

## Theories and Theorists Informing Coaching Practice

| Theory                     | Theorist            |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| Adult Learning             | Knowles; Kolb       |
| Transformational Learning  | Mezirow             |
| Behavioral                 | Skinner             |
| Social                     | Lewin               |
| Constructive Developmental | Kegan               |
| Humanistic                 | Rogers              |
| Changeology                | Norcross            |
| Intended Change Theory     | Boyatzis            |
| Motivational Change        | Miller and Rollnick |
| Process Change             | Schein              |
| Chaos Theory               | Wheatley            |
| Complex Adaptive Systems   | Stacey              |
| Integral Psychology        | Wilbur              |

### *Adult Learning*

Knowledge of adult learning tenets is foundational to coaching because learning is an important component of the coaching process. Adults learn differently from children, yet due to expediency and cost, adult learning most frequently occurs in a classroom setting, mirroring the experience of children. Merriam (2001) and Cranton (1994) maintain that adult learning is distinguished by building upon an independent self-concept that allows for direction of learning. Adults also accumulate and respond to a plethora of life experiences that inform and provide resources for learning. In addition adults associate learning needs with changing social roles and they have a problem-centered focus and an interest in immediate application of learning. Adults are internally rather than externally motivated and prefer voluntary and participatory learning experiences. Knowing these distinctions is a prerequisite for understanding how to work with adults. Coaches need to be able to build upon the self-directed nature and the problem-centered focus of the adult learner. Adults have to be able to integrate

what has been assimilated in discussions with the coach and to experiment away from coaching sessions, then return to sessions to discuss results. Effective coaching strategies and coaching assignments that respect the client as bringing his or her own resources and experiences to the process for joint work between the coach and client can produce dramatic results. If lacking a basic understanding of the premises that guide the adult learner, a coach may choose strategies that are ineffective in or may even thwart client change processes.

### *Transformational Learning*

Many coaches and clients find the coaching experience to be transformational (Bush, 2003; Gonzalez, 2004; Hurd, 2004). Advanced by Mezirow (1991), transformational learning theory asserts the following about learning: leads to empowerment; is not something outside of the individual but rather is created from interpretations and reinterpretations of new experiences; learning is a process that includes reflection and “reflective discourse”; and learning enables adults to make meaning from life’s experiences (Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 1991, 2000). Mezirow suggests that a component of the transformative learning experience is that of the “disorienting dilemma.” When one experiences an event that causes a reflection about and then a choice between two separate deeply owned values, one has a dilemma. Values clarification processes are frequently used in coaching practices. Coaches who are able to identify these dilemmas can be instrumental in assisting clients in the exploration of value systems and the beliefs associated with those systems in order to design actions that resolve the conflict. Boyatzis and McKee (2005) call these dilemmas “wake-up calls”- subtle or big changes unplanned in the individual’s life. A

coach's ability to recognize these events as integrated into the fabric of their clients' lives combined with acknowledgement of their contribution to decision making is paramount in helping move the client towards a goal.

### *Psychological Theories*

Psychological theories from behaviorism to psychoanalysis and from moral development to adult development inform the practices of many coaches. Many psychological theories embrace the perspectives that coaches should seek to do the following: identify the unconscious forces that guides one's life; assimilate archetypes into everyday coaching practices; use mental practices to change thinking and perspectives; apply a humanistic choice-centered approach to coaching practices; identifying the level of consciousness being expressed; structure strategies based upon stage of development, and embrace the clients self-actualization needs.

Behavioral psychology emphasizes interest in environmental influences on behavior. Coaches with this background and experiences hold the view that behavioral modifications are most effective in producing change ; therefore they often use positive reinforcement, conditioning, biofeedback, extinction procedures and modeling in their coaching practices. These strategies can be extremely useful when the client is attempting to change a health behavior or overcome behavioral issues but can also be limiting if they exclude a consideration of the whole person thus eliminating a host of factors that can influence individual behaviors.

Constructive-developmental psychology is also relevant to adult learning, interpersonal relationship and transformation (e.g. Kegan's (1994) work in adult development). This theory suggests that individuals make meaning about their world,

understand their world, and interact with their world based upon specific stages of adult development. Specific strategies for coaching can be more or less successful depending upon the individual's stage of development. A full understanding of adult development provides the coach with a foundational knowledge that results in matching strategies with stages of development and honors the client's capability to take actions.

Positive change strategies can be found in both humanistic psychology and positive psychology. Stober (2006) offers that coaching and humanistic psychology share similar paradigms regarding the self-actualization of the individual with coaching focusing on strategies that move the client towards choice and growth. An additional link can be found around collaboration as both coaching and humanistic psychology have collaboration as foundational to their respective processes. Happiness is important to human beings and many clients choose coaching as a pathway to finding more life satisfaction or fulfillment. Building on the work of Peterson and Seligman (2004) and Csikszentmihalyi (1997), Kauffman (2006) outlines the direct connection between positive psychology and coaching honoring the fundamental belief in the possibility that humans can develop, improve and grow. Coaches who engage the principals of positive psychology envision strategies for affirming these principles and assist clients to create more fulfilling and empowered lives.

Many of the coaching competencies identified later in this chapter such as building trust and intimacy, active listening, asking powerful questions, and creating awareness, are based upon psychological theories and psychological approaches to guiding the client back to psychological health. As each coach chooses strategies based upon an understanding of the principles that guide their choices combined with resonance to the

specific psychological paradigm and best suited for the client, outcomes can be more readily achieved.

