


Academic Paper

# Towards understanding that coaches' knowledge of themselves is the enabler of client insight

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## Abstract

Lack of a coaches understanding of their own psychology impacts on the effectiveness of coaching, in particular the client's ability to access insight. Despite the general awareness of the role of the coach, the concept of coaches' psychology needs a deeper understanding in the coaching literature. This article reports on an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) study of the elements that promote the occurrence of Aha! Experiences, and considers ways coaches enable the occurrence of client insight. This article seeks to deepen coaches' understanding of the role they hold as the central tool for successful coaching.

## Keywords

Insight, equine facilitated coaching, transformative learning, consciousness, embodied creativity, experimental learning

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## Introduction

Within the coaching literature there is much discussion with regards to the various conditions, and factors that need to prevail in order to achieve successful coaching outcomes (Grover & Furnham, 2016; Nieuwerburgh, 2014). However, it appears that the topic of the coach knowing themselves, and the impact this has on the coachee is limited. Often coaches do not investigate their own psychology and are unaware of their own constraints, and how these constraints restrain their coachees. Others however have undertaken self-observation or involve creative approaches to remove barriers and support the “unlocking of a person’s potential, or trigger for ‘A-ha! moments’” (Van Nieuwerburgh, 2014, p.120).

An understanding of how the coach's knowledge of themselves supports coachee insight will, therefore, contribute to the knowledge of how to achieve successful coaching outcomes. Building understanding of the impact of the coach's knowledge of themselves provides additional understanding for both coaching literature, and the focus of training for new coaches.

A shift of perception, and in particular insight into situations or problems is highly desirable, yet in the literature insight is poorly understood, considered rare in its occurrence, and a complex phenomenon (Levitt *et al.*, 2004). However, Equine Facilitated Learning (EFC) repeatedly delivers Aha! Moments of insight which transform the client. Yet research in the field of EFC focuses on the psychological and psychotherapeutic outcomes of working with horses and has yet to consider how insight is achieved through this coaching intervention. In addition, studies into insight have traditionally been conducted in laboratories, focusing on the mechanism of problem-solving, with little research into insight as it occurs in a natural setting (Klein and Jarosz, 2011; Hill and Kemp, 2018).

This study attempts to build a broader understanding on how insight occurs in a natural setting through the medium of EFC. Thus, providing an indication of the factors or elements required for the creation of Aha! Moments and how this relates to dyadic coaching. In particular, the study highlights the need for coaches' self-knowledge to enable successful outcomes.

EFC is defined as a practice where participants work with horses to uncover insight and self-awareness through groundwork exercises, the horse is not ridden. The delivery is a phenomenological one, focusing on the individual's perception of the experience and what it means to them.

The following provides an analysis of relevant literature relating to EFC, coaching and insight, and studies of consciousness development. Followed by the reasons for selecting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as the methodology most suited to this study. Findings and discussion are organised around key themes emerging from participant experiences of insight through EFC. To conclude, vital pointers are made as to how insight could be achieved by coaches.

## Literature Review

This section reviews important background information necessary to understand insight not only how it is defined and understood but also how it is felt and the emotional mood. Insight is also considered in relation to neuroscience and creative problem-solving, how it is defined by individual boundaries, as a function of consciousness, and the role of presence, and mindfulness.

### An understanding of insight

The term insight is often linked with the concept of intuition; however, the two terms are distinguished as different in relation to the process of occurrence. Zander *et al.* (2016) explain that the two processes appear similar where intuition, the sensing of a solution, is part of a longer reflective process, and that it precedes insight, the sudden and unexpected arrival of the solution. Stuyck *et al.* (2021) describe insight as a quantum leap in understanding with insight achieved through unconscious processes. The 'Aha' aspect becoming the hallmark of insight and being related to how sudden the solution came to mind (Webb *et al.*, 2019), the perceived ease or effortlessness with which the solution was obtained (Shen *et al.*, 2016) and the positive emotion that coincides (Ishikawa *et al.*, 2019).

