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Coaching Consciousness

How neuroscience helps coaches do more

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I often ask coaching audiences, why do you coach? Do you have a bigger agenda than just helping clients “get what they want?” Invariably, many if not most professional coaches respond that yes, they do have a broader agenda, and this is actually what their clients really want.

These clients may come in with an issue or problem, but they are hoping to come away with a new way of encountering the world. And the coaches want to see something they might call “transformation” or an increase in awareness. For the sake of this article, let’s call this consciousness.

But in order to call it that, we probably have to first talk about what, exactly, consciousness is. This is not a simple question; in fact, it’s one that philosophers and scientists have been debating for as long as philosophy and science have existed. Some have settled on the idea that fundamental consciousness is the awareness of our awareness, and the scientific exploration has focused on finding the seat of this awareness, as if it were an on-off switch.

This is fine – but in the human development field (which includes our profession of coaching), I think it’s actually more helpful not to ponder consciousness as an on-off switch, but instead, think more in terms of levels of consciousness.



No problem can be solved from the level of consciousness that created it.”

– Albert Einstein

Let’s take the fact that we are aware as a given. To me, it’s actually not so interesting. What is interesting is how aware are we? How able? How effective?

And so, here’s my definition of levels of consciousness:

Levels of consciousness are the increasingly regulated and refined emergent properties of a complex system. The impact of increasing one’s level of consciousness seems to be more long-term, stable, and life-affirming results achieved with less effort.¹

What's useful about the idea of levels of consciousness is that levels can be increased (and this is where coaching comes in.) In my collaborative work over many years with my partner in BE-above Leadership, Ursula Pottinga, we have seen that there appear to be four key factors in increasing levels of consciousness:

1. **Realization** – Awareness, bringing things into presence.
2. **Regulation** – Managing triggers, recovering from stressors.
3. **Integration** – Becoming more personally and interpersonally differentiated and linked.
4. **Stabilization** – Wiring in new thoughts and behaviors.

These factors build upon each other and are interrelated. They are also both *indicators of and ways to develop* higher levels of consciousness. Let's take a deeper look at each, and how coaching can help each factor.

WHAT IS REALIZATION?

All personal growth starts with some sort of self-awareness; as we "realize" more about our habitual thoughts and behaviors, we can start the process of positive change.

It's important to note (and most coaches know this) that much of our thinking and behavior operates below conscious processing. In other words, we don't always know a) how we feel, b) what we really want, and c) why we are doing certain things and not doing others.

In my view, if everyone was fully aware of these three factors, there would probably be much less need for coaches! Professional coaching has many tools and strategies to help clients, in the words of my friend Mandy Blake, "surface the invisibles" by bringing things into our conscious awareness. These tools and strategies include:

- Deep, reflective listening.
- Powerful, disruptive questions and inquiries.
- Exploring values, purpose, saboteurs and limiting beliefs.
- Entertaining new perspectives.
- Working with body intelligence.
- Keeping possibility open and holding their dreams even when they get discouraged.

HOW COACHES CAN HELP WITH REALIZATION

Probably the main thing is to be sure you aren't simply "coaching for results" and/or overfocusing on what client *already* has in their awareness. Create room for the necessary "aha" and "oh shit" moments that are so important in coaching. Here are a couple of ideas for doing this:

- Regularly give clients "inquiries" as homework; don't just have them do tasks. An inquiry is a question that can't – and shouldn't – be answered in the moment.
- Focus as much (or more) on the "being" aspects of the client's life as well as the doing. For example, when a client is exploring what to do, ask them who they want to be in the process. If that question is too abstract, you can ask things like, "What qualities do you want to bring to bear?" or "What values do you want to honor as you do that?"

WHAT IS REGULATION?

To me, Regulation means the ability to notice and recover from strong emotions without doing damage to others in the process. In other words, it's a key aspect of emotional intelligence. Understanding that we're always having an impact on those around us is also critical, and the ability to self-regulate helps us be more intentional about what kind of impact we want to have.

Neuroscience has shown us that a stronger connection between the prefrontal cortex and limbic regions is important for self-regulation, and being in what is known as the "Goldilocks Zone" of stress² is also important for optimal prefrontal cortex function and ability to regulate.

It's actually more helpful *not* to ponder consciousness as an on-off switch, but instead, think more in terms of *levels* of consciousness.

As coaches, we help our clients with this by:

- Aiding them in learning to monitor what's going on and practicing more effective responses. (The more clients practice this, the stronger the connections become – we'll talk about this more under Stabilization).
- Helping clients identify and manage their stress (and perhaps provide tools as well, such as reframing, breathing, even focusing on values and purpose).
- Bringing awareness to whether client's intentional impact is their actual impact.
- Exploring with the client the cost of being emotionally dysregulated.
- Using mindfulness in coaching.

