The Coach as Reflective Practitioner:
Notes from a Journey Without End

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Introduction

“If we don’t move forward on this, someone is going to wind up in the hospital.”

On this dramatic note ended a team meeting led by Alan, the Vice President of a global corporation’s product division. Such declarations were typical of Alan, whose intimidating style left him isolated from his team and who was the object of occasional reproach from his boss. As a consultant to the team, I had become convinced that Alan’s enormous leadership strengths were limited by his proportionally long shadow. Although I established a good initial base for working with him, I was unable to build on it to bring about meaningful behavior change. Why not, I wondered?

Questions like this prompted me to begin reflecting systematically on my practice as a coach. All too often I had found myself winging it—while of course pretending that I knew exactly what I was doing. I realized that I was engaging in what was primarily an intuitive form of working with my clients. As I thought about my practice, the serious limitations of working on an intuitive basis became clearer. My reflections have given me insight into the limits and accomplishments of my work with Alan and other clients. This in turn has helped me identify areas in which I need to grow. I came to understand that the best way for me to review my practice was to begin creating a model that made explicit the various influences on my coaching practice.

In this chapter, I offer a general framework for constructing a model of coaching and describe my efforts to apply it to my own practice. In doing this, my goals is to encourage other coaches to review their own practices and to provide a tool that might be useful as they build their own personal models. The chapter is organized around an introductory rationale for and presentation of the framework, followed by an account of
how I have used its various elements to reflect on my coaching practice and begin building a coaching model. In order to make concrete the practical implications of a model, I report on my investigation into my work with Alan and two other clients, describing how these experiences both reflected and informed my core practices.

**Becoming a Reflective Practitioner**

As I began thinking of how to construct a model, Donald Schön’s studies of the reflective practitioner came to mind (Schön, 1982, 1986). His research on professionals in action lends support to the notion that coaching is more art than science. In studying professions as diverse as architecture and psychotherapy, he found that when faced with the challenge of choosing among competing theories to deal with unique cases, practitioners create artistic performance in which they respond to complexity in a simple, spontaneous way. Schön gives that artistry a name—*reflection-in-action*. When exercising this artistry, practitioners frame problems, devise and experiment with solutions, and reframe as the situation talks back. They make sense of the situation not through rote application of a theory, but with reference to a “repertoire of examples, images, understandings and actions” (Schön, 1982, p.163).

There is an irony in Schön’s work. Although the professionals he studies are reflective in that they make non-routine decisions in the moment, his research suggests that they tend to exercise their artistry in an unself-conscious and therefore relatively unreflective way (Schön, 1987, pp. 119-156). In such interactions, the practitioner who is aware of his or her methods has an edge over those who are naïve about their craft. A coach with this awareness is more likely to be able to recognize the limits of his or her
approach and treat it as a set of hypotheses, subject to continuous testing and revision. Such a coach will also be more able to invite a client into a partnership and employ methods that are transparent and subject to mutual influence.

For these reasons a coach would do well to aspire to being a truly reflective practitioner, capable of the following qualities:

- Awareness of their own filters for making meaning of coaching interactions
- Awareness of their own assumptions, methods, and tools
- Commitment to an inquiring stance toward their effectiveness
- Ability to regard each new client as a fresh challenge to a model in continuous evolution.

I see the creation of a personal model as a means to becoming a reflective practitioner of this kind. Reflecting on my model is a way for me to think about my practice out of the moment of client contact and allows me to be more conscious of making choices from a range of theoretical and methodological repertories that, in turn, inform and deepen my core practices. Ultimately, to be a reflective practitioner is to see in the moment of client interaction everything one would see if one were to step out of the moment and reflect. Clearly, this is an unobtainable goal, but small steps may be taken toward reaching that aim by routinely allowing time out to adopt a posture of inquiry. This stance distinguishes the reflective from the intuitive practitioner.

Recognizing that others might approach the challenge of model building in a different way, I concluded that the best way to review my practice was to create a framework that identified three influences that inform a coach’s core practices: the coach’s vision, the coach’s frames for understanding human behavior, and the coach’s
**personal profile.** Together these elements constitute a framework for model building (see Figure 1). Fleshed out to describe a particular practice, these elements, interacting dynamically with one another, constitute what I mean by a model. It is critical to conceive a model with explicit reference to how the coach and client co-shape the coaching relationship, so that is also reflected in the framework. In the remainder of the chapter, I use the framework to document my reflections on my practice and describe the model that has evolved—and will continue to evolve.
Vision

Until I began reflecting on my model, I would have been hard pressed to articulate my vision of coaching. I have come to believe that making one’s vision explicit is a critical element of a coaching model. A coach necessarily has an image of the enterprise that guides what he or she is doing, whether explicit or tacit. Without awareness of that vision and how it is formed, coaches will be blind to at least some of their motives for intervening in certain ways. This idea came home to me when I heard Peter Block advocate an approach to executive coaching based on helping people “become the authors of their own experience.” On hearing this view, I recognized it as a tacit vision of coaching that I had been moving toward for some time; this conscious acknowledgement proved quite helpful to me. Indeed, it led me to recognize conflicting tensions in my vision of coaching between advocating such an aspiration versus accepting a client’s goals even when they are more limited. I address this tension below.

