

A shared space: relational coaching

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I become through my relation to the *Thou*; as I become *I*, I say *Thou*.

Martin Buber (1958)

At the heart of coaching rests a genuine meeting. True, coaching offers tools and models, a language, and a worldview – yet it is the human connection, unfolding in the shared space between coach and coachee, that is the most important factor for the success of coaching. Buber (ibid) held that affinity to another person preceded identity-formation. Our ability to know ourselves is facilitated by connection, as we reflect in another person’s eyes. A group can provide us with further opportunities to meet with ourselves as we observe other peoples’ mirrors, thus fostering mutual growth and development.

Relational psychoanalysis is an exciting and paradigm-shifting movement in the therapeutic arena, which has been gathering momentum for the last three decades. Relational perspectives challenged the claim that man is solely controlled by his drives, and instead proposed that people are first and foremost relationship-seeking (object-seeking). According to the relational worldview, man is understood to possess a deeply-seeded need for relating, one that cannot simply be reduced to drives and sublimation. The *self* cannot exist in isolation, but is rather created from and is organised within an ongoing dialogue with another.

In the first cohesive text on relational psychoanalysis, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell (1983) used the term relationality to amalgamate different psychoanalytic traditions that shared an emphasis on the importance of real relationships to our development. Relational psychoanalysis no longer views the psyche simply as a battlefield of drives and defense mechanisms, against which man

stands as an isolated animal struggling to control its drives in order to be accepted by the protective society. In addition to this admittedly depressive position, the psyche can also be seen as co-created from relational matrices. Mitchell (1993) expanded:

The individual discovers himself within an interpersonal field of interactions in which he has participated long before the dawn of his own self-reflective consciousness. The mind of which he becomes self-aware is constituted by a stream of impulses, fantasies, bodily sensations, which have been patterned through interaction and mutual regulation with caregivers. (p.132).

One may wonder what the relational turn in psychoanalysis has got to do with life-coaching. The relational-analytic world is seemingly light-years away from the coaching field. However, the relational understanding of *self* and *mind* offers an important scope for life-coaching. Moreover, we believe that relational principles may deepen adjacent milieus to psychotherapy such as coaching, consulting and groupwork. This paper illustrates three relational aspects that may be immediately applicable in life-coaching.

1. Wider-mind: Dyadic-self and group-self

We emerge out of and are saturated with relations with others. Yet we (in Western culture) organize our experience into selves with what feels like distinct, inviolable interiors, with boundaries, partly negotiable and partly nonnegotiable.

Stephen Mitchell (2002)

Gregory Bateson is a modern image of the Renaissance man: he contributed to fields as varied as cybernetics, psychiatry and anthropology. It is Bateson's theory of mind, though, which deserves our focus here. Mind, according to Bateson (1972, 1979) was a cybernetic system. Mind was not only comprised of intrapsychic experiences, but also from interpersonal connections (which Bateson called 'patterns which connect'). When therapist and client, or coach and coachee, dialogue with each other, mind is not just the separate subjectivities, but also the field within which the two operate – the dyadic, intersubjective dimension. Mind therefore includes the two people and the relationship between them – we term it here a '*wider mind*⁴'. This wider-mind has mind qualities, i.e. it has thinking, sensing, and feelings – a whole which is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, according to Bateson, a group might have an autonomic quality of mind, creating the members of the group as well as being created by them.

The *self* in relational psychoanalysis resembles Bateson's understanding of mind in three principal ways. Firstly, the *self* is understood as a process (verb) rather than an object (noun): a pulsating principle of constant reorganization more than a concrete entity. Secondly, the self is de-centered: the field of self expands beyond the boundaries of skin to include relationships and connections to others. Thirdly, the relationship between the intrapsychic and interpersonal is dialectic and evolving: the two people emerge from one another, communicate with one another and are in a continuous dialogue. We co-create a wider-mind and are concurrently being created by it. The following email from a group-coachee may demonstrate this relational-field:

“Dear A.

⁴ A term influenced by Stephen Gilligan's (1997, 2002) interpretations of Bateson's work.

Being with you is in-fact being with ourselves. We have sensed you, hurt alongside you, identified with you, and have all joined together to share the experiences you have been through.

May you be surrounded by our love.”

