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Professional Section

Authenticity in Coaching

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Abstract

As coaches and mentors we aspire to enable our clients to develop their own authentic personal style, to reflect their authentic values in their chosen outcomes and to realise their innate potential. To do this end we seek to develop our own self-awareness and our ability to be fully present in the learning relationship. In this article the authors explore methods of achieving high levels of self-awareness, self-understanding and self-management and the positive physiological effects of being in this state of flow. They also offer us some simple tools, techniques and technology which we can practise and use in the moment to support the sustainable development of this state within us.

Keywords: Authenticity, Self-Awareness, Emotional Intelligence, HeartMath®, Flow, Interference

Authenticity in Coaching

There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and will be lost.

Martha Graham

Introduction

Coaching has grown markedly in the past twenty years into an established professional discipline. The wide range of coaching literature, comprising books and articles exploring various aspects and approaches of coaching, testifies to this rich and rapid growth. A common thread in much of the contemporary professional discussion is the fundamental importance of the coach's self-awareness. This is also a theme that features prominently in the curricula of coaching courses around the world – those of the UK's OCM and Henley and Ashridge Business Schools, the Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, the Institute of Executive Coaching of Australia, to name but a few. In the present stringent economic environment, budgets for coaching in all sectors are being squeezed and organisations are demanding more for less, placing coaches under ever more pressure to deliver quick and effective results. At the same time, the increasing focus on professional standards includes the essential need for coaches to maximise their own objectivity and presence. For example, the International Coach Federation (ICF) Code of Ethics requires a coach to “recognise personal issues that may impair, conflict, or interfere with coaching performance” (ICF, 2010) and the Association for Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision (APECS) Ethical Guidelines similarly demands that a coach “look after oneself physically, emotionally, mentally and motivationally so that clients and organisations receive the best service possible” (APECS, 2010). The authors consider a high level of self-awareness and self-management to be a fundamental professional coaching standard and also understand the challenge of achieving and sustaining it.



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Authenticity: the What? the Who?

Our ability to develop our own self-awareness and to be fully present in the learning relationship supports our capacity for “genuineness” (Connor & Pokora, 2007), which “involves being aware of our own feelings and being able to use them to connect in a real way with the client, rather than hiding behind a façade or professional veneer.” To connect in a genuine or authentic way with our client is a significant – and arguably, the most important – part of our ability to coach and mentor effectively. Sometimes we find ourselves able to connect quite naturally, at other times this can be more challenging. And the greatest challenge of all is acknowledging that the reason for this lies within ourselves. If we are unable to connect in a real way with ourselves, we will be less effective at building connection with our client.

In the domain of leadership, an authentic leader has been described as “the kind of leader people want to follow”. (Silsbee, 2008). Authentic leaders in different domains – Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Admiral Lord Nelson, Mother Theresa – were all people who invited us, in Silsbee’s words “to join in something that is ennobling, that is greater and more worthwhile.” Contemporary successful business leaders are often characterised by their “credibility”, and this quality is sometimes used interchangeably with authenticity, whereas it is really only one facet of it. Authenticity is deeper and broader: it is the unadulterated embodiment of our intention. As Gandhi said: “You must be the change you want to see in the world.” Many of us are fortunate to have met or to know people like this today: ordinary people who quietly and privately live their lives in harmony with this principle and others who sincerely commit that intention to their families, their work, their community. Their authenticity is deep and powerful: it both defines their character and generates a connection with something innate, but perhaps buried, within us. They embody, to quote Covey (2004), “the natural principles and processes on which a high-trust culture is based.”

