

An Action Research Study on Coaches' Cultural Awareness in the Public Sector

Catherine Carr, Talent Management Division, B.C. Public Service Agency, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Lily Seto, Talent Management Division, B.C. Public Service Agency, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Contact Email catherine.carr@gov.bc.ca

Abstract

The purpose of this action research project is to understand how a coach's own cultural lens impacts his/her coaching. Fourteen internal coaches from a government human resources organization in British Columbia were introduced to Rosinski's Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) through education and self-assessment. Coaches wrote accounts on the role culture played within successful and less successful coaching sessions. Six themes were identified: culture is complex; awareness of the culture of the coaching profession; cultural awareness affects coaching outcomes; similar coach-client orientations makes for more comfortable coaching; the challenge of adapting to the client's orientation; and leveraging possibilities through different orientations.

Keywords: cultural orientations framework, coaching, action research, coach awareness, internal coaching, coach training, government

Introduction

The practitioner and academic communities have called for coaches to enhance cultural awareness skills (Handin and Steinwedel, 2006; Plaister-Ten, 2009). In the British Columbia Public Service (BCPS), there is a corporate diversity and inclusion initiative that includes embedding the principles of diversity into all human resources practices including the internal coaching services (British Columbia Public Service, 2011). This action research study was designed to align with this initiative by increasing coaches' self-awareness around cultural context in order to enhance effective service delivery.

Background

The BCPS internal coaching service began operations in June 2011, and is a key component of the British Columbia (BC) government's human resource transformation. Coaching services includes

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

individual coaching, team coaching, leadership 360 debriefs, coaching skills courses, and broader strategic coaching initiatives to support developing a coaching culture across the organization. Eighteen coaches are located across the province. Services are delivered mainly through telephone and virtual technologies, although in-person coaching is available in eight locations. The team of eighteen coaches was introduced to the proposed study and the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF). Based on the coaches' availability, fourteen volunteered to participate in this study. These coaches had participated in two or three previous seminars on culture in the workplace.

The setting for this coaching service is the British Columbia (B.C.) Public Service in Canada. There are sixteen ministries and additional agencies, crown corporations and an Office of the Premier, employing 26,000 employees in the social, natural resource and corporate sectors. Sizes of the Ministries and offices vary, as do the cultures of each organization. The majority of employees work in Victoria, the provincial capital, with others spread out over 280 communities around the province.

British Columbia is ethnically diverse. Indigenous Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Metis) comprise of 4.2 % of the population and Aboriginal youth are the fastest growing demographic in B.C. There are 198 First Nations communities, each with its own unique traditions, history and culture. Additionally, British Columbians immigrated from over 170 different countries; an additional 40,000 new immigrants arrive each year. 17.4 % of B.C.'s population self-identifies as being from an ethnic culture. The employees in the public service represent these groups, although not at the same percentages as the population at large.

Cultural diversity within our group of fourteen coaches who volunteered for this study includes:

- One male and thirteen females
- One aboriginal woman, one visible minority woman, and one gay-identified coach
- Geographically widely dispersed coaches in eight locations across the province, including rural and urban settings
- An age range of 32-58
- All coaches were internally certified as B.C. Performance Coaches using a model which draws from the GROW (Whitmore, 2002) and Coactive (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, Kimsey-House, and Sandahl, 2007) models with training on coaching internally in a public sector environment. Seven coaches have additional external certification from four different coach training schools and hold Associate Certified Coach (ACC) to Professional Certified Coach (PCC) designations with the International Coach Federation. Education ranges from high school education to doctorate level
- Coaching experience varied from one and a half years to fifteen years. Seven of the coaches were newer coaches, having been practicing for one and a half years in total.
- Coaches have backgrounds including counselling, human resources, strategic planning, labour relations, team leadership, management, negotiation and conflict transformation, organizational development, and training and development
- All coaches have English as their primary language and were born in North America or an English speaking country (e.g. Scotland for one).

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Culture

Many authors conceptualize culture as having both visible and invisible layers, with invisible layers becoming more apparent with increased self-awareness and reflection. For Hofstede (1984), culture consists of hidden values that are broad preferences with behaviour following those preferences. Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2011) likewise define the invisible layer as assumptions, which reflect our taken for granted core values. Spencer-Oatey (2004) combines values and assumptions as the core layer, and then defines the next layer as beliefs, attitudes and conventions. Schwartz (2007) created a value inventory that clusters values into types and also separates out an individual vs. culture-level analysis. Rosinski (2003) measure both cultural orientations and abilities and explicates how coaches can use this framework with clients. The COF is based on research by culture experts such as Milton Bennett, Edward T. Hall, Geert Hofstede, Florence Kluckhohn, Frederick Strodbeck, and Charles Hampden-Turner (Rosinski, 2003).

