



Reflections from the field

Keeping our heads above water: applying Kegan's 'orders of consciousness' theory in coaching

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Abstract

This article proposes that an understanding of Kegan's 'orders of consciousness' theory can help executive coaches particularly when working with clients during periods of organisational change. The proposition is illustrated by examples from the field, indicating that the coach can create an environment which effectively supports the client's transition to a new sense of self by actively considering the client's existing order of consciousness. This sense of self, separate from the client's interpretation of and reactions to their experience, is needed so that the client can function effectively in our fast changing culture, which demands that we be self-directing both as learners and as workers.

Key words: executive coaching, transition, organisational change, self concept

Introduction

Through the experience of coaching, I have come to believe that the way we understand the world and how we construct its meaning is critical in establishing how we feel about ourselves and our ability to make sense of our lives and our roles within them. If how we think about the world, our consciousness, is instrumental in how we see ourselves within that world, our sense of self, it seems important for us, in our coaching practice, to understand the development of our thinking processes.

We generally accept that child cognitive development, like physical development, is directly related to chronological age; the most well known theory being Piaget's four stages of cognitive development described by Sugarman (2001, p83) as 'ubiquitous'. Brief insights into the lives of adults through my coaching practice, have led me to believe that human development does not end on reaching adulthood. This appears to be supported by the considerable body of work on adult and lifecourse development. Sugarman (2001) provides a useful overview. This includes Erikson's eight stage theory of psychosocial development; McAdams's 'life story' based stages of development; or Levinson's (1978) lifecourse development stages.

Levinson's 'eras' span approximately 25 years, each marked by a period of stability and consolidation followed by a period of transition. Typically my clients have experienced transition similar to those described by Levinson (1978) but not always at the age suggested by him. This perception is supported by Wethington (2002) in a study of the way Americans experience the 'midlife crisis' with more than 52% of reported midlife crises being 'off time' (p95). This suggests that such transitions are not simply related to the client's chronological

age, but are also the result of their experience. While phase theories have their place as a way of understanding the type of transition the client may be going through, I believe they are insufficient in themselves to explain the process of such transitions, and in particular the associated transformational learning; why it takes place on one occasion, but not on another.

The question which is most important in my coaching practice is not so much what transitions clients go through and at what age, as what I as a coach can do to support them as they encounter periods of change and discontinuity. This includes supporting positive outcomes for the client by helping them discover that *how* they see their world impacts on their experience and that they are able to change this thereby gaining a sense of control over their life. Kegan (1994) appears to provide a possible answer. He proposes that it is through the way we think, what he calls our 'way of knowing', that we actively give shape and coherence to our experience making it part of our system. He further proposes that our 'way of knowing' develops over time progressing in sequence through a series of stages he calls 'orders of consciousness'.

In this article I focus on Kegan's orders of consciousness theory and examine how it relates to my experience as a coach and whether it is helpful in explaining some of that experience. I then consider whether it might inform practice and if so, how it might be applied in order for the coach to become more effective when working with clients experiencing change and transition.

Testing the theory against coaching practice

Kegan (1994, p.5) suggests that "adulthood itself is not an end state but a vast evolutionary expanse encompassing a variety of capacities of mind". He presents a theory of development of the mind in which we progress through stages or orders of consciousness. Kegan's proposition is that people are 'the active organizers of their experience' (1994, p.29). His theory goes beyond cognitive development which is about thinking, and is about 'the organizing principle we bring to our thinking *and* feeling' [my emphasis] and how we relate to others and ourselves. He proposes that the underlying logic of mental organization is the 'subject-object' principle. This theory resonates with Pinker's (1994) theory of language development, which includes the principle that children have an innate ability to identify the subject and object in a sentence. It suggests that perhaps there may be a common underlying principle for human interactions including language and relationships. Kegan (1994) further suggests that over time we can change our organizing principle and this allows us to liberate ourselves from a particular way of being i.e. how we experience and interpret a particular situation.

Orders of consciousness are hierarchical (Kegan, 1994, pp. 94-95). Most adults, though not all, reach the third order in their early to mid-twenties. This, according to Kegan's theory, is the Cross-Categorical stage of development in which the individual can for example, think hypothetically, generalise, and construct ideals and values. They are conscious of their own role and how it interacts with the role of others, and identify themselves with their own needs and preferences. An individual operating at the third order level will perceive those who 'offend against' their system or values as offending them personally. This can give rise to a defensive reaction such as anger.

