

The background features several vertical, wavy lines of light that appear to flow downwards. The colors transition from bright green on the left to yellow and then red on the right, creating a sense of energy and movement. The lines are set against a solid black background.

SPIRITUALITY IN COACHING

NICK WRIGHT

EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

Coaches in organisations often focus on practical issues or tasks in order to change a person's way of thinking or behaving, perhaps for example in order to improve his or her performance and potential at work (Whitmore, 2002). In doing so, coaching can be successful in motivating and achieving valuable change and results.

Nevertheless, coaching can also prove deeply transformational if used to enable a client or client group to explore and wrestle with underlying psychological, spiritual and existential issues that influence their experience, aspirations and stance in the world.

'Who am I? What does my life mean? Why am I here? What is real? What is true? How can I know?' These are some of the deep questions that sometimes surface in coaching conversations and relationships.

The language and framing may offer a disguise with such concerns more likely to be presented as something like, 'I don't know what to do about my job' or 'I lack self-confidence at work'. Nevertheless, the underlying issues may reveal profound psychological, philosophical and spiritual questions, struggles, fears and desires (van Duerzen & Hanaway, 2012).

In this article, I will introduce an approach to coaching that includes an explicit spiritual dimension. Spiritual language creates its own questions with a diverse range of definitions available to us (Howard & Welbourn, 2004).

As a Christian, I'm using it to mean something like 'the outworking of a relationship with God.' This may feel inadequate bearing in mind the richness of faith beliefs and experiences throughout the world. Nevertheless, I want to be authentic about where I'm coming from and, if it will help, I invite you to substitute my definitions and constructs with your own.

DIGGING DEEP

Some coaches use a method known as the '7-whys' or 'laddering technique' drawn from personal construct psychology and qualitative research (Breakwell, 2003). The technique involves asking a client to describe an issue of interest or concern and then to ask, 'Why is that important to you?'

Each time the client responds, the coach repeats the question until the person's core constructs, beliefs and values are revealed. It's a way of helping the client grow in awareness of how he or she perceives, creates and experiences the world and of what may influence his or her behaviour.

One of the psychodynamic challenges of using such a method is that it can provoke anxiety and defensive routines in the client, especially if handled insensitively by the coach (McLoughlin, 1995). It may cause the client to face issues they had never been aware of or considered before and, in some situations, this can leave them feeling unsettled, disorientated or distressed.

In light of this, any such coaching technique is best used in the context of a trusting, supportive relationship with the client understanding and agreeing beforehand to what it could entail (Mearns & Thorne, 1999).

Lydia came for coaching because, as an experienced manager, she felt under-confident and nervous when presenting to senior leaders. It felt irrational to her because, at a head level, she knew they appreciated her work and considered her to be highly competent. We discussed how she would like to approach this issue together and agreed to use the 7-whys technique:

Coach: What do you hope for from this time together?

Lydia: I feel scared every time I have to present to the senior leadership team. It feels like going to the dentist. I get tense inside and I want to be able to handle it differently, more confidently.

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Coach: So you want to handle presenting to senior leaders differently, more confidently. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: Because if I could handle it differently and come across as more confident, I would come across as more competent and more professional.

Coach: You want to come across as more confident, more professional. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: I want them to be impressed by my work and the way I can handle myself. I don't want to look or feel foolish in front of them.

Coach: It sounds important to you that they should be impressed. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: Because they are my bosses...and because I'm worried that if they aren't impressed, they will think less of me as a manager.

Coach: You feel worried that they will think less of you. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: Because I don't want to come across as a failure. I don't want to let them down, to be a failure.

Coach: You feel concerned about being a failure and letting them down. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: (Looking tearful) Because if I let them down, I would also be letting God down. I believe that God led me into this job and I'm worried that I will fail Him.

Coach: You are worried about letting God down. Why is that important to you?

Lydia: (In tears) When I was growing up, I felt like I had to get everything right or my parents wouldn't love me. I feel a bit like that with God too. If I don't get this right, maybe He won't love me.