Origins of a Practice

David Kantor suggests that all practice begins through imitation. Consciously or unconsciously, we all begin by appropriating approaches from others—parents, teachers, and role models of other kinds. Upon reflection it was clear that the base from which I began to imitate came from my graduate education. I was inspired to become a consultant by exposure to the work that a renowned theorist/practitioner, Chris Argyris, had developed in conjunction with Donald Schön and others—work referred to as *Action Science* (Argyris & Schön, 1975; Argyris, Putnam, & Smith, 1985; Torbert, 1991).
With a background in Action Science, it is no surprise that in working with Alan, I made the following statement in the conversation in which I proposed a coaching relationship:

It appears that you send mixed messages to the team. On the one hand, you frequently make statements about the value of openness and participation. On the other hand, you are seen as a leader who sometimes goes around subordinates to directly solve problems.

I then gave examples from the interviews to support the perception, and went on to ask, “What’s your reaction to this view?”

This statement is a typical Action Science intervention, calling attention to a gap between Alan’s espoused theory (i.e., individual and team empowerment) and his theory-in-use (i.e., unilateral intervention to solve problems). Implicit in my approach is a vision of the coach’s role: I presented a challenge to Alan by pointing to gaps between intentions and actions, offered to provide support by helping him become aware of the sources of this gap, unlearn old ways of thinking and acting and learn new ways, and offered the implicit vision of congruence between aspirations and actions. In adopting this approach, I was essentially imitating Chris Argyris and other senior practitioners of his method whom I had experienced personally as classroom teachers, seminar leaders, and coaches.

Evolution and Conflicts

Reflecting on my model has made me aware not only of this original tacit vision, but also of other aspirations that I hold for clients that have evolved over time—from a variety of influences—that potentially conflict with this vision. Increasingly, I see myself as
encouraging a client to become aware of the conscious and unconscious influences on his or her behavior, to take ownership of those influences and their consequences, and to use this expanded commitment and awareness to envision and act upon a wider range of choices. Such aspirations for clients are potentially more ambitious than the vision of merely reducing gaps between a client’s intentions and actions. This raises a disturbing question. What if the client has no interest in the kind of learning required to become the “author of his or her experience,” but has much more pragmatic aims? Is it appropriate for a coach to confront clients with what he or she holds to be limited aspirations on their part? My answer to this question—though still evolving—tends toward the negative. This leaning has more to do with my personal profile than with my espoused beliefs and points to the interdependency of different elements of a model of one’s practice. I pick up this thread later in reviewing that element of the framework and again in reviewing my core practices.

At the same time, there is a synergistic parallel between these aspirations for my clients and my commitment to being a coach who is a reflective practitioner. By aspiring to coach in ways that reflect an explicit awareness of and openness to learning about the consequences of my underlying assumptions and influences and a willingness to explore new options, I am trying to do for myself as a coach what I desire to help my clients do for themselves—to become, as Block might phrase it, “the author of my practice.” The coaching model (Figure 1) attempts to capture this parallel.

In summary, by using the framework to investigate the source of my vision, I gained several insights. Least surprising was that I could trace much of my vision to role models from my graduate training—models whom I continue to imitate. Most interesting
was that my vision was largely tacit, and the effort to make it explicit has surfaced some serious tensions that I would do well to resolve. More generally, reflecting on my vision and its sources confirms my intuition that a coach’s vision is a significant influence on a coach’s core practices.

**Frames for Understanding Human Behavior**

A model of coaching will inevitably entail assumptions about why people behave as they do. The challenge is to become conscious of those assumptions and assess their strengths and limits. Are they robust enough to sustain a coach’s encounter with the wide range of challenges posed by different clients facing different organizational and personal challenges? My general framework led me to examine two areas of concern: psychological influences on behavior and individual differences. I found upon reflection that each area extended my range of core practices and led to options that were more responsive to the client at hand.

**Psychological influences on behavior.**

Action Science had given me some basic assumptions about human behavior, but it did not offer a comprehensive and systematic way to understand how individual experience shapes behavior. I soon discovered a need for such theories.

In working with particular individuals, each with their own rich history of family and other influences on their development, I intuitively drew on learning that I had assimilated from a decade of exposure to therapy. My therapists came from no single school of thought. However, my principal coach and mentor articulated in one of our sessions a perspective that seemed to characterize an unstated common assumption:
“Any face to face work is about linking internal structures to the creation of external structures, linking internal imagery and critical events in one’s life to how one imprints and creates structures in the external world.” I tacitly took this internalized sensibility to my encounters with Alan.

