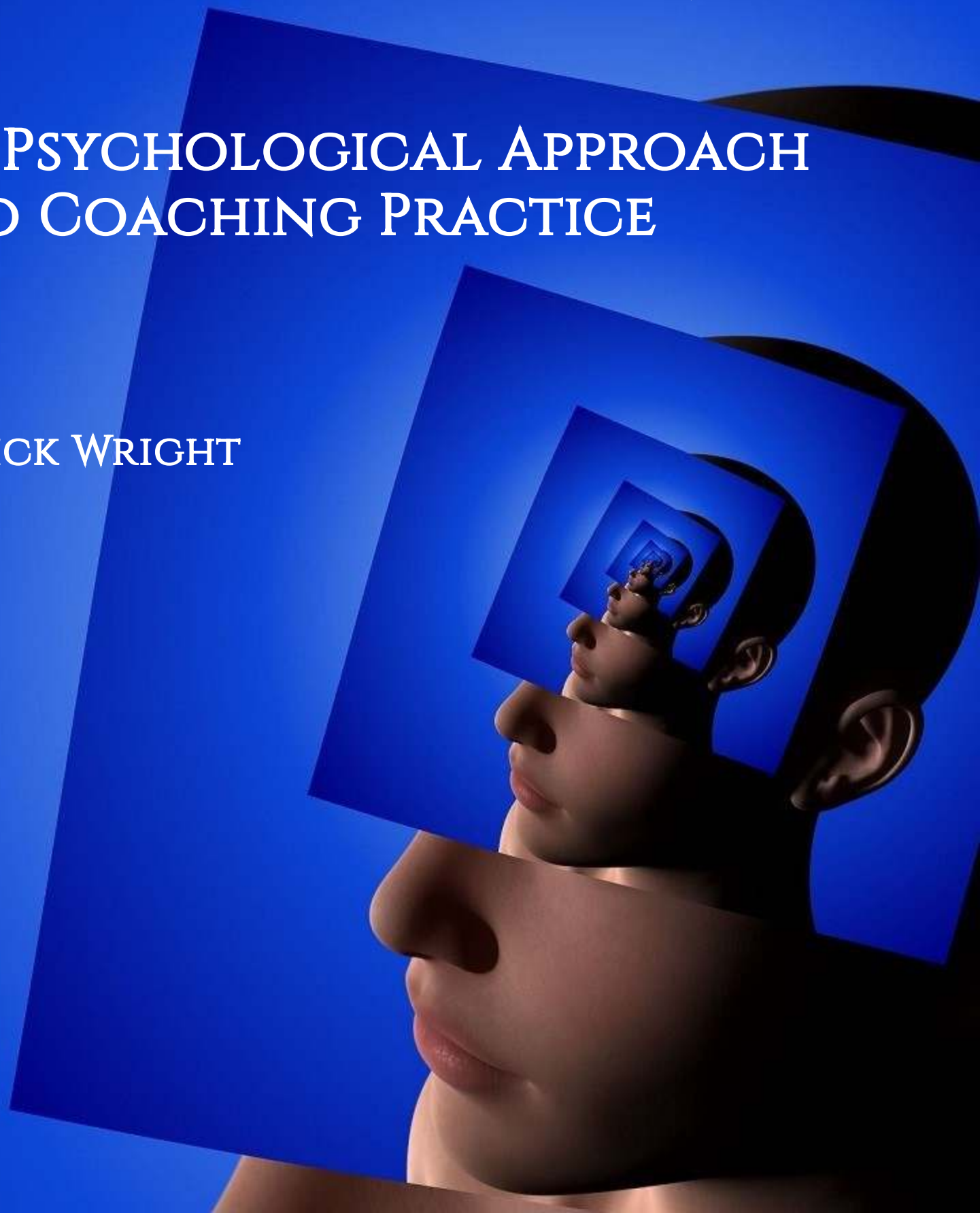


SEEING IS BELIEVING

A PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH
TO COACHING PRACTICE

NICK WRIGHT



REALITY IS PERCEPTION

Anaïs Nin is said to have said, 'We don't see things as they are but as we are.' It's a useful maxim for coaching practice, reminding us that we and the people, teams and organisations we work with perceive any person, encounter or situation selectively and subjectively.

We could think of this as one of the core ideas in psychological coaching. It's as if our personal, cultural and contextual experiences function as filters for what we see and don't see, what sense we make of it, what meaning we may attribute to it and, as a consequence, how we may feel and what we may decide to do in response.

This kind of psychological perspective on people, groups and organisations calls for an essentially phenomenological approach to coaching practice, working with clients in such a way that enables them critically to explore, understand and make choices in relation to, for instance, their own and others' personal and cultural perceptions, beliefs, values, assumptions, narratives, behaviours and actions.

In this sense we could describe this approach as metaphysical, drawing deep existential-spiritual questions into the frame such as reality, truth, being, meaning and purpose in the world.