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It became apparent that Lydia was carrying deep psychological hurt and fear that she had buried or suppressed in order to avoid the anxiety it evoked. We could have approached her confidence issues at a surface level, perhaps coaching her using cognitive or behavioural techniques to improve her self-confidence or presentation skills.

By probing deeper, she was able to identify core psychological and spiritual issues and to work through them to find a different way of being, feeling and acting at work and in the world. She commented afterwards that it felt like a profound release.

An alternative approach to posing questions in this way could be to invite a client to depict an issue or scenario they are dealing with by acting it out physically, for example by adopting a posture that represents the issue for them and how they are experiencing it, to configure it using objects or to depict it graphically on paper using pens or crayons.

This kind of physical and creative approach can help bypass rational filters and defences (Clarkson, 1999). The role of the coach is to help the client explore and experience what he or she is depicting to reveal what is most important to them.

SPIRITUAL DIMENSIONS

You may have noticed that little I've described so far requires a distinctive spiritual outlook or faith. Psychological and existential issues are not confined to clients or coaches operating in a spiritual domain.

In fact, there isn't a single, uniform spiritual outlook within the coaching field but, rather, a spectrum of beliefs and approaches. We don't have space to cover them all here so, instead as an example, I will explain how a Christian belief system may influence a coach's thinking and practice.

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Firstly, it is likely to influence the coach's beliefs about him or herself, including sense of 'calling'. Coaches may see their coaching insights, abilities and opportunities as a gift from God to be used for the benefit of others. They will seek to act personally and professionally in the best interests of others, whether that be the client, client group or others on whom the client's behaviour impacts.

Secondly, it is likely to influence the coach's belief in the potential and limits of his or her abilities. God's intervention in, through and between the client and coach can achieve a deeper change than the coach is capable of achieving on his or her own. In light of this, the coach may pray before, during and after coaching sessions, acknowledging dependence on God and staying hopeful.

Thirdly, it is likely to influence the coach's attitude and approach towards the client and the wider systems of which the client is a part. This will include demonstrating love, value and respect, listening, hearing, suspending judgement and working hard. It will also mean taking risks, challenging if necessary and keeping a wider ethical perspective in view, especially where others are affected.

This latter aspect can sometimes feel difficult if the client subscribes to a radically different ethical system to that of the coach.

Johannes was an unemployed teenager in Germany. He came for coaching because he was struggling with family relationships and he had joined a neo-Nazi group. I had spent years as a human rights activist and Johannes' affiliation with neo-Nazis left me feeling deeply uncomfortable.

Fortunately, I had a perceptive supervisor who helped me process how I felt so that I could stay focused on the client and the underlying issues influencing his perspective and behaviour:

Supervisor: What's on your mind and heart today?

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Coach: To be honest, I'm struggling in my work with Johannes because of his enthusiasm for neo-Nazi ideology. I don't want to impose my own values on him but I find his attitude and behaviour towards the local immigrant population upsetting and alarming.

Supervisor: You sound quite antagonistic towards Johannes' beliefs and behaviour. It's as if his feelings of hostility towards those who he perceives are different to him are somehow resonating with your own feelings?

Coach: I hadn't thought of it that way but you have a point. I do feel antagonistic and I'm at risk of modelling the same attitude and behaviour towards Johannes that he is acting out in his behaviour towards local Turkish people.

Supervisor: What need do you believe Johannes' affiliation with the neo-Nazis is fulfilling for him?

Coach: He's feeling insecure at home and the neo-Nazi group is providing him with a sense of belonging. Perhaps he's acting out what the neo-Nazis expect of him in order to be accepted by them. He's worried about being rejected by them as well as by his family.

Supervisor: So he's insecure, fearful of rejection. How do you believe Jesus would respond to him in this situation?

Coach: I believe Jesus would reach out, touch him at his point of insecurity, show him acceptance and love. I see now how I need to be...and how not to reinforce his insecurity further by inadvertently mirroring his behaviour.

