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The ‘S’ Factor: Exploring the Spiritual Dimension to our Work as Coaches

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Abstract

This article explores spiritual roots and shoots of coaching, and argues for the need for more spiritually informed approaches in coaching practice. It looks at common experiences in coaches’ own developmental journeys, and suggests how these experiences may provide keys to serving our clients in deeper and potentially more meaningful ways. The article will be of interest to practitioners exploring spiritual dimensions to their work, and is also relevant to supervisors and providers of coaching or mentoring development programmes, inviting them to consider more spiritually aware ways of supporting coach and mentor development.

Key words

spiritual, presence, servant leadership

Introduction

This article explores a growing awareness and appreciation of a spiritual dimension in the coaching and mentoring profession, and its relevance to our clients and the systems they are a part of.

For the purpose of this discussion, we will not enter a lengthy discussion to define the terms ‘spiritual’ or ‘spirituality’, nor attempt to explore differences between ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’. I invite you as the reader to bring your own interpretations and definitions, but also offer my own ideas about how we might approach this vast subject.

A working description, which I offer is:

Spirituality is a function of our being human, which, when we are alive to it, supports the fuller development, connection and integration of all of who we are (mind, emotion, body, soul....) – ‘the universe within’, and our fuller connection, engagement and integration to all of what is (humankind, environment, planet, cosmos.....) – ‘the

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universe without', and that connecting to our spiritual selves only truly happens in the moment.

The description below (Fluker, 2008) adds a stronger emphasis on purpose and Buberian 'I –Thou'-ness:

Spirituality refers to a way or ways of seeking or being in relationship with the other who is believed to be worthy of reverence and highest devotion. In this definition, I am concerned with the other as inclusive of both individuality and community. The other is not impersonal, but intimately related to who I am and who I become. The other has a face – and the face of the other is the foundation of ethics and the origin of civil society. Beyond our private quests for meaning and authenticity, we are connected to others. Indeed, in order to be fully human and ethical, we must 'face the other'.

In order to explore shared meaning with regards spirituality, I also propose a framework or set of lenses to support ways of dialoguing and applying spiritual concepts in an accessible way. I have found it helpful to identify key principles or *components*, which underlie a wide range of different expressions. Drawing from Bohm's concept of implicate and explicate order (1980), I wondered if it would be possible to put forward a typology of spiritual principles, which nest within each other. Using the analogy of refraction of light through a prism, it seems to me that the abstract concept we call spirituality is like white light. When we shine it through a prism (the prism of our consciousness, the prism of our experience) we experience a rainbow of coloured light.

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What I offer as a simple typology is:

<u>White light</u>		
One-ness		
connectedness of everything, universality, consciousness		
<u>Blue</u>	<u>Yellow</u>	<u>Red</u>
Presence	Love	Meaning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stillness, mindfulness, being • Acceptance, emergence, observer effect • Kairos vs chronos experience of time • Presence and wholeness in relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy, humility, compassion, unconditional positive regard • Respect, value, forgiveness • Stewardship • Right relationship and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values, integrity, quality • Purpose, choice • Legacy and contribution • Meaningful relationship

Signs of the times

A quick scan across the current landscape of our profession reveals the emergence of a number of relatively recent areas of interest such as mindfulness, meditation, quantum physics, heart-based living, somatic, transpersonal and existential approaches to name a few. These areas frequently support more embodied approaches to coaching, and offer new avenues for working with the client. They point to a growing desire to move beyond the purely cognitive and concrete, and embrace practices which have more of a spiritual dimension.

At the same time, there is a growing conscience regarding the role and purpose that coaching has played and could play in shaping society, the economy and perhaps even world events. It can be a challenging space to work in, given the realities of making a living and satisfying the client's expectations for tangible outputs and return on investment. Coaching can be viewed on a spectrum, where on one end its primary function is to maintain or strengthen the status quo, and on the other, to challenge it (Jarvis and Macinnes, 2008). Coaches seeking to 'be the change' can find themselves sitting in an uneasy space between those two, manifested as the tension between serving agendas concerned with outputs that reinforce unsustainable and potentially

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unhealthy organisational norms, and holding true to their own beliefs and values about change, meaning and purpose.

Sometimes in order to live in line with our values and beliefs, we and our clients need to make tough choices, choices, which are based on something that goes deeper than financial security and fitting in with the establishment. The unrelenting pace of change, and the toll of fear, stress and uncertainty, which has been endemic in the years leading up to and following the global economic crisis (with its own backdrop of political and climatic change) has created both a spiritual vacuum and a spiritual openness. There is an opportunity for coaches to engage clients in exploring the values they seek to live by, and support them in understanding how to derive a sense of meaning, contribution and purpose in the face of tottering economic and social systems. This theme is echoed in recent publications (Casserley and Megginson, 2009; Blakey and Day, 2009), which have encouraged coaches to think about what their role might be in addressing such challenges.