In working with Alan, I naturally looked for opportunities to probe for information about his family background that might help me understand the ways he approached his role and interactions with others. After several sessions, he was willing to talk about his childhood, revealing some important information. He was the oldest of seven children who were abandoned by their father when Alan was nine. From that point on, he acted like a surrogate parent, taking responsibility for himself and his siblings.

Alan acknowledged that the message that he carried away from this experience was one of feeling a high degree of personal responsibility combined with a distrust of other’s help. Indeed, he experienced profound ambivalence in situations where he needed help. At the conscious level, he truly believed in the company rhetoric of empowering individuals and teams. But his own history led to a deeper set of beliefs in which he doubted that he could count on others to do what they were supposed to do. These deeper beliefs undermined his commitment to the espoused management philosophy. From this information I constructed the following intervention:

I feel in a double bind in my relationship with you, and I sense that others do as well. You are a person of great strength and power. Your team members experience the possibility that this power may be used against them [Alan laughs here] and they fear you. What they don’t see is that you use some of that power against yourself, by putting not just them but yourself in double binds that prevent
you from getting help from others. As I try to help you by bringing up these kinds of issues, you will have an instinct to push me away, so my double bind is that if I work with you in the way that has the greatest potential pay off, it’s likely you’ll fire me. If I don’t pursue them, I may not get fired, but I will deliver less than maximum value and at some level you will be disappointed, as will I. I’d like to get your reaction as to whether any of this rings true and if so see whether you’d like to pursue it with me.

Alan responded:

You underestimate me and don’t give me enough credit. I see your comments as pointing to a weakness on my part, which I recognize . . . I do some things that create problems without knowing it. For example, I recently said to my wife, “I wish the kids would come to me more often to talk about things instead of always just to you.” She said, “If you could see the look on your face when something simple happens, like a glass of milk spills, you’d know why the kids don’t talk to you.” So I know I’ve got an issue there.

He went on to say, “I’m interested. Some of the things you said I’d be interested in talking more about.” To work with Alan, I had supplemented my Action Science approach with loosely formulated theories of the impact of psychological development on behavior. I was moving beyond imitation of my original role models to broaden my theoretical base. In so doing, I was imitating earlier role models (my therapists) and a new one (my coach), albeit rather intuitively.

The above interaction represents a moment in which my current reflection on my model has helped me see aspects of the encounter with Alan that escaped my attention at
the time. I was so relieved that he was willing to move forward that I was blind to some of the more obvious problems inherent in his response. The limits of his understanding of the “double bind” are clear now. I was satisfied with the chance to move forward and also had difficulty seeing the dismissive quality of his response, which was later pointed out by my coach. Here were clues that I missed to the challenge that lay ahead and to the potential need for other approaches in working with him.

At about the same time, another client, Bill posed a very different challenge, requiring me to reach further beyond the theories of Action Science. Bill’s boss engaged me to support Bill, the manager of a semi-independent subsidiary of a large company, in addressing issues that had led him to be put on probation. In a three-way negotiation with his boss regarding the nature of the coaching relationship (which Bill had the option to decline), we identified and put into written form expectations regarding improvement in three areas: profitability, customer service, and creating an environment supportive of the development of team members. Quantitative measures were attached to the first two areas. We agreed to stay in touch regarding the third, “softer” area. In probing the concerns of his boss and team members in this third area—micro-managing, a tendency to focus on the negative in dealing with subordinates—Bill revealed thought patterns heavily oriented toward negative self-evaluation (e.g., “I’m just no good”). Along with recurrent self-critical thoughts, Bill experienced a good deal of what he termed anger (“I’m like a crab, all hard on the outside”) and what sounded like depression (“I’m just down, no energy”). He saw himself as a failure in both his professional and personal life. At work he felt ineffectual in his efforts to influence his boss and more generally in
dealing with a “political” organization. At home he was having trouble coping with his two teenage children.

From the outset, Bill was open and revealed his self-critical thoughts and the apparently related feelings of anger and depression. Action Science provided me with no particular tools for understanding or addressing these issues. Instead I consciously chose an approach based on cognitive therapy (Beck, 1979; Burns, 1989). Aaron Beck and his followers had made more explicit some of the notions that seemed to underlie Action Science, such as the linkage between thoughts and action, and offered more explicit assumptions regarding thoughts as the cause of moods and feelings. Practitioners of this approach had identified a range of typical dysfunctional thought patterns (e.g., perfectionism), along with a range of tools for helping people recognize and overcome their blind reaction to such inner thoughts (Burns, 1989).

Bill was quite willing to take on homework assignments consisting of cognitive therapy exercises in which he explored the linkage among triggering events (e.g., a hostile comment from his son), automatic thoughts (e.g., “my son hates me”), and the consequences (the belief that “I’m an inadequate parent [and therefore an inadequate person]”). For example, after identifying particular powerful and recurrent automatic thoughts he would ask himself:

- Are there distortions in the thoughts?
- Are there any counter arguments to the thoughts?
- What if this thought were true? What is the underlying assumption?

