



CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

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Rethinking Authenticity

*(The) idea of
authenticity is often
(and mistakenly)
understood as being
true to yourself.*

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To become a great leader, so the prevailing narrative goes, a manager must develop a deeper understanding of their ‘true’ self, and then behave in accordance with that true self at all times. Behaving in accordance with one’s true self is often referred to as being authentic, a definition based on a theory of self for which there is very little evidence. In this article we explore an alternative meaning of the word authenticity and its implication for coaching.

We are not one, but many

In the leadership literature we read about the quest for authenticity, usually expressed in terms of seeking to understand a true self. We conduct personality tests and 360 feedback surveys, interpreting the findings as if they reflect the operation of a single self. The coaching literature depicts people as unitary entities defined by a single set of beliefs, motivations and experiences. Yet there is no evidence to support the idea that there is one me or one you. There is no single centre of self in the brain. The only real evidence for the existence of a single self is our subjective sense of being. This sense of self may be comforting, in that it gives us a sense of being in control, but it is likely illusoryⁱⁱ.

Whilst we value the capacity of leaders to make well-informed, rational, decisions, it would appear that the decision-making process is largely subconscious. As long ago as 1983, a group of researchers found that the onset of brain activity signaling a voluntary act preceded the individual’s conscious intention to perform the act by several hundred millisecondsⁱⁱⁱ. Conscious will therefore, may be a fiction we make up to make us feel good about our (conscious) selves. Another group of researchers conducted a series of experiments with split-brain patients^{iv}. The researchers worked with the left and right hemispheres of the brain separately and asked the left-hemisphere to explain the responses of both halves of the brain to visual stimuli. The left-

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hemisphere of the brain made up stories and confabulated, suggesting the existence of a 'left-hemisphere' interpreter (LHI), whose role it is to constantly seek out order and reason, and relate this story to the conscious self. In the split-brain experiment the LHI was disconnected from aspects of self in the right hand brain and so had to guess what the right brain was experiencing. This implies that our 'true self' is a multiplicity of different selves, distributed across the brain, all communicating silently to this LHI^v.

Multiplicity theories have been around a long time. Plato spoke of the rational self, the appetite and the spirit. Freud described the ego, superego and id. Fritz Perls wrote about the topdog and the underdog. Eric Berne defined parental, adult and child ego-states etc ... Richard Schwartz went so far as to posit a whole family of internal selves, with different 'parts' both cooperating and working against each other within an 'Internal Family System' (IFS)^{vii}.

Tatiana Bachkirova is the only author to have devised a theory of self specific to coaching. She describes three aspects of self. The first aspect is the pre-reflective self, a nonverbal consciousness. The second aspect is the ego, an aspect of self that is both conscious and unconscious, comprising a network of numerous mini-selves, translating the needs and functions of an individual into action. The mini-selves engage with each other and may come into conflict. The third aspect is the narrator, making up stories to explain how the person as a whole interacts with the environment. This story is ultimately fictitious, since the narrator does not have access to what is happening in the unconscious.

Authenticity, through this lens, is not about a single self, in control of all its actions, for there is no such thing. Authenticity through this lens is about the extent to which all these different mini-selves are aware of each other and work together collaboratively. Mary Watkins, a clinical and developmental psychologist, suggests that a hallmark of healthy psychological development is the progressive elaboration of different internal characters, and the continuous enhancement of imaginary conversation among those characters.

This idea that we comprise multiple selves actually makes sense to a lot of people. We can hear it in the way people talk. For example^{viii}:

I was the transformation guy, bringing a modern way of thinking to a bureaucratic organization. But the organization's mantra was 'we're a family' and I was treated like a drunken Uncle Fester, as an outsider. I was the 'firefighter' rather than the 'architect' or 'builder' and I created some of the bushfires without knowing it. In the second year, when people realized I was a 'glue-man' trying to make everyone successful, I tried to turn relationships round through the use of language.

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From a multiplicity perspective we can see in this account multiple selves in action, including drunken Uncle Fester, firefighter, architect etc ...

Implications for Coaching

Now we come to the 'so what?' question. If we suppose multiplicity theory has legs, what practical implications does this have for the way we coach?

