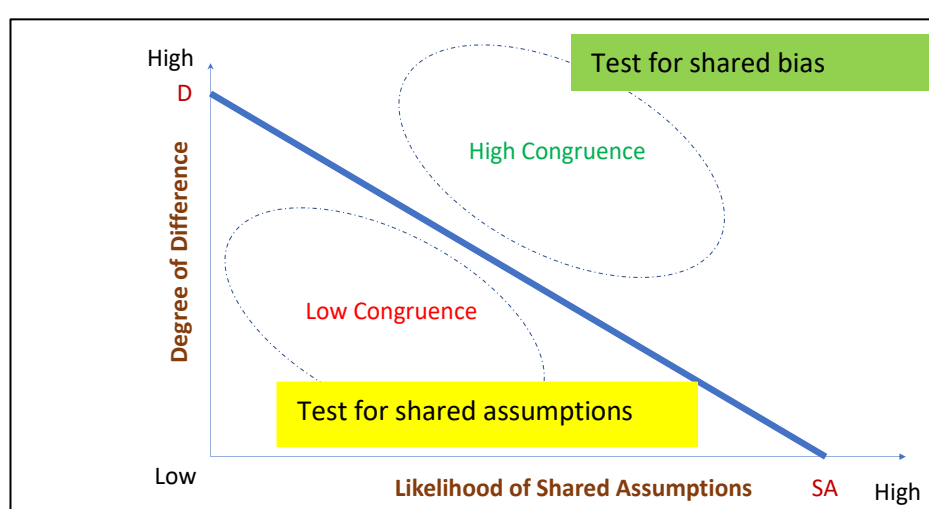
⁴ Professor Geoff Bird, Presentation on Brain, Judgement and Perceptions and the Impact on Coaching, Meyler Campbell Faculty Development Day, May 10, 2018.

⁵ I must acknowledge that some of my thinking on this was shaped during an insightful supervision session with Keith Krasny on May 16, 2018.

The implications for coaching is that the greater the differences between the coach and client then the less likely that the “predictions” of the coach will be relevant – or will be similar to those made by the client.

If this is true, then there are implications for the coaching relationship. Specifically, the coach and client will either be in a condition of **high congruence** – where there is a limited to moderate degree of difference and a fair to high level of shared assumptions. Otherwise, they could be in a state of **low congruence** – a situation in which there is a high measure of difference between the client and the coach and in which the level of shared assumptions is low. In areas of high congruence, the key risk will be **shared bias** – and this needs to be constantly tested in the coaching engagement. For low congruence situations, the main focus should be to test for **shared assumptions**. The figure below demonstrates the areas of congruence as it relates to the "line of shared perspective."

Figure 2: Areas of Congruence



Such an analytical frame has practical implications for the coaching process. I have used the “Big Five” coaching skills as outlined by Scoular (2011) as a basis for analysis.⁶ These are summarised below:

TABLE 1: PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF DIFFERENCE ON COACHING USING THE "BIG FIVE"

IMPLICATION FOR COACHING	LOW CONGRUENCE Test for shared assumptions	HIGH CONGRUENCE Test for shared bias
Contracting	- Raise “difference” explicitly and explore the implication with the client for the coaching relationship; - More time might be needed to explore and understand the worldview of the client – might be required for a first session.	- Be mindful of blind spots shared with the client; - Ask explicitly if the lack of difference is relevant to the issues of the client; - Agree that in some instances a coach with low congruence might be needed.

⁶ Scoular, Anne, *The Financial Times Guide to Business Coaching*. Harlow: Prentice Education Limited, 2011. pg. 61

Listening	- Rigorously test for meaning: Agree that the coaching sessions will have many questions for clarification – "can you help me understand what you mean by that"?	- Listen for commonality in and constantly reflect on whether this shared assumption – helps or needs to be challenged to support the client's insight
GROW Model	- Take time to focus on "reality" – as a way of understanding the issue from the client perspective.	- The "goal" should be tested from the perspective of "the other."
Questioning	- Use of language is very critical – test words carefully making sure that the meaning is the same for the client as for you.	- Really focus on questioning assumptions by taking on the perspective of the primary "audience" of the client, i.e., the employee, the boss, the peer, the Board.
Non-directive	- Less intervention is better since the client's view might not be apparent to the coach.	- Can be more interventionist, especially to push in directions that make the coach "uncomfortable."

The above discussion is very preliminary and can only be considered a very high level, exploratory analysis on the issue of "difference" in coaching. In my view, this sets up a research hypothesis which can be subject to further empirical investigation and validation. However, if we agree that coaching is both a process and a social engagement, we need to begin to have a more data-rich conversation about the impact and the power of difference in the effectiveness of coaching. This will become even more pressing as the business environment is increasingly called upon to address issues such as gender and ethnic equality – and more general issues related to fairness. The coaching industry should have a critical review of the role 'difference' plays in the coaching process.

Sheldon Daniel
sheldon.daniel@sxd.me

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barrett, Lisa Feldman (2018) *You aren't at the mercy of your emotions — your brain creates them* [online] Ted.com. Available at: https://www.ted.com/talks/lisa_feldman_barrett_you_aren_t_at_the_mercy_of_your_emotions_your_brain_creates_them?utm_campaign=tedsread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare [Accessed June 15. 2018].

Beech, PNH, Cornelius, N, Gordon, LJ, Healy, G, Ogbonna, E, Sanghera, GS, Umeh, C & Woodman, P 2017, *Delivering diversity: Race and ethnicity in the management pipeline*, British Academy of Management and Chartered Management Institute, London.

David, Susan (2016) *Emotional Agility: Get Unstuck, Embrace Change, and Thrive in Work and Life*, London: Penguin Life.

Gallway, W. T. (1979) *The inner game of tennis*, Toronto: Bantam Books

Kline, N. (1999) *Time to think*, London: Ward Lock.

Kline, N. (2014). *Improving Thinking Through Coaching - Interview with Nancy Kline*. [online] YouTube. Available at: <https://youtu.be/YP9jUNc5qyY> [Accessed 1 Mar. 2018].

Page, N., & De Haan (2014) 'Does executive coaching work?' *The Psychologist*, Volume 27, 582–587. Available at: <https://thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-27/edition-8/does-executive-coaching-work> [Accessed 5 April. 2018]

Roberts, Laura Morgan, Mayo, Anthony J., Ely, Robin J., and Thomas, David A. (2018) Beating the Odds,. *Harvard Business Review*, March–April, pp.126–131. Available at: <https://hbr.org/2018/03/beating-the-odds> [Accessed 2 June. 2018]

Scoular, Anne (2011) *The Financial Times Guide to Business Coaching*, Harlow: Prentice Education Limited.

Topping, Alexandra, Barr, Caelainn and Duncan, Pamela 2018. 'Gender pay gap figures reveal eight in 10 UK firms pay men more', *The Guardian*, [online] 4 April 2018. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2018/apr/04/gender-pay-gap-figures-reveal-eight-in-10-uk-firms-pay-men-more> [Accessed 30 April, 2018].

Whitmore, J. (2009) *Coaching for performance*, 4th ed. London: Nicholas Brealey.