



Dancing between Cultures: Culturally Intelligent Coaching for Missions and Ministry
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The Cultural Bias of Coaching

Coaching is a product of the West, specifically the U.S. As such it has a distinct cultural bias! This impacts the coaching relationship, the conversational model and process of the coaching, communication styles, even content of coaching sessions!

Let's take a quick look at some of the biases of traditional coaching, as it is often taught and promoted in coach training programs.

Status and Equality Values

In the area of Status and Equality values, coaching has a definite bent towards Equality value. Our orientation is to “walk alongside” our clients, assuming a non-hierarchical partnering relationship; whereas in Status-value cultures, the unspoken expectation is that EVERY relationship has someone of higher status and someone of lower status. Clients from Status cultures enter the coaching relationship with the assumption that the coach is either of higher or lower status than they are. If higher, the coach is owed respect and honor and because Status-value cultures often also believe that learning is best guided by a mentor, the coach will be expected to share stories, advice, and counsel. If the coach is perceived as lower status, the client may never start coaching! In addition, coaches are routinely trained to expect clients to tell us what they think rather than to treat the coach as an expert/teacher/guru. We expect our clients to answer questions from us rather than vice versa; and to share answers from their own perspective, rather than what they think we want to hear as the potentially higher status person. We even expect our clients to give us direct feedback about our performance as their coach and express their preferences freely (this also touches on the Communication value of Direct vs. Indirect). Western trained coaches expect clients to take initiative in the relationship (contact the coach, initiate scheduling, set up zoom links); while in other cultures, initiative would be expected from the higher status person (often perceived by the client to be the coach) and could be interpreted as a sign of care by the coach for the perceived lower status person (often the client). Coaching also assumes that coachees can change their level of influence through achievement and often overlooks the factor of role or status in the client's ability to effect change.

Autonomy and Community Values

Another value set, Autonomy vs. Community, also impacts how decisions are made and how change happens. Traditional coaching assumes that the individual has the power to change their own life; and in more humanistic coaching, even to determine their destiny. As such,

coaching's bias is definitely towards Autonomy value. Traditional coaching assumes that the individual can make decisions, and choose goals and action steps on their own, often without reference to others, *during* the coaching appointment. Community-value clients may be more likely to prefer group coaching; or to want to consult important others in their group, team, tribe, or family before committing to a goal or even to a small step. Consulting others becomes a regular action step.

Values related to Change and Planning

Crisis and Non-Crisis values relate to how people approach planning: whether anticipating and planning ahead, or having a more spontaneous, improvisational approach. Traditional coaching has a tendency towards Crisis value due to an emphasis on planning for the future, goal setting and action steps. Coaching is all about gaining clarity and making a plan to move forward: it is future-oriented. Non-Crisis orientation tends to be present-oriented and to deal with what is right now. However, a Non-Crisis value orientation can be expressed in coaching's tendency to believe that a solution will arise, that experience in the moment is important. Coaches embrace a Non-Crisis orientation when they are able to let go of the need to resolve situations that the coachee is not ready to resolve, believing that God will work in whatever comes; in starting with debriefing current experience and helping coachees find the relationship between that experience and bigger, future-oriented goals, rather than vice versa; and in recognizing that action steps may have changed based on the condition of the moment.

To a lesser extent, coaching often tends to value Risk over Caution; simply because coaching itself is about change and is centered around helping clients change. Coaches expect change and focus on change. Pace here is the key. Caution clients prefer a longer decision-making process and change can create anxiety. Incremental change is the preference. The value for Caution also impacts the coaching appointment itself and this is where especially new coaches will tend to favor Caution in the process of their coaching: following the same formula in each appointment. This does provide continuity and predictability for Caution-value clients. Risk clients will be open and interested in changes in routine, and discontinuous change.

