Chapter Three in Catherine Fitzgerald and Jennifer Garvey Berger, editors, **Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives**. Palo Alto, Calif.: Davies Black Publishing (2000).

THE COACH AS REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Notes from a Journey without End

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"If we don't move forward on this, someone is going to wind up in the hospital." So ended a team meeting led by Alan, the vice president of a global corporation's product division. Such declarations were typical of Alan, whose intimidating style left him isolated from his team and who was the object of occasional reproach from his boss. As a consultant to the team, I had become convinced that Alan's enormous leadership strengths were limited by his proportionally long shadow. Although I established a good initial base for working with him, I was unable to build on it to bring about meaningful change in behavior. Why, I wondered?

Eventually, questions like this prompted me to begin reflecting systematically on my practice as a coach.[1] All too often, I had found myself winging

it—while of course pretending that I knew exactly what I was doing. I realized that I was engaged in a primarily intuitive method of working with my clients. As I thought about my practice, the serious limitations of relying on an intuitive approach became clearer. My reflections have given me insight into the limits and accomplishments of my work with Alan and other clients. This in turn has made me more aware of my core practices as a coach and helped me identify areas in which I need to grow. I came to understand that the best way for me to review my practice was to begin creating a model that made explicit the various influences on my coaching practice.

In this chapter, I offer a general framework for constructing a model of coaching and describe my efforts to apply it in my own practice. In doing this, my goal is to encourage other coaches to review their own practices and to provide a tool that might be useful as they build their own personal models. The chapter is organized around an introductory rationale for and presentation of the framework, followed by an account of how I have used its various elements to reflect on my coaching practice and begin building a coaching model. In order to make concrete the practical implications of a model, I report on my investigation into my work with Alan and two other clients, describing how these experiences both reflected and informed my core practices.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

As I began thinking of how to construct a model, Donald Schön's (1982, 1987) studies of the reflective practitioner came to mind. His research on professionals in action lends support to the notion that coaching is more art than science. In studying professions as diverse as architecture and psychotherapy, he found that, when faced with the challenge of choosing among competing theories to deal with unique cases, practitioners create artistic performances in which they respond to complexity in simple, spontaneous ways. Schön gives that artistry a name—*reflection-in-action.* When exercising this artistry, practitioners frame problems, devise and experiment with solutions, and reframe as the situations talk back. They make sense of the situations not through rote application of a theory

but with reference to a "repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions" (Schön, 1982, p. 163).

There is an irony in Schön's work. Although the professionals he studies are reflective in that they make nonroutine decisions in the moment, his research suggests that they tend to exercise their artistry in an unself-conscious and therefore relatively unreflective way (Schön, 1987, pp. 119–56). In such interactions, practitioners who are aware of their methods have an edge over those who are naive about their craft. A coach with this awareness is more likely to recognize the limits of his or her approach and treat it as a set of hypotheses, subject to continuous testing and revision. Such a coach will also be more able to invite a client into a partnership and employ methods that are transparent and subject to mutual influence.

For these reasons, coaches would do well to aspire to being truly reflective practitioners, capable of displaying the following qualities:

- Awareness of their own filters for making meaning of coaching interactions
- Awareness of their own assumptions, methods, and tools
- Commitment to an inquiring stance toward their effectiveness
- Ability to regard each new client as a fresh challenge to models that are continuously in evolution

I see the creation of a personal model as a means to becoming a reflective practitioner of this kind. Reflecting on my model is a way to think about my practice outside the moment of client contact and allows me to be more conscious of making choices from a range of theoretical and methodological repertoires that, in turn, inform and deepen my core practices. Ultimately, to be a reflective practitioner is to see in the moment of client interaction everything one would see if one were to step out of the moment and reflect. Clearly, this is an unobtainable goal, but one may take small steps toward it by routinely allowing time to adopt a posture of inquiry. This stance distinguishes the reflective practitioner from the intuitive one.

Recognizing that others might approach the challenge of model building in a different way, I concluded that the best way to review my practice was to create a framework that identified three influences that inform a coach's core practices: the coach's *vision,* the coach's *frames for understanding human behavior,* and the coach's *personal profile.* Together these elements

