Thoughts on coaching in culture

Gedanken zu Coaching zwischen Kulturen

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Abstract

The most creative challenge in coaching may be found in the complexity of a coaching relationship when the coach and the client come from different cultural backgrounds. This cross-cultural relationship not only faces unusual difficulties and pitfalls but also encompasses a greater potential for the leverage of synergies.

Zusammenfassung

Die Komplexität der Coachingbeziehung zwischen einem Coach und einer KlientIn unterschiedlicher kultureller Herkunft könnte möglicherweise die kreativste Herausforderung im Coaching darstellen. Diese Beziehung über zwei Kulturen birgt viele ungewöhnliche Schwierigkeiten und Fallen, umfasst aber auch ein grösseres Potential für das Finden von Synergien.

1. Introduction and definitions

"Culture is so pervasive that even when an individual seems to break away from it, as in states of insanity, the 'madness' is still influenced by its norms and rituals." (Kakar 2004, p. 9) Therefore it seems that the topic of culture inevitably merits discussion and reflection in all disciplines that deal with human behavior. This paper is about the complexity of a coaching relationship when the coach and the client come from different cultural backgrounds.

The definition of coaching used here is broadly based on Rosinski's (2003): the art of dialogue between the coach and the client that combines techniques and methodology from different disciplines. Its focus is current and forward-looking. Its aim is to reach the objective as set by the client. The coach is the enabler, facilitator and the catalyst for the change the client is looking for.

The definition of culture for this paper is a broad one: "A group's culture is the set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group." (Rosinski 2003, p. 20) It is complied of explicit manifestations such as language or visible factors such as artifacts, around a core of norms, values and innate unconscious basic assumptions and beliefs. The challenge of defining culture is summarized excellently as follows: "Culture is like gravity: you do not experience it until you jump six feet into the air." (Trompenaars 1993, p. 11)

1.1 Cultural projections and judgment

In practical terms Kakar (2004) explains that, "This capacity for empathic understanding and interpretation is more likely between people who share the same cultural background. When the words, dreams and behavior, the inhibitions, desires and sensitivities, of the observed are intimately resonant with the observer's own, he can spot 'clues' that might appear insignificant or incomprehensible to a neutral or alien observer. This does not mean that a trained observer has no access to the interior psychological process of individuals outside of his own culture, for much of this is indeed universal. However, other things being equal, such as unconscious resistances in the observer, or the possibility of empathizing wrongly (that is, of courting one's own projections), the quest for psychological truth is less encumbered when both the observer and his subjects belong to the same culture." (Kakar 2004, p. 3)

Allow me to illustrate what I think Kakar meant by an example I have observed: In a team coaching of culturally diverse participants the following exercise was conducted in order to elicit their social relations. The participants were told that they had been shipwrecked and found themselves in a rescue boat with members of their family: their mother, their partner (husband or wife) and their child. One person had to leave the boat otherwise they would all drown. They themselves could not be that person because they were the only one on board who knew how to steer the boat. That no one or all should leave the boat were not valid answers. Interestingly most participants irrespective of cultural heritage and gender except one man of Arab descent made the difficult choice that the elderly mother should leave the boat. The Arab man suggested that his partner should leave the boat and based his decision on the fact that all other members of the family were "more easily replaced" except a biological mother. Most of the participants in the room expressed their disgust at his decision and felt it was a confirmation of their perceived lack of respect for women in Arab culture. When reminded that the mother in question was also a woman the response was that the culture in question only respects women who have sons. Hence they had also assumed that the child in the boat was not a boy.