The supervisor's approach helped me stay in professional mode and facilitated a shift in my perspective, attitude and behaviour by drawing on psychological and spiritual principles.

Fourthly, it is likely to influence the coach's beliefs about the client and wider organisational and social structures. He or she will try to see and approach the client as a child of God with precious innate potential and a uniquely valuable purpose in the world.

Depending on the contract, the coach may help the client discover or create his or her own identity, meaning and purpose within a wider social, spiritual or cultural narrative/framework.

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The coach may do this by enabling the client to reflect on a current issue or experience in light of biblical or other spiritual material, or conversely on biblical material in light of an issue or experience (Foskett and Lyall, 1988). The coach's role is not to teach or instruct the client but, rather, to help him or her reflect more deeply in order to develop his or her own understanding, relationship with and stance in relation to God, other people and the world.

One method known as the 'Swedish model' starts with a passage from the Bible and the coach poses questions to the client. Some refer to this as applied theology, inquiring into and applying biblical principles to real-life situations.

For example: 'What things in the passage illuminate or inspire you; what things don't you understand; what things in the passage surprise you; what things do you agree with and approve of; what are you turned off by, reject or question; can you name something like it from your own life and experience; what are you now prompted to do?' (Green, 1990, p84).

An alternative method entails starting with the client's experience and posing questions.

For example: 'Where is God's activity to be found in this situation; is there a link between the client's experience and some biblical character or situation; how is the client handling a particularly painful or baffling situation; can the client face and deal with ambiguity and complexity; how has an event or encounter affected the client's level or pattern of prayer life; what theological material demands further study as a result of this reflection on practice?' (Wesson in Ballard, 1986, pp136f).

HEARING VOICES

In approaching any coaching relationship and situation, I listen for four voices:

One is the voice of the client, for example his or her interests, hopes or concerns. One is my own inner voice, for example what I'm noticing or what feelings the client's story is evoking for me. One is the voice of the client's environment speaking through the client, for example the pressures, values and concerns or his or her organisation, family or community. One is the voice of God, for example discerning a sense of 'calling' or an ethical principle from the Bible.

Depending on the client's own beliefs and worldview, I may encourage and support them to listen for different voices too. It's about raising awareness, focus and attention, e.g. 'What are you noticing?' or, paradoxically, 'What are you not noticing?'

This may include helping the client to become more aware of what's happening in his or her body, listen to his or her environment, tune into his or her own intuition, raise thought patterns and beliefs into consciousness, observe his or her own behaviours and feelings, discern spiritual prompts or hear other people afresh.

One of the challenges is, of course, how to discern God's 'voice' in the midst of all kinds of other psychological and environmental voices.

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It's a difficult one. After all, the client and coach could be deluded in this venture or confused by the range of possibilities that emerge. There is no simple formula or magic solution so I find it important to approach this prayerfully whilst paying attention to my own relationship with God.

If a client or client group/organisation is facing an important decision, for instance, I may invite the client to create space for prayer and reflection, consider the issue and weigh up the decision from a range of different perspectives, e.g. mission, values, impact, identity and intention:

Mission: Which course of action is most consistent with what God has already been doing in and through the client's life or work?

Values: Which course of action is most consistent with biblical ethical principles?

Impact: Who will be affected by the client's decision and how?

Identity: How would this decision affect the client's sense of identity and relationship as a child/agency of God?

Intention: What's the client's intention in taking this course of action?

CRITICAL REFLECTION

I hope this article will stimulate critical reflection in the context of spirituality in coaching practice. I have sought to show how a spiritual dimension can influence the kinds of issues and questions the coach and client may focus on and address, the coach's own outlook and approach and some of the methods the coach may use.

I will welcome feedback from readers' insights, ideas and experiences.

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For further reading, see Willows & Swinton (2000) for a helpful collection of articles aimed at developing theological reflection in the midst of pastoral practice; and Graham, Walton & Ward (2005) for a range of theological reflection methods including theology-in-action or praxis. (See Bibliography for details).

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