

Chapter 10. Let your body be your coach: An experiential-existential perspective on embodied coaching Greg Madison

Introduction

"Nature" (and human nature) are not finished forms. "Nature" comes from natus, being born. Nature is metaphorical: it never just is. It is for further birth.
Eugene Gendlin¹

I first became aware of the profession of coaching in the late 1990s. My response at that time was a mixture of suspicion and concern. I worried that coaching was a form of 'therapy-lite' practiced by astute entrepreneurs who were not adequately educated in counselling skills or psychological theory; an unholy blend of business acumen and therapeutic promise. Most of my psychotherapy and psychology colleagues formed a similar prejudice about coaching. However, over the intervening years my attitude has evolved and transformed through increasing contact and more open dialogue with coaches. As coaching has developed into a profession in its own right with sophisticated reflexive models of practice, my interest and subsequent involvement has grown (see Grant, 2006; for an overview of this development).

¹Gendlin(E.,(*Let\$your\$Body\$Interpret\$Your\$Dreams*,((pg.(150)(Wilmette,(Ill):(Chiron(Publications((

Perhaps it is not a coincidence that my positive reappraisal of coaching practice corresponds with an inversely negative view of what has transpired in the professions of psychotherapy and applied psychology. As therapy and psychology have become narrowly obsessed with parodying the medical model and its associated claims to scientific certainty and 'evidence-based' interventions, the relatively unregulated profession of coaching has become a refuge where more relational and existential approaches to practice, encompassing the unquantifiable aspects of life, are still permitted, though not mainstream.

Coaching as a model, or metaphor, gained prominence from its successful application in the sporting world. It increasingly began to appear as a descriptive term in the business context in the last decades of the 20th century. Since then, the coaching world has expanded exponentially and it is now populated by numerous models and frameworks, mostly informed by experimental research, psychometric testing, psychological meta-theories, with practice often restricted by coach and client alike to 'goal-achievement'. Goals are typically in the direction of 'happiness', 'success', 'healthier' work-life balance, and improved performance. Such coaching models are often denoted by clever acronyms enhancing their marketability.

What do I mean by 'coaching'?

In this chapter I would like to sketch a form of existential coaching that offers a practical methodology that remains consistent with existential philosophy. This form of experiential-existential coaching prioritizes implicit experience over explicit technique or predictable outcomes. I call this form of existential practice 'embodied coaching' and I

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hope to illustrate its contribution to coaching practice as well as business cultures. Although 'coaching' can refer to various activities, from practical mentoring to quasi-counselling; I will use 'coaching' to refer to the diverse emerging profession of 'business or executive coach'. Such coaches are brought in to enhance the performance of 'rising stars' as well as train more remedial staff in basic professional skills. Often coaching is contracted as a 'package' with group training supplemented by individual sessions. These one-to-one sessions are characterized by more flexible boundaries and more focused topics than we might expect to find in most counselling practice. Topics might include communication styles, leadership skills and performance enhancement, how to deal with stress or workplace conflict, work/life balance etc.

However, if you perceive an overlap between these topics and conventional counselling territory, you would not be wrong. Yes, coaches have become the counsellors of the workplace. Though generally not trained to a significant degree in psychotherapeutic skills or theory, or in psychological interventions, coaches end up exploring life issues that previously would either end up in the counsellor's office or nowhere at all. Therefore it may not be surprising that coaching has been called 'the acceptable face of counselling' (see Spinelli, 2008; Summerfield, 2006; or chapter two in this book, for discussion of the coaching/counselling demarcation).

Please see the published book to read the rest of this chapter.