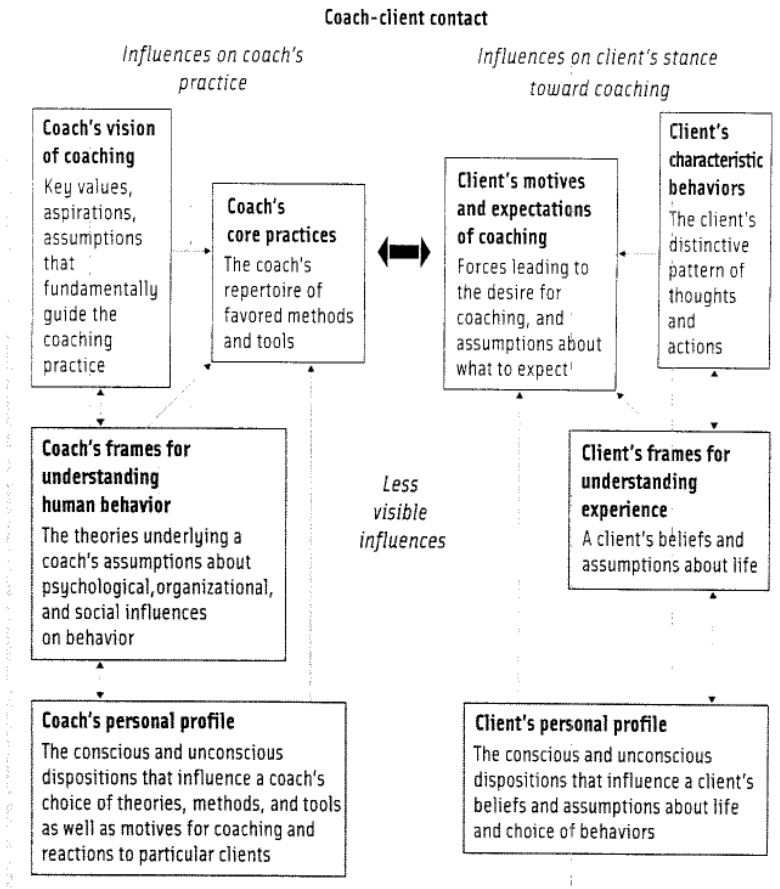

FIGURE 1 · FRAMEWORK FOR MODEL BUILDING

constitute a framework for model building (Figure 1). Fleshed out to describe a particular practice, these elements, interacting dynamically with one another, constitute what I mean by a model. It is critical to conceive a model with explicit reference to how the coach and client jointly shape the coaching relationship, so that is also reflected in the framework. In the remainder of the chapter, I use this framework to document my reflections on my practice and describe the model that has evolved—and will continue to evolve.

Vision

Until I began reflecting on my model, I would have been hard pressed to articulate my vision of coaching. I have come to believe that making one's vision explicit is a critical element of a coaching model. A coach necessarily has an image of the enterprise that guides what he or she is doing, whether explicit or tacit. Without the awareness of that vision and how it is formed, coaches will be blind to at least some of their motives for intervening in certain ways. This idea came home to me when I heard Peter Block advocate an approach to executive coaching based on helping people "become the authors of their own experience."[2] On hearing this view, I recognized it as a tacit vision of coaching toward which I had been moving for some time; this conscious acknowledgment proved quite helpful to me. Indeed, it led me to recognize conflicting tensions in my vision of coaching between advocating such an aspiration versus accepting a client's goals even when they are more limited. I address this tension below.

Origins of a Practice

David Kantor suggests that all practice begins through imitation.[3] Consciously or unconsciously, we all begin by appropriating approaches from others—parents, teachers, and role models of other kinds. After reflection, I saw that my methods of practice had their seeds in my graduate education. I was inspired to become a consultant by exposure to the work developed by a renowned theorist/practitioner, Chris Argyris, in conjunction with Donald Schön and others—work known as Action Science (Argyris and Schön, 1975; Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985; Fisher, Rooke, and Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 1991).

With a background in Action Science, it is no surprise that, while proposing a coaching relationship in a conversation with Alan, I made the following statement: "It appears that you send mixed messages to the team. On the one hand, you frequently make statements about the value of openness and participation. On the other, you are seen as a leader who sometimes goes around subordinates to solve problems." I then gave examples from the interviews to support the perception and went on to ask, "What's your reaction to this view?"

The statement is a typical Action Science intervention, calling attention to a gap between Alan's *espoused theory* (i.e., individual and team empowerment) and his *theory-in-use* (i.e., unilateral intervention to solve problems).

Implicit in my approach is a vision of the coach's role: I present a *challenge* to Alan by pointing out gaps between intentions and actions, offer to provide *support* by developing his awareness of the sources of this gap so that he can unlearn old ways of thinking and acting and proceed to learn new ways, and hold out the implicit *vision* of congruence between aspirations and actions.[4] In adopting this approach, I was essentially imitating Chris Argyris and other senior practitioners of his method whom I had experienced personally as classroom teachers, seminar leaders, and coaches.

Evolution and Conflicts

Reflecting on my model has made me aware, not only of this original tacit vision, but of other aspirations I hold for clients that—evolving over time, due to a variety of influences—could possibly conflict with this vision. Increasingly, I see myself encouraging clients to become aware of the conscious and unconscious influences on their behavior, to take ownership of those influences and their consequences, and to use this expanded commitment and awareness to envision and act on a wider range of choices. Such aspirations for clients are potentially more ambitious than the aim of merely reducing the gaps between their intentions and their actions.

This raises a disturbing question. What if the client has no interest in the kind of learning required to become the "author of his or her experience" but has much more pragmatic goals (which in fact turned out to be the case with Alan)? Is it appropriate for a coach to confront clients with what he or she perceives as limited aspirations on their part? My current view—which I continue to examine—is that I wish to take a stance with my clients that openly advocates an ambitious vision for their development, yet respects their right to decide for themselves the level of aspiration they think makes sense. (I will pick up this thread later when I review my personal profile and core practices, the two other elements of the framework.)

At the same time, there is a synergistic parallel between holding high aspirations for my clients and my commitment to being a reflective practitioner. By aiming to coach in ways that reflect an explicit awareness of and openness to learning about the consequences of my underlying assumptions and influences as well as a willingness to explore new options, I am trying to do for myself as a coach what I desire to help my clients do for themselves—to become, as Block might phrase it, the author of my practice. The coaching model (see Figure 1) attempts to capture this parallel.

In summary, by using the framework to investigate the source of my vision, I gained several insights. Least surprising was the realization that I could trace much of my vision to role models from my graduate training—models whom I continue to imitate. Most interesting was determining that my vision was largely tacit, and the effort to make it explicit has raised some serious tensions that I would do well to resolve. In general, reflecting on my vision and its sources confirms my intuition that vision is a significant influence on a coach's core practices.