The key debate in insight studies is whether insight is spontaneous or a restructuring of the initial problem, leading to alternative interpretations that suddenly fit together as a whole, or good Gestalt (Laukkonen *et al.*, 2021). Bowden *et al.* (2005) in their neuroimaging study provide more solidity to the understanding of restructuring of the initial problem. Bowden *et al.* (2005) study suggests that the sudden flash of insight occurs when solvers engage distinct neural and cognitive processes that allow them to see connections that previously eluded them. Suggesting that insight is the result of accessing a different neurological process. However, the debate remains as to whether intuition

and insight are two processes that build on each other or do they fundamentally differ (Zander *et al.*, 2016).

Insight seems to be measured externally, through process or sensed factors, yet other scholars consider internal process, the level of consciousness that insight arrives from. Kraus and Holtgraves, (2020) theorise that insight problem-solving occurs below the level of consciousness. Bowden *et al.* (2005) also considers it to be a subjective experience, making it difficult to pinpoint precisely when it occurs and much more difficult to study.

## Feeling, emotion, and insight

Scholars studying insight refer to the external or felt aspects of insight as indicators of its arrival. The role of the body as a conduit of insight is also expressed by Longhurst (2006) and Pert (1997) who assert that the unconscious mind, required for insight, is accessed through the body. The reader can find more here in the works of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty (2012), and the body's support of behavioural shifts Van der Kolk (2015).

The link between the body, feeling and the psyche is also expressed by Heron in his theory of feeling and personhood (Heron, 1992). Heron (1992, p.96) expresses that feeling is the grounding of the psyche, is 'resonance with being', providing the access to the subconscious. Laukkonen *et al.* (2021) study tested whether real-time and embodied feelings of insight can predict correct solutions. They found a strong positive relationship between Aha moments and accuracy for problems that demand implicit processing. They also found the intensity of the insight experience further predicted the accuracy of solutions.

The connection between the body and the unconscious mind is also considered in equine coaching literature. Gehrke (2010) found that horses' ability to remain coherent or present to their own emotional states allows them to increase the capacity for human beings to regulate their emotions and achieve psychophysiological coherence in themselves. This matches closely with Siegel (2012) who looked at resonance and attunement from a neuroscience perspective and discovered that as individuals develop a mindful awareness of their actions and reactions, their internal process becomes coherent and cohesive. In this respect there may be a coupling connection in the horse-human relationship where the whole organism is engaged. The horse-human relationship may bring participants into a coherent state, a state of mindful awareness.

## Transpersonal insight

With little research into the natural occurrence of insight, the study of insight has become a rational affair, reducing insight to a cognitive process that steps over the possibility of transcendental ways of knowing.

The philosophers Schelling and Hegel maintain that we must go beyond reason to discover that mind and nature are both simply different movements of one absolute Spirit, a Spirit that manifests itself in its own successive stages of unfolding (Wilber, 2000, p.274). Insight here is considered to arise outside the self, being derived from unity consciousness, the non-dual which connects the whole of creation, something beyond thought, from the transpersonal (Wilber, 2006). For these philosophers and scholars, the role of consciousness, awareness and insight connect closely with eastern traditions and the spiritual and transcendental ways of knowing.

Mindfulness derived from the Buddhist tradition engages the position of being open, receptive, and emergent as a way of being (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Siegel (2010) expresses this as *mindsight*, a 'focused attention which allows one to see the internal workings of our own minds'. Siegel (2010) considers that presence enables individuals to shift to a place of choice. Enabling the exploration of

possibility, as awareness shifts from the internal to the external world and attaining this stage of focus may create an environment where insight or peak experiences are reached (Siegel, 2010).

Presence is echoed in transpersonal coaching's notion of the 'held space'. Dängeli and Geldenhuys (2018, p.103) express the 'held space' to include 'energetic resonance and rapport, a participatory perspective, mindfulness, intentionally cultivated attitudes of acceptance, compassion and interconnectedness, and induction of a state of awareness of wider perspective and receptivity'. However, within the held space between the coach and coachee is discussion, verbal exchange. A study by Schooler *et al.* (1993) considered how language overshadows insight and found that verbalisation can result in the disruption of nonreportable processes that are critical to achieving insight solutions. This follows scholars who have suggested that creative thoughts, in particular insights are distinct from language processes. Of notice is James (1890) who identified that many important insights have occurred in the absence of words.