The work of practitioners in the field of emotional intelligence brings a further dimension to this theme. Bharwaney (2007) described emotional intelligence (EI) as “an essential mix of emotional, personal and social competencies that influences our overall ability actively and effectively to cope with daily demands and pressures”. Grant and Greene (2003) list EI as an essential quality of a great manager-coach. Whitmore (2009) distinguishes general awareness from self-awareness: “Awareness is perceiving things as they really are; self-awareness is recognising those internal factors that distort one’s own perception of reality.” Whilst the authors have used a variety of EI frameworks, we have found the BarOn Emotional Quotient Inventory™ (EQ-i®) to be the most popular and well validated tool. Table 1 provides a short summary of the EQ scales.



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Table 1: EQi™ Descriptions (published by Multi Health Systems, Toronto, www.mhs.com)

EQ-i™ is a trademark of Multi Health Systems Inc, Toronto, Canada. It is the first scientifically developed and validated measure of Emotional Quotient (EQ). The Author is Dr. Reuven Bar-On.

INTRAPERSONAL

Self-awareness and self expression.

Self regard (SR)	To perceive, understand and accept yourself accurately.
Emotional self-awareness (ES)	To be aware of and understand your emotions.
Assertiveness (AS)	To express yourself and your emotions effectively and constructively.
Independence (IN)	To be self-reliant and free of emotional dependency on others.
Self-Actualisation (SA)	To strive to achieve personal goals and to actualise your potential.

INTERPERSONAL

Social awareness and interpersonal relationship.

Empathy (EM)	To be aware of and understand how others feel.
Social responsibility (RE)	To identify with your social group and co-operate with others.
Interpersonal relationship (IR)	To establish mutually satisfying relationships and relate well with others.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Emotional Management and regulation.

Stress tolerance (ST)	To manage your emotions effectively and constructively.
Impulse control (IC)	To control your emotions effectively and constructively.

ADAPTABILITY

Change management.

Reality testing (RT)	To validate your feelings and thinking objectively against external reality.
Flexibility (FL)	To adapt and adjust your feelings and thinking to new situations.
Problem solving (PS)	To solve problems of a personal and interpersonal nature effectively.

GENERAL MOOD

Self Motivation.

Optimism (OP)	To be positive and look at the brighter side of life.
Happiness (HA)	To feel content with yourself, others and life in general.



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Orme and Bar-On (2002) explained how humans are driven to satisfy four basic needs – meaning, self-expression, relationships and balance. Amongst other combinations, a balance of the three EQ components of Emotional Self-Awareness, Empathy and Reality Testing indicate someone who is in touch with themselves, with others and the situation they find themselves in. The authentic coach is therefore someone who is in tune with their emotional intelligence and can navigate themselves through any interaction by acknowledging the strengths of the person they are interacting with, while remaining true to their own. O'Neill (2007) recommends that we develop a healthy balance of “backbone and heart”, whereby we are strong and flexible and also able, through genuine empathy, to stay engaged in the relationship. “Your resourcefulness and authenticity are crucial dimensions of your work ... The worst-case scenario occurs when you are unaware ... and you run your client through a methodology that rings hollow to the dilemma your client faces.”

Authenticity: what stops us connecting in a real way with our feelings?

As coaches, our varying level of connection with our client derives from our own “Inner Game”. Gallwey (1986) describes his personal experience that “the true goal of the Inner Game is to be found within.” At those times when we are able to connect with our client quite naturally, we feel a state of wholeness referred to elsewhere as “the zone”, “flow” or “oneness”. In Gallwey’s terms, this is the result of our “letting go of ‘should’” so that we can be in touch with the sense of who and what we truly are. As a tennis coach, he had learned that we connect best with our inner selves when we achieve detachment from self-concern and we “let the natural concern of a deeper self take over ... It happens when one lets go of attachment to the results of one’s actions and allows the increased energy to come to bear on the action itself.”

The simple equation for this, as developed by Downey (2003) is:

potential minus interference is equal to performance

Downey cites some examples of the interference which blocks our ability to focus on the desired outcome: fear, lack of confidence, the ‘be perfect’ driver, anger, boredom and frustration. These and other forms of negative self-talk arise from our perception of the world around us, both people and events, and from our own perceived performance limitations. The interference can become an ongoing, energy-draining, emotional undercurrent of judgement, negative projection, insecurity and worry. This can generate a habitual response-pattern that does not serve us well and which drains our capacity to be authentic. In the words of Victor Frankl (1959): “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.” As coaches, our aim is to help our clients inhabit and exploit that space.



