

Understanding the choices your client makes a little bit better

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Coaches as change agents

The essence of personal change is built on the fundamental belief in your personal authority to be able to make a choice.

As coaches we constantly work with individuals who want to change. We also change constantly – whether it is in our personal capacity as we grow as individuals or when we enhance our coaching skills. This article has as its aim a dialogue to understand this constant we gather our livelihood from: Change!

More specifically to understand just a little bit better the choices our clients make in their change processes.

To position ourselves as coaches in this process, let us start with the definition of coaching. While knowing that there are a myriad of definitions available, for the purpose of this article, we want to create a departure point and be transparent about this departure point, so for our argument we take as departure point the International Coaching Federation's (ICF) definition of what coaching is. The ICF defines coaching as *partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential*.ⁱ

I would like to start our conversation by asking: What does this definition say about the person that is doing the coaching? A possible answer would be that the coach is the facilitator of the “creative process”. In the ICF definition, the facilitator is qualified as one that “inspires” through a “though-provoking” partnership. Partnership implies for me an engagement to facilitate positive change. Or as David Rock puts it succinctly “Coaches are change agents who serve the best interest of their clients”ⁱⁱ. Change implies, being an agent (Defining agent as “something that produces or is capable of producing an effect: an active or efficient cause”ⁱⁱⁱ).

The second question that arises is: “If we as coaches are change agents, will it help us if we understand the change process?” It is a bit of a rhetorical question. Of course we do!

I would, however, like to suggest a deeper look at this question. Enough has been written around the change process of organizations as well as of individuals in these organizations. What I would like to explore with you, is to think about and maybe understand the deeper processing of change in our clients as we coach them.

The route I suggest we take in this exploration is simply: First to understanding how our brain works, then unpack an assumption I have that a core belief about our own authority is the pivotal point in changing our life for the better, I would then like to suggest a possible thinking tool to use and then to integrate it into the coaching process.

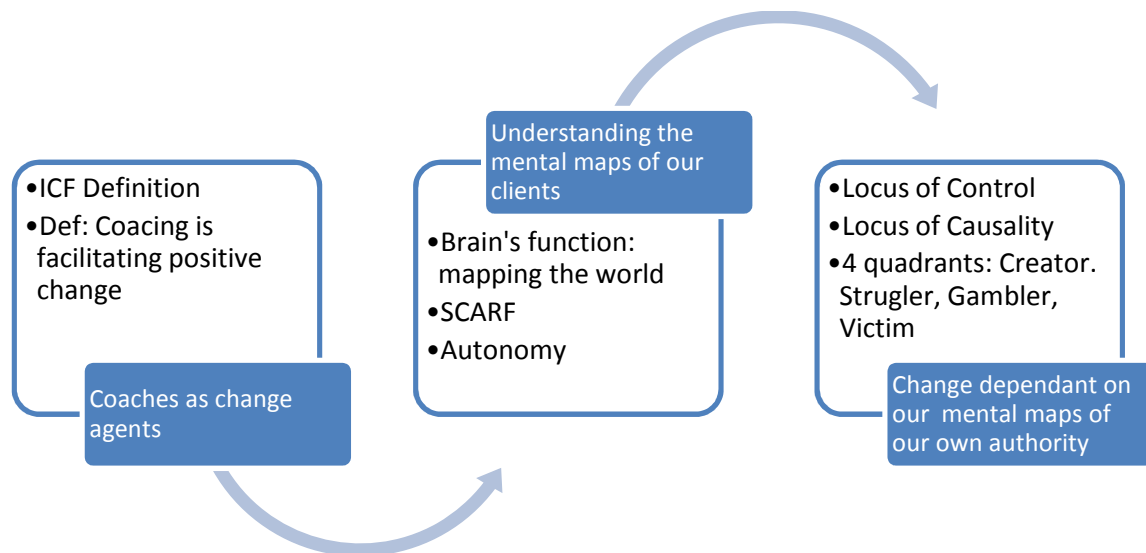


Figure 1: Flow of argument

Understanding mental maps

Understanding how the brain works assist us in using it better. David Rock^{iv} explains how the brain works as follows: From the moment we are born, our brain interacts with the world trying to make sense of what might otherwise be senseless and random noise. To the brain, all the senses are the same: data enters the outer layers of the brain, our 'neocortex', which tries to identify patterns in order to make meaning. Our brains are built to recognize and interact with these patterns throughout our lives.