For the purposes of this study, we selected Rosinski's cultural orientations framework (2003) as a conceptual framework and primary assessment tool for several reasons: a) it is designed for use by coaches, b) the cultural categories selected transcend typical categorizations such as age, gender, ethnicity and this was aligned with our diversity strategy, c) the COF has a team profile that we can utilize for future initiatives and d) the training and assessment tool was cost effective. Other models were considered (e.g. Paige, 2004), however the COF framework seemed particularly designed for coaches to have coaching conversations that facilitate leveraging cultural differences and creating new possibilities.

Rosinski's definition of culture is broad, which fit for our public service context: "A group's culture is the set of unique characteristics that distinguishes its members from another group" (Rosinski, 2003, p. 20). This definition of culture includes visible elements such as behaviours, language and artifacts, as well as invisible ones such as values, beliefs and norms. The coaches identify with a number of cultures based on this definition including such groupings as: geographic, economic, educational, ability, religion, ethnicity, profession, social factors, gender, sexual orientation, age, language and physical ability.

While these cultural groupings are indeed important, Rosinski (2003) notes that individuals are increasingly identifying with cultures reflected through their value systems and social placement rather than, say for instance, their nationality. Schein (2010: p.9) reinforces this point, stating that "culture is not only all around us but within us as well" and that culture includes the beliefs, values, norms, and rules of behaviour for any particular group. In B.C. it is recognized that, "in an era where geographic and cultural boundaries are not the barriers they once were, the societies that succeed will be the ones that are most inclusive because they draw on the benefits of a wealth of different perspectives to drive innovation and advancement" (British Columbia Public Service, 2012).

Barriers and Possibilities

The coaches in this program strive to be inclusive; however, they are not immune from ethnocentrism, or the assumption that one's own culture is the essence of reality. Rosinski (2003) asserts that ethnocentrism occurs in stages. The first stage is when we ignore differences; the second is when we judge differences negatively; and the third stage occurs when we downplay their importance. Rarely, is malice attached to ethnocentrism; rather, it comes from a lack of awareness.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Rosinski's experience is that, in organizations that function normally, the first stage is rare amongst coaches and leaders; however, the second and third stages are common.

Coaching across cultures means increasing one's self-awareness so that one is aware of beliefs and become more open to those of the clients: "If we understand the dynamics of culture, we will be less likely to be puzzled, irritated, and anxious when we encounter the unfamiliar and seemingly irrational behavior of people in organizations..." (Schein, 2010, p. 9). Self-aware coaches can help clients consider and leverage new possibilities that fit for their own needs, leveraging new possibilities from two seemingly contradictorily perspectives (Rosinski, 2003). Leveraging possibilities must also be coupled with nuanced coaching wisdom and skills such as knowing when and what change a client is ready for.

Methodology

This group of coaches sees their role as change agents, leading the way to support an inclusive and culturally sensitive workplace. An action research methodology was chosen to support the coaches to explore the role that their own cultural preferences play in coaching, thereby strengthening their coaching. The intent was to facilitate coaches' learning, and to inform coaching initiatives in other organizations.

Reason and Bradbury (2001: p.1) describe action research as bringing "together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities". Action research is purposeful, empowering, and recognizes the socially embedded context that research is carried out in. For this action research, three experienced and COF trained coaches introduced Rosinski's Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) as an opportunity to increase understanding of the coaches' cultural orientations and consider that of their teammates' and clients'.

The Cultural Orientations Framework (COF)

Rojon (2010) conducted research to assess the psychometric properties of the COF. Her results showed that the COF has construct validity, however could be improved through greater internal consistency. While improvements could be made to improve the assessment tool, the COF is mainly used to facilitate discussion about an individual's worldviews and to stimulate individual development. The purposes for using the COF are:

- To assess and consider alternative cultural differences,
- To bridge different cultures,
- To assist the client with articulating and envisioning their desired culture, and
- To leverage cultural diversity.

The COF is an online self-report assessment tool that takes approximately fifteen minutes to complete. The COF asks questions regarding seven cultural categories that include seventeen cultural dimensions as shown in Table 1.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Table 1. Cultural Orientation Framework

Category	Orientations
Sense of power and responsibility	Control/Harmony/Humility
Time management approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scarce/Plentiful• Monochronic/Polychronic• Past/Present/Future
Definitions of identity and purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being/Doing• Individualistic/Collectivistic
Organizational arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hierarchy/Equality• Universalist/Particularist• Stability/Change• Competitive/Collaborative
Notions of territory and boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Protective/Sharing
Communication patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Affective/Neutral• Formal/Informal
Modes of thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deductive/Inductive• Analytical/Systematic