Back in 2004, Sir John Whitmore, a long-term advocate for spiritual approaches addressed the Foundation of Workplace Spirituality, reflecting on his own experiences of working in more spiritual ways with corporate clients, and communicating a real sense of urgency for coaches to step up to the mark:

I find time and time again when I've been working, what I have felt has sort of been sort of on the edge, that afterwards I could have gone further. So what I want to do really here is to encourage those of you particularly who interact with this community that desperately needs to change, to go for it; to take spirituality in there, to do it. Because I don't know how business is going to clean up its act unless it gets spiritual values in business.

Since then we have witnessed in a very heightened way the destructive power of organisations whose sphere of influence far exceed their sphere of concern, and whose leaders appear to have no moral compass to guide them. Perhaps it really is time for coaches to consider how their own spiritual growth serves the world's needs, and engage in this journey with passion and courage.

How we get there – clues in our own journeys?

Clearly there are challenges in adopting a spiritual perspective in coaching. Conventional coaching wisdom argues that the client's agenda is paramount, and that

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the coach should be careful not to impose their values and beliefs, but I feel this misses the point. Bringing a spiritual perspective to practice does not necessarily imply use of a specific set of tools, approaches or agenda. It is more about the quality and awareness which we bring into the coaching space regardless of the approaches we hold to in our practice.

‘The success of intervention is not only what leaders do and how they do it, but their “interior condition”, the inner place from which they operate or the source from which all their actions originate.’ Kalungu-Banda (2009)

In considering what ‘interior conditions’ we bring to bear in our work, it is worth reflecting on an interesting phenomenon, which seems to have gone under our professional radar. I have observed through delivering coach development programmes and acting as a coach supervisor for a number of years that many coaches experience points in their development and practice, which they would describe as having a spiritual quality or dimension, which has added value to their client’s experience of coaching. In the absence of published research in this area, I would offer my own thoughts as to why coaches experience a spiritual dimension to their professional development.

1. Working with principles, which support values, meaning, and a heightened sense of humanity

A turning point in coach development is the transition beyond an over-dependence on tools and techniques, or adherence to fixed views of right and wrong (Bachkirova and Cox, 2007) and the learning to trust in themselves and their clients. At this point coaches begin to discover their own authentic approach and presence, which tend to be shaped more by principles and values rather than by rules. Principles and values are concerned with overarching truths, and in coaching or mentoring contexts tend to be drawn from an understanding of the conditions for human development and flourishing, such as meaning and purpose. Interestingly, many whose life’s work underpins commonly held coaching principles have personally embraced spiritual perspectives, which shine through their work, for example Carl Rogers, Martin Seligman, Tim Gallwey, as have many of coaching’s architects and influencers.

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2. Opportunity to connect more deeply to own sense of life purpose

Individuals find that coaching offers them the opportunity to fulfil a vocation which supports their own sense of life purpose and enables them to contribute in ways which were not previously accessible to them. Coupled with a growing sense of ease and authenticity in their practice, this can lead to a deeper experience of wholeness and oneness. This is reinforced in a virtuous circle when they support clients to uncover and fulfil more of their own life's purpose.

3. Serving the bigger whole

Coaches and mentors also reach points in their development when they become aware of their impact in the bigger scheme of things, and find that their role developing into that of a servant leader. The Centre for Servant Leadership (Spears, 2005) identifies ten key characteristics of the servant leader, many of which arguably overlap with qualities of a mature coach: listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualisation, foresight, stewardship, commitment to growth of people, and building community. Servant leadership implies a holistic and comprehensive view, and coaches and mentors entering a servant leadership stage of their development will be engaged with a sense of purpose, which goes beyond their own personal quests for identity and meaning.

4. The opportunity and permission which coaching allows the coach to engage in lengthy stretches of presence and mindfulness.

There are few contexts in life in which we are required to really listen and hold the space for another. Developing presence and a mindful approach is almost a basic requirement in coaching, and arguably benefits the coach as much as the client. Many novice coaches are keenly aware of their tendency to interject or advise the client, and this self-doubt can be healthy. It enables the coach to question conditioning received through years of education and employment where success is equated to knowing the right answer or devising solutions. Whilst it's challenging initially to operate from a place of not knowing, once coaches experience that holding the space for their client is sometimes all they need to do, they may make shifts at a fundamental level within themselves, which often lead to other shifts and 'unconditionings'.