Communication Values

One of the strongest value orientations of coaching is its emphasis on authenticity. Coaching's bias is definitely towards authenticity and Vulnerability value. In fact, without some vulnerability, especially in heart-transformation coaching, not much coaching can take place! Coaches expect clients to reveal where they are falling short; and coaches are trained to ask direct questions about action steps and noncompletion of goals at the beginning of each session! This is consistent with Vulnerability-value culture. Vulnerability-value people more readily admit when they have made mistakes and they are willing to try things that they may very well fail at.

Coaches expect that clients will trust them quickly and share openly about their goals, mistakes, failures and shortcomings. A common coaching phrase used in coach training programs is that 'mistakes are an opportunity to learn'. In Concealment cultures, protecting one's "face" or image is important. Shame is avoided and mistakes are quietly and discreetly covered. Trust can take a long time to establish. The first goal that a client brings will likely not be the "real" goal; that

would be revealed over time as trust is built. Some cross-cultural coaches have expressed that establishing trust and modeling and giving permission for vulnerability and sharing failures is a long process and that it is their first priority in creating the atmosphere in the coaching relationship that allows real change to take place. This is arguably one of the most challenging value continuums for coaching.

Traditional coaching has some flexibility regarding Direct or Indirect communication-value communication. Though coaches can use direct questions and occasionally challenge the coachee's patterns or responses, they are just as likely to ask lots of open questions, to watch and pray, to use metaphor or story. In high-context cultures, where lots of communication is nonverbal, the distance coach is handicapped; especially one who does not know the client or their culture well. Nonverbal cues can be easily missed by a Direct-culture coach, and this is magnified many times when using zoom, phone, or whatsapp, rather than in-person sessions.

Time Values

Coaching, because of its Western flavor, has a strong tendency towards time/schedule. Most coach training programs emphasize coaching etiquette which involves starting and ending on time and tends to interpret client lateness in terms of avoidance or lack of motivation. Coaches are trained to manage and maximize the use of time during the coaching session. Most coaching material on time management is clearly focused from a Western, schedule-oriented, efficiency perspective.

When it comes to Long-Term vs. Short-Term values, coaching can be quite versatile, focusing on whatever time period the client specifies. Coaches simply must be attuned to what the client sees as realistic or valuable, whether short term or long term. One note here that is important is the different value for leisure and recreation in Short- and Long-term cultures that the coach must adapt to.

Task and Relationship Values

Coaching seems fairly balanced in the area of Task/Relationship. Coaching is definitely based in relationship and depends on the power of relationship; and it's also action-oriented and goal-focused, which is more Task orientation. When coaching for performance, Task orientation is paramount. This orientation is also more pronounced in executive coaching, which tends to be fast-paced and focused on goal attainment. When coaching for transformation or character development issues, particularly heart transformation, goals and action steps tend to become more reflection-oriented, and the coaching, more relational.

Thinking Pattern Values

Finally, in terms of thinking patterns, coaching is more neutral in practice in regard to Conceptual and Practical values (starting with theory or starting with practice/experience). This could be because Western cultures vary on this continuum. Americans tend to be Practical, while Europeans tend towards Conceptual. Conceptual coaches will spend more time exploring and focusing on understanding and meaning; and Practical coaches on action planning;

however, coaching itself is flexible; and coaches would do well to adapt to the value their *client* prefers.

Coaching has some bias towards Dichotomistic (vs. Wholistic) value, especially in the sense that coach trainees are always taught a conversation management strategy or model such as GROW or the funnel, which exposes a bias towards linear conversation. Wholistic-value clients and coaches will be likely to find a linear conversational model quite limiting and artificial; while Dichotomistic coaches and clients would find the lack of a linear model confusing and disorienting.

Summary

Coaching itself has cultural value biases that the ethical and astute coach and coach trainer will learn to be aware of. When working cross-culturally, it is vital to not simply be aware of our own cultural values and our client's cultural values, but the cultural values of coaching itself. Ethical practice demands that we are both self-aware and client-aware; and able to adapt cross-culturally, for the benefit of our clients.