This and other forms of reflection seemed to be helpful to Bill. Team members reported improvements in the overall climate for development. His boss began to hear
similar reports, which led him to be pleased with the coaching. Several years later, I checked in with Bill to see what if anything he had taken away from the coaching of long-term value. He said he had learned to “think more in grey rather than black and white” and had learned that he was “personalizing things that were not personal.” He felt he was “more open to other viewpoints” and “intolerant of narrow-mindedness.” Bill attributed this to the exercises he had done and to my challenging his thought process.

There are no doubt other ways in which a coach might have addressed Bill’s concerns or even arrived at a different diagnosis. I found a need to expand the core theoretical base from which I was operating and found that in this case cognitive therapy served this purpose well.

**Incorporating theories about individual differences.**

Although Bill took to the methods of cognitive therapy, I discovered that many of my clients—like Alan—were not promising candidates for such tools, let alone the more reflection-oriented methods of Action Science. Based on these and similar experiences, I had already concluded that this failure to take into account individual differences was not a problem simply with the pedagogical tools associated with Action Science, but a limitation of the theory itself. In essence this school of thought does not explicitly encourage a coach to treat one person differently from another. In addition, it does not account for the possibility that some people may not respond well to its methodological approach.

As a result, I found myself attracted to a theory of personality differences. I found the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)—a tool based on such a theory, grounded in the work of Carl Jung—a useful vehicle for understanding common
differences among people and for understanding myself and my reactions to others. It also seemed to me highly complementary to Action Science. The differences pointed to by the MBTI offer clues to the preferences that inform a person’s particular theory-in-use. Although it relies on self-reported data, always inherently suspect from an Action Science point of view, one could view type as a hypothesis to be explored. And I found that the MBTI could sometimes provide more rapid and direct insights into people’s actions than did Action Science.

The MBTI held great value in the case of Chris, whose style was perceived to contribute to the problems he and his partners were having in retaining the loyalty of their younger colleagues in a professional services firm. Interviews with members of the firm revealed a number of concerns about Chris’ leadership style: he was seen as being indirect to the point of being dishonest in dealings with employees (“people doubt that they are ever hearing the true story”), chronically unable to give negative feedback (“you sense that something is wrong but don’t know where you stand”), unable to say no to clients (“he’ll agree to deliver more than we promised and then leave it up to us to do the work”), too willing to sacrifice his standards to please clients (“he’ll always go for the second best solution if that’s what the client wants”), and having a chronic tendency not to keep commitments (“he works to keep his options open and constantly double or triple books”). Chris’ MBTI profile was ENFP, a people-oriented style with an orientation to the big picture, high sensitivity to values and feelings, and great flexibility.

Like most ENFPs, Chris was reluctant to hurt others’ feelings, leading him to avoid conflict and withhold negative evaluations. His tendency to over-commit resulted from the same pattern: not wanting others to be disappointed. Of course, his strategies
only worked in the short run. Using the MBTI to understand the motives underlying the behavior helped Chris get better at saying no to avoid even greater pain later on. Chris also found his MBTI profile useful in highlighting a key personal value—his integrity—highly characteristic of ENFPs and reinforced by the values of his firm. The importance of maintaining integrity led him to identify two areas in which he felt he needed to bring about change: “Being bolder, in terms of where I take a stand on things . . . and the ability to deliver what I promise.”

While many colleagues share a preference for the MBTI, some are attracted to Human Dynamics (Segal & Horne, 1999) and others prefer the Enneagram (Riso & Hudson, 2000). My attraction to the MBTI has been reinforced by my consistent experience that clients like it and that it often generates useful insights. A considerable body of research also supports the instrument’s basic validity and reliability (Fitzgerald, 1997).

There is no clear limit to the types and number of theories that are relevant to understanding individual behavior. By way of brief further example, I have also found it useful to supplement my theoretical base with systems perspectives (Oshry, 1995; Senge, 1992) and theories of the impact of culture (Harrison, 1995, pp. 147-282; Schneider, 1994). And I’m increasingly mindful of the importance of having a firm grounding in theories of the impact of ethnicity, class, and gender (e.g., McGoldrick et al., 1985).

Using the framework for model building to review my frames for understanding human behavior has led me to several conclusions. First, it has made clear that drawing on multiple schools of thought, rather than a single favored paradigm, increases a coach’s capacity. An example of this is my use of techniques based on cognitive therapy with
Bill. Second, it became clear to me that I did not fully see the initial signs of the barriers that I had faced with Alan. I attribute this lack of insight to the limits of my intuitive application of psychological theories as well as to limits in both my personal profile and my core practices, which I explore below. This has helped me identify areas on which I need to focus as I continue my model-building process, which I review at the end of the chapter.