Early on in life these neurons are not yet very well connected. It's as if the world's houses are put in place, but without any roads, power lines or phone lines. Everything is in place, just with no map attached, which are created moment by moment by experience and by activity. The concept of map-making is a physical perspective on the way we interact with the world; a perspective that is useful for us as coaches to understand.

The concept of a map was developed by neuroscientist Gerald Edelman^v. He developed a theory called Neural Darwinism, bringing across some of the ideas of Darwinian selection and survival of the fittest and applying them to the brain.

Edelman's theory was that every piece of data, every idea, every habit, and every thought is made up from a map in our brain. Each map or set of connections is made up of approximately 10,000 – 50,000 neurons. We create maps for every visual, audio or sensory impulse; every word, face, person, idea, and memory; everything that stays with us forms a map that is part of our brain. Sometimes we form maps temporarily and some of these get hardwired – for example, when driving a car, we don't retain every number plate that we pass as this is too much information, but after multiple times of taking the journey you will have a map of the route that you took.

According to Edelman, our brain creates maps that are internal representations of the way the external world works, in order to understand and interact with the world. The maps that make the world make the most sense, get the most energy. Another way of saying this is that the maps that get the most feedback get further hardwired into our brain and become more dominant.

An individual's maps are synonymous with the idea of filters, values and beliefs, which are all hypotheses for how to best function in the world, or in other words, operating rules for the brain. These are often held beneath the conscious mind, hardwired into the brain.

Peter Senge in his book, *The Fifth Discipline*^{vi}, also refers to these maps. He describes it as “Nature’s Templates: Identifying the patterns that control events.” *Structures of which we are unaware of that hold us prisoner.*”

We are bound by these “templates,” these structures to react and behave in certain predictable and “intuitive” ways. Such as déjà vu, though events and circumstances may change, we re-live these experiences over and over again—because we’re programmed to react in that way.

Whether concerning family, community, business, or any other entity, we do not carry “an organization” in our minds, says Senge. Instead, what we carry in our heads are images, assumptions, and stories—and deeply held internal images of how the world works. Joel Arthur Barker, building on the work of Thomas Kuhn, popularized the same concept as “paradigms.” The “internal images” we hold dear “affect what we can see”—for humans “observe selectively,” “limit our thinking to what’s familiar,” “share our perceptions,” and “they shape how we act.” “Einstein understood this when he said, “Our theories determine what we measure.”

“There is more than just intellectual insight,” “At a deeper level it is our most basic assumptions and our way of putting the information together that is the greatest source of limitation.” “Mental models are very, very powerful. They shape the way we organize information. They don’t determine what information we have, they determine the sense we make of information.” says Senge.

As coaches we interact directly with these mental models or hardwired maps of our clients. I think you would agree that to understand these mental models or maps would be very beneficial. For our discussion, the map or mental model we are interested in is the one that governs our belief in our own authority.

To understand this belief, we need to understand one of the fundamentals of being human, namely, being autonomous. I am of opinion that our belief in our own authority directly links with being autonomous. To understand autonomy better, we can use the SCARF model.

SCARF^{vii}

The study of the brain, particularly within the field of social, cognitive and affective neuroscience is starting to provide some underlying brain insights that can be applied in the real world (Lieberman, 2007^{viii}). Social neuroscience explores the biological foundations of the way humans relate to each other and to themselves and covers diverse topics that have a different degree to which they can be operationalized and unambiguously tested.

From this diversity, two themes are emerging from social neuroscience. Firstly, that much of our motivation driving social behaviour is governed by an overarching organizing principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward (Gordon, 2000)^{ix}. Secondly, that several domains of social experience draw upon the same brain networks to maximize reward and minimize threat as the brain networks used for primary survival needs (Lieberman and Eisenberger, 2008)^x. In other words, social needs are treated in much the same way in the brain as the need for food and water.

The SCARF model summarizes these two themes within a framework that captures the common factors that can activate a reward or threat response in social situations. This model can be applied (and tested) in any situation where people collaborate in groups, including all types of workplaces, educational environments, family settings and general social events.

The SCARF model involves five domains of human social experience: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness.