1. Take your time

If different aspects of self are more present than others in different contexts, then the self or pattern of selves that show up in the coaching room is unlikely to represent the full myriad of selves that operate in contexts outside the coaching room. Both coach and coachee must be careful not to assume that initial accounts of a coaching situation are always fully-formed, and nor should they move too quickly to a single unified interpretation of events. It may be equally unproductive to move too quickly to a goal or unified intention. It may take time for the various selves to align to agreed versions of past, present and future.

2. Venture outside the coaching room

The more opportunity the coach has to witness the coachee engaging with others, the more opportunity the coach has to experience the coachee operating in different organisational contexts, demonstrating different aspects of self. Following the same line of thought, coach and coachee may seek to incorporate group coaching and/or team coaching sessions into the assignment. Coaching in the presence of other people may trigger the manifestation of different aspects of self that would not otherwise show up in the one-to-one relationship.

3. Rethink your approach to psychometrics

Many coaches work with personality instruments and multi-rater surveys as part of assignments. The majority of these tools implicitly assume the existence of a single self. Evidence suggests however, that people don't behave consistently in different situations^{ix} and that people rate themselves differently on self-scored personality tests depending on the social role they are thinking of at the time. A multiplicity perspective encourages the coach to ultimately decide what the data means.

4. Explore yourself

Richard Schwartz identifies possible blockers to effective practice^x, including the presence of a critical self within the coach, or an approval seeking self, anxious to demonstrate progress to the paying client, or a

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rescuing self, an angry resentful self, and various evaluating selves. A multiplicity perspective demands of the coach a sophisticated sense of self, including not only an awareness of different selves, but an understanding as to how they relate to each other and when each is most likely to show up.

5. Choose not to know

If the self is as complex and dynamic as described here, then it is a brave or foolish coach that purports to speak authoritatively upon the personality of another. The multiplicity perspective encourages us to be uber-curious, and to 'hold lightly' all the theories we've been taught.

Narrative coaching

Narrative isn't the only approach that can be used to explore multiple selves, but it's certainly worth a look. First, because many multiplicity theories point to the importance of storytelling, and second, because narrative approaches tend to be 'post-modernist', privileging the coachee's version of events as a version of reality. From the narrative perspective four practical areas of technique/ process emerge.

1. Ask – is the multiplicity approach appropriate here?

David Clutterbuck warns us against using the same tools and models all the time. To introduce the notion of multiplicity to someone for whom this has little meaning is unlikely to be effective.

2. Identify and name

Opportunities to experiment with multiplicity present themselves often quite naturally in coaching, for example when a coachee is contemplating internal conflict. As an alternative to other techniques, such as motivational interviewing, CBT, or Immunity to Change frameworks, try framing internal conflict as conflict between different aspects of self, each with its own personality, beliefs and motivations. Coach and coachee then give character to these different selves and hypothesise how they may interact. Characterization includes describing the appearance of each self, its personality, and its motivation for showing up in the person's life.

3. Encourage interaction

Naming selves makes them less overwhelming, and makes it easier for them to interact. Lots of writers point to the role of the practitioner in facilitating a deeper relationship between different aspects of self^{xii}.

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Examples of specific techniques include psychodrama, internal team building and empty chairs. Helping the coachee to identify different selves, to give them each a character, and to encourage their interaction is an entirely different approach to helping the coachee become more 'authentic'.

4. Encourage interaction between different aspects of self and others

You may already invite other stakeholders into the coaching conversation, for example the line manager. The relationship between coachee and line manager is an example of a specific context, one in which particular aspects of both participant's selves may be revealed. Experiencing such interactions through a multiplicity lens provides further opportunity for reflection and insight.

Conclusions

We live in a complex world, with leaders having to adapt to different contexts and situations. A multiple theory of self suggests that people may bring quite different aspects of self to those different scenarios. Theories of multiplicity may be particularly useful to coaches as a means by which to further explore their coachee's relationships with different people across increasingly complex environments. The model discourages coach and coachee from moving quickly to simplistic perspectives of people and events. Coaches may experiment with theories of multiplicity through any modality, but a narrative approach may be particularly fruitful, given its emphasis on the ability to work with story.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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