**Personal Profile**

To an even greater extent than most types of practitioner, the coach’s primary instrument is himself or herself. Thus the personal qualities of the coach need to be a part of a coach’s model. David Kantor has long advocated this view and has created a set of tools for therapists and consultants that is explicitly designed to help them identify their “boundary profile”—areas of potential synergy and friction in the match with individual clients and client systems (Kantor & Neal, 1985; Kantor, 1997; Kantor, 2001a). The concepts and instruments of the boundary profile are equally helpful as a diagnostic tool with clients. In addition, I have found several additional sources of support in increasing my awareness of my own profile as a coach.

**Gaps between espoused theories and theories-in-use.**

Consultants and coaches are as vulnerable as their clients to gaps between their espoused theories and their theories in use. Even coaches who are committed to self-knowledge are at risk of remaining systematically blind to their own limitations. Argyris provides an interesting example of such a gap in the coaching practice of a renowned source of advice on effective behavior, Stephen Covey. Argyris (2000) analyzes the
transcript of a coaching interaction between Covey and his son contained in the widely read *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Covey (1989) reports feeling “upset and disillusioned” (p.177) by his son’s failure to keep commitments regarding yard work. Yet he suppresses those feelings and instead “faked a smile” and asked how the yard work was going, despite obvious evidence that the answer was negative. Argyris points out that Covey as coach behaved in ways that are inconsistent with his recommendation to act authentically, apparently in the interest of being “positive.” Argyris concludes that “Covey employs two mutually inconsistent theories of effective action: the one that he espouses and the one that he actually uses” (p. 22). In his vulnerability to such inconsistencies, Covey is no different from the rest of us.

Action Science predicts—and years of observing the practice of managers and my own practice as consultant and coach convince me—that such discrepancies are inevitable and human. Discovering such discrepancies is a powerful clue to one’s model of oneself as coach, to reflecting on areas where one is ineffective and to discovering areas where one is blind.

How to discover such discrepancies? I have acquired the habit—typical of practitioners of Action Science—of taping wherever possible my consulting and coaching interactions. Sometimes simply listening to segments of a tape (or reading a transcription of the segment) generates insight into interactions that seem not to have gone as well as I’d like but for which I had no clear explanation. For especially puzzling interactions, creating learning cases are a powerful albeit more labor-intensive tool for self-reflection. One prepares such a case by recording *spoken dialogue* between two parties in one column and one’s *internal dialogue* in a parallel column. Simply writing such a case
often leads to subtle insights into how one framed the situation and the resulting options. However, using it as the basis for a consultation with a colleague or coach is even more powerful.

**Support from a coach or mentor**

Ultimately a coach cannot see what he or she cannot see. The classic model in training psychotherapists is clinical supervision—having one’s own coach. I have found this to be of enormous value in becoming cognizant of my patterns of reflection-in-action. I initially engaged a coach who was a highly skilled practitioner of Action Science. Subsequently I have used another individual of more eclectic background for many years in the unusual combination of coach, mentor, and therapist. Having a coach who knows me extremely well enables me to present complex challenges with the confidence that I will have support in recognizing blind spots and the ways in which I may be stuck in the self-reinforcing interplay among my vision, theories, methods, and personal proclivities. I also find that scheduling regular meetings with a coach has the additional advantage of building reflection into my routine by making it a task, where it can more successfully compete for scarce time with other tasks.

I felt sufficiently challenged by my interaction with Alan that I decided to use it as the basis for reflection with my coach. He helped me think about the link between Alan’s internal structures and how he created structures in the external world. In reviewing with me the transcript of key interactions with Alan, my coach framed the challenge in terms of helping Alan recognize that “he uses his structure to keep himself in power and from surrendering to help. He doesn’t see how he creates double binds that
prevent him from getting what he wants.” This helped me shape the intervention that I documented earlier.

Even as I felt that I had—with my coach’s help—successfully shifted my coaching of Alan to a deeper level, subsequent reflection with the coach helped me realize that I had missed an opportunity to show Alan his own pattern in action. Pointing to Alan’s statement that I had underestimated him, my coach saw a “maneuver of neutralizing your power by devaluing your input. . . . That’s how he works.” I came away from this discussion with the mixed feelings that were typical in my work with my coach: that I was gaining insights that potentially improved my ability in the future to see a broader range of options in the moment of client contact, but at the same time feeling rather dull-witted and in over my head. Such, I suppose, is the hidden tuition of the path of continued learning.

Knowing your type.