SCARF Model of Social Threats and Rewards

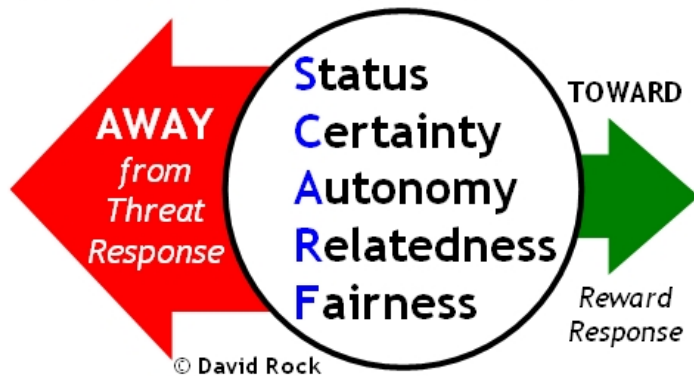


Fig. 2 – The SCARF Model

Status is about relative importance to others. Certainty concerns being able to predict the future. Autonomy provides a sense of control over events. Relatedness is a sense of safety with others, of friend rather than foe. And fairness is a perception of fair exchanges between people.

These five domains activate either the 'primary reward' or 'primary threat' circuitry (and associated networks) of the brain. For example, a perceived threat to one's status activates similar brain networks to a threat to one's life. In the same way, a perceived increase in fairness activates the same reward circuitry as receiving a monetary reward.

Autonomy

Autonomy is the perception of exerting control over one's environment; a sensation of having choices. Mineka (1985^{xi}) showed that the degree of control organisms can exert over a stress factor determines whether or not the stressor alters the organism's functioning. Inescapable or uncontrollable stress can be highly destructive, whereas the same stress interpreted as escapable is significantly less destructive. (Donny et al, 2006^{xii}). The difference in some rodent studies was life and death (Dworkin et al, 1995)^{xiii}. An increase in the perception of autonomy feels rewarding.

Several studies in the retirement industry find strong correlations between a sense of control and health outcomes (Rodin, 1986^{xiv}). People leave corporate life, often for far less income, because they desire greater autonomy.

A reduction in autonomy, for example when being micro managed, can generate a strong threat response. When one senses a lack of control, the experience is of a lack of agency, or an inability to influence outcomes.

Reducing autonomy threat

Working in a team necessitates a reduction in autonomy. In healthy cultures, this potential threat tends to be counteracted with an increase in status, certainty and relatedness. With an autonomy threat just below the surface, it can be helpful to pay attention to this driver. The statement 'Here's two options that could work, which would you prefer?' will tend to elicit a better response than 'Here is what you have to do now'.

Increasing rewards from autonomy

Providing significant autonomy in an organization can be difficult. Yet even a subtle perception of autonomy can help, for example by having self-directed learning portals, where employees get to design their learning curriculum, and self-driven human resource systems.

Allowing people to set up their own desks, organize their workflow, even manage their working hours, can all be beneficial if done within agreed parameters. Sound policy establishes the boundaries within which individuals can exercise their creativity and autonomy. Sound policy should enable individual point-of-need decision-making without

consultation with, or intervention by, leaders. In this regard, sound policy hard-wires autonomy into the processes of an organization. (Footnote IV)

Deeper understanding of autonomy

Barber and Martin (1999)^{xv} give a comprehensive argument on the importance of defining autonomy. In their thorough definition various important markers can be set. They define autonomy as: “autonomy becomes **an agent’s active use of its capabilities to pursue some goal without intervention, oversight, or control by any other agent.**”

This definition includes the agent^{xvi} being pro-active, meaning that to be useful, autonomous agents must consider their goal, make decisions about how to achieve the goal, and act constructively on these decisions.

To act without intervention, is somewhat difficult to comprehend. In a mechanical world agents are able to work on behalf of their user without the need for any interaction or input from the user. You switch on the kettle and it boils the water. In a dynamic multi-faceted world we are continuously influenced from the environment, which in itself is an intervention. Yet to be autonomous the agent must act independently from deliberate intervention or control in order to be able to be held responsible for the actions he initiated.

Barber and Martin identify three types of intervention:

1. modification of an agent’s environment,
2. influence over an agent’s beliefs, and
3. Intervention in an agent’s decision-making process.

All three are equally important considerations for agent design and operation.

However, to provide clear boundaries for the term, they propose that “autonomy” should apply only to the third type of intervention (as the most salient dimension of the concept of autonomy). They label freedom from the other types of intervention as (1) “environmental isolation” and (2) “incredulity” (non-gullibility), respectively.