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As Egan (1994) observed: "Many clients ... are involved in problem situations they are not handling well. These clients need ways of dealing with, solving or transcending their problem situations. In other words, they need to manage their problems in living effectively." It is difficult to see how we can help and support our clients to do this unless we are self-aware enough to manage our own "problems in living". O'Neill (2007) underlines this: "Our goal should be to minimize how often we are reactive and recover equilibrium more quickly." We can do this by consciously tuning into our own being and by letting go of our own internal interference, so that we create an authentic connection with our clients that generates flow.

The Physiology of Flow

For the past 20 years scientists at the Institute of HeartMath⁷ have studied the mind-body-emotion relationship (Cryer et al, 2003), to understand the effect of internal interference on our mind, heart and other body systems and the precise emotional, mental and physiological levers that can counteract it. They have found that emotions affect the rhythm of our heart – or beat-to-beat changes in our heart known as our heart rate variability (HRV) – in different ways. Positive emotions like compassion, appreciation and kindness generate a smooth, flowing rhythm pattern whereas interference emotions like anxiety, irritation, frustration, generate a chaotic heart rhythm pattern.

They have also found that a smooth, flowing HRV pattern synchronises with many other rhythms and systems in our body – our respiratory and blood-pressure rhythms, our higher-level brain systems, our autonomic nervous system, our hormonal system – and thereby aligns our physical, cognitive and emotional systems. The Institute of HeartMath has termed this state of optimal functioning and flow "physiological coherence", which is qualitatively different from relaxation. "The state of coherence promotes a calm, emotionally balanced yet alert and responsive state that is conducive to cognitive and task performance, including problem solving, decision making and activities requiring perceptual acuity, attentional focus, co-ordination and discrimination." (McCraty & Childre, 2010).

Generating Flow

Over time, HeartMath has devised a system of easy to learn and use tools, techniques and technology to enable us to generate flow in the moment. They help people make positive emotional and attitudinal shifts that induce the coherence state. This process helps us and our clients to recognise that habitual emotional patterns either deplete or renew our physical, mental and emotional resources. We achieve increased personal coherence as we learn to self-regulate our emotions from an intuitive, intelligent and balanced inner reference. By learning how to create and sustain a positive emotional shift, we can actually facilitate "a repatterning process in our neural architecture where coherence becomes established as a new, stable baseline norm. Self-regulation of emotions and stress responses then becomes increasingly familiar and, eventually, automatic." (McCraty et al, 2004-2005). We can, effectively, learn how to be in the space Frankl describes, and learn how to be in genuinely authentic flow. The "zone" is within all of us; getting there is an internal developmental process.

⁷ The Institute of HeartMath is recognised as one of the world's foremost authorities on emotional physiology, resilience, stress and optimal performance.



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The Relational Field

Many of us have experienced a sense of chemistry, or the opposite, with another person, or have sensed the atmosphere among a group of people in a room (quite independently of their body language). We often talk about people being on the same wavelength as us. Research conducted in the laboratory of the Institute of HeartMath has shown that when an individual is in heart coherence, the heart radiates a more coherent electromagnetic signal into the environment that can be detected by nearby animals or the nervous systems of other people (McCraty 2004). The heart generates the largest rhythmic electromagnetic field of all the body's organs, one that is approximately 60 times greater in amplitude and 5000 times stronger than that produced by the brain and can be detected several feet from the body, in all directions (McCraty et al, 1996). So we are literally living in each other's electromagnetic field and how we fill that field has a real impact on our ability to transmit and capture true meaning; our ability to connect in a real way with ourselves is actually the key to connecting in a real way with others.