Frames for Understanding Human Behavior

A model of coaching will inevitably entail assumptions about why people behave as they do. The task coaches face is to become conscious of those assumptions and assess their strengths and limits. Are they robust enough to survive an encounter with the wide range of situations presented by different clients facing different organizational and personal challenges? My general framework led me to examine two overlapping sources of influence on a coach's assumptions: *psychological influences on behavior* and *individual differences.* I found on reflection that in each area I had extended my range of core practices and identified a wider range of options for being responsive to clients.

Psychological Influences on Behavior

Action Science gave me some basic assumptions about human behavior, but it did not offer a comprehensive and systematic way to understand how individual experience shapes behavior. I soon discovered a need for such theories.

In working with particular individuals, each of whom had his or her own rich history of family and other influences on their development, I intuitively drew on learning assimilated from a decade of exposure to therapy. My therapists came from no single school of thought. However, my principal coach and mentor articulated in one of our sessions a perspective that seemed to characterize an unstated common assumption: "Any face-to-face work is about linking internal structures to the creation of external structures, linking internal imagery and critical events in one's life to how one imprints and creates structures in the external world." I tacitly took this internalized sensibility to my encounters with my client Alan.

In my work with Alan, I naturally sought opportunities to probe for information about his family background that might help me understand his ways of approaching his role and interactions with others. After several sessions, he was willing to talk about his childhood and revealed some important information. He was the oldest of seven children who were abandoned by their father when Alan was nine. From that point on, Alan acted as a surrogate parent, taking responsibility for himself and his siblings.

Alan acknowledged that what he learned from this experience was to take a high level of personal responsibility while distrusting the help of others. Indeed, he experienced profound ambivalence when he needed help. At the conscious level, he truly believed in the company rhetoric of empowering individuals and teams, but his history led to a deeper set of beliefs, which made him feel that he could not count on others to fulfill their responsibilities. These deeper beliefs undermined his commitment to the espoused management philosophy. From this information, I constructed the following intervention:

> I feel that I'm in a double bind in my relationship with you, and I sense that others do, too. You are a person of great strength and power. Your team members experience the possibility that this power may be used against them [Alan laughs here], and they fear you. What they don't see is that you use some of that power against yourself, by putting yourself in double binds that prevent you from getting help from others. As I try to help you by bringing up these kinds of issues, you will have an instinct to push me away, so my double bind is that if I work with you in the way that has the greatest potential payoff, you're likely to fire me. If I don't pursue them, I may not get fired, but I'll deliver less than maximum value, and at some level you'll be disappointed, as will I. I'd like to get your reaction as to whether any of this rings true and, if it does, to see whether you'd like to pursue this with me.

Alan responded,

> You underestimate me and don't give me enough credit. I see your comments as pointing to a weakness on my part, which I recognize. . . . I do some things that create problems without knowing it. For example, I recently said to my wife, "I wish the kids would come to me more often to talk about things instead of always going to you." She said, "If you could see the look on your face when something simple happens, like a glass of milk spills, you'd know why the kids don't talk to you." So I know I've got an issue there. . . . [But] I'm interested. Some of the things you said I'd be interested in talking more about.

In order to work with Alan, I supplemented my Action Science approach with loosely formulated theories of the effect of psychological development on behavior. I was moving beyond imitation of my original role models to broaden my theoretical base. In so doing, I was imitating earlier role models (my therapists) and a new one (my coach), albeit rather intuitively.

Reviewing the above interaction as part of my current examination of my model has helped me see aspects of the encounter that escaped my attention at the time. I was so relieved by Alan's willingness to move forward that I was blind to some of the more obvious problems inherent in his response. It is now clear that there were limits to his understanding of the double bind I had mentioned above. But I was satisfied with the chance to proceed and did not catch the dismissive quality of his response, which was later pointed out by my coach. Thus I missed clues to the challenge that lay ahead and to the potential need for other approaches in working with him.

At about the same time, another client, Bill, the manager of a semi-independent subsidiary of a large company, posed a very different challenge, requiring me to reach further beyond the theories of Action Science. Bill's boss engaged me to address issues that had led him to put Bill on probation. Before the engagement began, with participation strictly voluntary for Bill, we conducted three-way negotiations to establish the nature of the coaching relationship. During the meeting, we identified and wrote down our expectations regarding improvement in three areas: profitability, customer service, and an environment that supported the development of team members. We attached quantitative measures to the first two issues and agreed to stay in touch regarding the third, softer one. In probing the concerns of his boss and team members in this third area—which involved micromanaging, a tendency to focus on the negative in dealing with subordinates—Bill revealed thought patterns heavily oriented toward negative self-evaluation ("I'm just no good"). Along with recurrent self-critical thoughts, Bill experienced a good deal of what he termed anger ("I'm like a crab, all hard on the outside") and what sounded like depression ("I'm just down, no energy"). He saw himself as a failure in both his professional and personal lives. At work, he felt ineffectual in his efforts to influence his boss and more generally in maneuvering within a "political" organization. At home, he was having trouble coping with his two teenage children.