As already illustrated, I have found the MBTI quite useful in identifying ways in which my natural inclinations might align themselves or conflict with those of a particular client, as well as in highlighting some of the strengths and weaknesses of my characteristic tendencies when coaching. For example, as an INTP, it reminds me of my lack of appreciation for detail and structure and of the possibility that some clients (with Sensing and Judging preferences) would prefer me to be more prescriptive than I’m inclined to be. It also reminds me that I will feel the most passion in working with clients, who—like me—view life as a never-ending search for meaning. And as a person who has only a mild preference for Thinking as opposed to Feeling as a basis for decision-making, the MBTI has also helped me recognize my internal struggle between
being an observer/bystander who enjoys solving problems and being a passionate advocate on behalf of my values—a tension that is directly reflected in ambivalence in my vision for coaching as well as in my coaching practices.

**Core Practices**

A coach’s vision of coaching and theoretical orientation is one step removed from actual coaching. The distinctiveness of a practice emerges in face-to-face interactions with the client. I have found it instructive just to make an inventory of core practices. In assessing my core tools and methods, I noticed a continuing prominent role for tools that my teachers had modeled, which included the distinction between *Model I* and *Model II* behavior (i.e., the skills corresponding to unilateral vs. collaborative interactions), the *ladder of inference* (i.e., a way of mapping the specific steps in the reasoning process that lead one from concrete data to assumptions, beliefs, and conclusions that influence action), and the learning cases described earlier.

I can now see that I have also developed—partly through imitation and partly through adaptation—a less explicit underlying methodology. As I reconstruct the common features of my coaching interactions with Alan, Bill, and Chris, I identified a number of elements, which remain significantly influenced by an Action Science orientation, which are presented in Figure 2.

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**Figure 2**

**Core Coaching Method**

- Begin the coaching relationship by establishing goals, boundaries, and preferred modes of working together,
In broad outline these elements of my approach to coaching may well resemble the practice of other coaches, or even therapists. The potential distinctiveness of the approach lies, I believe, in my self-conscious balancing of advocacy and inquiry, an orientation I share with other practitioners of Action Science.

**Balancing advocacy and inquiry**

The relative balance of advocacy and inquiry in my practice is guided by the underlying Action Science principle of bilateral or shared control. Coaches inevitably make choices—explicitly or otherwise—about the desired balance of control over the coaching interaction. The fundamental questions are: does the coach have an agenda, and if so, how does he or she manage it? Should he or she make it explicit, or keep it in the background as a guide to the interaction? Action Science encourages practitioners to make their intentions and hypotheses known, testing them openly with clients. It also recommends giving equal emphasis to inquiry—listening, asking questions to understand and clarify—and advocacy—offering assessments and interpretations, making suggestions, or asking questions that encourage the client to reflect in a particular way.

I have found that many other coaching approaches deviate from Action Science’s emphasis on coupling advocacy with inquiry and on giving equal weight to both. Some, for example, favor advocacy over inquiry, in pursuit of transformational changes in the client. Such approaches encourage a coach to view a client’s defenses against frontal assault as obstacles to be beaten down in the interest of the client’s liberation. Equally prevalent is the tendency to favor inquiry over advocacy, typically on grounds that power to resolve problems resides within the client. At its best, this approach leads coaches to reflect back what they are hearing and ask facilitating questions (see examples below) to
which the coach does not have a predetermined answer. Such questions can be genuinely helpful—and are highly useful for coaching a client in an area in which the client is more expert than the coach. However, taken in its pure form, the strategy needlessly disempowers the coach, by rendering invalid his or her own perspective.

To reinforce a conscious choice between advocacy and inquiry and to attempt to maintain a balance between the two, I have developed the template shown in Figure 3. I adapted this framework from one originally aimed to provide a structure for inquiry only (Whitmore, 1992). As the template suggests, my approach—at least as espoused!—combines the active listening/support orientation of a client-centered approach with a willingness to challenge quite directly. It’s worth commenting on both ends of this continuum.

**Balancing Advocacy and Inquiry with the GROW Model**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reflect</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Reality</th>
<th>Options</th>
<th>Wrapup</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask clarifying questions</td>
<td>What would a successful outcome look like?</td>
<td>What reasons did they give for the change?</td>
<td>What would be involved in pursuing that option?</td>
<td>When would be a realistic target date for completion?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask facilitating questions</td>
<td>What do you want?</td>
<td>Where are you now?</td>
<td>Have you faced anything similar before? If so, did you learn anything about how to handle it?</td>
<td>What specific steps might you take?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask challenging questions</td>
<td>What would be a goal that would represent a breakthrough for you?</td>
<td>What prevented you from saying what you thought directly to your boss?</td>
<td>If you knew the answer, what would it be?</td>
<td>Given what you know about yourself, how might you sabotage this commitment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assert</td>
<td>Given what you’ve said, I think we should focus on... (What do you think?)</td>
<td>I see you making an assumption that you may not be aware of... (What’s your reaction?)</td>
<td>I see another option that I’d like to put on the table... (What do you think?)</td>
<td>I think it would make more sense to do A first, then B, for the following reasons... (Does that make sense?)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3
Reflective Listening and Mindsets

Incorporation of an emphasis on reflective listening has enabled me to moderate a default tendency toward advocacy. In my colleagues Barry Jentz and Joan Wofford (Jentz, 1999), I found a powerful set of role models for what it means to use, and teach, reflective listening, a skill that is consistent with the inquiry of Action Science but which does not receive special emphasis in that theory. I find that using this tool, in contrast to inquiry through asking direct questions, not only helps me test out the accuracy of my listening, but also gives more freedom to the client to take the conversation in directions that serve them.