A third element of their definition highlights the **goal-directedness** of being autonomous. That is, once an agent agrees to work toward a particular goal, it may pursue that goal in an autonomous fashion without intervention, oversight, or control by any external entity. Here, the term “goal” should be interpreted broadly as a high-level task or desired state, an intended plan or course of action, or a low-level primitive action to be performed.

The final definition then is: ***Autonomy is an agent’s active use of its capabilities to pursue some goal without intervention in an agent’s decision-making process by any other agent.***

An important assumption underlies this definition: It assumes that the agent will have the **opportunity** to pursue a decision.

Bavetta & Peragine (2000)^{xvii} brings an interesting perception on the opportunity to be autonomous. For them the quantitative assessment of autonomy freedom requires information about potential preferences as well as the awareness of the circumstances of the choice.

They distinguish two reasons for attributing value to having opportunity. The first is rooted in the view that opportunity is valued for its own sake, because choosing an option from a set

that contains other alternatives reflects an individual's opportunity freedom. They call such a reason for valuing opportunity, substantive.

The second reason they attribute value to having an opportunity is for instrumental (procedural) reasons. Whereas, having the possibility of selecting among different alternatives is important for its consequences on the development and exercise of one's own individuality. Access to opportunity is important for instrumental reasons, and Bavetta & Peragine refers to it as autonomy freedom.

An analytically useful distinction can be drawn between procedural and substantive value of having opportunity.

The latter assigns importance to availability of opportunity **irrespective of the choice process**. Access to any further opportunity x enlarges the decision maker's opportunity freedom irrespective of whether the newly acquired alternative would ever be chosen or, at least, considered for selection by the decision maker in the deliberative process.

Availability of opportunities may also be valuable for procedural reasons. If a client prefers her work in the bank but the local restaurant would commit her to less hours, having such an opportunity becomes valuable since it would confront her with alternatives whose selection requires a careful weighting of their respective merits.

The process of forming one's own preferences and selecting among alternatives is important since it contributes to the development of the client's moral and personal qualities and makes her own life the product of her choices. From the procedural point of view then, having opportunity becomes valuable for its impact on **the deliberative process** rather than for its opportunity freedom enhancing properties.

The value of having opportunity does not rest on the mere fact of having an alternative available but is the consequence of the decision maker's engagement in a deliberative process, since choosing is instrumental for and an expression of a person's autonomy.

But, how can the process of developing and affirming one's own autonomy be captured? The answer is by gathering information on the menu of available alternatives and on the set of potential preference relations that a decision maker confronts. Potential preferences are instrumental to have a grip on 'good reasons'. If two opportunities may be chosen on the basis of two different preference relations, then the decision maker has to refer to her fundamental qualities for deliberating and therefore the choice they call for is a relevant one.

These fundamental qualities, to say it differently, are some criteria (or screening device) for distinguishing potential from conceivable preferences. The question is whether reasonableness would be the right screening device. In our conversation this refers to the mental models activated in the process of making choices.

If we want to assess how much autonomy an agent enjoys, we should include the preferences that the decision maker is aware of when given his own individual circumstances at the moment of making his choice. These circumstances—not any sociologically determined criterion such as reasonableness—should be the guideline for eliciting potential preference relations and, ultimately, relevant choices.

In Bavetta & Peragine's view then, an individual enjoys autonomy to the extent to which he or she may accomplish conscious evaluations of the available alternatives and base his or her choice on such an evaluative process.

Bavetta & Peragine therefore define an alternative space, that they call the space of opportunity situations. An opportunity situation is a space composed of a) information about the set of alternatives available to a decision maker and b) the set of all available potential preference relations that he is confronting in a specific choice situation (contextual circumstance).

Bavetta & Peragine further argues that the addition of a new opportunity enlarges the chooser's extent of autonomy freedom if it makes a relevant choice in the light of the set of potential preference relations that the decision maker is aware of. Hence, the 'irrelevance' of an opportunity can be determined by the limited set of available preference orderings; i.e., by his unawareness in the choice of a specific opportunity.

Measuring autonomy freedom has been so far accomplished by looking at a decision maker's relevant opportunities when his admissible potential preferences are elicited on the basis of what is reasonable. Bavetta & Peragine argued in favour of awareness as an alternative criterion for eliciting the set of admissible potential preferences. On the basis of awareness, the decision maker has been able to construct a ranking based on information about all available opportunities and all preference relations that the decision maker is aware of.

