The Myth of Neutrality in a Coach – a Relational Approach

Can I communicate without sharing something of my self? There are many training programmes for coaches and mentors which advocate a neutrality in the coach. The reasoning usually given is that this is empowering for the client because there is no interference from the practitioner. The result is often someone who can seem like a robot, or a Californian in a comedy show who always answers a query with another question. Coaches trained this way have complained to me that they feel they are shutting part of themselves down - 'its like sitting on my hands'!

Leaking Coaches
A training in a psychological approach to coaching can show how impossible it is to be truly neutral. The unconscious is by definition unconscious - and leaks out at times! 'Unconscious' is properly defined as repressed material - for example if we don't like someone we are talking with, perhaps because they remind us of someone from our past, we may not only repress the associations and memories but also that we dislike the person in front of us.

The term 'non-conscious' has been coined to describe what is out of our awareness, yet is not repressed material. In either case we may communicate without awareness what is outside of our awareness - through subtle body language, and perhaps in ways we are not scientifically sure of yet, which may build on the recent discovery of mirror neurons. We now know that when one person feels empathy for another, their own neural pathways become a mirror of the other person - in other words the brain is wired to imitate another in order to feel what they are feeling.

TA and coaching
Neutrality is at odds with transactional analysis notions from the beginning of Berne's innovation of ego states and transactions in the late 1950s. Social diagnosis is when one person responds to the invitation from another to a particular ego state - and whilst a practitioner is encouraged to consciously notice such counter-transference responses so as to consider their responses and to consider the meaning for the client of the invitation, they too at times will be communicating out of awareness and inviting their client in some way.

All interaction, verbal or through gesture, posture, and facial expression has a social level and a psychological level ie an unconscious or non-conscious level, described in transactional analysis as an ulterior transaction. If these two levels are not congruent then both messages are picked up and the receiver usually
responds to the psychological level. Thus when we say ‘good to see you again’ and have a slight frown, it’s likely that the message received is not as positive as the words, and the response is likely to be to the psychological message! This then becomes a way to lower trust!

**Its all in the eyes!**
Some of this communication is very subtle indeed! Try this experiment – look at an object neutrally. Hold your gaze and think ‘cold’ thoughts about it. Return to neutral holding your gaze steady, and then consider the object with some warmth. Return your gaze to neutral. Run through this cycle a few times – and as you do so pay attention to what is happening on the inside of your face. When you have a good appreciation of the small changes that you can feel you might like to try this experiment in front of a mirror. Around the eyes are the Duchenne muscles – these are some of the few human muscles outside of conscious control. They reliably indicate our attitude to whatever we are gazing at – and when there is warmth the muscles make tiny movements on our faces. Small children are very good at picking up these subtle movements and may ask why something is said with ‘nice words and a cross face’. Most of us learn to not consciously notice this, especially when it seems of benefit not to ask too many questions – however at a non-conscious or unconscious level we are probably aware of the incongruity, and somewhere in our minds will make some meaning about this. These muscles help build trust – or lower trust.

**The complexity of relationships in coaching**
The first diagram (a relational approach) shows the complexity of the relationship in coaching – there is our relationship to oneself; the relationship to the Client; and the relationship between us. Via the client there is also a relationship to the system if we are an external coach (or we are in the system if an internal coach) and its culture; and also a relationship to the people in the clients system. All of these are communicating to us, mostly outside of awareness.

Our own communication is like a stone thrown into a still pond – the ripples may be far beyond our awareness and have impacts we know nothing of eg at the conscious level a colleague of our client mentions to a friend who mentions to his boss who tells his wife who tells her cousin who tells his boss.........................However out of awareness there may be all sorts of communication also passing along such a chain which results in a subtle shift at how each person views the world. Evidence of this type of occurrence is when a coach takes something about a client, or their organisation to supervision and it is discussed thoroughly and the coach makes a decision in some way in relation
to the case – and when they meet the client the next time they discover that the shift they had been discussing in supervision has already taken place

Non-conscious and Unconscious Communication via Coaching Relationships
This process is illustrated with the second diagram, which shows some of the thinking and processes which might take place in awareness or above the line, and names some of the aspects which are non-conscious or unconscious and are below the line. These are communicated as ulterior messages through the subtleties of tone and body language, along with the selectivity of what gets recognised and what is discounted. Some of these processes are positive and healthy and some may reflect problematic arenas and be difficult to work with.

Transference is when someone replays a historic relationship with a person in the present. Thus the coachee may treat the coach as a father, or as a former boss or as a big brother. The coach may also have a transference of their own and relate to the coachee like a son or a lover or a particular friend.

Counter-transference, in contrast, is the response to the transference – and often the clue that there is a transference. I might be feeling full of authority with a particular coachee – as a response to the transference she is putting on me as a one-time boss of hers. So counter-transference is full of useful information – and the coach needs to surface it within themselves and make meaning of it and then decide what to do with this information. Naturally, there may be counter-transference in the other direction too – and the coachee might be puzzled at the felt-sense that they might notice.

Projection might occur when, for example, the coachee notices that lots of her colleagues are angry a lot of the time – without noticing that she is also angry a lot of the time! In order to be useful a coach needs to check out what may be projections – this is far from being neutral! Projective identification is different – the coachee might disown her own feelings of anger (and remark that she is a person who never gets angry) and project them on to others who pick up the unconscious message and express anger. The coachee might then feel scared of this anger around her, and bring her fear to the coaching. The coach needs to understand these sorts of processes are a norm in everyday life, and have ways to understand and to explain them and also to work with them – again this is far from being neutral. In English we have the ancient expression ‘the pot calls the kettle black’ –which shows how historically these dynamics have always been present and understood in folk traditions.
And if the coach can stay ‘real’ in the coaching relationship – to be authentic, to
be present, to know that they too have their own complexity of history and
unconscious and non-conscious ways of relating – then they will have their own
responses to the coachee and be able to responsibly show the impact that the
coachee has on them, whilst maintaining the coachee’s experience and issues as
central at all times.

Purpose of Coaching
One way to think about the purpose of coaching is that it is for the coachee to
make new meanings. The creative genesis of meaning-making is a non-conscious
process – and the role of the coach is to create an environment where this
element is free to play and emerge. Those ‘aha moments’ which arise when we
make fresh connections in our mind are occasions when we make new meanings,
and those ‘aaahhh’ moments accompanied by a chuckle are times when we
crystallise a deep and resonant meaning. The coach is likely to be impacted too
at these moments, and it is a reflection of vitality and presence to authentically
show this impact – to remain neutral is to diminish the meaningfulness of person
of the coachee.

When driving a manual car, the neutral position is for ‘idling’ at traffic lights, or
for coasting along irresponsibly (as no longer in control of the car!), or for
starting up the car (with the handbrake on) or for stopping the car. The neutral
position is not helpful in human relationships – keep it for machines!