### *Organizational Development*

Organizations are in a naturally dynamic state. A prerequisite to affect change is an understanding of systems theory, organizational learning theory, organizational behavior theories, theories of leading change or a combination of these four. Due to the historical connection between organizational consulting and coaching, it is imperative that coaches working within an organizational setting have a grounded understanding of organizational change theories.

Senge et al. (1999) propose that organizational learning is fundamental to the success of an organization, thus requiring organizations to develop learning capabilities in the context of group relationships and business goals. This theory suggests that team learning produces exponentially greater results than when one learns individually. The individual contributes personally to the team in the form of consistent results and commitment to learning. From this perspective change is relational in that individual learning can lead to organizational change and vice versa. In an earlier work, Senge (1990) highlighted the need for organizations to develop self-discipline around the examination of their deeply-ingrained assumptions. New growth and learning occur when learning and self-discipline processes unite to produce creative tension. Coaches can use the understanding of individual and collective learning by encouraging clients to develop skills for personal success while, at the same time, holding the vision of the organization so that both can operate in concert with one another.

A second organizational theorist, Schein (1999), compares expert consultation models (the selling and telling) with doctor patient models (diagnosis and prescribing) and suggests that everything you do with an organization is the intervention - from assessment to completion of the consultation cycle. Therefore an assessment or evaluation can contribute as much to the process as do the strategies. Several of the core principles for process consultants (always be helpful, always deal with what is, clarify understandings, and move with the flow) seem to be taken directly from a coaching 101 textbook. Recognizing that the process of coaching includes asking the evocative questions, noticing, and direct communication can be a valuable insight for a results-driven coach because these are the processes that lead the client of what needs to change rather than simply to the targeting of goals.

Quinn (2000) concurs with Schein (1999) in maintaining that transformational strategies that move away from the outdated models of forcing change in organizations while moving towards participation and emerging realities are the framework for successful organizations of the future. This is potentially one of the most difficult tenets to understand in organizational coaching because our coaching models have typically been athletic coaches who order and direct behavior. A concern for authoritarian personalities is the integration of the management of individual behavior into a coaching framework without losing control of the situation. Being able to step back into guiding and advising roles can be a difficult movement for some coaches who subscribe to a results-driven mindset. At its best, coaching, most particularly in organizations, that respects the roles that learning, culture and context play in affecting change and

recognizes the impact that environment has on individual and collective change can facilitate a coaching process that guides rather than forces change.

### *Systems Theory*

Organizational change theory and systems theory share a common holistic view of the organization. This theory contends that characteristics of the parts when combined do not explain the whole, rather it is what emerges when the parts are combined together that defines the system- resulting in systems that are complex and unpredictable. Wheatley (1999) concurs and adds that our present ways of organizing are outmoded. Organizations are living systems in which individuals interact with their environments in adaptive ways. Challenging organizations to view stability, equilibrium and balance as temporary states, Wheatley uses the analogy of the of clouds to describe the self-organization process because clouds are self-organizing in that they take on new shapes as weather patterns shift and change. Human beings are also capable of this self-organization process. Stacey (2000) offers a somewhat similar yet distinct view of complex adaptive systems. In defining self-organization as “agents interacting locally according to their own principles, or ‘intentions’, in the absence of an overall blueprint for the system (p. 106),” he suggests that organizational change is unpredictable and emergent based on the interactions of the agents. One needs to focus on the individual participant because that is where transformative change begins- individuals having conversations as they act upon the unknown. Wilbur (2000), another author and foundational theorist for coach training programs, suggests that it is time to integrate of all fields of psychology; behavioral, psychoanalytic, existential, developmental, and cognitive into one view of human consciousness. Expanding upon

the work of Clare Graves, Wilbur asserts that the more we exercise all aspects of our being, taking in the multiple perspectives of an experience, the more likely it is that we will have transformative experiences. Wilbur encourages the building of practices that honor the dimensions of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental activities within the self, culture and nature.

Coaches who use systems theory to underpin their coaching practice focus on uniting the various aspects of the self through daily practices that reinforce the integration of the multiple aspects of self into a future that is both continuous and transformative. Cavanaugh (2006) adds that in order for transformation to occur coaches need to have an understanding of the tension between openness and closure. He contends that clients have to navigate between polar opposites in order to embrace change without being consumed and overcome by it. Finally, coaches who can bring an understanding of the fluidity of change at a systems level can guide their clients through a process that identifies a frame of reference along with an understanding of how that frame of reference interacts with life's complexities and polarities.

### *Review of Approaches*

Garnering an understanding of one's own theories and perspectives while honoring those of other coaching practitioners can contribute to a depth of coaching practice and serve to increase the potency of the field. Thus, the previous discussion of theory is not simply a futile exercise of tracing theories that contribute to coaching practice. The discussion is germane to one of the looming issues facing the field of coaching. The blending of theories into a guiding framework along with the resulting variety of coaching approaches and practices, has yet to be empirically researched, leaving the



field open to limitless possibilities yet without guiding principles and criteria. Sherman and Feas (2004) contend that the coaching field can be compared to the wild west of yesteryear stating that “the frontier is chaotic, largely unexplored, and fraught with risk, yet immensely promising” (p.1). In order for the field of coaching to evolve into this promise, empirically-tested practices that transcend the politics of discipline to reflect emergent theory will have to become embedded in coaching practice.