From the outset, Bill was open and revealed his self-critical thoughts and the apparently related feelings of anger and depression. Action Science provided me with no particular tools for understanding or addressing these issues. Instead, I pursued an approach based on cognitive therapy (Beck, 1979; Burns, 1989), a perspective to which I had been introduced by a colleague and which I had found helpful in understanding myself. Aaron Beck and his followers had made more explicit some of the notions that seemed to underlie Action Science, such as the linkage between thoughts and action, and offered more explicit assumptions regarding thoughts as the cause of moods and feelings. Practitioners of this approach had identified a range of typical dysfunctional thought patterns, along with a range of tools for helping people recognize and overcome their blind reactions to such inner thoughts (Burns, 1989).

Bill was quite willing to accept homework assignments consisting of cognitive therapy exercises in which he explored the linkage among triggering events (a hostile comment from his son), automatic thoughts ("my son hates me"), and the consequences (believing he is an inadequate parent and therefore an inadequate person). After identifying particular powerful and recurrent automatic thoughts, he would ask himself,

> Are there distortions in these thoughts?
>
> Are there any counterarguments to these thoughts?
>
> What if these thoughts are true? What is the underlying assumption about the consequences?

This and other forms of reflection seemed to be helpful for Bill. Team members reported that the overall climate had become favorable to development. His boss began to hear similar reports and consequently was pleased with the coaching. Several years later, I checked in with Bill to see what, if anything, of long-term value he had gained from the coaching. He said he had learned to "think more in gray rather than black and white" and he recognized that he had been "personalizing things that were not personal." He felt he was "more open to other viewpoints" and "intolerant of narrow-mindedness." Bill attributed this to the exercises he had done and to the challenges I had made to his thought process.

Looking back on this interaction, I see that I discerned a need to expand the core theoretical base from which I was operating and found that in this case cognitive theory served my purposes well. No doubt there are other

ways in which a coach might have diagnosed and responded to Bill's concerns. My reponse simply reflected my having by chance become aware of and attracted to cognitive therapy. This illustrates the intuitive and potentially arbitrary ways in which a coaching practice may evolve and underscores the importance of periodically stepping back to reflect on one's practice to ensure that it is evolving in coherent ways.

Incorporating Theories about Individual Differences

Although Bill responded well to the methods of cognitive therapy, I discovered that many of my clients—like Alan—were not promising candidates for such tools, let alone the more reflection-oriented methods of Action Science. Based on these and similar experiences, I had already concluded that the failure to take individual differences into account was not simply a problem with the pedagogical tools associated with Action Science but a limitation of the theory itself. In essence, this school of thought does not explicitly encourage a coach to treat one person differently from another. In addition, it does not allow for the possibility that some people may not react positively to its methodological approach.

As a result, I was attracted to a theory of personality differences. I found the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (MBTI) inventory—a tool based on such a theory and grounded in the work of Carl Jung—an effective instrument for understanding common differences among people and for understanding myself and my reactions to others. It also seemed highly complementary to Action Science. The differences indicated by the MBTI personality inventory offer clues to the preferences that inform a person's particular theory-in-use. Although it relies on self-reported data, always inherently suspect from an Action Science point of view, one could consider type a hypothesis to be explored. And I found that the MBTI tool could sometimes provide more rapid and direct insight into behavior than did Action Science.

The MBTI instrument was of great value with Chris, a partner in a professional services firm, whose leadership style appeared to be contributing to the company's problems with retaining the loyalty of younger colleagues. Interviews with members of the firm revealed a number of concerns about Chris's style: he was seen as indirect to the point of dishonesty in his dealings with employees ("People doubt that they are ever hearing the true story"), chronically unable to give negative feedback ("You sense that something is wrong but don't know where you stand"), unable to say no to clients ("He'll agree to deliver more than we originally promised and then leave i

up to us to do the work"), too willing to sacrifice his standards to please clients ("He'll always go for the second-best solution if that's what the client wants"), and chronically unable to keep commitments ("He works to keep his options open and constantly double- or triple-books"). Chris's MBTI profile indicated ENFP, a people-oriented style with a tendency to see the big picture, place a high emphasis on values and feelings, and exercise great flexibility. Like most ENFPs, Chris was reluctant to hurt other people's feelings, which caused him to avoid conflict and withhold negative evaluations. His tendency to overcommit resulted from the same pattern: he did not want others to be disappointed. Of course, his strategies only worked in the short run. Using the MBTI personality inventory to understand the motives underlying his behavior helped Chris improve his ability to say no in order to avoid even greater pain later on. Chris also found his MBTI profile useful in highlighting a key personal value—his integrity—which is extremely characteristic of ENFPs and was reinforced by his firm's values. The importance of maintaining his integrity led him to identify two areas in which he felt he needed to bring about change: "Being bolder, in terms of where I take a stand on things . . . and making sure I can deliver what I promise."

While many colleagues share a preference for the MBTI instrument, some are attracted to Human Dynamics (Seagal and Horne, 1997), and others prefer the Enneagram (Riso and Hudson, 2000). My attraction to the MBTI personality inventory has been reinforced because clients consistently like it and it often generates useful insights. A considerable body of research also supports the instrument's basic validity and reliability (Fitzgerald, 1997).

There is no clear limit to the types and number of theories that are relevant to understanding individual behavior. In brief, I have also found it useful to supplement my theoretical base with systems perspectives (Oshry, 1995; Senge, 1990) and theories of the influence of culture (Harrison, 1995, pp. 147–282; Schneider, 1994). And I'm increasingly mindful of the importance of a firm grounding in theories of the effects of ethnicity, class, and gender (e.g., McGoldrick, Giordano, and Pearce, 1996).