HOW COACHES CAN HELP WITH REGULATION

In terms of regulation, anything that allows the client to be more thoughtful and intentional about their actions and the impact is really important. Here are a few ideas:

- If you have a client who is struggling with "letting loose" on others, try having them use their drafts folder before they send a scathing email. Here's the key – they can write as many drafts as they like, but can only press send when their body feels settled and calm.
- Help clients assess the level of stress in their lives and have them explore what it does to their ability to be thoughtful and have empathy. Help them make the connection that it might be a question of reducing stress so that their brain can work optimally.

- Create your own toolbox of simple techniques that help clients settle and recover, and if client is interested, teach them these techniques. Great places to look are breathwork, somatics, and mindfulness.

WHAT IS INTEGRATION?

Dr. Dan Siegel defines integration as the *linkage of differentiated elements*. These words are key – to be integrated, we need both clarity (differentiation) and the ability to connect (linkage). One without the other is dysfunctional, but both lead to higher levels of effectiveness.

Integration is the “yes, and” of life, and various research studies show that it makes us more effective in every key area of life, including leadership and teams, creativity and productivity, and all manner of relationships.

Be sure you aren't simply “coaching for results” and/ or overfocusing on what client already has in their awareness.

There are many areas of potential integration for a human being, each of which helps them increase in consciousness: within the brain itself, in terms of the brain and body, and between self and others. Coaching helps people both differentiate and link in various ways, for example:

- Identifying values, purpose and other aspects of themselves (differentiation), and helping clients honor and live them (linkage).
- Exploring their many “parts” (differentiation) and helping these harmonize (linkage).
- Bringing their own needs/ideas/viewpoints into greater awareness (differentiation) and exploring how to meet these while honoring the needs of others as well (linkage).
- Making sure goals have resonance and meaning.
- Helping client resolve internal dichotomies and “saboteurs.”

HOW COACHES CAN HELP WITH INTEGRATION

I think of creating integration as the drumbeat of “yes, and.” And in today’s world, we hear a lot of either/or language. “I’d like to do this, but....” Here are a couple of ideas to work with this in coaching:

- Keep asking, what might be the answer that includes both?
- How do you honor x value *and* y value as well?
- What part of you are you abandoning of you do that? How can you include this?
- And always, celebrate and note where they have integrated something!

WHAT IS STABILIZATION?

It’s not enough to have insight and/or moments of higher awareness; consciousness means a state of general stability.

Neuroplasticity is the brain mechanism by which we become more stable and aspects of our selves become more reliable. There is a famous saying in neuroscience: “If it fires, it wires.” Fundamentally, this means that the more we practice more effective (and integrated) ways of being, the more we “wire in” higher levels of consciousness.

As one neuroscientist once said, coaching itself is a form of “self-directed neuroplasticity.” This tends to happen through:

- Encouraging client to experiment and try new things.
- Focusing on both motivations and actions.
- Encouraging both repetition and reflection.
- Working with goals and accountability.
- Helping the client learn from their mistakes.
- Celebrating successes.

HOW COACHES CAN HELP WITH STABILIZATION

One of the things I have learned about stabilization is that it points us towards respecting the process. Bad habits, internal negative self-talk, saboteurs, etc. were not created overnight; therefore, neither will they be “unwired” quickly.

New ways of being require intention, attention and celebration. Some ideas here:

- Take a stand (when possible) for longer-term engagements. When an HR department says they can give the client six sessions, I talk to them about neuroplasticity and the process of change. I share that I have seen coaching make a powerful difference, but that this occurs over a much longer time period.
- Don’t assume that the awareness will stabilize on its own. Help clients create structures to bring their new “ahas” into action.
- Celebrate, celebrate, celebrate. Make sure to help the client “wire in” successes by noting them and taking time to talk them through – not only what the client did, but who they were being (that is, the qualities they had to bring to bear).

And so, my fellow coaches, let me leave you with these thoughts. The first is a reminder – these factors build upon each other and are interrelated. My sense is that if we are committed to the process of learning and growth, we are all continually realizing, regulating, integrating and stabilizing. And the second is that even if you never thought of it this way, your work as a professionally trained coach may very well be increasing consciousness in this world, one courageous client at a time. ●

NOTES

- 1 I believe it is critical to *never* use the idea of “levels of consciousness” to label or judge anyone, especially oneself. This is the manipulative work of cults and high-control groups. Rather, this idea can be used as a sort of compass, held lightly and continuously explored without labels or assessment.
- 2 That is, just enough stimulation without being overwhelmed with stress.