A recent example from my coaching practice appears to support this view. I was working with a senior executive, in his late forties, who described how a colleague's behaviour in a meeting affected him and ultimately impacted on the effectiveness of the

senior management team. Earlier we had established that he held strong values around the concept of fairness and reason, and his colleague's behaviour appeared to offend these values, which he experienced as offending against him personally. His automatic response was one of anger and frustration resulting in behaviour perceived as 'putting the other person down'. Through the coaching process he was able to consider other possible interpretations of the reasons behind his colleague's behaviour and the impact his initial response might have. He was then able to identify alternative responses which would leave his own and his colleague's values intact and developed strategies for managing the situation in a way which resulted in a positive outcome for the senior team as a whole.

In making a change to how he viewed the situation from within himself, my client was perhaps moving towards Kegan's fourth order of consciousness. This is characterised by the capacity for systemic thinking including a way of thinking which 'permits a reflection on relationships and creating of distinction within those relationships that reorders existing arrangements according to new values' (Kegan, 1994, p173). My client was perhaps able to use fourth order consciousness to construct a new sense of self; one in which he is responsible for changing his own behaviours in order to support the working of an effective senior management team.

Kegan (1994) proposes that many aspects of modern life require fourth order consciousness, for example expecting employees to be self-directing while adhering to company rules. Another example from my coaching practice appears to support this view. I was working with a client who was relatively new to management as he took on a more strategic role. Between the initial contact and our first meeting the client's organisation went through a re-structuring and he found himself in a very different role by the time of our first session. This was to become a theme of our coaching relationship. During the 9 months that we worked together he experienced a change of role three times. I believe the coaching supported and challenged him by encouraging reflection about the situation he faced and his response to it. Through reflection he was able to change the way he thought about each re-organisation. As a result the way he perceived his situation during each change of role was quite different.

At our last session he commented, "I now feel I have control over what I do". He went on to describe how he now feels able to interpret his situation within the larger organisational context and this enables him to look for ways of making the situation work *for* him, rather than feeling things are being done *to* him; in Kegan's words he appears to 'have it' rather than be 'had by it' (1994, p34). I believe that this client experienced transition, and that this could be considered to be a case of transformational learning.

Bridges (1986) defines transition as the 'internal experience of a gradual, psychological reorientation process that develops as we respond and adapt to change.' Transition itself may be felt in a variety of ways from experiencing crisis to generating learning. Mezirow (1998) suggests that whether learning will be transformational will depend to a considerable extent on the client's capacity for reflection, and in particular on what Mezirow calls 'critical reflection of assumptions'. He proposes that it is through reflecting on our assumptions that we are able to effect a change in our established frame of reference and significant personal and social transformations may result.

It could perhaps also be argued that my client's transition was from Kegan's third order to the fourth order consciousness, i.e. a systemic 'way of knowing' for this particular aspect of his life. Certainly it appears that in this specific context the client may have moved

from seeing his relationship with his employing organisation as one of mutual reciprocity, to one where he has an active role in regulating his relationship with the organisation. As Kegan (1994, p168) puts it “The greater internality of this way of knowing now creates the self – not the present social surround – as the *source* of direction and value” and I would suggest that this is why the client feels he now has control.

Kegan (1994) presents results from a number of studies which indicate that the majority of adults operate largely at the third order of consciousness or somewhere between third and fourth order. In the studies taken together 58% of the adults do not reach the fourth order (p197). This suggests that the transition from third to fourth order is not part of a natural process of maturity related to age. Kegan suggests that “the capacity for fourth order consciousness is not an instinct; it evolves” (1994, p169) and that this evolution can be encouraged. The role of coaching in this context may be to encourage this fourth order evolution during times of transition, thus supporting transformational learning.

Kegan also notes that “it is rare to see people moving beyond the fourth order, but when they do, it is never before their forties” (1994, p.352). This raises the question whether our capacity for critical reflection, or perhaps critical reflection of assumptions (Mezirow, 1998), grows with age. While this capacity may appear to be age related, I would suggest that it may be less to do with our chronological age and more with our opportunity to experience and respond to change and transition. In the second of the above examples from my coaching practice, the client was not yet forty, yet his experience of change and of transition in a particular context may have created the conditions for achieving fourth order consciousness in this context. What Kegan does not make clear is how a change in the order of consciousness in one context may influence the capacity for such development in another context.