While I feel no conflict in being committed to fully listening to the client, I find myself struggling with what stance to take at the other end of the continuum: How much of an advocate is it appropriate for a coach to be? As mentioned when reflecting on my vision, I am attracted to a view of coaching that aspires to help clients be the “authors of their experience,” which involves making them aware of any limits in recognizing their freedom. Yet I recoil at the aggressive methods of the transformational schools (“Are you willing to have a breakthrough in this conversation?”). I have tentatively reconciled this dilemma by building on the work of Evans and Russell (1989) among others, from whom I came to appreciate the concept of mindsets as a tool for describing the beliefs and assumptions that drive behavior and from whom I gleaned particular ways of encouraging
awareness of tacit mindsets. Kegan and Lahey (2000) have invented an exercise compatible with this approach in which they lead clients through a set of questions that can generate potentially deep insights into basic assumptions that underlie the tacit commitments which conflict with espoused beliefs. In both cases, I am attracted to methods that have the power to generate deep insight into the degree to which clients are the authors of their experience, while leaving them in control of the level of depth with which they are comfortable pursuing this inquiry.

As I reflected on my core practices, it became clear how deeply Action Science continues to inform my approach to coaching—particularly my commitment to creating a balance between advocacy and inquiry. I also came to appreciate the added value of reflective listening as a tool for inquiry. These insights were useful, but not surprising. The most valuable insight was a surprise, one which builds on the insight that came from looking at my vision: my ambivalence regarding how much of an advocate to be and how I manage that dilemma through my use of the tool of mindsets in my practice. As a result, I have identified this dilemma as the focus of continuing reflection.

**Continuing to Build One’s Model**

If my own experience is any guide, the challenge of developing one’s approach to coaching is never over. Even for those who have arrived at Kantor’s third and highest stage of a model building—a model that is one’s own and that is internally consistent—the challenge of modeling the complex world of a coach will never be fully exhausted. The reflective coach adopts a posture of humility, bringing full commitment to bear on
any given coaching interaction while remaining only half sure of the approach, which is subject to continuing reflection and refinement.

My review of my practice has given me ready access to humility. Although I experienced moments of genuine pride as I reviewed notes and transcripts, I was even more frequently plagued with doubts and self-criticisms. With Bill and Chris, I felt reasonably satisfied, as both had come to an understanding of their own behavior, which enabled them to begin making changes in their personal and professional lives. However, I did not feel good overall about how I coached Alan. While I felt I had positioned myself for potentially powerful work with him through the intervention analyzed above, I didn’t succeed in working with him on these issues in ways that resulted in deeper learning on his part. My documentation of our interactions is incomplete subsequent to the meeting that I described, so I’m not now able to go back over all the interactions to analyze where I might have done something different. But I found him subtly resistant to reflection on his contribution to interactions, and I saw no pattern of improvement. While I was occasionally able to point to ways in which his framing of events led him to constrain his options or reinforce self-limiting beliefs, he did not seem to internalize these lessons. I helped him and his team identify long-term priorities and solve short-term challenges; his perceived need for my services waned; the coaching relationship faded out over time. I was frustrated because I had had the aspiration of helping Alan learn a set of attitudes and behaviors that would not only resolve current issues but prevent new ones. In particular, I wanted to enable him to take the rough edges off of his commanding but overbearing style.
Collaborative Setting Goals

What I had not realized until this recent reflection was that I never fully shared with Alan both this aspiration and my sense that we were failing to meet it. It was implicit in my double bind confrontation of him, but I had never explicitly returned to how we interpreted the contract for working together and never let him know that I thought he was failing to live up to my expectations. Without knowing it, I had fallen into a posture of holding an agenda for his improvement that I had not tested. This was an explicit violation of my model. How was I to account for this?

These reflections led me to contact Alan, with ironic result. I tracked him down in his new position, where he manages a budget 20 times the size of the one he had when we worked together and oversees a workforce of many thousands of people. Clearly my shortcomings hadn’t held him back too much. When I summarized my concerns about how I had failed to capitalize on our mutual awareness of the impact on his personal history on his current behavior, Alan was amused. He said:

I think what you got was pretty much what you were going to get. You sensitized me to some issues and I made some changes. But at some point you are who you are and it’s a two-way street. It’s also up to other people to accommodate to me. You may have missed an opportunity, but not by much.