I worked with a senior leadership team that faced some sudden, unexpected, serious and perplexing challenges. The CEO presented headline issues to the group briefly and I could see vivid expressions of shock, anxiety, confusion and frustration appear on people's faces around the room. Most were silent, speechless. The temptation at this point for the team was to snap into problem-solving mode, to tackle the issues immediately, head on, in an attempt to resolve them.

Instead, as team coach, I first introduced a simple model aimed at creating vital pause-reflect space before moving forward.

4 DIMENSIONS MODEL

I will share the model here that I shared with the team. I created it as a conceptual framework and critical reflective practice tool that draws on insights from Gestalt, psychodynamics, existential psychology and social constructionism. I will introduce each dimension in turn along with examples to illustrate what it could look like in practice. The dimensions may appear separate and distinct in theory but, nevertheless, overlap and interrelate in practice. I would encourage you to consider: 'Is there an insight or idea here that could inform and enhance my own coaching thinking and practice?'

The model has four dimensions which I have labelled in shorthand for simplicity as: Seeing, Feeling, Being and Creating. Each dimension holds its own potential in coaching to evoke fresh awareness, insight, stance, energy and action.

When working with clients, I don't raise or address the dimensions in any fixed order. I notice that some people engage and interact with some dimensions more easily and instinctively than others. In light of this, I tend to introduce the model and each dimension briefly and then invite the client to choose which (if any) they would like to work on and where to start.

SEEING – A GESTALT FRAME

The seeing dimension originates in Gestalt psychology. It suggests that, in any person, encounter or situation, we notice some things and we don't notice others, often depending on who or what matters most to us in the moment.^[1] It's a bit like when you walk into a crowded room and see a person that you find especially interesting, unusual or attractive. It's as if, in that moment, he or she stands out to you, becomes the focus of your attention, and everyone else in the room fades into a backdrop. It's a form of selective perception that enables us to focus by filtering out peripheral noise or distractions.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

This principle can be applied more broadly, not simply to what we 'see' literally but to whomever or whatever captures and holds our attention in any moment, relationship or situation. It can be very useful in coaching to raise awareness of what we or others are preoccupied by – often without realising it – and, perhaps, what we or they are missing as a result. In emotionally-charged situations, we may become like proverbial rabbits caught in headlights, fixated on one dimension of a person, issue or situation to the exclusion of all other dimensions. This was a risk for the leadership team.

As coach, we can pose questions aimed at raising the client's awareness in the here-and-now, for example: 'What are you aware of?', 'What is holding your attention?', 'What are you not noticing?', perhaps shifting the client's vantage points, literally or metaphorically by, for instance, moving seats, physical posture, actual locations or imagining or enacting diverse stakeholder perspectives or stances.[ii] It's a dynamic approach that can shift and broaden the client's gaze, enabling the person or group to perceive and create fresh ideas, options and resources that previously lay out of view.

A related approach in Gestalt is to raise awareness of, pay attention to and be curious about the total context of the client.[iii] 'Total context' includes the client him or herself; the coach; the relationship between them; the cultures, situations and systems of which he, she and they are a part. In short, everyone and everything that – in no matter how small or indirect a way – influences the client or is influenced by the client – insofar as we can know it. As a follower of Jesus, I and other people of faith may include whatever understanding of God and spiritual dimensions we hold in this equation too.[iv]

In doing so, the coach and client may explore who and what else beyond the client him or herself is influencing the client's situation, perception, feelings, sense-making and behaviour. One former supervisor expressed this well when I presented a dilemma. His response: "It's about you...and it's not only about you." It enabled us to broaden the conversation to consider wider systemic and cultural factors and, thereby, me to develop a more holistic strategy than by focusing on my own issues and practice in isolation.[v] It turns out the proverbial wood and trees are inextricably linked after all.

FEELING – A PSYCHODYNAMIC FRAME

The feeling dimension originates in psychodynamics. It suggests that we experience the present through the prism of the past. If I encounter a person or situation in the present that in some way and at some subconscious level reminds me of a person or situation I have experienced in the past, I may re-experience feelings from the past superimposed onto who or what I'm experiencing in the present.[vi] This can trigger a powerful emotional resonance-amplification effect, particularly if experiences and associated feelings from the past are highly charged, still alive for me or remain unresolved.

This insight can be useful in coaching if, for instance, we notice ourselves or others apparently over-reacting to news of potential changes.[vii]

Take, for instance, two clients, A and B, who both face redundancy. A has been made redundant before and, as a consequence, became destitute and lost his home. He hears the news of redundancy and feels deeply anxious. B has been made redundant previously too and, as a consequence, found a job that she loved far more than her previous role. She hears the news of redundancy and feels excited about new possibilities it may open up for her.

This illustration explains in part why different individuals, teams and groups may respond to what are, on the face of it, similar circumstances in such different ways.

It suggests that, when working psychologically as coach with people, teams and organisations, what is most important may not be so much what happens as what it means. What it means varies according to different past experiences, future expectations and the complex personal-cultural filters through which people and groups interpret and make sense of their experiences.[viii]

So: “How is the past influencing the client's present?”