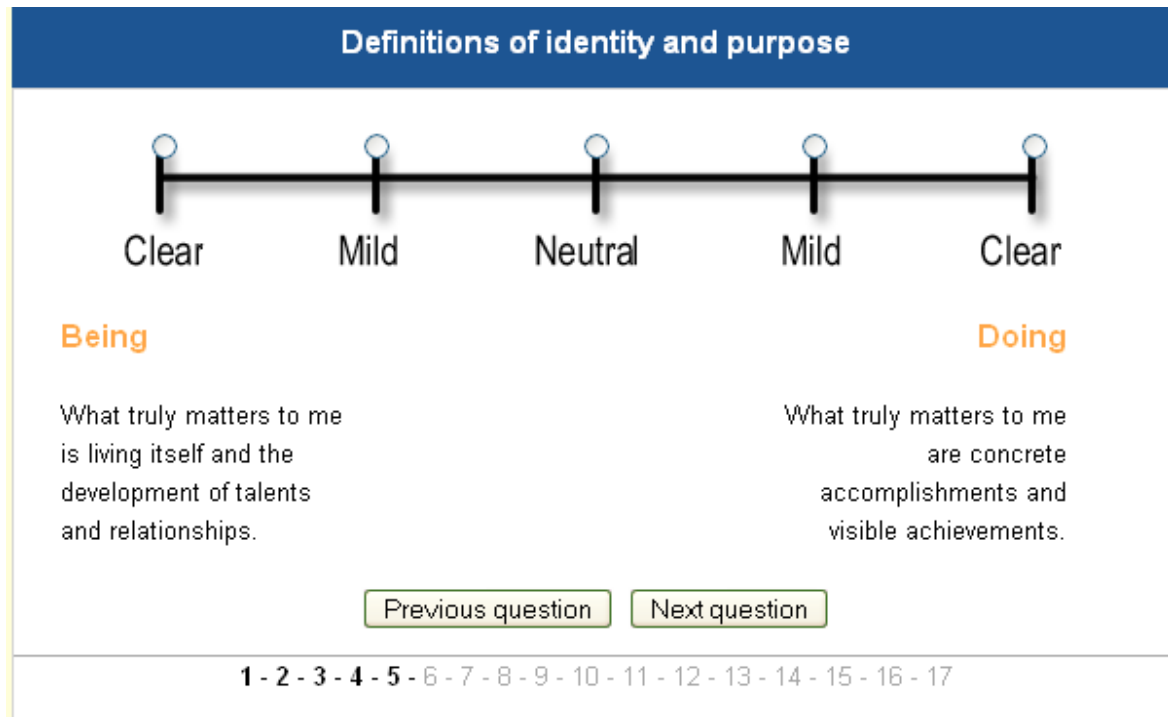
Individuals completing assessments locate where they see themselves within each category, and they rate their ability across each orientation of that category. Figure 1 below illustrates how the assessment looks.

Research Method

The primary intent of this research was to facilitate an action-learning workshop on applying a cultural lens to coaching in order to support coaches' self-awareness and learning to better serve a diverse client base. The secondary goal was to collect data arising from the workshop to highlight learning themes and foster further coach development.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Figure 1: The Categories of Being and Doing



The steps of this research were as follows:

1. Selection and training of Lead Coaches

Three Lead Coaches were selected to train in the COF. Two additional applicants were invited to assist with project design and assessment debriefing roles for the project. The three Lead Coaches were trained and supervised by Philippe Rosinski to use the COF. Ideally all coaches would have been trained, as was Rosinski's recommendation, however to be cost effective a choice was made to train three coaches. Supervision was provided on interpreting the COF assessments and the team profile, a training plan for orienting the coaches and debriefing their assessments, and the research findings.

2. Introduction to the action research project

The Lead Coaches introduced the research project and followed with two highly participatory forums over a two-month period. The intent of the introduction was to introduce the topic of cultural awareness and the cultural orientations framework for coach development. A second intent was to seek input from the group on aims and desired outcomes, explore the concept of cultural orientation, and agree on next steps.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

3. Individual COF assessments and debriefing

The coaches were provided with a pre-reading summary of Rosinski's Cultural Orientations Framework. The summary included background on Rosinski's definition of culture, cultural categories, dimensions, orientations, and the COF assessment instrument structure (number of questions under preference and ability) and completion instructions. Coaches completed the COF Assessment online and engaged in at least one debriefing session to explore their assessment results. The debriefing session was carried out by one of three Lead Coaches who were trained by Rosinski or the two additional coaches who were mentored by the first three. To align debriefing styles, a debriefing template was developed that both had similar questions for all debriefings and allowed for customization.