In using the framework for model building to review my frames for understanding human behavior, I came to several conclusions. First, drawing on multiple schools of thought, rather than a single favored paradigm, clearly increases a coach's capacity. Second, my inability to see the initial signs of the barriers I had faced with Alan was most likely due to the limits

of my intuitive application of psychological theories and to insufficiencies in my personal profile and core practices, which I explore below. This has helped me identify areas that require further attention as I continue my model-building process, as detailed at the end of the chapter.

Personal Profile

To an even greater extent than most practitioners, the coach is his or her own primary instrument. Thus, personal qualities must be part of a coach's model. David Kantor has long advocated this view and he has created a set of tools for therapists and consultants that is explicitly designed to help them identify their "boundary profile," areas of potential synergy and friction in the match with individual clients and client systems (Kantor and Neal, 1985; Kantor, 1997; Kantor, 2001a).[5] The concepts and instruments of the boundary profile are equally helpful as a diagnostic tool with clients. I have also found several additional sources of support as I attempt to increase my awareness of my own profile as a coach.

Gaps between Espoused Theories and Theories-in-Use

Consultants and coaches are as vulnerable as their clients to gaps between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use. Even coaches who are committed to self-knowledge are at risk of remaining systematically blind to their own limitations.

Argyris provides an interesting example of such a gap in the coaching practice of a renowned source of advice on effective behavior, Stephen Covey. Argyris (2000) analyzed the transcript of a coaching interaction between Covey and his son contained in the widely read *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (1989), in which Covey reports feeling "upset and disillusioned" (p. 177) by his son's failure to honor his commitments regarding yard work. Yet he suppressed those feelings and instead "faked a smile" and asked how the yard work was going, despite obvious evidence that the answer was going to be negative. Argyris points out that, as a coach, Covey behaved in ways that are inconsistent with his recommendation to act authentically, apparently in the interest of being "positive." Argyris concludes that "Covey employs two mutually inconsistent theories of effective action: the one that he espouses and the one that he actually uses" (p. 22). In being vulnerable to such inconsistencies, Covey is no different from the rest of us.

Action Science predicts—and years of observing the practice of managers and my own practice as consultant and coach convince me—that such discrepancies are inevitable and human. Discovering such discrepancies is a powerful clue to one's model of oneself as coach, to reflecting on areas where one is ineffective and discovering areas where one is blind.

How to discover such discrepancies? I have acquired the habit—typical of practitioners of Action Science—of taping my consulting and coaching interactions whenever possible. Sometimes simply listening to segments of a tape (or reading a transcription of the segment) generates insight into interactions that seem not to have gone as well as I would have liked for reasons I cannot explain. With especially puzzling interactions, learning cases are a powerful albeit more labor-intensive tool for self-reflection. The coach begins by writing down *spoken dialogue* between two parties in one column and his or her *internal dialogue* in a parallel column. Simply writing out such a case often leads to subtle insights into the framing of the situation and the resulting options. However, used as the basis for a consultation with a colleague or one's personal coach, it is even more powerful.

Support from a Coach or Mentor

Ultimately, a coach is simply unable to see what he or she cannot see. Clinical supervision, or having one's own coach, is the classic model in training psychotherapists, and I have found this technique to be enormously valuable in becoming cognizant of my patterns of reflection-in-action. I initially engaged a coach who was a highly skilled practitioner of Action Science. Subsequently, I have used an individual of more eclectic background for many years in the unusual combination of coach, mentor, and therapist. Having a coach who knows me well allows me to present complex challenges with the confidence that I will be supported in recognizing blind spots and in seeing how I may be getting stuck in the self-reinforcing interplay of vision, theories, methods, and personal proclivities. In addition, I find that scheduling regular meetings with a coach has the advantage of building reflection into my routine by making it a task, which more successfully competes with other tasks for my scarce time.

My interaction with Alan was sufficiently challenging that I decided to use it as the basis for reflection with my coach. He helped me think about

the link between Alan's internal structures and his ways of creating structures in the external world. After reviewing with me the transcript of key interactions with Alan, my coach framed the challenge in terms of helping Alan recognize that "he uses his structure to keep himself in power and eliminate the possibility of surrendering to help. He doesn't see how he creates double binds that prevent him from getting what he wants." This helped me shape the intervention that I documented earlier.

Even as I felt that I had—with my coach's help—successfully shifted my coaching of Alan to a deeper level, subsequent reflection with my coach helped me realize that I had missed an opportunity to show Alan his own pattern in action. Pointing to Alan's statement that I had underestimated him, my coach saw a "maneuver of neutralizing your power by devaluing your input. . . . That's how he works." I came away from this discussion with the mixed feelings that were typical in my work with my coach: I believed I was gaining insights that could improve my ability to see a broader range of options in the moment of client contact, but at the same time I also felt rather dull-witted and overwhelmed. Such, I suppose, is the hidden tuition we pay on the path of continued learning.

Knowing Your Type

As already illustrated, I have found the MBTI personality inventory quite useful in identifying ways in which my natural inclinations might align or conflict with those of a particular client. It also served to highlight some of the strengths and weaknesses of my characteristic tendencies when coaching.

For example, I learned that, as an INTP, I may lack appreciation for detail and structure and be less attuned to the possibility that some clients (with Sensing and Judging preferences) would like me to be more prescriptive. It also reminds me that I will feel the most passion when working with clients who—like me—view life as a never-ending search for meaning. And because I have only a mild preference for Thinking as opposed to Feeling when it comes to decision making, the MBTI assessment tool has also made me aware of my internal struggle between being an observer/bystander who enjoys solving problems and being a passionate advocate on behalf of my values; this tension is directly reflected in the ambivalence I feel regarding my vision for coaching as well as my coaching practices.

