

Book Review
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Coaching Understood: A pragmatic inquiry into the coaching process.

Cox, E. (2012) London: Sage.

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The development of the coaching literature has often been protracted and modest. In recent years, few coaching texts provided a significant leap forward in our understanding of psychological dynamics of coaching. For this reason, Cox's *Coaching Understood* is a game changer. More thoroughly and systematically than ever before, this work gets under the bonnet of the coaching engine and explores the mechanics of the coaching process. For anyone wondering why coaching works, this book is your answer.

Cox describes a dance between theory and practice and shows that one does not need to choose between rampant eclecticism and strict intellectual monogamy. While not being shy to draw upon best practice in other helping disciplines, she develops an understanding of coaching that is true to itself. Cox's is a pragmatic approach, but one that draws heavily on evidence-based theories. I would second her call for coaching-specific research to be conducted to collectively develop a rich base of research-supported practice, which will take forward the entire discipline.

A particular strength of Cox's model is the priority she place on not only explaining the stages in the personal development of the coachee, but she also sets out the process required to transition from one stage to the other. Her basic framework presents the raw material of coaching as the vague, often difficult to access and even more difficult to articulate experience. According to this approach, coaching must facilitate 'touching experience', finding ways of making explicit what may often reside in the unconscious part of the mind where it is shielded from reflection and change. Cox explains that the coachee's experience provides the raw material with which the coach and coachee must work. Her work on the role played by feelings, intuition and hunches is a significant advance on previous work to date. She goes on to show how to help coachees to articulate their experience through such methods as narrative construction.

Once the experience has been made explicit, it is possible to conduct reflection, or as Cox calls it 'to see their personal experience from a distance'. It is explained that in reality describing the experience and analysing it are intrinsically bound in coaching, as the coachee is encouraged to reflect on alternatives interpretations of his or her experience. For reflection to offer up its full benefits, Cox argues that it needs to be combined with critical reflection, which is a process of analysing, synthesising and evaluation information. This is a process of questioning underlying assumptions, values and beliefs, healthy scepticism, exploring the potential impact of the context and investigating possible alternative explanations. In Cox's analysis this is first and foremost a learning experience, in which the coachee takes his or her self-knowledge to a new level of understanding. This enables post-reflective thinking, the stage in Cox's model where the coachee is able to look back at their experience with the benefit of a clearer, more balanced view and consider future actions with the confidence of self-knowledge and clarity of thought.

However, Cox demonstrates at length that it is through the interaction between the coach and coachee that the progress is made. Her chapters on listening, questioning, clarifying and 'being present' take these subjects to a completely new level, exploring how the coaching alliance enables reflection and growth. A significant idea in this book is around the difference between empathic and

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authentic listening, whereby Cox makes the challenging point that in coaching the conversation is co-constructed and which allows for greater insight to be achieved. Cox goes further to propose an integrated model of listening that combines the salient aspects of both approaching to listening, whereby the coachee has the benefits of active listening that ensure he/she feels listened to, whilst maintaining the tension of authenticity in the making.

Cox adds somewhat controversially that “in coaching, being misunderstood by the coach could have useful consequences for the clients” as it enables the coaching conversation to explore differing perspectives. I suspect that the author expected a reviewer to highlight this passage, for it is striking in its non-conformity. This in a sense sums up this book, which makes bold claims as to the distinctive features of a coaching approach and takes several firm strides towards defining the coaching-specific practices, often by contrasting them with that of counselling and mentoring.

Similarly, when Cox addresses the role of questions she argues that questioning in coaching has a distinctive focus, based not on the questioner’s need to know, but rather “the coach’s need to clarify the task and ask questions that help the client to know.” This, she suggests, affects all aspects of questioning in coaching. Most notably, Cox tackles the role of the coach’s existing knowledge, which she argues should not govern the kinds of questions asked by the coach. Questions are not merely to fill the gap of missing information; rather, it is intended to generate an exploration and reflection. Existing knowledge is most useful as a jumping off point, but it should not govern the conversation, for it is the growing awareness of the coachee that is truly important.

My favourite chapter is about integrating experience, for it is here that Cox’s approach comes together. Her thesis that pre-reflective experience needs to be unpacked to allow for reflection on experience, so that it may provide upgraded post-reflective thinking culminates in the transfer of the learning through coaching to the new level of experience – thus bringing the coaching full circle. The coachee can go on to create a new level of experience, which provides a further platform for reflection and growth, but one that is enhanced by the process of development afforded by the coaching.

In my analysis, the book gives pre-eminence to deeper forms of coaching (such as person-centred approaches), giving less attention to more behavioural or goal-focused approaches. The process she describes is correct for these approaches too, but I would suggest with slightly different emphases. Cox indeed does acknowledge that “in some coaching assignments there may be less need to incorporate in-depth phenomenological reflection, particularly if the emphasis is on the achievement of practical goals.”

For effective coaches who know that what they practice works, this book will explain to them why this is so. For coaches who are looking to improve their skills, this book provides a systematic introduction to what works and why. Cox ominously warns that the days of cowboy coaches are numbered. While I don’t believe that Cox has a team of sheriffs at her disposal, with this book they now certainly have one massive excuse fewer.