The COF assessment results in a summary report showing preferences across 17 dimensions. There is no interpretation or guide to exploration within the data printout itself. The assessment provides an opportunity for an exploratory coaching conversation rather than an interpretative summary itself. Participants must become familiar with the framework model by training with Rosinski and/or by referring to his books to understand the summary. To help with familiarization and to aid participant understanding, the Lead Coaches developed supplementary handouts for all the coaches. The handouts summarized COF concepts and defined cultural categories. Each debrief session typically included:

- Contracting (discuss confidentiality, informed consent and clarify desired outcomes.)
- Information on the COF Process and the Principles
- Use of Initial Coaching Questions (What was it like to complete the assessment? What stands out to you? Were there any surprises? What would you like to have by the end of this debrief?)
- Exploration of Personal Cultural Orientations (How do you see culture? When you thought about your preferences, what context were you thinking about yourself in? What would you say are your strongest preferences? Can you give some examples of when your strongest preferences enhanced /detracted from the coaching experience?)
- Exploration of Self-Mastery in Coaching (What type of client do you tend to connect with the least/most? How is this reflected in your assessment? How might you leverage these differences?)
- Planning for Action and Application (What would you like to do going forward?)

4. Coaches Forum and accounts

The first coaches' forum focused on the coaches' cultural orientations as individuals and as a group. A combination of reflection, writing, and discussion was used over a 1.5-hour period. At the end, coaches submitted one to three paragraphs each. Two prompts were used:

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

- A. Please write about a time when you or your clients' cultural lens impacted your client in a positive way.
- B. Please write about a time when you or your clients' cultural lens impacted your client in a less than ideal way.

Following the writing of these individual accounts, there was a forty-five minute facilitated group discussion about their recollections. The workshop ended by inviting the coaches to reflect on new insights going forward. All fourteen coaches submitted their individual accounts in writing. Additionally, the group discussion was transcribed and informed the research.

5. Clarification of submissions

There were follow up conversations with ten of the fourteen coaches where clarification was sought in order to better understand their submission. These conversations occurred by virtual communicator (audio-visual) (six coaches) or by email (four coaches). Questions were asked in the format of:

1. "You said X. I am wondering what you mean?" or
2. "You said X. Please say more."

The additional results and comments from these 5-10 minute conversations were added to the coaches' account summaries. All coaches were sent their final written submissions to further validate that they reflected what the coach intended. Two coaches made minor changes to the text at this stage.

6. Second Coaches Forum and participatory planning

The second forum was held six weeks later to provide a follow up to further explore insights from the assessments, applicability to coaching, and to discuss the team COF profile. Input was sought to design next steps in their learning and in the research process. Through this collective effort, the coaches decided to set up a COF study group for several months and to evaluate the tool for client use. This timing coincided with developing a larger learning and development framework for the group.

7. Qualitative thematic analysis

Each of the two researchers reviewed the results individually, making notations of key words and emerging themes and then met to discuss and find agreement upon themes.

8. Validation of results

The findings were validated with the participating coaches, which meant that all coaches were provided with the themes and the selected quotations. As a result one quotation was modified to better reflect the original intent of the coach and two others were asked to provide clearer examples of the themes. Otherwise the coaches were in agreement with the chosen themes and quotations. Several coaches commented that they appreciated reading the themes and quotations as this formed an important part of their learning about cultural orientation.

9. Consultation with Philippe Rosinski

Philippe Rosinski reviewed the results and offered feedback on the findings and analysis. This fostered further learning for the researchers. Discussions focused on how similar orientations feel

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

comfortable for coaches, and considered the question of whether some dimensions were more about personality while others were more culturally shaped. Some of this feedback is incorporated in this paper.

It is beyond the scope of this research paper, however of note, the group aggregate for the coaches was also prepared and debriefed.

Data Collection Summary

The primary data collected were written accounts of coaching experiences from the first forum. Triangulation of the research findings enhanced validity through multiple methods and data sources, including:

1. Collecting written individual coach experiences from the forum. No client names or identifying particulars were used (via email);
2. Submission content clarification through in person or virtually conducted interviews;
3. Validating the chosen themes with the coaches;
4. Consulting with Philippe Rosinski on the themes and analysis; and
5. Validating and advancing the themes through a literature review.

Results

Six themes emerged from the collected accounts: culture is complex, awareness of the culture of the coaching profession, cultural awareness affects coaching outcomes, similar coach-client orientations are more comfortable situations to coach, leveraging possibilities through different orientations, and the challenge of adapting to a client's orientation.

1. Culture is complex

The most common dimensions discussed in these client scenarios were: being vs. doing hierarchy vs. equality, monochronic vs. polychronic competitive vs. collaborative, control vs. harmony vs. humility, and collectivistic vs. individualistic. The first three dimensions were discussed most frequently. The coaches spoke about their value of taking time to reflect, and be present in the moment, however found themselves busier than time allowed for consistent reflection. Many talked through changes they might make to be more in alignment with their preference.