Core Practices

A coach's vision of coaching and theoretical orientation is one step removed from actual practice. The distinctiveness of a practice emerges in face-to-face interactions with the client. I have found it instructive just to inventory my core practices. In assessing my core tools and methods, I noticed a continuing prominent role for tools I had seen modeled by my Action Science teachers, such as the distinction between *Model I* and *Model II* behavior (the skills corresponding to unilateral versus collaborative interactions), the *ladder of inference* (a method of mapping specific steps in the reasoning process that lead a person from concrete data to assumptions, beliefs, and conclusions that influence action), and the learning cases described earlier.

I can now see that I also developed—partly through imitation and partly through adaptation—a less explicit underlying methodology that reflects an Action Science perspective. As I reconstructed the common features of my coaching interactions with Alan, Bill, and Chris, I identified the elements presented in Table 3.

In broad outline, these features of my approach to coaching may well resemble the practice of other coaches or even therapists. The potential distinctiveness of the approach lies, I believe, in my self-conscious balancing of advocacy and inquiry, an orientation I share with other practitioners of Action Science.

Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry

The relative balance of advocacy and inquiry in my practice is guided by the underlying Action Science principle of bilateral or shared control. Coaches inevitably make choices—explicit or otherwise—about the desired balance of control within the coaching interaction. The fundamental questions are

- Does the coach have an agenda, and, if so, how does he or she manage it?
- Should the coach make this agenda explicit, or keep it in the background to guide the interaction?

Action Science encourages practitioners to make their intentions and hypotheses known and to test them openly with clients. It also recommends equal emphases on *inquiry* (listening, asking questions that increase clarity

Table 3

Core Coaching Method

- Begin the coaching relationship by establishing goals, boundaries, and preferred modes of working together, usually based on some external source of data on the client's behavior.
- Conduct individual sessions by drawing on the following elements:
  - Encourage the client to give examples of the challenges he or she faces, with concrete data regarding thoughts, feelings, attributions of others' motives, and other factors.
  - Explore the ways in which the client frames examples, using active listening—asking clarifying questions and reflecting back key thoughts and feelings—to test your understanding of what you have heard and to create a climate of safety in which the client can identify thoughts and feelings that lie beneath conscious awareness.
  - Explore options for handling the particular challenge, inviting the client's suggestions and selectively offering your own when you see choices beyond the client's awareness.
  - Clarify implications for action on immediate challenges.
  - Look for opportunities to probe more deeply into the factors shaping the ways in which the client frames challenges, including personal history.
  - Look for opportunities to offer alternative ways of framing challenges and use those reframings as a way to help the client become more aware of how he or she constructs meaning.
  - Generate and test hypotheses about characteristic patterns in the client's way of framing challenges and acting on those frames, based on examples presented and from other available data.
- Conclude the coaching relationship, taking stock of what has been accomplished and eliciting feedback.

Source: This simple threefold framework for organizing the method was influenced by Landsberg, 1997, pp. 122–23.

and understanding) and *advocacy* (offering assessments and interpretations, making suggestions, or asking questions that encourage the client to reflect in a particular way).

I have found that many other coaching methods deviate from Action Science's approach of coupling advocacy with inquiry while giving equal weight to both. Some, for example, favor advocacy over inquiry in pursuit of transformational changes in the client.[6] Such approaches encourage a coach to view a client's defenses against frontal assault as obstacles to be beaten down in the interest of the client's liberation. Equally prevalent is the tendency to favor inquiry over advocacy, typically on grounds that power to resolve problems resides within the client. At its best, this approach leads coaches to reflect back what they are hearing and ask facilitating questions to which they do not have predetermined answers (see examples below). Such questions can be genuinely helpful and are highly useful for the coach when a client is more knowledgeable about a given area. However, taken in its pure form, this strategy needlessly undermines the coach by rendering invalid his or her own perspective.[7]

I developed the template shown in Table 4 in order to reinforce a conscious choice between advocacy and inquiry and to maintain a balance between the two. Originally, this framework was meant to provide a structure for inquiry only (Whitmore, 1992), but I adapted it to express my beliefs. As the template suggests, my approach—at least as espoused!—combines the active listening/support orientation of a client-centered method with the willingness to make direct challenges. It's worth commenting on both ends of this continuum.

Reflective Listening and Mind-Sets

By incorporating an emphasis on reflective listening, I have been able to moderate in myself a default tendency toward advocacy. In my colleagues Barry Jentz and Joan Wofford (Jentz, 1999), I found a powerful set of role models who showed me what it means to use, and teach, reflective listening, a skill that is consistent with the inquiry of Action Science but which does not receive special emphasis in that theory. Using this tool, in contrast to inquiring by asking direct questions, not only helps me test the accuracy of my listening but gives clients more freedom to take our conversations in directions that may be more helpful to them.

