

# Coaching at Work

## “This way out”

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**H**uman beings find change difficult. We want it, yet we fear and resist it. It is the same with coaching clients – they may have a genuine wish to find new, better ways of functioning, yet they cannot relinquish their old ways.

The psychodynamic model of the mind makes a unique contribution to understanding this paradox. It explains the complex, deep-rooted nature of our emotional and behavioural patterns and why we repeat them – even when they do not serve us well. It also provides crucial insights into how to build a strong working alliance with the client and help them overcome invisible obstacles ‘below the surface’.

The psychodynamic model has its origins in the revolutionary theory of the human mind developed by the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud.

During his lifetime, Freud continually revisited and refined his ideas. This process of evolution has continued since his death, as psychoanalysts further modify his concepts in light of experience and

# THIS WAY OUT

The psychodynamic approach to executive coaching helps clients understand complex emotions and change their behaviours – even ingrained, unhelpful ones. **Catherine Sandler** explains how

research. Yet many of Freud's fundamental ideas about human functioning still underpin the psychodynamic approach today.

This article introduces some of these concepts and illustrates how they can inform the practice of executive coaching.

### **Key psychodynamic concepts**

#### ***The unconscious mind and psychological defences***

Freud believed we possess a dynamic inner world (hence the term psychodynamic), in which feelings, thoughts and wishes move in and out of conscious awareness. This interaction is driven by conflict between

different aspects of ourselves, with the unconscious part of our minds serving as a 'safety valve' to ease unbearable emotional tension.

This process is a normal part of mental life. As we grow and develop a conscience, learn to consider others and create the relationships and ties we depend on for our survival, we must suppress some biological drives.

We are also programmed from birth to seek and maintain a sense of psychological safety. To achieve this, we routinely consign emotions that are intolerably painful to our unconscious.

Psychodynamic theory describes how we unconsciously use a range

### **Case study: 'I'm not angry, just disappointed'**

**Adam was a regional managing director in a large IT services company, responsible for improving results in a highly competitive marketplace. His CEO wanted coaching to help him develop a more inspiring leadership style and become better at managing poor performance.**

Adam described two direct reports who were resistant to his leadership and not delivering results. His body language reflected his frustration. His face flushed, he leaned forwards, twisted his hands and his voice rose. Yet, when I empathised, he sat up, shook his head vigorously and insisted he was not angry, just "a bit concerned". Clearly I had triggered a defensive response. Adam glared at me and said it would be "totally unprofessional" to get angry with colleagues. He seemed to equate feeling angry with behaving aggressively.

Adam complained that his CEO was distant and unsupportive. Again, he showed non-verbal anger, but this time he blocked my anticipated response. Raising his palm, he assured me he was not angry, just a little disappointed.

It seemed to me that Adam had strong feelings about difficult workplace relationships but that these feelings made him anxious. I privately hypothesised that Adam was experiencing an inner conflict, largely unconscious, between the part of him that felt angry and the part of him that was scared by, and possibly ashamed of, his own aggressive feelings. It seemed that his fear of losing control was leading him to censor his emotions and remain 'reasonable' at all costs.

Both denial and rationalisation seemed evident and I thought Adam was also using projection to help resolve his inner conflict. When I empathised, he rejected my comments. In this way he disowned the unacceptably angry part of himself, perceiving it as coming from me and pushing it away.

What might the impact be of these defences on Adam's behaviour at work? His habit of inhibiting uncomfortable emotions and censoring critical thoughts would compromise his ability to deal firmly with difficult colleagues. If Adam could acknowledge his anger, without being overwhelmed by anxiety or losing control, he could mobilise the emotional energy needed to bring spark and determination to his performance.

To address these issues, it was necessary to get alongside Adam and avoid triggering his defensiveness. Returning to the issue of the poor performers, I commented positively on the patience and self-control he was showing in the face of their undermining behaviour. I saw Adam visibly relax. I mentioned how natural it would be for him to have mixed feelings. Quite clearly, he felt strongly committed to being controlled and professional, yet another part of him perhaps felt fed up at the amount of time and energy these difficult individuals took up.

This time Adam responded with a deep sigh and admitted that sometimes he did feel fed up. This was a significant turning point. After six months, his self-awareness was transformed and he was managing his anxiety far more effectively. He had dealt with the underperformers (one improved, one left), and brought greater energy to his leadership role. The CEO was delighted with Adam's "new confidence and determination".



allowing us to function. Yet when used in an excessive or rigid way, defences exact a high price. They can hinder our capacity to fulfil our potential and create emotional and behavioural problems.

It was Freud's observation of patients suffering such symptoms that led to the development of psychoanalysis as a clinical treatment, designed to relieve symptoms by 'making the unconscious conscious'.

### **Transference and counter-transference**

These two psychodynamic concepts have important implications for any practitioner-client relationship, including coaching. They suggest that we unconsciously transfer aspects of past relationships with parents, siblings and others, to significant relationships in the present.

Transference, namely the way in which the client experiences and relates to the coach, can provide valuable information about their

“ Listen carefully to clients' narratives, but do not take their version of reality at face value ”

of specific psychological defence mechanisms. These include repression (when a whole area of emotion is deeply buried), denial and rationalisation (when aspects of reality are pushed down and explained away), splitting and idealisation (when the self and others are seen as all good or all bad) and projection (when an uncomfortable, unwelcome attribute or feeling is attributed to another person and then blamed or criticised).

However, we do not use these psychological defences in a

random or unpredictable fashion. Instead, each of us develops a consistent pattern.

Psychodynamic theory points to the central role of our early life experiences (combined with our innate temperaments) in influencing the evolution of these patterns. Our relationships with parents, siblings and other key figures are seen as particularly significant in creating our unique 'inner landscape'.