Perhaps because the coaches were introduced to Rosinski's framework, there were frequent references to the COF terms for cultural orientation in their writing. Some coaches did mention other typical cultural categories such as age, gender, and ethnic background:

I had one pivotal experience about working with Aboriginal people. I was dealing with a First Nations person and we were emailing. We were talking about resources. He said those are not resources. Those are my ancestors. I now understand... the importance of land to him.

A third of the coaches in this study struggled with defining and understanding the notion of culture and described the term 'culture' as "ambiguous and complex." One participant describe this as,

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

“Culture is so pervasive... it’s challenging to think about as it impacts all things. I’ve been struggling to understand it full; I see the other coaches struggling also.”

Another coach was trying to distinguish culture from personality, perhaps wondering if some dimensions belonged in this cultural orientations assessment. This question might be valid; however, in reality, one cannot always know the origin of an individual’s style or preference or how much of preference is personality based and how much is learned. Assessment instruments like the COF point out ‘what the client’s perceived orientation is, however, they don’t inform where the preference came from or why it is present. The COF provides an opportunity for a coaching conversation to support the client to make sense of findings themselves. As coaches, clients can be asked if their preference is effective for them, in their context, at this time. If not, is this preference something they want to reconsider? Other tools such as Schwartz Value Inventory separates out the personal from culture context more explicitly.

Some coaches reflected on the many differing cultural orientations present in their multiple life contexts and were not deterred by this complexity. Some appreciated the cultural framework language and saw how the COF helped them articulate what they were observing as in this comment: *“It gives me a language when someone is stuck.”*

As coaches grappled with the notion of culture, some realized that culture was simply a compilation of preferences gathered through one’s life and that cultural preferences are powerfully linked to our values. The guiding principle of how to best support a client, came down to “what are the client’s values?” One coach noted, *“When clients begin to explore their values they often get “aha moments” realizing why they are not finding meaning in their current roles.”* Another described values as a coaching guidepost.

I understand that this is not the way that others see the world and I often struggle with whether my job as a coach is to help them see the possibility and challenge their view or to help them get to whatever goal they have set even if that seems like an unnecessary compromise. Ultimately I hold their alignment with their values as the guidepost.

Several coaches realized that using a cultural frame for coaching was in many cases different from their usual coaching approach. One coach described working with a client using a psychological lens rather than a cultural orientation. Thus the COF gave this participant a new framework that complemented and created more of a multifocal lens to seeing client’s stories through.

She might have needed more therapy [outside of our service]... If this client were to return for further coaching, I would focus more on skill building in hierarchy, the opposite to her preferred orientation of equality.

Having limited perspectives to work from will limit the value of coaching, be it any single perspective including only applying a cultural lens.

2. Awareness of the culture of the coaching profession

A few coaches wrote about the inherent bias of the coaching profession: *“We have assumptions in coaching. What is the agenda of coaching?”*

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Coaches tend towards a control orientation, namely believing that individuals can and want to effect change in their own lives and in their environment. One coach recognized how this view may not fit for some clients who have an orientation towards humility.

I think if people have a low sense of their own determinate power it significantly diminishes the potential impact of an action-oriented intervention like coaching.

The model used in this coaching program is non-directive, which encourages clients to come up with their own answers, but sometimes clients prefer a consultative (more directive) approach. In this instance, the coach validates the client's need for advice, while simultaneously promoting self-exploration.

I needed to understand him more and build a relationship. Really he is not looking for coaching. He is looking for advice. "Tell me what to do and I will do it." I won't cut him off because I want him to stay interested in communicating with his staff. I will say, "I have thoughts, and I can share my thoughts, but what do you want to do."

Coaches must cross over their own coaching workplace culture, professional teachings, and their instilled beliefs about what coaches do and don't do in order to offer clients information that might be of use.

3. Cultural awareness can affect coaching outcomes

Coaches were asked to describe a time when their or the client's cultural lens impacted the outcome in a less than ideal way. Most coaches had the perspective that a mismatch in cultural orientation was responsible for less than ideal outcomes. The importance of reflecting on our work when we are struggling is illustrated by this quote from a coach who felt ineffective, or stuck:

By the third coaching session, it became clear that I was operating more from my agenda (taking time, going deep and focusing on leadership presence, or being) than his (finding a new position immediately to open the way to his advancement). He was going through the motions but not showing excitement in the process.

A few coaches described feeling disengaged from their clients, and they wanted to end the coaching relationship as a result of having differing values and beliefs:

I struggled with taking her to the opposite orientation because it isn't my preference. I didn't want to offer her more sessions, as I didn't think I was able to help.

On the other hand, our awareness of our cultural preferences can increase possibilities to find middle ground, and to leverage different orientations in the coaching:

My own personal preference towards striving for balance and harmony with nature leaks into my coaching, and I often find myself asking the question "Where is the middle ground?"