While I feel no conflict in committing myself to fully listening to the client, I find myself struggling to decide on my stance at the other end of the

Table 4

Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry with the GROW Model

		Goal	Reality	Options	Wrap-up
Inquiry	**Reflect**	It sounds like you would like to focus on . . . (?)	So the project is going well overall but you're concerned about . . . (?)	What I'm hearing is that you see three options . . . (?)	So you're now feeling confident of being able to follow through . . . (?)
	Ask clarifying questions	What would a successful outcome look like? What specifically should we focus on?	What reasons did they give for the change? How would you account for your success?	What would be involved in pursuing that option?	When would be a realistic target date for completion?
	Ask facilitating questions	What do you want? What would you like to get out of this session?	Where are you now? What's working? What's not working?	Have you faced anything similar before? If so, did you learn anything about how to handle it?	What specific steps might you take? What obstacles might you face?
Advocacy	**Ask challenging questions**	What would be a goal that would represent a breakthrough for you?	What prevented you from saying what you thought directly to your boss?	If you knew the answer, what would it be?	Given what you know about yourself, how might you sabotage this commitment?
	Assert	Given what you've said, I think we should focus on . . . (What do you think?)	I see you making an assumption that you may not be aware of . . . (What's your reaction?)	I see another option that I'd like to put on the table . . . (What do you think?)	I think it would make more sense to do A first, then B, for the following reasons . . . (Does that make sense?)

continuum: how much of an advocate should I be? As already mentioned, I am attracted to a view of coaching that aspires to help clients be the "authors of their experience," which involves making them aware of any limits to recognizing their freedom.[8] Yet I recoil at the aggressive methods of the transformational schools ("Are you willing to have a breakthrough in this conversation?").

I have tentatively reconciled this dilemma by building on the work of Evans and Russell (1989), among others; through them, I came to appreciate the concept of *mind-sets* as a means of describing the beliefs and assumptions that drive behavior; I also gleaned particular ways of encouraging awareness of tacit mind-sets. Kegan and Lahey (2000) developed a compatible exercise in which they lead clients through a set of questions that can generate potentially deep insights into the basic assumptions underlying tacit commitments that conflict with espoused beliefs. Both approaches illustrate methods that enable clients to gain deep insight into the degree to which they are the authors of their experiences yet allow them to control the depth of the inquiry and their aspirations for change.

As I reflected on my core practices, I saw clearly how deeply Action Science continues to inform my approach to coaching—particularly my commitment to creating a balance between advocacy and inquiry. I also came to appreciate the importance in my model of reflective listening as a tool for inquiry. These insights were useful but not surprising. The most valuable insight was a surprise and builds on the insight I gained from examining my vision: my uncertainty regarding how much of an advocate to be and how I manage that dilemma in my practice through the use of mind-sets. Consequently, I have identified this dilemma as the focus of continuing reflection.

Continuing to Build One's Model

If my experience is any guide, the challenge of developing one's approach to coaching is never over. Even for those who have arrived at Kantor's third and highest stage of model building—a model that is one's own and is internally consistent—the task of modeling the complex world of a coach is ongoing. The reflective coach adopts a posture of humility, bringing full commitment to bear on any given coaching interaction while remaining

only half sure of the approach, which is subject to continuing reflection and refinement.

Examining my practice has given me ready access to humility. Although I experienced moments of genuine pride as I reviewed notes and transcripts, I was more frequently plagued by doubts and self-criticisms. For example, I felt reasonably satisfied with my sessions with Bill and Chris, since they both came to an understanding of their own behavior and began making changes in their personal and professional lives. However, I did not feel good overall about coaching Alan. Although I believed I had positioned myself for potentially powerful work with him through the intervention analyzed above, I did not succeed in working with him in ways that would have resulted in deeper learning on his part. Alan subtly resisted reflecting on his contributions to interactions, and I saw no pattern of improvement. While I was occasionally able to point out ways in which his framing of events led him to reduce his options or reinforced self-limiting beliefs, he did not seem to internalize these lessons. After I helped him and his team identify long-term priorities and solve short-term challenges, his perceived need for my services waned, and the coaching relationship faded out over time. I was frustrated because my aspiration had been to help Alan learn a set of attitudes and behaviors that would not only resolve current conflicts but prevent new ones. In particular, I wanted to enable him to smooth off the rough edges on his commanding but overbearing style. My incomplete documentation of our subsequent interactions makes it impossible to go back and determine the points at which I might have done things differently.

Collaboratively Setting Goals

I had not realized until this recent reflection that I never fully shared with Alan either this goal or my sense that we were failing to achieve it. It was implicit in my double-bind confrontation with him, but I had never explicitly returned to our interpretation of our contract for working together, and I had never let him know that he was failing to live up to my expectations. Without knowing it, I had fallen into a posture of holding an untested agenda for his improvement. This was an explicit violation of my model. How was I to account for this?

These reflections led me to contact Alan, with ironic results. He had been promoted to a new position, managing a budget twenty times the one he had been handling when we worked together and overseeing a workforce of

many thousands of people. Clearly, my shortcomings had not held him back much. When I summarized my concerns about my failure to capitalize on our mutual awareness of the influence of his personal history on his current behavior, Alan was amused. He said,

> I think what you got was pretty much what you were going to get. You sensitized me to some issues, and I made some changes. But at a certain point, you are who you are and it's a two-way street. It's also up to other people to accommodate me. You may have missed an opportunity, but not by much.

He went on to describe the impact of my consulting work with his team, which had resulted in their commitment to a vision of operational excellence. This vision led him to master new methods that produced tremendous gains in efficiency, for which he was promoted to his current position. I had unknowingly succeeded in an area that was Alan's highest priority. Where I fell short was in neglecting to clearly express my own differing aspirations and negotiate the goals for our coaching relationship in a collaborative way. This was a deeper failing, but one that led me to recognize the importance of resolving my ambivalence toward being an advocate and of including my clients in setting goals for the coaching relationship.