Let us place ourselves again. For us as coaches, to better understand our clients change process, we need to understand their mental maps regarding autonomy. Autonomy is a biologically engraved survival function and links directly to the belief that we have the authority to choose. As coaches, we therefore need to have a solid understanding of what autonomy is.

We can define autonomy then as our clients' active use of their capabilities to pursue some goal without intervention in their decision-making process by any other agent. The opportunity and the awareness of an opportunity is equally important as it is an often overlooked leverage point in the decision making process.

For our exploration I now would like to suggest a model to assist in understanding the mental models activated in the process of making choices and suggest it be used as a tool to create awareness for our clients about their choice process.

Mental Map on own authority - Locus of Control and Causality

I would like to introduce two concepts that I think play an important role in determining a person's mind maps of his or her own autonomy.

The first concept is "locus of control". Locus of Control refers to an individual's perception about the underlying main control of events in his/her life. Or, more simply: Do you believe that your destiny is controlled by *yourself* or by *external forces* (such as fate, god, or powerful others)?

A locus of control orientation is a belief about whether the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do (internal control orientation) or on events outside our personal control (external control orientation). (Zimbardo, 1985, p. 275)^{xviii}

In general, it seems to be psychologically healthy to perceive that one has control over those things which one is capable of influencing.

However, it's important to warn people against lapsing in the overly simplistic view that internal locus of control is good and external locus of control is bad. There are important subtleties and complexities to be considered. For example:

- Internals can be psychologically unhealthy and unstable. An internal orientation usually needs to be matched by competence, self-efficacy and opportunity so that the person is able to successfully experience the sense of personal control and responsibility. Overly internal people who lack competence, efficacy and opportunity can become neurotic, anxious and depressed. In other words, internals need to have a realistic sense of their circle of influence in order to experience 'success'.
- Externals can lead easy-going, relaxed, happy lives.

Despite these cautions, psychological research has found that people with a more internal locus of control seem to be better off, e.g., they tend to be more achievement oriented and to get better paid jobs. However, thought regarding causality, is needed here as well.^{xix}

This brings us to the second concept: Locus of Causality. This concept refers to an individual's perception about the underlying cause of events in their life. The underlying belief is whether you are able the cause things to happen or do things happen to you?

As with locus of control, there is a further distinction within personal causation or intentional behaviour between an *internal Perceived Locus of Control*, in which the actor is perceived as the "origin" of his or her behaviour, and an *external Perceived Locus of Control*, in which the actor is seen as a "pawn" to heterogeneous forces. The distinction between internal and external Perceived Locus of Control has since been crucial for studies of intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation and of perceived autonomy in a more general way. (Deci & Ryan, 1985).^{xx}

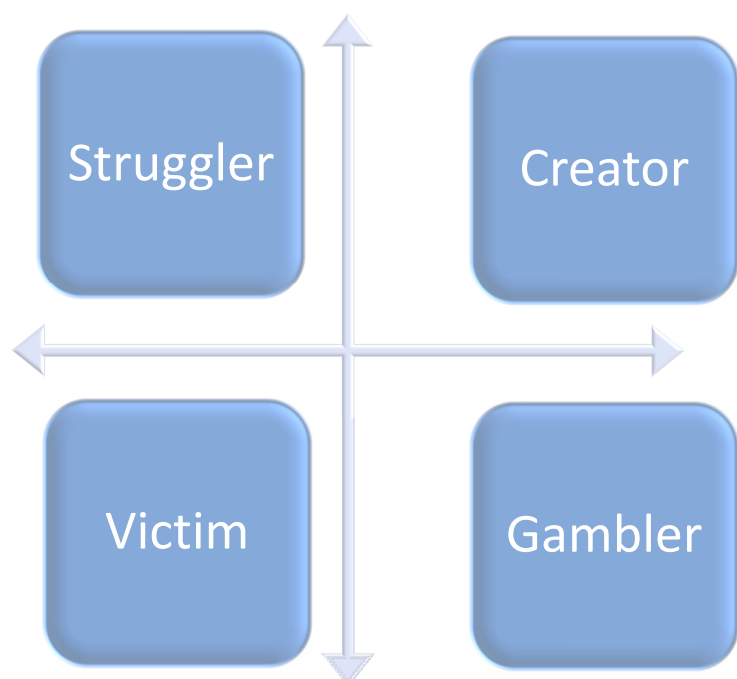
Usually these two concepts are seen as independent of each other. I believe as Hagger and Armitige (2004)^{xxi} do, that these two concepts are intertwined. I propose that we place them on two axels as dynamic continuums.