Relevance to future work with clients

Kegan’s view of subject-object theory as a “‘constructive-developmental’ approach to human experience ...[which] ... looks at the growth or transformation of how we construct meaning” (1994 p.199) seems complimentary to other approaches to establishing how the client sees the world, such as Learning Styles Inventories or Myers-Briggs Type Indicators. It may begin to explain why clients who appear to have similar outcomes in psychometric questionnaires may not be equally effective in making sense of their world.

For example, when working with a client newly appointed to a team manager role in his mid-late twenties we established that he had an activist learning style. During our coaching sessions he would look to me to provide answers, and help him understand the ‘rules’ of management. In this he could be said to be demonstrating third order consciousness. In contrast a former colleague who is a senior manager in his late forties also clearly displayed an activist preference, but he appeared to work with and sometimes around company rules to achieve goals which were mutually beneficial to him and the organisation, demonstrating the fourth order consciousness capacity “to organise our knowing in a way that can originate value” (Kegan, 1994, p173).

I consider preference and ability to be two separate dimensions which both need attention in my coaching practice. If our style or type is our preference on a scale of possible preferences, our effectiveness in applying that style depends on our ability. Kegan supports this view when he states ‘Myers-Briggs types are simply *preferences about* the way we know, rather than *competencies* or *capacities* in our knowing’ (1994, p201). I have represented this graphically in Figure 1.

From his review of research Kegan concludes that developing cognitive ability at the fourth order of consciousness is related to age and most adults do not progress beyond third order level. Despite this Kegan observes that to successfully meet expectations placed on us in modern life we are expected to operate at the fourth order. He describes this as being 'in over our heads'. I suggest that we may look at this situation positively as one which provides challenge and therefore more opportunity for transformational learning. If modern life consists of frequent change and therefore potential opportunity for transitions over time our numerous experiences of change and transition in different contexts may enable us to develop the capacity for fourth order consciousness in all contexts before the age of forty.

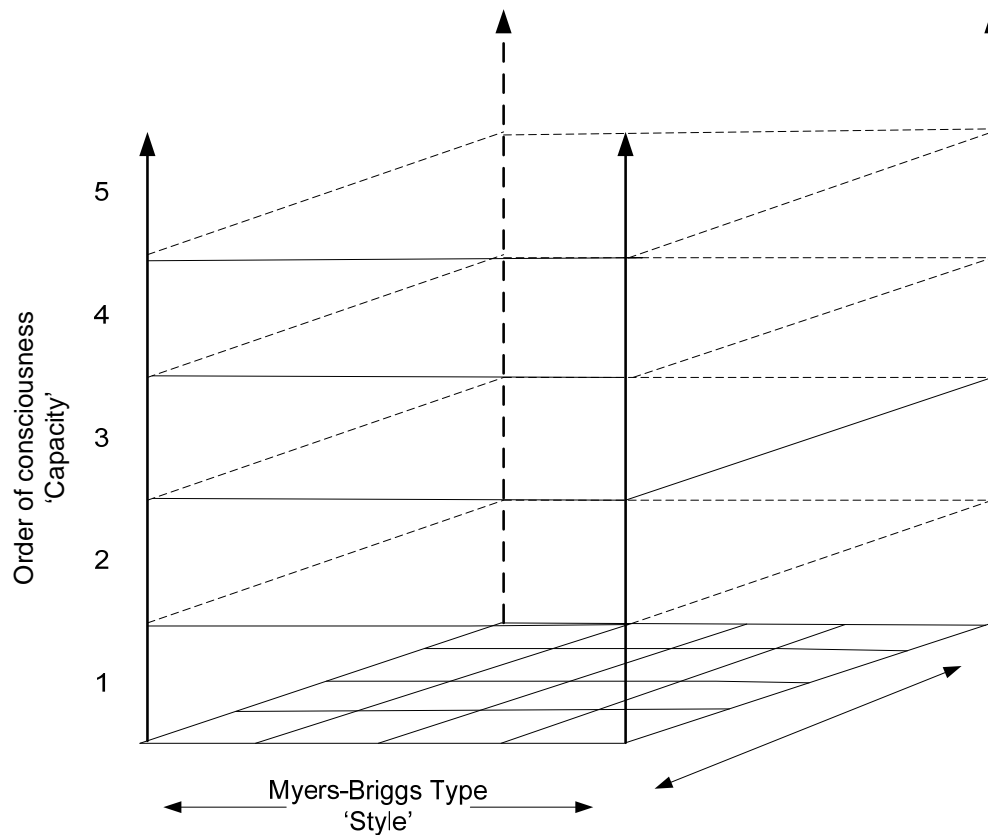


Figure 1: Relationship between 'style' and 'capacity' (based on Kegan, 1994)

However, frequent change and challenge may not be enough, as Merriam (2004, p.65) asserts: 'Although cognitive development can be seen as an outcome of transformational learning, I argue that mature cognitive development is foundational to engaging in critical reflection and rational discourse necessary for transformational learning.' This is a catch 22 situation.