H. Group Coachee

Unlike traditional psychoanalysis, life-coaching allows the coach greater freedom in bringing his authentic self to the coaching session, as long as it serves the coachee and coaching process. When we invite the coachee to share his past successes with us, we in fact allow him to resonate within our own world. In turn, we might share with him that which was awoke in us. When a coachee shares her values with us, we enter a challenging dialogue between two sets of values: our own person cannot but interact with hers. The coachee’s consciousness and our own are no longer merely personal entities but also a singular dialectic field, within which we construct and deconstruct feelings, beliefs, opinions, and wishes. This is a shared space – a fertile and powerful platform for reorganization, development, and growth. The relational approach invites the coach to be as fully present in this shared field as she dares. In some ways, the coaching ethos that involves non-hierarchical and informal connections between coach and coachee provides a more relaxed entry into the shared relational-field than the classical analytic praxis.

The presence of a wider-mind is even more pronounced during groupwork. A group is indeed a platform for personal work created by the members of the group: it is at the same time more than that: offering a wider identity-field, which creates the members of its group. A coaching group primarily focuses on mobilizing resources and changing positions and perceptions to cultivate growth and development. Every

person's resources joins in and together these are harnessed within the group-self (a wider-mind), thus furthering the personal coping-capacities of each and every member.

As attested by Bateson, and in accordance with relational psychoanalysis, the *self* can be described in two ways: as a personal object *and* as a process of relational organisation. Paradoxically, it is both at the same time. The relational coaching (and relational psychotherapeutic) practice involves cultivating our capacity to surrender into the wider, pulsating self. Relational-coaching 'goes through' the coach and the dyad (or the coach and group). The coaching relationship becomes a process of weaving mutual influence, mutual change and continuous reorganization. Different from both traditional coaching and traditional psychotherapy, this is a deep process requiring mutual sharing and genuine emotional involvement of the coach. The Spanish poet Antonio Machado (1983) depicted it marvelously when he wrote:

*The eyes you're longing for-
listen now,
the eyes you see yourself in
are eyes because they see you.*

We may describe relational-psychotherapy and relational-coaching as practices that encourage wider-mind connections. For those working in groups, relational descriptions (as well as Bateson's) might strike a familiar chord. The concept of the whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts receives an exciting theoretical and clinical validation. Group-coaching that adopts relational principles, including a wider understanding of mind and self, opens itself to a coaching model that resembles shamanic or tribal cultures. The premises of connection and mutual

responsibility, intimacy, co-creation of wider-mind and (dare we say it) love that guide the relational dance, are in par with the healing arts and Eastern philosophies perhaps even more than traditional therapeutic philosophies. In traditional cultures, the self is identified as first and foremost a part of a social matrix (and only later an individuated subject, while Western philosophy views the individual as the primary unit (e.g. see Levine & Frederick, 1997; Tice & Baumeister, 2001).

The de-centered position of self, where we are each more than a personal-object but also a part of a larger relational process, is a humbling one. It allows us to think about the self as a flowing motion of ever expanding circles contained within larger ones, a movement sustained by dialectic tensions. We are being continuously recreated within larger selves (wider-minds); the *I* that we experience therefore changes according to the context. Hence, we partake in many varied ‘selves’ when we work with a client or coachee, when doing groupwork or writing a paper with you – our readers – in our mind. The resources available to us, as well as the complexity of these selves, change all the time.

The three of us are meeting you here, on these very pages. Our distinctive voices struggle to be differentiated, until we find ourselves able to give into our triad, to trust in this wider-mind that finds a unified voice, recreating us afresh. We are three different writers; we are a single writing process.

2. Appropriate self-disclosure: relational perspectives

Nonverbal attunement creates the original space of thirdness in which the free flowing back-and-forth does not appear as a reaction to the other's demand but as the partners' mutual creation of a dance—the first form of mutual

recognition. This space later becomes that of dialogue, in which it becomes possible to create meanings that transcend those of the singular person and to analyze the interaction between two partners.

Jessica Benjamin (2000)

A coach working relationally is required to develop complex attentive skills: She needs to be noting the coachee but also attending herself introspectively and opening to the shared field created between her and the coachee. Lastly, she notes the relationship between these three fields (coach, coachee and the relational field). David Paré and Mishka Lysack (2004) described this attentional-dance as “relational attunement.” One aspect of this relational turn manifests in the coach’s (and therapist’s) self-disclosure.

