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Title: The Impact of the Inner Game and Sir John Whitmore on Coaching: A Commentary

Year of publication: 2009

Journal / Source: *Annual Review of High Performance Coaching and Consulting*

Citation: Passmore, J. (2009). The Impact of the Inner Game and Sir John Whitmore on Coaching: A Commentary. *Annual Review of High Performance Coaching and Consulting*. 41-44.

The Impact of the Inner Game and Sir John Whitmore on Coaching: A Commentary

Introduction

Simon Jenkin's article raises some interesting and contentious topics that are the subject of debate within coaching and between psychologists and non-psychologists. This commentary explores the notion of difference between psychological and non-psychological practitioners and the application of their knowledge to the arena of coaching. The commentary also reviews the contribution of writers and practitioners such as John Whitmore and Miles Downey to coaching practice.

Psychology: Does it matter and what for?

Jenkin's paper explores the debate around what is the nature of coaching psychology. It notes how the definition has been changing and developing over the past decade to reflect both scientist (academic) and practitioners thinking, but with a common base of practice being explicitly underpinned by psychological knowledge.

The debate however misses the question what is psychological knowledge. Many non-psychologists hold the view, that 'psychology' is a dark deep unknowable knowledge held by a few. Many psychologists take a different view, including myself. For many of us psychology is the study of human behaviour, cognition and emotion; that is, at its simplest, what we as people think, feel and do. As humans we all have direct experience of observing and thinking about what others are doing, thinking and feeling. We only need to sit at a table at Pizza Express to observe the couple talking, laughing or arguing, with their body language and facial expressions, to have a view about what others think and feel. George Kelly, a USA humanistic psychologist suggested the same, when he noted 'we are all psychologists'.

As practicing psychologists we may formalise some of these processes, observing larger groups or asking their opinions, so we can generalise our opinions (hypothesis) from the couple to the wider population. Further we create experiments to observe outcomes; such as what happens to the couple who have just had an argument when we call one of the couple away for a telephone call and send over a bunch of red roses to the other one with a note which says 'sorry'.

In coaching, I would suggest all coaches are concerned with what their coachee thinks, feels and does. They have views (hypotheses) about why this may be the case and plans (interventions) as to what they might do with their coachee to help them move forward. However, a coaching psychologist or a coach who trained is underpinned by psychological principles is likely to be able to go further in being able

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to describe why they have selected this plan rather than another, and what evidence (previous published studies) support the use of intervention A as opposed to intervention B.

From the coachee's perspective will they do anything different? My own research (Passmore, 2008) with a sample of some 250 experienced coaches in the UK drawn from members of the Association of Coaches (primarily a non-psychological trained group) and the BPS SGCP (primarily a psychological trained group) found that both psychologically trained coaches (either chartered or licensed with the BPS or an equivalent body) and non-psychologically trained coaches use the same behaviours drawn from a sample of coaching behaviours from humanistic, behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, motivational interviewing and psychodynamic models. While not conclusive the research appears to support the argument by trained coaches who are not trained in psychology that they do the same work as those coaches who have psychological background.

So what else may be the difference? The second difference noted in Jenkin's paper is that psychological coaches have a psychological underpinning to their work. It is true that chartered psychologists, due to the common aspects in their training, will all share a joint understanding of human motivation, behaviours and change. Although this common body of knowledge is not as common as one might think. Such a body of knowledge however is not exclusive to psychologists and many others with backgrounds in HR, consulting and other disciplines, have knowledge which overlaps with that held by psychologists, due to the common (doing, feeling, thinking) nature of psychological issues. What can be argued is that the best trained non-psychological coaches are likely to hold much of the knowledge of a psychologist, while less well trained coaches may rely of varying versions of intuition which may be close or far from the reality of the coachee. However, it is also fair to say that little, if any research has been undertaken to explore the knowledge differences between practicing coaching psychologists and non-psychologically trained coaches, and this is an area worthy of further research.

The third area which was not explored in the article, but is worthy of comment is the difference in the training between psychologists and non-psychologists when working with clients who have as yet undiagnosed clinical needs. Berglas (2002), writing about the USA business sector, suggested that the numbers in this category were sufficiently high to be a cause for concern that non-psychologically trained coaches were working with these individuals as if they were 'normal' and on the assumption they would respond to non-clinical interventions. Andrew and Carole Buckley (Buckley & Buckley, 2006) writing in the UK make a similar point, that mental health issues are wide spread and coaches will come into contact with these on a regular and frequent basis. However the recognition of such conditions can be difficult, even for psychologists. This is particularly true in the UK, where the major of UK coaching psychologists have a background and training in occupational settings, where clinical issues are not included as part of their training. As a result coaching

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training should include clinical aspects if we are to equip coaching psychologists and other practitioners with the skills needed to identify and refer such clients.

The final area which has been discussed, but again which is not covered in detail is the aspect of coaching research. While many practitioners are highly qualified, few have the level and rigour of training found among psychologists. This training provides a background in the scientific methods applied to the human condition, and as a result, much of the recent robust research has been undertaken by psychologists with an interest in coaching practice. This includes qualitative studies using recognised and respected methodologies such as Grounded Theory (Passmore, 2008) or Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Gyllensyen & Palmer 2005; Gyllensyen & Palmer, 2007), or quantitative approaches with control groups and random allocation of participants to conditions (Spence & Grant, 2007; Green, Grant & Rynsaardt, 2007). It is only through these methods that coaching is going to offer the evidence that it can make a difference to the lives of individual and secondly how it makes such this difference (Passmore & Gibbes, 2007). It is this research and peer reviewed publication which will help coaching establish itself as an separate evidenced based domain of practice.

The contribution of non-psychological writers

In the second part of Simon Jenkins article, Jenkin's moves to highlight the role of non-psychologically trained practitioners such as Sir John Whitmore and Miles Downey. Both are rightly attributed with taking coaching from what the very best humans naturally do when developing others, such as in the Greek myth of Alcumus, Odysseus and Mentor, into common parlance, and a skill which all good managers should have.

As always with such trends, coaching has caught the zeitgeist of the times. The new millennium has seen a stronger movement towards the individual and away from treating all employees the same. There has been a parallel movement towards personal learning and towards individuals taking greater responsibility in the workplace. Coaching, offers a way which organisations can deliver a more personalised development agenda.

In this process, Simon Jenkin's correctly identified John Whitmore as one of the defining figures of coaching. A writer, thinking and practitioner who may be has done more than anyone over the past decades to popularise coaching, through his Coaching for Performance titles which has sold 500,000 copies and has been translated in to thirty-two languages across the world including Korean and Turkish.

Jenkin's summarises the historical development of the coaching approach through Whitmore's work, but at the centre the two key concepts of awareness and responsibility are rightly highlighted. While less explicit in psychological writers these

principles run through the work of other leaders in the field from Tony Grant to Stephen Palmer.

Conclusion

While Jenkin's suggests that the divide between psychologists and non-psychologists is a dichotomy, it has been suggested in this commentary that this is a false dichotomy, which does no favours to either coaching psychologist or to coaching practitioners. Instead it has been argued that initial evidence suggests that in practical terms for the coachee there may be little difference in the practice between experienced coaches and experienced coaching psychologists. The prime difference may be in their ability to describe what they do or their interest in undertaking and writing research led publications, which help us to take the scientific aspects of this emerging domain forward.

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