In my experience, illustrated by the examples above, appropriate support and challenge from a coach may speed up development by providing the space for critical reflection of assumptions (Mezirow, 1998), and therefore transformational learning. My coaching experience, however, is with educated professionals. Findings from order of

consciousness studies in Kegan (1994, p.195) support the view that cognitive development plays a role. Results from a sample representative of the general population show 18% of the sample at the fourth order level, compared with over 40% at fourth order level from the highly educated sample.

The above suggests that only those who already have developed cognitive capacity, who are already able to critically reflect, will benefit from coaching. This goes against my belief that everyone can develop and does not appear to be borne out by anecdotal reports of the success of mentoring/coaching schemes working with disadvantaged groups.

Adams (2006, p.277) may provide an alternative view. He proposes the concept of an existential-phenomenological model of life span development in which he suggests that “change comes about as a consequence of an opening to experience which leads the person to reflect on their situation in the world, the givens of existence and their responsibility for their life”. This fits with my experience of clients who come for coaching because they feel they want to change something. At the start of the coaching relationship clients need not be aware that in order to make that change they will also need to change themselves, their own behaviour or rather, the way they think about their world.

The importance of both challenge and support has been described by Daloz (1999). My aim as a coach is to provide the client with sufficient support and challenge to generate opportunity for their personal growth, but what kind of growth the client experiences will depend to some extent on their starting point.

To illustrate I will go back to the example of the manager who faced three changes of role in 9 months. Our early work together consisted of my supporting him through Stage 3 (Depression) on Hopson’s transition curve (1986, p.139) and, once he was able to accept the situation, challenging him through questioning. Questions about what he might be assuming, what others might need from him and how others might interpret the changes helped him to develop new perspectives on his situation and to develop new meaning to guide him through his transition. In doing so, on the first occasion he appeared to be using Kegan’s (1994) third order of consciousness and the outcome was a reframing of points of view; a new understanding of the relationships and responsibilities between roles, still a third order way of thinking. By the time we were working through his third role change he appeared to be working at Kegan’s fourth order of consciousness, thinking systemically and focussing immediately on how to make the situation work *for him* and the organisation, rather than why it was happening *to him*. It is worth noting that at the time I was not aware of Kegan’s orders of consciousness theory and I am drawing these conclusions retrospectively.

Awareness of Kegan’s (1994) order of consciousness theory could also be helpful when working with senior managers around Goleman’s (2002) Emotional Intelligence domains: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management. These are the *what*, or the visible competencies or behaviours which are evidence of emotional intelligence. Based on the principle that the order of consciousness is an indication of the capacity, the *how* or ‘way of knowing’ that the client applies to achieve the competencies, finding ways to encourage and fast track such development could be particularly useful when working with senior managers who need to manage complex relationships.

Conclusion

My aim in this article was to explore whether orders of consciousness theory (Kegan, 1994) provides underlying principles for my intuitive belief that the way we see our world is critical in enabling us to respond effectively to our experience. I set out to explore whether this theory is applicable to coaching practice.

I have tested my understanding of Kegan's theory against my coaching experience and concluded that it could provide some useful insights. The theory appears to explain how a particular way of understanding our world can be instrumental in creating a strong, independent sense of self, and it defines the stages of development as hierarchical. While lifecourse development theories such as Levinson's (1978) are helpful in considering the type of challenge clients face, they are limited in that they are strongly influenced by the culture, period and sample studied. The principles of orders of consciousness theory however, appear to be more universally applicable. I have also considered its application to two dimensions of coaching: helping clients become aware of their preferences or style, and supporting clients in developing their capacity to make effective use of their style preferences. Orders of consciousness theory is helpful in the second of these, by proposing general principles for generating capacity.

As a coach I can provide the necessary support and challenge to help my clients towards transformational learning. By actively considering their existing order of consciousness I can question and support in a way which encourages transition to the next possible order of consciousness and new sense of self. This sense of self, seen as separate from our interpretation of and reactions to our world, is needed so that we can function effectively as adults in our current culture, which demands that we be self-directed both as learners and as workers.

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