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5. Listening at deep levels

Developing deep listening skills (sometimes described as whole body listening) can be experienced as a state of transcendence or merging, which may be the vehicle for deeper truths and insights to emerge. Both coach and coachee may briefly enter a meditative or trance-like state and sense of being able to access wisdom which is experienced as within and sometimes beyond the self. This kind of peak experience might be described as a state of flow, but is not without its own hazards as it may prove an addictive state for the coach, or be used as a unique measure of the quality of the coaching itself.

6. Practicing unconditional positive regard, non-judgement towards the client

Person-centred principles exist within the foundations of coaching (Peltier, 2001), and the 'necessary and sufficient' conditions identified by Carl Rogers could be seen as having a spiritual dimension, which go beyond pure emotional intelligence, especially when one considers unconditional positive regard. When coaches develop their capacity for unconditional positive regard and a non-judgmental approach to clients, this may act as a catalyst to developing a more compassionate and heart-centred approach to work and life.

7. The privilege of seeing transformational change unfold

The 'Joy of Coaching', if a book with such a title was ever to grace a bookshelf, would no doubt include a chapter on transformational change, and the privilege to act as witness to the birth of something new, something which literally did not exist or was not manifest before. The self-generating capacity in humans, of 'life forward energy' (Weiser Cornell, 2005) hints at powerful cosmic forces of creation, renewal and healing, and participating in this level of change can be experienced as profound and potentially life-changing.

8. Experiencing moments of grace in the coaching relationship – where somehow God or the Universe come in to play

And finally, there are times when we acknowledge that something greater than ourselves is at work, when we experience moments of grace that exceed our expectations for what is possible, and where keys appear and doors open and we know that life will never be the same for our client. Somehow something really big has just happened, and it is time to be thankful for Whatever or Whoever helped that happen.

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Steps forward

So how do we individually, and as a profession develop more of a spiritual basis to our practice?

Perhaps one key to moving forward with spiritual approaches in coaching lies within *what we ourselves have experienced* in our own developmental journeys. This is part of what we bring into the room (Long, 2011), and which impacts the shared field with the client. When we experience shifts in our own spiritual development, especially in the context of our work, this paves the way for different levels of engagement with our clients. There are implications for how we develop ourselves spiritually, and nurture our ability to work from deep presence and compassion, whilst upholding field independence and the ability to ask fundamental 'why?' questions, two of twelve qualities of spiritual intelligence (Zohar, 2000, 2004). There are implications for our personal practices, development and self-care which go beyond conventional views on coach development, continuous professional development and supervision.

The sensitivities surrounding spirituality have made this area a challenging one for coaches to explore together. A desire to be seen as politically correct, the fear of causing offence or of being misunderstood, or simply coming across as irrational or out of touch with reality can create powerful barriers. In addition, we lack the language and experience to discuss spiritual themes across diverse perspectives, and there are few arenas in which we can do so.

Yet I believe it is vitally important that we do, and that our profession is poorer without them. My experience of running a number of events throughout 2011 shows that when we create safe and open environments, we gain ease in our own personal expression, a greater enthusiasm to learn from different perspectives, and renewed in our sense of personal purpose and contribution.

We need, however to move beyond the feel-good factor of spirituality, and dialogue with greater maturity and sense of purpose. Holding a spiritual perspective in our work shouldn't merely be part of personal branding, it needs to connect with where it's really needed and support both sustainable and transformational changes in ourselves, our clients and beyond. We need to build a better understanding of how to apply spiritual practices and perspectives and how we therefore manage expectations with clients about our way of working. We also need to develop an understanding of where the

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pitfalls are, and what 'shadow' elements to be watchful for, such as pride and the desire to control and exert power over others.

There are also implications for how we run coach development programmes, how we supervise, and how we evaluate coaches. Commonly, novice coaches are introduced to coaching via a fixed set of tools and processes which they learn to abandon at later stages in their development. Yet increasingly I encounter individuals who from the outset yearn for more emotionally and spiritually intelligent approaches, and who only later want to develop processes to contain their chosen approaches. Coach development programmes need to reflect the emotional and spiritual maturity of the individual by being more organic, person centred and self-directed.

Finally, spirituality encompasses sets of multi-faceted and interlinked principles, and each individual will have their preferred starting point. Yet it is vital that our spiritual expression is neither solely concerned with the personal experience and practice, nor solely concerned with purpose and agency in the world. Each of these two sides is diminished without the other. On the one hand, a purely individualistic spirituality becomes self-absorbed and irrelevant, whilst a purely service oriented spirituality can become dogmatic and sterile. Our journeys need eventually to encompass both practice *and* purpose elements. By doing so, we are able to increasingly bring a presence which is concerned with meeting the needs of the future whilst being compassionate and connected to ourselves and our clients.

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