

# Speaker's Corner: Coach-Mentoring Shifting Cultures – Balancing Cultural Perspectives

*'The challenge of modernity is to bring the world together into a unified whole in the middle of which diversity can exist. The respect for difference works only if connected with this vision.'*

Malidoma Patrice Somé

This quote from Somé's *Of Water and the Spirit* (1994)

captures for me the essence of a sustainable

approach to harmonious living and working. I was introduced to Somé's work during a phone interview I conducted late last year on behalf of one of my coachees, a South American male, with his functional line manager, an Eastern European male. My interviewee was one of ten key stakeholders who my coachee had asked me to interview for the purpose of generating a feedforward report in support of his own coaching programme. My coachee had previously alluded to some challenges he had experienced in relating to his functional boss. Going into this interview, I found myself curious to understand what might lie behind them.

During the course of our 50-minute conversation, I was listening for any differences and similarities in attitude, behaviours, communication style and values between my coachee and his functional boss. The two individuals have different cultural backgrounds, different interests and different experience. They see the world in rather different ways. But they have two important aims in common: they both want to achieve the best possible business outcome for the large, global, multinational organisation which employs them, and they want to do this in harmony with their own values and with each other. These were the seeds I believed I needed to nurture in order

to generate the mutual understanding, tolerance and trust necessary for their relationship, and their mutual business area, to prosper.

In light of his feedforward report, my coachee broadened and deepened his coaching goals, with a greater focus on relationship building, influencing, negotiating and developing a more coaching leadership style. Our approach to working together has been holistic, drawing on multiple perspectives both for choosing meaningful objectives and for attaining them effectively. He has found that taking time to build relationships and engender trust has enabled him to step outside his comfort zone and try something different. He has begun, in Philippe Rosinski's (2003)<sup>1</sup> words, to 'leverage differences'.

## The power of organisational culture

The culture of my coachee's sponsor organisation is strong and unifying. Like many other large organisations, it is shaped by a wide range of experiences shared by overlapping groups of individuals based on ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, language, professional background, race, religion, sexual orientation and several other characteristics. In the past 30 years, there have been various attempts to define and characterise national, societal and organisational cultural difference. In 1982, Deal and Kennedy<sup>2</sup> defined organisational culture in succinct, simple terms: 'the way things get done around here'. Hofstede's (1980)<sup>3</sup> work on national cultural

difference identified four dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity.

One of the most widely quoted models of organisational culture was developed by Handy (1988)<sup>4</sup>, who identified four cultural groups: power, task, person and role. In 1989, Morgan<sup>5</sup> offered several different metaphors for organisational culture that have since become embedded in our cultural lexicon:

- an intangible 'social glue' that holds everything together: how the language, norms, values, rituals, myths, stories and daily routines form part of a coherent 'reality' that lends shape to how and what people do as they go about their work
- an iceberg: 'what you see on the surface is based on a much deeper reality'
- an onion: 'corporate culture ... has different layers ... (which) lead to the innermost values and assumptions that lend meaning to the outward aspects of the culture'
- an umbrella: 'overarching values and visions that unite ... the individuals or groups working under the umbrella'

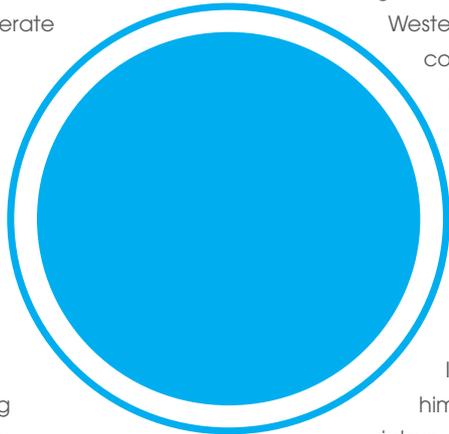
Whether working from a culture definition or metaphor, there are several threads running through the concept of culture

(the social glue). As we know, individuals' values and assumptions are rarely openly stated and yet they significantly influence how people make sense of what happens to them. An organisation's values



## Sally-Anne Airey

may be stated publicly, but the deeper reality from which they are drawn is also largely hidden (the iceberg). When we coach individuals, groups and teams in organisations, I suggest that we need to be able to operate at a multidimensional level, to surface these values and assumptions and to support a more inclusive understanding of multiple perspectives.



In his work on coaching across cultures, Philippe Rosinski offered the following definition, 'A group's culture is the set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group'. Rosinski views culture in a dynamic and inclusive fashion – ie we don't need to give up our own cultural preferences, but we can learn from other cultures while enriching our own and having more choices available.

Into this mix comes the question of identity: a coachee may be both a professional and a parent. As coach-mentors, we may find ourselves exploring how the values associated with each can be in conflict and we might encourage a coachee in this position to explore what synchronising them might look and feel like.

### Coaching through cultural transition

From 2005-2013, I lived and worked in Eastern Europe, firstly in Kyiv, Ukraine, and then in Moscow. I now live in France and regularly travel to Moscow to work with clients there. One is a Russian male senior executive in a multinational. During the course of his 16 years in the same organisation, he has experienced many mergers and acquisitions as the Russian operation has grown and developed. He

has needed to adapt to a constantly shifting organisational culture while developing his own professional profile and positioning himself competitively alongside his English-speaking, Western European colleagues. The more senior he has become, the more challenging he has found it to adopt the behaviours expected of a senior manager.

In my work with him, I've observed an interesting duality. On the one hand, he's a deep professional expert with a thorough understanding of the cultural norms of an organisation he has known for many years; on the other hand he's a Russian, deeply influenced by his national origin, race and language. We jointly observed that, in stressful situations, the win-lose negotiating tactics characteristic of his national cultural background unduly influenced his negotiating behaviours and undermined the outcomes he would have preferred to achieve. Our work together has again been holistic, and has focused on raising and balancing his awareness, developing his strategic behaviours and practising tools and techniques for enabling him to manage his emotions in the moment. With a greater sense of spaciousness and resourcefulness, he has felt better able to tolerate and leverage difference.

Last year, in an article on 'Diversity on a Global Scale in HR Management', IBM's Vice President for Global Workforce Diversity was quoted as follows: 'We're seeing that culture now extends to areas of difference such as technical orientation, management style and other domains, which affect how we run the business and interact with others ... When you begin to build a culture that is respectful and inclusive around things like

race, gender and sexual orientation, the organisation learns the skills to manage without assumption.'

In the context of coach-mentoring in shifting cultures, I believe that our role is to help people find new ways of reconciling alternatives and building meaningful, trusting relationships. In this way, as Philippe Rosinski advocates, people can start to leverage the differences that may previously have divided them, achieving unity in diversity and thence competitive advantage for their organisation.

### References:

1. Rosinski, P. (2003) *Coaching Across Cultures: New Tools for Leveraging National, Corporate and Professional Differences*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
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3. Hofstede, G. (1980) *Cultures Consequences*, Thousand Oaks, California, Sage.
4. Handy, C. (1988) *Understanding Voluntary Organisations*, Harmondsworth, Pelican.
5. Morgan, G. (1989) *Creative Organisation Theory: A resource book*, Newbury Park, California, Sage.

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