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

I think that being aware of when cultural differences are getting in the way is the most important thing for me at this time.

4. Similar coach-client orientations make for more comfortable coaching

Most of the coaches wrote about successful coaching experiences where they had a similar cultural preference to their client. It often appears that when we are of similar orientations, the coaching feels easy, flows, and facilitates trust and rapport:

So perhaps because we were similar in that category, that's where the connection/relationship occurred to allow the client to be vulnerable, open, explore and make movement.

Sometimes, however, when the coach has a similar orientation as the client, that coach may be less able to challenge that orientation:

It is hard to steer someone to another direction when it isn't yours either.

Sometimes a coach helps clients align with their own preference and underlying values in a positive way and sometimes a different perspective is needed. One coach could see both sides of having a similar orientation:

In the first situation, our similarities served the situation. She didn't need to be about adapting to the opposite [orientation and fitting in with her work culture]. It was affecting her health.

In another situation, my client and I both valued equality and being collaborative. However, that didn't seem to serve us this time. What she needed to get ahead in her environment was the opposite. She needed to understand hierarchy and competitiveness.

5. Different orientations can be used to leverage possibilities

Some coaches saw the possibilities of revealing cultural lens to help their clients see their current perspective and then consider viewing their situations differently. However, switching from one orientation to another didn't just happen. It required awareness, and an ability to appreciate and accept the value of the alternate position. One coach described how her own increased cultural awareness helped her coach a client to increase his. The result was increased acceptance of differences in the workplace:

Extreme differences (whether personality or cultural) require a level of openness first, then some real effort in continuing to create understanding, and to some level a degree of acceptance for each other, before the two worlds can come together.

One coach described how developmental level plays a role in the degree to which differences can be leveraged or the client helped to view a situation more systemically:

I realize that a client's ability to see outside of their own cultural lens is in part a function of their developmental level, as is my ability to help them. Can they take another perspective? Can they see the subjective nature of their own stance in the world? Can they move away from what seems personal and consider a bigger dynamic at play?

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

6. *The challenge of adapting to a client's orientation*

Coaches try to leverage potential and possibilities; however, they often come up against organizational barriers to change. Individual coaching can increase awareness and illuminate choice points, but is not an organizational level approach:

I coached an Aboriginal employee and she was struggling with “fit” in her job – what occurred to me is that she was oriented towards a collectivistic approach and her organization expected her to be individualist. There was no middle ground that she could see or that was being offered.

Power and influence varies by geography. Political trends shift decision-making power between centralized to decentralized, regionally based structures. Clients sometimes come to coaching because they are grappling with organizational cultural shifts and potential conflicts or congruency between their values and those espoused by the organizational approach.

[My client] works in a small northern community and in the past, he was consulted regularly and was also able to consult his staff regularly on impending changes. Now, he has noticed that many of the decisions are made centrally and they appear in his email as directives to implement. He struggles with this approach. In addition, he has now applied for a promotion and his hope is to introduce a more collaborative approach at the higher level. Through coaching, he decided to collaborate in a 360-degree fashion.

Discussion

These coaches initially found that culture was challenging for them to define and understand, particularly through a cultural orientation model rather than a categorical framework (e.g. different age, gender, ethnicity). In part, this may be because of the categories used in the COF, but also because the COF assessment offers self report data without built-in interpretation. For some newer coaches and for those who are familiar with using interpretive style assessments, this was challenging. One needs to be fully trained in the COF model and familiar with accompanying books to use the instrument well. It also focuses the coach more on the coaching than the tool, supporting coaching conversations about how the client makes sense of their results. An alternative assessment such as the Berlitz Cultural Orientations Indicator (COI), with its detailed printout, provides more guideposts and discussion prompts. The coaches also noticed that at times they prioritized different values based on the context. Schwartz (2007) points out that the relative importance of our values will guide our action in different contexts. The Schwartz Value Inventory may be of additional benefit, given its distinction between personal and culture contexts.

As a practitioner group, these coaches started the research with varying levels of knowledge about cultural perspectives and culture (outside of the common definition of ethnic culture) was a new concept for some within the context of their coaching practice. Half of the coaches had less than two years experience in coaching. While the concept of culture was ambiguous for some, for others using a cultural orientation framework helped them identify their own and clients' underlying assumptions and values that they might not have noticed otherwise.

Coaches could typically see the obvious visible layer of culture such as the example of what it is like to work with a task-oriented person when you are a feeling-oriented coach. The invisible layers

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

of values and assumptions were surfaced through coaching conversations about the COF results. These layers were more challenging to bring to awareness and act upon, particularly when there was a difference in orientation between the coach and client. While most coaching was seen as effective, a couple of coaches described a lack of cultural fit with a particular client and their desire to end the coaching. Others disclosed struggling with taking an opposite orientation because it wasn't their preference. This points to the need to develop coaches' self-awareness around their own cultural orientation before they are qualified/able to coach clients. The Lead Coaches in this study recommended that cultural awareness be included as a core competency in the next iteration of our internal Performance Coaching Certificate Program.

