



Bridge Across Cultures

Dealing with cultural differences in the coaching relationship

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In a world as complex as ours, each of us is shaped by many factors, and culture is one of the powerful forces that acts on us. Anthropologists Kevin Avruch and Peter Black explain the importance of culture this way:

“... One’s own culture provides the ‘lens’ through which we view the world; the ‘logic’... by which we order it; the ‘grammar’ ... by which it makes sense.” (Avruch and Black, 1993)

“Ask yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions and what new information might be helpful.”

The original meaning of the word coach was “a vehicle whose purpose is to take a very important person from where they are to where they desire to be...”

In other words, culture is central to what we see, how we make sense of what we see, and how we express ourselves.

As people from different cultural groups take on the exciting challenge of working together, cultural values sometimes conflict. We can misunderstand each other and react in ways that can hinder what are otherwise promising partnerships. Oftentimes, we aren’t aware that culture is acting upon us. Sometimes, we are not even aware that we have cultural values or assumptions that are different from others!

Learning is all about awareness and being open to new possibilities. We should consider two very important

questions that help to shed light on ways to approach cultural differences in the coaching arena:

1. What do I need to unlearn?
2. What new information do I need?

Cross-cultural coaching relationships are very much like cross cultural friendships. Each is built around some shared interests, experience, background or characteristics. Such relationships often form around the appearance of sameness or similarity in one or more of the attributes outlined above.

However, the individuals are never quite the same. One needs to maintain a “double-consciousness” which recog-

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Patterns of Cultural Differences

Six fundamental patterns of cultural differences – ways in which cultures, as a whole, tend to vary from one another – point out some of the recurring causes of cross-cultural communication difficulties that require some unlearning on our part in order to overcome barriers to good communication. Next time you find yourself in a confusing situation, and you suspect that cross-cultural differences are at play, try reviewing this list. Ask yourself how culture may be shaping your own reactions and what new information might be helpful in clarifying the confusion.

1

INTERACTIVE STYLES

The way people communicate varies widely between, and even within, cultures. One aspect of communication style is language usage. Across cultures, some words and phrases are used in different ways. For example, even in countries that share the English language, the meaning of “yes” varies from “maybe, I’ll consider it” to “definitely so,” with many shades in between.

Another major aspect of communication style is the degree of importance given to non-verbal communication. Non-verbal communication includes not only facial expressions and gestures; it also involves seating arrangements, personal distance, and sense of time. In addition, different norms regarding the appropriate degree of assertiveness in communicating can add to cultural misunderstandings. For instance, some white Americans typically consider raised voices to be a sign that a fight has begun, while some black, Jewish and

Italian Americans often feel that an increase in volume is a sign of an exciting conversation among friends. Thus, some white Americans may react with greater alarm to a loud discussion than would members of some American ethnic or non-white racial groups.

2

ORIENTATION TO CONFRONTATION/ CONFLICT

Some cultures view conflict as a positive thing, while others view it as something to be avoided. In the U.S., conflict is not usually desirable, but people often are encouraged to deal directly with conflicts that do arise. In fact, face-to-face meetings customarily are recommended as the way to work through whatever problems exist. In contrast, in many Eastern countries, open conflict is experienced as embarrassing or demeaning; as a rule, differences are best worked out quietly. A written exchange might be the favored means to address the conflict.

In a coaching situation, we often perceive a need to challenge a statement the client has made or a point of view that has been expressed. We must keep in mind that the act of challenging may create a state of conflict with the client which can, in turn, create a barrier to the development of a strong coach/client relationship. Coaches must be aware of how that client processes conflict culturally.

3

ORIENTATION TO TASK COMPLETION

From culture to culture, there are different ways that people

move toward completing tasks. Some reasons include different access to resources, different judgments of the rewards associated with task completion, different notions of time, and varied ideas about how relationship-building and task-oriented work should go together.

When it comes to working together effectively on a task, cultures differ with respect to the importance placed on establishing relationships early on in the collaboration. A case in point: Asian and Hispanic cultures tend to attach more value to developing relationships at the beginning of a shared project and more emphasis on task completion toward the end as compared with European-Americans. European-Americans tend to focus immediately on the task at hand, and let relationships develop as they work on the task. This does not mean that people from any one of these cultural backgrounds are more or less committed to accomplishing the task, or value relationships more or less; it means they may pursue them differently.

As the coach works to establish the initial contract with the client around desired outcomes, he/she must be sensitive to how aggressively they approach the discussion of tasks and task completion strategy.

4

ORIENTATION TO DECISION-MAKING

The roles individuals play in decision-making vary widely from culture to culture. For example, in the U.S., decisions are frequently delegated – for example, an official assigns responsibility for a particular matter to a subordinate. In many Southern

European and Latin American countries, there is a strong value placed on holding decision-making responsibilities to oneself. When decisions are made by groups of people, majority rule is a common approach in the U.S.; in Japan consensus is the preferred mode. Be aware that individuals' expectations about their own roles in shaping a decision may be influenced by their cultural frame of reference.

In coaching, decisions need to be owned by the individual being coached in order to be most effective. How coaches help clients get to various decision points is key in the coaching relationship. The coach must not make assumptions about what it will take to get a client to a decision based upon the client's culture or gender. Active listening and leading from behind are very important approaches when trying to determine how best to get a client to make and own a decision.

5 VIEWS RELATED TO PRIVACY

In some cultures, it is not appropriate to be frank about emotions, about the reasons behind a conflict or a misunderstanding, or about personal information. Keep this in mind when you are in a dialogue or when you are working with others. When you are dealing with a conflict, be mindful that people may differ in what they feel comfortable revealing. Questions that may seem natural to you – What was the conflict about? What was your role in the conflict? What was the sequence of events? – may seem intrusive to

others. The variation among cultures in attitudes toward disclosure is also something to consider before you conclude that you have an accurate reading of the views, experiences and goals of the people whom you are coaching.

6 ORIENTATION TO KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Notable differences occur among cultural groups when it comes to epistemologies – that is, the ways people come to know things. European cultures tend to consider information acquired through cognitive means, such as counting and measuring, more valid than other ways of coming to know things. Compare that to African cultures' preference for affective ways of knowing, including symbolic imagery and rhythm. Asian cultures' epistemologies tend to emphasize the validity of knowledge gained through striving toward transcendence. (Nichols, 1976) Recent popular works demonstrate that our own society is paying more attention to previously overlooked ways of knowing.

You can see how different approaches to knowing could affect ways of analyzing a coaching problem or finding ways to resolve it. Some clients may respond better to being referred to books and articles to gain new ideas and approaches to issues they are facing. Others may prefer provocative dialog to stimulate their thinking. A critical component to coaching cross culturally is to be keenly aware of how the client best processes information.

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nizes the importance of feeling both the same and different, of acknowledging the essence of 'me' while understanding that relationships need not transcend race or ethnicity but can embrace differences and be enriched by them.

“Individual coaches must examine their own motives and assumptions in the coaching relationship.”

Cross-boundary relationships face special barriers. Language differences and perceptions of accents can block the formation of a mutually beneficial relationship. Americans tend to perceive having an accent as a sign of ignorance. Alien styles of socializing may also make it difficult to begin relationships. For example, strongly sex-divided social spheres make coaching with some male executives more difficult for females. Finally, unconscious racism can be a potent barrier to coaching relationships.

Cross-cultural coaching involves a great deal of introspection. Individual coaches must examine their own motives and assumptions in the coaching relationship. The coach and client must engage in a process of ongoing explanation to each other, clarifying their intentions and reactions. ●

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