Psychological defences are part of everyday life, protecting us from being overwhelmed by anxiety and

inner world. Similarly, counter-transference, how the coach experiences the client, can also be a helpful source of insight.

### **Drawing on the concepts** **Remember that some of the client's thoughts, feelings and behaviour may be driven by unconscious processes**

Listen carefully to clients' narratives, but do not take their version of reality at face value. For instance, a new client insists she is committed to coaching, yet repeatedly postpones sessions or

## Do's and Don'ts

- **Do develop working hypotheses about your client's inner world**

Take time to make sense of clients' emotional and behavioural dynamics. It will help you identify underlying issues. Make sure you generate working hypotheses, using evidence you can review, confirm, modify or revise as the coaching process unfolds.

- **Don't share unfiltered concepts**

Hypotheses about clients' dynamics should not be shared explicitly with them. If behaviour is driven by unconscious thoughts and feelings, describing them will be met with denial or puzzlement. Definitive pronouncements about the client's psychology or amateur interpretations are highly inappropriate. Instead, your hypotheses should be held in mind, tested in practice and used to inform your work.

- **Don't use jargon**

Use everyday language to build a bridge between your thinking and clients' realities.

- **Do get alongside the client**

The purpose of coaching is to build clients' insights and promote new, more effective behaviours. Craft your interventions carefully to avoid triggering feelings of shame, guilt or failure as this will provoke a defensive reaction and close down learning. Avoid collusion with clients' unproductive patterns.

arrives late. She may attribute this to circumstances beyond her control, but the delays may also be an unconscious signal that she feels anxious and ambivalent.

Holding this possibility in mind enables you to take steps to reduce her anxiety and avoid colluding with her avoidant behaviour.

### **Look for the client's unacknowledged emotion**

Consciously or unconsciously, we all experience difficult feelings such as fear, anxiety, anger, rage, hatred, envy, jealousy, shame and guilt. These are routinely aroused by the normal vicissitudes of working life, and even our most task-focused and self-controlled clients are not immune to them. However, they may well resist acknowledging them.

Without asking the client explicitly, look for the verbal and non-verbal clues to feelings they may be hiding from you or from themselves when an issue is discussed. For example, the client who calmly tells you that his much-valued boss is leaving, may focus on the rational aspects of this decision, insisting that these things happen. Yet beneath this may lie a sense of sadness or anger. By helping the client acknowledge and share these feelings, you are building his capacity to deal more effectively with work-related situations involving loss.

### **Take anxiety into account**

When considering clients' behaviours both at work and in the coaching relationship, ask yourself whether and why they are anxious.

Anxiety is our physiological and emotional danger signal and is far more frequently experienced than we realise. It is a natural response to change, uncertainty, loss (real or threatened), criticism, rejection or failure. But it is often unconscious, so it can manifest itself in behaviour that does not appear to have any link with anxiety at all.

Thus, a client who fears being judged a failure may recount his successes and drop names with apparent confidence, even arrogance, while subtly suggesting the coach may not be up to the job.

Understanding how a client defends against anxiety enables you to understand their characteristic emotional and behavioural pattern and identify those aspects that limit or hinder their leadership performance.

### **View your relationship with the client as a vital coaching tool**

First, always pay careful attention to the client's attitude and behaviour towards you, especially at the outset of coaching when the transference is often clearest. This provides invaluable information about the individual's inner world and their working relationships.

Tune in, too, to the counter-transference – your unfiltered emotional experience of the client. If you find yourself, for instance, feeling stuck and ineffective with a new client, ask yourself whether this reflects a tendency of your own or whether it might reflect something about the client's dynamics.

Second, remember that for those clients who struggle to form and maintain close working relationships, the creation of a strong working alliance – a relationship of trust and joint commitment to the coaching task – may in itself represent the most

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powerful element of their developmental experience.

### Dispelling the myths

While the psychodynamic approach will not appeal to all, do not be put off by common myths.

First, it need not involve in-depth exploration of the client's childhood, parental relationships and upbringing. In my practice, I use the client's current behaviour at work and within the coaching relationship to understand their dynamics. While helpful links with the client's life history often emerge, this is not the main route to exploring their issues.

Second, I do not believe that only trained clinicians can make appropriate use of this model, which has an immense amount to offer fields such as coaching when used with thoughtfulness.

There are some important provisos, however. You will need a

high level of self-awareness, along with the capacity to manage your own emotions, recognise your professional limitations and understand the boundary between coaching and therapy.

If you are interested in this approach, I recommend finding in-depth experiential development opportunities, whether through therapy, counselling or other programmes. Supervision by a seasoned practitioner with experience of this model is vital.

Third, psychodynamically influenced executive coaching can deliver exceptional value, not only to the individual, but also to their organisation. I hold myself accountable to both and focus unwaveringly on the client's performance at work.

Through its powerful insights into human behaviour, the psychodynamic approach enables me to coach at pace and at depth, helping clients shift entrenched negative patterns and achieve striking and sustainable improvements in their leadership ability. ■

### Further reading

- A concise introduction to psychodynamic ideas can be found in Susan Howard's *Psychodynamic Counselling in a Nutshell* (Sage, 2006).
- To learn more about Freud's ideas, start with selected writings such as those in *The Penguin Freud Reader* (2006).
- My book, *Executive Coaching: A Psychodynamic Approach* (2011), is designed to provide a clear and accessible introduction to the application of psychodynamic ideas to executive coaching. Illustrated with many case studies, it is published by OUP as part of the 'Coaching in Practice' series. **To buy a copy at the special price of £18, visit [www.openup.co.uk/sandler](http://www.openup.co.uk/sandler) and enter promotional code: SANDLER11**