He went on to describe the high impact he attributed to my consulting work with his team, which had led to a vision of commitment to operational excellence. This vision had led him to master new methods that resulted in tremendous gains in efficiency and that were the basis for his promotion to his current position. I had succeeded in an area of which I was unaware. And where I fell short was not in failing to meet his aspirations,
but to make clearer my own aspirations and to negotiate the goals for our coaching relationship in a collaborative way. This was a deeper failing, but one that led me to a realization of the importance of clarifying my own ambivalence about being an advocate and of negotiating any such aspirations with a client in a collaborative way.

Another conclusion I draw is that I need to keep working on my ability to assert myself in the face of extremely strong personalities like Alan. I was already stretching myself to challenge him as I did. Apparently, I would have to have developed myself further to continue to challenge him.

Clarifying Stages and Boundaries

I also think that I might have maintained a stance of greater potency with Alan had I been equipped with a better-developed model of the stages of a coaching relationship. My thinking about this has not gone beyond recognizing that a coaching relationship has three stages: establishing a relationship, doing work together, and concluding. This model now strikes me as too limited. Kantor argues persuasively that the therapist/patient relationship—and by extension the coach/client relationship—is most fruitfully viewed from a developmental point of view, with differing stages of development representing choice points for the continuation—or not—of the relationship (Kantor, 1985). I am beginning to explore applications of Kantor’s approach to my practice, while recognizing that his framework will require some adaptation from the therapy context.

In this connection, I am working to clarify my beliefs about the boundary between coaching and therapy. My current view is that while there are likely to be differences in the client’s motivation to pursue “deeper” issues, there is no inherent difference in the range of material that is relevant. Nonetheless, I do believe that a therapist may be more
able in some cases to help a client with in-depth work, based on superior training and specialization. How do I recognize the boundary where my effectiveness diminishes and the help of a therapist would be more appropriate? Under what circumstances might parallel coaching and therapy make sense? These are questions that I intend to continue to pursue.

**Understanding Adult Development**

I also see value in expanding my model to more explicitly include theories of adult development. Daloz (1999) illustrates the value of such perspectives by summarizing three developmental schemes (Kegan, 1994; Perry, 1968; and Levinson, 1978) and applying them to his mentoring of adult learners. I find Kegan’s approach particularly compelling. He posits a path of development that leads to increasing consciousness of responsibility for how one constructs the world and acts in it. This framework promises to be useful to me in addressing the dilemma of how much of an advocate to be in pushing clients to become “authors of their experience.” Meehan (1999) has taken a significant first step in clarifying this dilemma by comparing the differing approaches recommended by practitioners of Action Science versus those who use Kegan’s model when encountering limits in a client’s framing of choices.

**Conclusion**

The main goal of this chapter has been to advocate the value of building a model of one’s coaching practice in order to facilitate the transition from being primarily an intuitive practitioner to a more reflective one. The ideal end state of being a reflective practitioner—one who is able to see in the moment of client interaction everything he or
she can see after stepping back and reflecting—is unattainable. However, investing in systematic reflection will move one incrementally in this direction.

By using a framework to assess the state of my model development, I hope I have stimulated others to invest in the time-consuming work of self-reflection and illustrated one approach constructing a model. The technology for model building is at a primitive stage of development. The more pilgrims who take this path and are willing to report on their progress, the more quickly we can together bring light to an area that is woefully undeveloped and which we have a professional obligation to explore. Although reflecting on one’s practice is often difficult and sobering, it is also rejuvenating—an antidote to boredom and stagnation.
Notes

1 I have received enormous support in these reflections by participating in a seminar on “Leadership Model Building” led by David Kantor and B. C. Huselton of the Leadership Model Building Company.

2 Remarks during a presentation on “Executive Coaching,” May 1, 2001, in Cambridge, MA at an event sponsored by the Executive Coaching Forum.

3 Kantor offers a three stage model, of which the second and third stages are: constraint (i.e., as we imitate, we begin to add to/subtract from/amend the model in accordance with our own experience, testing the model’s limits and experimenting with the incorporation of elements from other models) and autonomy (i.e., we develop an internally consistent set of principles for our practice that is comprehensive enough to deal with all the challenges we typically face) (Kantor, 2001b).

4 Laurent Daloz (1999) suggests that mentors provide these three elements—which helped me recognize them in my practice.

5 The simple three-fold framework for organizing the method was influenced by Landsberg (1997, pp. 122-123).

6 Fernando Flores is a particularly dramatic representative of this movement. See Harriet Rubin’s description of him (“The Power of Words”) in issue 21 of Fast Company.

7 Carl Rogers (1961) is the grandfather of this approach, which continues to attract followers.

8 An intriguing theoretical question, which I do not pursue here, is whether a coach can truly enable clients to become the authors of their experience when the coach’s choice of
methodological approach is the stimulus for framing such authorship and therefore plays a shaping role.
References


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