Let us make the x-axil the locus of control continuum and the y-axil the locus of causality. Both have an internal and external pole. The interplay between these two continuums gives us a dynamic interpretation model of how our client's mental models of their own capabilities to pursue their goals without intervention in a decision-making process, by anybody else, might look.

Figure 3 – Control and Cause matrix

If people have a mental model that they have no control over circumstances and they have no power to cause any change, I classify them as victims. They have given up any hope and have resigned themselves to fate. Both their locus of control and causality is external.

If people have a mental model that they have no control over what happens to them, but they believe that they have the ability to change things, I classify them strugglers. Such a person has an internal locus of causality but an external locus of control. Life is a



constant struggle against the great big unknown forces out there. People with this mentality usually believe in conspiracy theories and tend to be radical or fundamental in their religious and political beliefs.

If people have a mental model that that they have control over their life but no control over what happens to them, their locus of control is internal, but their locus of causality is external. I classify them as gamblers. They have a mentality that life has dealt me a hand of cards and I need to play it to the best of my ability.

Lastly, if people believe that they have control over their choices and they are able to take initiative to make things happen, both their locus of control and causality is internal. I classify them as the creators of their own life. In my mind this is the psychologically healthy space to be in.

It is important to note that we all move up and down on these continuums. Life is dynamic and multi-dimensional. No one can be boxed into just on quadrant. It is also important that we all have a circle of influence. Inside the circle we are creator or victim, struggler or gambler.

The fact of life is that sometimes things happen outside our circle of influence. The tsunami and earthquake that hit Japan early in 2011 was definitely outside the circle of influence of the nation. They were legitimate victims. But they did not stay there. They moved on the continuum to be re-creators of their country.

It comes back to the awareness of our mental models that underpin our autonomy. Once we are aware we can move on the continuum towards the healthy quadrant and start creating our own life with the conscious choices we make.

More specify, with the awareness, we are able to re-creating our mental models around our own authority. As coaches we are the change agents that can assist our clients in this process of creating healthy mental models, through the coaching dialogues we have with them.

Dialogues that create effective mental maps.

Let us try and put things together. We started by defining coaches as change agents. The question was asked: what do we change? Simplistically put, we change our client's ability to change themselves. To be able to do this, we need to understand the foundational stone of the client's mental maps regarding their autonomy. We therefore need to understand the concept of autonomy very well.

Our departure point for understanding autonomy better, is the neuroscientific perspective that the brain moves towards being more autonomous and away from less autonomy. Defining autonomy as our clients' active use of his/her capabilities to pursue some goal without intervention in their decision-making process by any other agent. Adding to that, the perspective that the awareness of the choices available and the awareness of the process making those choices, are just as important.

Trying to systemize our thoughts I proposed a four quadrant model that helps us create awareness of the said processes.

Using the model effectively should be done in the context of dialogue. Normally in coaching "lingo" we refer to the coaching conversation. I find that the concept "dialogue" brings the essence of the coaching process to the foreground more powerfully.

The discipline of "dialogue," is the capacity of to be able to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together." (Dialogue differs from the more common "discussion," which has its roots with "percussion" and "concussion," literally a heaving of ideas back and forth in a winner-takes-all competition.)

Dialogue is an activity in which participants may have a discussion, of which the focus is, as much as anything else, on attending to and discussing individual internal dynamics--assumptions, beliefs, motivations, etc. The idea is not to eliminate them from happening, but to surface them in the conversation in a way that furthers the dialogue. Dialogue, involves joining our thinking and feeling into a shared pool of meaning which continually flows and evolves, carrying us both into new and deeper levels of understanding none of us could have foreseen. Through dialogue "a new kind of mind" begins to come into being, based on the development of common meaning... People are no longer primarily in opposition, nor can they be said to be interacting, rather they are participating in this pool of common meaning, which is capable of constant development and change. (Bohm 1998)^{xxii}

In the end then, our adventure brings us to this point. As coaches, we create shared meaning for our clients. In our conversation, we aim to create a shared meaning around a tool that can be used to facilitate our client's awareness regarding the mind maps around which they have about their own autonomy. I hope it has added value.

Happy Coaching

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