Authenticity: The How?

We can start by returning to the theme raised by Connor and Pakora (2007) "being aware of our own feelings and being able to use them ... " – in other words, self-awareness and self-management. There are many ways we can develop these. In the authors' view the most beneficial and effective method is a holistic one, which embraces both psychological and physiological awareness, along the lines of the following four-step approach:

1. *Psychological Self-Awareness. A reliable, thoroughly validated emotional intelligence measurement tool will provide helpful insight into our current psychological state, particularly when that insight is facilitated by an experienced coach who is trained in the tool. By becoming more aware of the depth and balance of our psychological profile, we can assess how well our profile is serving us now and which aspects of it might serve us better if we managed them more effectively.*
2. *Physiological Self Awareness. PC and hand-held technology developed by HeartMath measures the degree of smoothness, or chaos, of our HRV and thereby gives us both in-the-moment feedback on our physiological coherence and also a view of our coherence pattern over time. By becoming more aware of how our emotions are affecting our body, particularly the negative emotions associated with our internal interference, we can learn to transform them into healthier, more resilient and flowing energy.⁸*

⁸ The beneficial results of this emWave® technology have been validated by numerous clinical studies at major corporations and leading hospitals, and published in multiple peer-reviewed scientific journals.



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- 3. Emotional Focusing and Restructuring. Our ability to remain in balance, instead of reacting emotionally to daily demands and pressures, saves energy and enables us to respond more authentically. To do this reliably, we need to shift our focus inwards, away from the external negative stimulus, to re-connect with ourselves. HeartMath has developed a system of emotional refocusing and restructuring tools and techniques, which create internal coherence and enable us to access a state of calm and optimum mental and emotional flexibility, at any time, in any situation.*

The change in the HRV pattern is immediate (Figure 1) and, if we repeat this regularly, over time we can restructure our neural circuits and establish a more coherent baseline of autonomic nervous system activity.

- 4. Goal Setting. The deeply personal feedback we gain from the intentional shift into a positive emotional state provides a tangible benchmark against which we can actually measure our developing self-awareness, self-management and sense of connectedness. Setting ourselves meaningful goals will shape and support this important journey.*



Authenticity: the When? the Where?

Szabó and Meier (2008), who developed the solution-focused coaching model, make a convincing case for brevity and simplicity in coaching and for coaching in a “relaxed and minimalistic” way. They remind us that “coaching should primarily be defined by its effects.” This has never been more relevant than it is today and now is the time for us to take on board these tools and develop a strong authenticity, a grounded signature presence, to enable us to serve our clients most effectively. The authors believe that relaxed, simple and effective coaching occurs when we feel at ease and connected with ourselves and our client, and indeed cannot occur if we are not. In this way we can use all our “senses to communicate a real belief in the worth and capacity of the client to achieve what they want and value.” (Connor & Pokora, 2007). The power to develop this authentic connection lies within us, readily accessible, just waiting for us to tune in.

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Sally-Anne Airey is an executive coach, with 29 years' experience as a leader, manager, trainer and coach in government service, business and education, in the UK, France, Germany, Eastern Europe and the USA. Resident in Moscow, she works internationally and cross-culturally. She is principally interested in the development of emotional intelligence and resilience to achieve personal and professional success. She is a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development and a Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists in the UK.

Geetu Bharwaney has specialised in emotional intelligence research, development and evaluation since 1999. She is author of 'Emotionally Intelligent Living' (Crown House Publishing, 2001,2007) and several articles and papers on emotional intelligence. She is a member of the Ei Consortium (www.eiconsortium.org), a group of academics and practitioners who disseminate best practices in the areas of emotional intelligence research and development. She is particularly interested in using emotional intelligence assessments and tools from the HeartMath system to help clients be in touch with their 'inner leader'. She completed her Masters in Psychology of Health, with Distinction from City University. She is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.



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