A small number of coaches struggled with a desire to differentiate personality variables from culture and did not identify that there was interplay between the two. A broader perspective is offered by Peterson (2007) who argues that it is "more important for a coach to have a good understanding of the ways in which people may vary and of what is meaningful to the individuals they are coaching than it is to determine whether a particular aspect of a person's character derives from innate personality, culture, or life experiences" (pg. 264). Any framework, including the COF, is the map not the territory, and needs to be regarded as a coaching tool to facilitate conversation and foster insights and new possibilities.

Adding to the confusion was the variability of cultural preference across multiple contexts. "What context do I answer from?" was raised, they were instructed to choose one context or go with their default preference. For many, their answers to cultural orientation were, "It depends." What coaches were able to appreciate was that culture was reflected in their preferences and linked to their values; while they might have differing values in some contexts, their strongest values guided their preferences.

A predominant theme in the accounts was that similar cultural orientations between coach and client typically help create rapport, trust and momentum in the coaching. Some coaches however, recognized that similarity can create blindness to alternative orientations and reduced ability to leverage differences. Another predominant theme was that different orientations typically meant that the coach and client did not align and could even result in the coach or client not wanting to work together. Again, some coaches could appreciate that it was this very difference that enabled them to help their client see an alternative way of approaching a situation.

Some coaches identified that once they understood cultural preferences, this framework became a powerful tool and language to frame a client's experience. Others saw merit in using a cultural framework to assess if their client's self-perception aligned with how they saw their client. One coach described how thinking about culture expanded her coaching toolkit, as she saw that she could work with a client in a broader way than the psychological one she was currently using. Rosinski's Global Coaching (2010) book, offers this expanded way of working as well, encouraging coaches to consider six intertwined lens: physical, managerial, psychological, political, cultural and spiritual.

Bias of coaching

Coaches reflected on the underlying bias of the coaching profession. Typically, the coaching stance is one of being future-focused, self-actualizing, and action-oriented. This stance may help leverage possibilities, however may also, in its extreme, misalign with possible organizational

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

realities of inherent barriers to change, hierarchy, politics and power. This change-oriented focus may also not fit with certain cultural stances around acceptance rather than change or even a client's readiness. A danger in coaching occurs when the coach assumes the client is not "coachable" or not ready for coaching, when in fact, it is the coach who is not ready for that particular client.

This particular group of coaches was trained in non-directive coaching wherein giving an opinion or information is typically seen as directive. Coaches needed to challenge their program philosophy and training in order to effectively coach across all client scenarios. For instance, one coach account indicated a client preference to hear the coach's opinion. The coach, in this case, adjusted her coaching style and used more of a coach/consult model to match this client's need. A more directive approach might be culturally necessitated or simply a matter of matching a particular client's communication style in order to create rapport and trust (Plaister-Ten, 2009). Thus, coaches who adhere to a universal non-directive approach because that is what they were taught to do may limit results for some clients.

Skill and ability

One coach commented "Do I leverage [orientations], help clients accept where they are, or adapt?" A skilled coach will assess the degree to which a client wishes to change, has the internal resources to do so, and external environmental factors to support implementing the desired change. A skilled coach will also consider not just change for change's sake, but also the value of acceptance and the orientation of change versus stability. Finally, a developmentally skilled coach will consider what the emerging possibilities are for the client that the client is ready for, and will stretch them if they so desire.

A coaching program such as this that has coaching available to 26,000 people working in government has the power to shift culture by bridging and synthesizing cultural differences. However, culture is not something that is just taught; it is something to be contemplated and reflected upon over time to successfully inform coaching. Moving out of one's own familiar preferences is may not be easy or comfortable. More regular coaching supervision is essential to support this learning process. Based on these findings, the researchers of this project recommended increasing coach supervision within this internal coaching program.

Limitations to the research

This action research project was a small study with fourteen coaches who voluntarily submitted accounts on the impact of culture on their work with clients. Five participants were actively included in the design and activity of this action research project. Ideally, all fourteen coaches would have been fully trained in the COF and engaged in all facets of the research project design and implementation. This would have enhanced participants' engagement in learning about cultural orientation.

Any assessment tool has its own built in biases, including a cultural perspective on culture. Any model is limited by nature of what is selected in or out. In Rosinski's model typical cultural categories such as age, gender, and ethnic background are not used in favour of more universal cross-cultural dimensions. Some coaches who participated in this research wanted a framework that more explicitly discussed the traditional culture categories and allowed them to directly speak to those

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

cultural categories. This model serves as a springboard for a coaching conversation, however does not provide a detailed interpretative report. Use of other assessment tools may be easier for coaches to debrief and may generate different research results.