For many decades, psychoanalysis prided itself for abstaining from self-disclosure. Analyst and analysand would enter a deeply meaningful and intimate relationship, within which the analyst attempted to be a blank-slate, a mirror reflecting the analysand’s projection. The endeavors to minimize the therapist’s influence in order to maintain the patient’s autonomy and integrity created one-person psychology. The analyst’s internal responses (reactive countertransference) were understood as irrelevant to the therapeutic task and, when particularly strong, an indication of insufficient analysis: the analyst would then be expected to occupy the couch himself.

Appropriate self-disclosure in coaching should be understood as expanding the coaching-vessel: the coach uses her own feelings and sensations as a part of her coaching skills. The coaching relationship too becomes a coaching-skill. Unlike psychotherapy, the coaching-relationship is not a central axis for changework, however it certainly is a legitimate platform for reflection (organisation) and a tool for

calibrating goals. For example, the coach may communicate to the coachee feelings of worry or apprehension, which arise when the coachee shares a goal that the coach perceives as dangerous or unrealistic. The working premise, based on wider-mind approach, is that every event that emerges in the coach's consciousness is also an opening to an affective shared-field, representing the dyadic-self. Thus, when I share with you what emerges in my consciousness, I am offering sensations, feelings and thoughts from our shared-mind, the wider space in which we partake.

In the following example, the coach appropriately disclosed her reaction to her coachee: "I am listening to you describing your future goal, a day in your life when your wish finally comes true. I can hear the hope and anticipation in your voice, I sense the yearning in your words yet something within me contracts. I am sharing with you what took place within me, and I wonder whether you can connect to this contraction. Could it be relevant to you in any way?"

As we can see, the relational dialogue strives to foster mutuality and symmetry within the coaching relationship, all the while bearing in mind that the goal is to support the coachee or client (and that there is an important asymmetry in the relationship). A relational conversation allows a leveled clarifying of emotional and cognitive structures, where the coach exposes her humanity, granting access to her own processes and experiences, as long as these are relevant for and useful to the coaching process. The coach reveals herself to the coachee as a subject, an authentic human being, with feelings and sensations, knowing and ignorance.

3. The power of group-coaching: resources from the depth of the wider-mind

“My journey, or rather all of our journeys, began the day we were born, perhaps even the day the world was conceived. The yearning to live meaningfully brought me here to this group. I have met incredible women, each one at a different stage of her life, holding plenty of question-marks, thoughts, wishes, and potential paths. Yet we have all shared an authentic primal desire for meaning. The entire process was accompanied by deep introspection, attending our unique movement in life, our strengths and weaknesses. We noted the experiences that brought us this far and those that we are creating every single moment afresh, all the while we touched, and were able to give and receive, influencing and being influenced by one another. Listening to each other was the gate through which we entered, holding a promise for new learnings... Our shared journey was characterized throughout by mutual support and encouragement for growth, ratified and celebrated with each and every step.”

Y, group coachee.

Relational-coaching emphasizes the quality of presence in the here-and-now and the living, pulsating connection, thus encouraging and cultivating an opening to a wider-mind. The intersubjective position is born out of deep connection: an *Us* wider than each of the *I*'s it comprises. Inside the safe container of coaching (or therapy), the person can reorganize within a wider-self, in an organic and gradual manner. In his poetic way, psychologist and psychoanalyst Daniel Stern (1983) considered intersubjectivity as a “psychic entry into the human race.”

When we perceive group-coaching processes as intersubjective events, the resources of each participant become understood as part of the group-self not merely

in a metaphoric way, but in a concrete fashion. When I am able to partake in a wider-self, in a focused, cultivated and resourceful manner, my being and doing become richer, and my personal capacities are enriched and amplified. Even when I finally disconnect from the group-self, I carry it with me. The group-self becomes an empowering agency for its members – through the content dealt with, the processes gone through and also through the expansion of identity. This meeting, characterized by Buberian I-thou relationship, views each person as a unique vital being. This is a mutually-created reality that is multidimensional and highly facilitative for growth and healing. When the coach is a part of this dialogue too, a wider-field of connections unfolds into each of our persons, mobilizes deep processes of change and growth.

To conclude, the relational approach offers an exciting horizon for life-coaching in general and for group-coaching in particular. The theoretical depth of relational psychoanalysis assists us in conceptualizing phenomena that each group facilitator knows intuitively, validating work that's done 'through the coach' and 'through the group.' Relational theory explains the benefits of, and encourages us to surrender our selves to the field of connection, which is possibly not only a therapeutic but also a spiritual act.

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