



CREATIVE COACHING: MAKING IT UP AS YOU GO ALONG

Executive coach, psychotherapist and OD consultant **Vassilis Antonas** shares two of his favourite tools for generating creativity in the coaching encounter.

I can still recall my first day at my psychotherapy postgraduate training. Eager to get on with it, as I always am, when asked what my request was, I responded: 'Bring out the tools and methodologies, line them up on the table and teach me how to use them.' It was the mid-90s and I had just completed my mandatory two years relevant experience for this training, serving in the Greek Armed Forces as a psychologist. Prior to that I had completed my studies at an American university. Both appointments placed a heavy focus on diagnosis and classification, so my attitude was: 'if I can classify it, then I know what needs to be done with it.'

The years went by and my four-year training in humanistic integrative psychology did not provide me with a single tool. Neither did my outstanding supervisor, Renos Papadopoulos, who, despite being an expert Jungian analyst, never used a single Jungian term in the five years we worked together. My hopes lay with my executive coaching and organisational development training, but by the time I got to it I had realised that tools and methodologies will only get you so far. Making a difference for coaching clients, helping them enhance their performance and increase their influence is mostly dependent on the art of relating. And relations are, for the most part and despite recurring patterns and archetypal configurations, unique. As such, our approach, strategy, methodology and tools also need to be unique, customised and consequently creative.

For 'square' characters such as myself, who lean towards pre-defined or templated actions, this can be a challenge. It is even more challenging for coaches who originate from a

business background (In the same way it is very challenging for practitioners who originate from a counselling background to comprehend that when corporations pay for their executives to receive coaching, their primary concern is their ROI'). I see this everyday with my supervisees and trainees. As coach Hetty Einzig puts it: 'I sympathise with people's desire for answers, sure-fire tools and conclusions.'¹

I have therefore attempted to generate a theoretical and practical context, whereby coaching practitioners, regardless of predisposition and background, will be enabled, with relative ease and comfort, to progress and take appropriate risks with their coaching interventions; this is a context that allows for method and creativity to co-exist and complement each other.

The following are two of these concepts, antithetical in nature, which will hopefully stimulate your thinking and enrich your coaching intervention arsenal.

1. CUSTOMISED 360 SURVEY

The 360 survey is a standardised tool, used extensively by HR departments in the context of employee performance appraisal. For anyone unfamiliar with 360s, they comprise a set of questions (usually on a Likert scale^{**}) regarding the

* Return on investment

** A psychometric scale used in questionnaires where respondents specify their level of agreement or disagreement on a symmetric scale for a series of statements.

employee's performance that is distributed to supervisors, colleagues, subordinates and an external associate (and at times the employee themselves). While one couldn't expect HR departments to generate a different questionnaire for each one of the hundreds or thousands of employees, a coach could do this, when for example working with a high potential executive.

The way I generate a customised 360 survey tool with my clients is to split the questionnaire into two parts: the first part represents the company's values, mission and strategy. For example if the company places focus on being agile, I will include a question about this. This might look like: 'The executive can change direction whenever needed with ease and speed.' This first part satisfies the company's needs as the paying sponsor.

The second part of the 360 focuses on the employee's needs and aspirations. In order to formulate these questions, I begin by asking them: 'If you could get into people's heads and listen to their thoughts, what would you mostly want to find out about, regarding your impact on them and how they view you?'

This invitation usually takes them by surprise and, despite causing some initial discomfort and anxiety, usually yields some stimulating responses. In addition to making use of the data collected, the very process of creating this questionnaire generates thought-provoking coaching dialogue, supports the creation of rapport and advances the coaching relation and the depth of exploration that can be achieved. I recommend this one wholeheartedly.

2. GENERATING ADVERSITY-ACTIVATED DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SYNCHRONISTIC INTERPRETATION

We will frequently come across coachees who have been referred to us by their company for support during transitional times or who have come to us privately to revitalise their momentum following challenging, professional developments. These may range from assuming a new role in a new country (a frequent phenomenon in multinationals) to being bypassed for promotion, to receiving a low performance appraisal or being made redundant.

When it comes to success and failure, I subscribe to a binary model. You either succeed or fail and the new age glorification of the latter has not done anything to shift my mind one bit from my position in 2015 when I wrote about the glorification of failure.² At the same time, the fact that your lack of performance, insight, foresight, preparation or simply luck yielded poor or unwanted results in the past does not mean that you cannot or should not utilise or take advantage of those results for the future.

And this is where Carl Jung's theory of Synchronicity conveniently comes in, or at least the version that I have chosen to interpret and utilise when it comes to supporting my clients' evolution. According to Jung, 'the connection of events, may in certain circumstances be other than causal and requires another principle of explanation.'³

We don't need to expand further on Jung's philosophical and at times metaphysical explorations. All we need do is subscribe to the statement below, in order to utilise his concept to the advantage of our clients:

*'We cannot imagine events that are connected non-causally... but that does not mean that such events do not exist. Their existence or at least their possibility – follows logically from the premise of statistical truth.'*⁴

In other words, our task as coaches is not to find out what caused the misfortune or challenge that our coachee is facing. Our task is to generate and extract meaning in relation to the event – meaning that will generate action, mobilisation and direction. Therefore, the question that a coach can ask a coachee under such circumstance is: 'What purpose does this turn of events serve for you?' And in case this particular position is difficult to grasp (and it usually is, since people are not accustomed to attributing purpose to negative events or behaviours), we can support this exploration with complementary questions such as:

- What are the new possibilities that this event opens for you?
- Which set of skills are you being invited to enhance and develop, based on this event?
- How does this turn of events lead the person you were yesterday to evolve into the person you wish to become tomorrow?

I hope that these two methodologies will encourage you to take some creative risks and come up with customised approaches of your own.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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4. ibid