I have also concluded that I need to keep working on my ability to assert myself with extremely strong personalities like Alan. It was already a stretch to challenge him as I did. To continue challenging him was apparently beyond my capacity at the time.

Clarifying Stages and Boundaries

I believe I might have maintained a more potent stance had I been equipped with a better-developed model of the stages of a coaching relationship. My thinking about this had not gone beyond recognizing the three stages of a coaching relationship: establishing the relationship, working together, and concluding.

This model now strikes me as too limited. Kantor (1985) argues persuasively that the therapist-patient relationship—and by extension the coach-client relationship—is most fruitfully viewed from a developmental standpoint, with different stages of development representing choice points for the continuation, or dissolution, of the relationship. I am beginning to explore the possibility of applying Kantor's approach to my practice, although I recognize that his framework requires some adaptation from the therapy context.

In this connection, I am working to clarify my beliefs about the boundary between coaching and therapy. Currently, I feel that while there are likely to be differences in the client's motivation to pursue deeper issues, there is no inherent difference in the range of relevant material. Nonetheless, I do believe that a therapist may be of more help with in-depth work in some cases, due to superior training and specialization. How do I recognize the boundary where my effectiveness diminishes and the help of a therapist would be more appropriate? Under what circumstances might parallel coaching and therapy make sense? These are questions I intend to pursue.

Understanding Adult Development

It has also become clear to me that I would do well to expand my model to more explicitly include theories of adult development. Laurent Daloz (1999) illustrates the value of such perspectives by summarizing three developmental schemes (Kegan, 1994; Levinson, 1978; Perry, 1968) and applying them to his mentoring of adult learners. I find Kegan's approach particularly compelling. He posits a path of development that leads to greater consciousness of responsibility for how one constructs the world and acts in it. (See Chapter 6 for an overview of this approach and its implications for coaching.)

Kegan's scheme provides a rigorous conceptual framework for understanding the vision that I now recognize I have been tacitly holding—that of helping clients become "the authors of their experience." This capacity essentially corresponds to the fourth of Kegan's five stages of development. Reflecting on this framework has also enabled me to recognize that I have begun to hold a related yet deeper aspiration for my clients, corresponding to Kegan's fifth stage—that of helping clients see the limits of their self-authorizing systems and find ways to constructively interact with others who make meaning in different ways.

As I begin to incorporate Kegan's framework into my coaching practice, I face the unresolved dilemma of how to reconcile the use of that framework with my commitment to making aspirations explicit and collaboratively setting goals. Practitioners of Kegan's approach tend to keep their methodology tacit, not making it known to clients. My own inclination, consistent with others who have integrated Action Science with a developmental approach (Fisher, Rooke, and Torbert, 2000), is to be transparent with clients about my methods. However, this requires finding ways to introduce a hierarchical scheme of development that could appear evaluative and

create defensiveness. Meehan (1999) has taken a significant first step in mapping this dilemma by comparing the risks and benefits of the differing approaches recommended by practitioners of Action Science versus those who use Kegan's model when encountering limits in a client's framing of choices.

Conclusion

The main goal of this chapter has been to demonstrate the value of building a model of one's coaching practice in order to facilitate the transition from primarily an intuitive practitioner to more reflective one. The ideal end state of being a reflective practitioner—one who is able to see in the moment of client interaction everything he or she can see after stepping back and reflecting—is unattainable. However, investing in systematic reflection will move one incrementally in this direction.

By using a framework to assess the state of my own model development, I hope I have stimulated others to invest in the time-consuming work of self-reflection and illustrated one approach to constructing a model. The technology for model building is at a primitive stage of development. The more pilgrims who take this path and are willing to report on their progress, the more quickly we can bring light to an area that is woefully unmapped and which it is our professional obligation to explore. Although reflecting on one's practice is often difficult and sobering, it is also rejuvenating—an antidote to boredom and stagnation.

I hope that this account of my journey will encourage other coaches to come forward with their accounts of building their models and sustaining ongoing reflection.

Notes

[1] I have received enormous support in these reflections by participating in the seminar "Leadership Model Building," led by David Kantor and B. C. Huselton of the Leadership Model Building Company (www.leadershipmodelbuilding.com).

[2] Remarks by Peter Block made during the presentation "Executive Coaching," May 1, 2001, in Cambridge, Mass., at an event sponsored by the Executive Coaching Forum.

[3] Kantor offers a three-stage model, of which the second and third stages are *constraint* (i.e., as we imitate, we begin to add to, subtract from, or amend the model according to our own experiences, testing the model's limits and experimenting with the incorporation of elements from other models) and *autonomy* (i.e., we develop an internally consistent set of principles for our practice that is comprehensive enough to deal with all the typical challenges).

[4] Laurent Daloz (1999) suggests that mentors provide these three elements, which helped me recognize them in my practice.

[5] A comprehensive description of Kantor's "boundary profile" tools is not yet publicly available. However, William Isaacs provides an excellent summary of three of them—Actions Positions (the Four Player Model), Communication Domains, and System Paradigms—in *Dialogue* (1999), pp. 192–229.

[6] Fernando Flores is a particularly dramatic representative of this movement. See Harriet Rubin's (1999) description of him.

[7] Carl Rogers (1961) is the grandfather of this approach, which continues to attract followers.

[8] An intriguing theoretical question, which I do not pursue here, is whether a coach can truly enable clients to become the authors of their experience when the coach's choice of methodological approach is the stimulus for framing such authorship and therefore plays a shaping role.

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