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Alfred Adler and Coaching Unique Opportunities and Challenges

By Marcia Reynolds, M.A., M.Ed., MCC

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IN BECOMING A COACH

Alfred Adler and Coaching

BY MARCIA REYNOLDS, M.A., M.ED., MCC

The author has completed courses at four accredited coaching schools, including the first foundational course for each of them. She indicates in this brief addendum to the description of the Adler School in Toronto what most impressed her with regard to the approach taken by the Adler school of coaching. Marcia Reynolds focuses on three reasons: 1) an open instead of closed-end process, 2) a focus on strengths instead of weaknesses, and 3) a strategic instead of tactical view of possibility.

AN OPEN INSTEAD OF CLOSED-END PROCESS

I am a certification reviewer for the ICF, meaning that I review oral and written exams for people looking to be certified by the International Coach Federation. Over the past five years, I have seen a steady decline in the creativity of the coaches that come to the table. An increasing number seem to coach formulaically, bent on either discovering goals and solutions (what I call solution-based coaching, which I now see is also a fault of the ICF competencies and exam since it requires every coaching session to end with clear goals, action plans and follow-up) or to over-compensate by clarifying the emotional and physical content of every choice (with questions such as, “How do you feel about feeling mad right now?”)

At the Adler school, they refrained from giving anything that could be construed as a formula until everyone had

a few days to practice coaching. Instead, they gave guidelines such as “explore a person’s gifts and talents, and then discover how he or she is applying these in life now or how they could in the future” or “explore all that is possible for a person in a particular situation in a fun, creative way before choosing a few options to explore. Use emotional reactions as one criterion for choice before logic.”

A coach provides more than a scenario where clients can safely work through problems. A coach is also there to take the client to places where they would not have gone alone. The trained coach knows well how to ask the question that “pops” the client’s bubble of thought, allowing them to see beyond the limits they impose on a situation. Therefore, I believe the coaching relationship should not be solution-focused. I think it should be holistically human-focused. Coaching can be more free-form, giving our clients the benefit of exploring all options when facing a dilemma or the time to just reflect on whom they are being today. In fact, one of the best things a coach can do is to help clients observe their thinking patterns so they can create new ones at any time they choose. What is most beautiful about this approach is that ultimately, as humans, once they see their “law of movement” (what motivates their choices in life), they usually integrate social interest by natural choice into their decisions and actions as they mentally evolve.

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One might argue that coaching for social interest is a coach’s “agenda” and coaches should not have an agenda when coaching. I don’t see the aim of social interest as a fixed agenda for the coach. I see it as the logical path of growth as clients develop their own capacity and courage to explore the moral, ethical, and spiritual sides of their decisions and actions. Therefore, I see the role of the coach more than to help their clients problem solve and to “help a client go from where they are today to where they want to be” based on goal-setting and hand-holding. I believe the role of the coach is to help their clients uncover how they answer the questions about life through both introspection and by objectively analyzing their behavior, especially under pressure, in the past, present, and feasible future. In so doing, they can fully understand why they think, act and feel the way they do. Only then, can a client be free to define new goals and choices for themselves.

In an open-ended approach, the coach first asks why a person wants a goal before looking at steps and deadlines. For example, the coach can ask, “How does the goal fit into the overall picture of what you want to achieve? Is the goal a part of your ‘vision of perfection (assuming this vision has been previously explored)?’ What will happen if the goal isn’t reached? What other outcomes are possible in this scenario (other possible outcomes will call for different goals)? How does this goal play into your view of yourself? Is it intended to make you look or feel better in the eyes of others? If that weren’t true, would you still make this choice? How will this goal affect others? Have you considered the outcomes for each person involved as a result of your decision? Are there any options that could create even greater benefits for those involved?”

The coach should swim around in the pond with the clients before heading to shore. It is amazing what they will find together just below the surface of the water.

A FOCUS ON STRENGTHS INSTEAD OF WEAKNESSES

Adler came to view people as holistic, whole, creative, and purposeful. If this is so, then they are not broken and do not need to be fixed. I am not a fan of assessments that look at weaknesses. I do like inventories that shed light on styles and

strengths. Instead of asking, “What is missing?” the coach should be exploring “What is present?”

Why spend time on weaknesses when we have so many strong traits to call on to get the results we desire?

We all have many gifts, talents, and strengths we can use to solve our problems. It is likely that our weaknesses are ingrained. Why spend time on weaknesses when we have so many strong traits to call on to get the results we desire? Also, the greater the focus we have on what is positive about ourselves, the more likely we will do the same with others. Therefore, coaches need to work on their own mental evolution as well. When we, as coaches, have social interest, we develop a lens of compassion and optimism. We naturally see how to help bring out the gifts and strengths in those we meet. The seeds of love and compassion grow as our hearts open in the presence of others. Hate, jealousy, and discrimination fade as we seek to find what we can give instead of take. Through our individual growth, we as coaches can best help our clients. And then through our individual clients, we as coaches can help spread social interest in our culture.

A STRATEGIC INSTEAD OF TACTICAL VIEW OF POSSIBILITY

The possibility-focused instead of solution-focused view opens the door to viewing new worlds in oneself and in our environments. Instead of looking at “what do you want to do, what can you do, what will you do, and when will you do it?” the strategic view surveys the landscape first. With guidance, people can learn to step out of a situation and see the principles at work in a broad system, as if the fish were finally able to see the water they are swimming in. At this level, people can compare and connect different ideas and points of view for a purpose, and create a new perspective out of the pieces. With this perspective, they may see that many answers to a problem can work, and that any solution is pliable and subject to change.

In my experience, when a client is willing to view their situations from this higher perspective, they often bring the impact of others into their view. Their decisions turn out to be more imaginative and creative, and they, as humans, become more inclusive and caring. From this position, the coach can safely ask, “What if?” questions to help the client ponder and dream. The key here is for the coach to help their clients let go of expectations and desires for specific outcomes. However, this growth requires in-depth self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and motivations that may be considered eccentric or fluffy and criticized by many people in our society (for example, we rarely use the words love and compassion in public at work, but they can be used in the privacy of the coach/client relationship). Therefore, the coach must first establish trust and rapport before asking clients to leap over any emotional and cultural cliffs.

It is true that forward motion requires that we set goals and take actions to meet those goals. Yet according to Adler, even choosing to take no action is in service of a goal we hold for ourselves. Using Adler’s perspective in our coaching, we can help our clients to uncover their personal goals and motivations, and then create broader visions for themselves that include social interest, defining new goals and ways of being along the way.

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