Because the coaches were familiarized with the COF, they naturally referred to this framework when writing their accounts. Accounts could have been collected before the coaches were introduced to the COF; however, a decision was made to introduce the assessment tool first. If the assessments were done after the submissions, coaches would have still come with previous training and experiences around cultural awareness that may have impacted their writing, however, the writing may have been more authentic and reflected their own language and voice.

Recommendations

Four suggestions for future research for the profession are:

- Conduct a similar study over a longer period of time to capture early and later accounts about how culture impacts coaching.
- Collect participant accounts prior to training on any assessment tools or cultural orientation frameworks.
- Study both the coach and client cultural perspectives on given sessions and compare self reports to taped and analyzed transcripts. In this realm, there may be an opportunity to use the COF in a more in depth way for this group of coaches that would go beyond general awareness.
- Compare and contrast other cultural orientation and diversity models for coaching use and consider which ones align best to a public service context such as this one.

Conclusion

This study has identified six culture specific themes that this group of coaches experienced when coaching clients. These themes provide insight into how coaches regard the influence of culture in their work, and their varying degrees of ability to work beyond similar orientations and to work with different ones. There is value for coaches to be aware of their own cultural orientations and how these might impact choice points in the coaching and ultimately, the client's progress. Coaches had insight into the inherent bias of the coaching profession's non-directive approach, noting this doesn't work for all clients. Coaches also typically value, and ask questions that are future-focused and change oriented, yet may work in organizational cultures that do not shift quickly.

Implications for practice include ensuring adequate coach training and supervision to develop coaches' cultural self-awareness so that they understand the impact of their values and assumptions in the coaching process. Finally beyond tools and frameworks, optimally, the coach brings his or her own self-awareness, curiosity, and a willingness to meet each client anew, at this time, in this context, without preconceived notions of who this person is or needs to be in order to best serve the client.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

References

- British Columbia Public Service, (2012). *Reflecting our communities: Building a diverse B.C. public service*. Victoria, B.C.
- British Columbia Public Service, (2011). *Diversity initiative project submission*. Victoria, B.C.
- Outer den, B. (2010). Coaching and cross-cultural transitions: a narrative inquiry approach. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue 4, 95-105.
- Handin, K., & Steinwedel, J. (2006). Developing global leaders: executive coaching targets cross-cultural competencies. *Global Business and Organizational Excellence*, 26(1) 18-28.
- Hofstede, G. (1984). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values* (2nd ed.). Beverly Hills CA: Sage Publications.
- Kegan, R. (1982). *The evolving self: problem and process in human adult development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Paige, M (2004). *Instrumentation in intercultural training*. In D. Landis, J.M. Bennett, and M.J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Peterson, D. (2007). Executive coaching in a cross-cultural context. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 59(4), 261 – 271.
- Plaister-Ten, J. (2009). Towards greater cultural understanding in coaching. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, Special Issue 3. pp. 64-81.
- Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice*. London: Sage Publications.
- Rojon, C. (2010). Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) Assessment Questionnaire in Cross-Cultural Coaching: A Cross-Validation with Wave Focus Styles. *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 8 (2) 1-26.
- Rosinski, P. (2003). *Coaching across cultures: new tools for leveraging national, corporate & professional differences*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Rosinski, P. (2010). *Global coaching: An integrated approach for long-last results*. London: Nicholas Brealey.
- Schein, E. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (4th ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Spencer-Oatey, H. (2004). *Culturally speaking: managing rapport through talk across cultures*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Schwartz, S. (2007). A theory of cultural values and some implications for work. *Applied Psychology: An International Review*, 48(1), 23-47.
- Trompenaars, C. (2006). Cultural intelligence: is such a capacity credible? *Group & Organization Management*, 31(1), 56-63.
- Trompenaars, F., & C. Hampden-Turner, (2011). *Riding the waves of culture: Understanding diversity in global business* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: McGraw Hill.
- Whitmore, J. (2002). *Coaching for performance*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey,

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>

Whitworth, L., Kimsey-House, H., Kimsey-House, K., & Sandahl, P. (2007). *Co-active coaching: New skills for coaching people toward success in work and life*. Boston, MA: Nicholas Brealey.

Dr. Catherine Carr is a Practice Lead for the BC Public Service, specializing in team coaching, leadership development, and mentor coaching.

Lily Seto is the Coaching Strategist with the BC Public Service, specializing in culture shift, coaching, and facilitation.

The current issue and full text archive of this journal is available at
<http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/research/areas/coachingandmentoring/>