Here's an example from personal experience. I once expressed intense frustration in a classroom where we were discussing abstract psychodynamic theory with little application to practice. The tutor, a psychotherapist, responded calmly and wisely and, in doing so, illustrated the principles perfectly: "It's not the first time you've been here is it, Nick?"

He was right. I had felt similar frustrations in university some years before where theology had been presented as an abstract academic pursuit, rather than as an adventure in faith with the Jesus I knew. His simple yet profound question raised my awareness of my core beliefs, values and learning style.

BEING – AN EXISTENTIAL FRAME

The being dimension originates in existential psychology. It suggests that people are influenced and motivated by deeply-held beliefs and values.[ix] It can be useful when, for instance, noticing or preparing for how people may respond to forthcoming changes. It reminds us to explore what beliefs or values a change may support or threaten.

I introduced a leadership team meeting earlier in this article, in which it became clear that the same changes supported or threatened different things for different people in the team, depending on what was and felt most important to them personally and organisationally.[x]

I once worked with a high school that had decided to implement a new appraisal system. The leaders invited me to run a series of workshops for managers and staff that would enable them to do appraisals well. It quickly became clear, however, that similar systems had been tried in the past (see psychodynamics above), were perceived to have failed badly and that many managers and staff now felt very cynical about this latest initiative.

Instead of using a conventional training approach, therefore, I decided to use an existential group coaching approach with workshop participants.

This approach shifted the focus from institutional systems and processes to personal beliefs and values. It also shifted the training dynamic from didactic to invitational. I posed questions such as: “When you get up in the morning and come to work, what is the difference you want to see?”; “What matters most to you in terms of what the school is here to do, e.g. in relation to students, families, wider community?”; “How important is it to you to know what difference your contribution is really making?”; “What – if anything – would make ‘appraisal’ worthwhile and meaningful for you?”

The conversations that followed created a tangible lift in energy, motivation and personal leadership; a co-active approach to conversations between staff, managers, colleagues and wider stakeholders and a cultural shift from process-driven to purpose-full.[xi]

The coaching principle here was to raise awareness of and enable people to tap into what matters most to them as a source of inspiration, focus and stance. It reminds us that when people appear to support or resist change, it’s sometimes less about what the change involves practically and more about what it represents existentially.

CREATING – A SOCIAL CONSTRUCT FRAME

The creating dimension originates in social constructionism. It suggests that we never perceive an objective reality and that nor are we able to do so. Instead, it proposes that we (a) notice some people and things and not others (see Gestalt above), (b) attach meaning and significance to them personally and culturally then (c) make connections that appear, to us, to create a coherent narrative or whole.[xii]

Our sense of what is real and true is, thereby, something that we construct personally and culturally rather than something that is essentially there per se.[xiii] What appears true becomes as-if true for us.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

Take an object that we regard as a 'chair'. It's an everyday object that we design, use and label as such in our own culture. In doing so, it's as if, for us, the object is inherently and obviously a chair. A chair is what it is.

Now imagine dropping the same object into a jungle where people have never seen or heard of a chair. If those people found it, what could that same object be and mean for them: for example, a portable shelter, a tool for clearing undergrowth, useful firewood? The notion of chair isn't a property of the object itself. It is socially-constructed, that is, the meaning we attribute to the object.

Now take a dot-to-dot puzzle in a children's activity book. The dots are numbered to create a pre-determined picture by joining them together in a specific order. We can think of this as analogous to how a client creates, subconsciously, his or her own coherent-to-self story of what is real and true in any person, relationship or situation.

We can help a client or group grow in awareness of how they create their own narratives personally and culturally, what meaning they attach to people and things that feature in them and to recreate new narratives by, for instance, reframing or changing metaphors.

I worked with a leadership team that reported serious cross-functional tensions. As team coach, instead of reinforcing the perceived problems by focusing on them, I reframed the narrative using appreciative inquiry.

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I enabled the team to step back from what they perceived as the immediate issues to share stories of when things had gone well; what they would like things to be more like, more of the time; what would need to happen for that to happen; what they were willing to do to achieve it. In doing so, they improved team relationships and co-created a new, shared reality.

PRINCIPLES AND BENEFITS

I will return now to the senior leadership team at the start of this article. They used the model as a reflective tool, individually and in conversation as a team. It enabled team members to share when they received the news: what had caught their attention; which aspects they hadn't heard; how they felt now; where those feelings were coming from; what beliefs and values the news had triggered for them; how that influenced their sense of what is most important; what team-organisational story they were now telling themselves; what preferred narrative they were willing to commit to as leaders.

The psychological coaching principle here was to shift the team's focus momentarily from the task, the 'out there' to the personal and relational, the 'in here'. It moved team attention from 'there and then' issues and plans to immediate personal-team 'here and now' experiences. It viewed leaders as people, not simply as job titles and roles. It raised awareness, created empathy and enabled the team to tap into what mattered most as they led people forward. In doing so, it increased team trust, built team resilience and developed team resourcefulness in the midst of critical change and transition.

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[This article was first published in Coaching Today, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, January 2019]