In summary there is no real consensus on the arrival of insight, definitions are very external world orientated in terms of a process-based measurement, with studies focusing on formulations of problem-solving skills. There is some movement towards more participant-based research, but little research into insight as it occurs in a natural everyday occurrence. The focus has resided upon unravelling the process or spontaneity that underlies sudden insight, and the feeling and definition of the moment itself, where insight is seen as having different qualities from non-insight knowledge at the process, cognitive, neurological, emotion, and feeling levels of analysis. The studies point towards The Aha moment residing at the edge of consciousness or from the subconscious, which brings together both the personal and the transpersonal. Yet at this stage the research studies, report on the content of laboratory experiments and seem unable to move beyond the literal, the type of problem, incubation periods, problem solving skills and whether it was or wasn't an insight, rather than consider the internal world or subjective understanding of the individual.

## Methodology

This study used the qualitative methodology of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, *et al.*, 2009) to explore how insight is achieved through EFC. This approach was chosen firstly, due to the phenomenological nature of the EFC delivery itself, and due to the nature of the subject under study 'insight'. Insight has a personal nature to it, an event that occurs in an individual's consciousness, and is a self-reported experience. The internal nature of the experience set within the lived experience of an EFC session, can only be phenomenologically experienced and reported.

The research is rooted in an interpretivist, constructivist paradigm engaging each participant's unique experience, and their own layers of meaning (Willig, 2013). Research conducted from this standpoint recognizes, "that different perspectives generate different insights into the same phenomenon" (Willig, 2013, p.46).

Smith *et al.* (2009) recommend for IPA that participants are derived from a homogeneous small sample, enabling rich, deep, and sensitive analysis providing a particular perspective of the phenomenon being studied.

All participants self-selected by responding to an open request to attend the study. Four participants came forward and the option to decline from the study without explanation was highlighted throughout the engagement (Wiles and Boddy, 2013).

## Data collection

The research looked for freedom of expression within the participants and so the interviews conducted were semi-structured and provided the primary method for data collection (Alvesson and Ashcraft, 2012). The semi structured interview was combined with photo elicitation with the questions providing the initial opening to the interview and the photo elicitation as the second stage. Sultan (2019) recommends that boundaries and consistency be maintained across interviews with a time limit of 60 – 90 minutes. The interviews remained within these parameters.

## Data analysis

Smith *et al.* (2009, p.81) provide a 'six-step process to support the data analysis approach which provided a sense of order and confidence in undertaking the IPA' and this approach was followed for this study.

Each interview was analysed separately to examine each individual perspective and their unique situation. After each interview I took time to reflect and consider the individual, and any reaction within myself. By exploring each case independently, I immersed myself in the data. Initially, I read the transcript and highlighted areas of significance. Next, I listened to the recording whilst reading the transcript and identified tone of voice, emotion, and any thoughts of particular significance. Finally, I made a spreadsheet and transferred the highlighted areas creating columns for emerging grouping, initial comments, and personal reflections. I then looked to code the lines. At this stage I was working with the notes and key phrases, and this is where the themes began to emerge. After color coding each emerging theme, I used the filter function to review the coded lines to understand any variations within the clusters. I then grouped themes together with a descriptive label. To make sure I had been true to the original source I relistened to the transcripts to ensure a strong connection was evident but also to look for any significant variations or overlooked areas in undertaking the process.

## Findings

Three themes and eight sub-themes emerged from the analysis; these are outlined in Table 1. Each theme and sub-theme are presented, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the participants.

**Table 1: Themes and Sub Themes**

Themes	An open approach	Personal development from the experience	Sustained change
Sub Theme	Open motivation	Learning from life – a spontaneous living metaphor	Self-learning
	Emotional engagement	Personal ownership	Change in being
	Characteristics of the space	Presence – state of being	

### Theme 1: An open approach

The findings point to a surrender to the unknown or an opening of the self to the 'other'.

#### Open Motivation

The participants attended the session with a desire to support their wellbeing. All participants recalled that in months prior to attending the session they had been contemplating a situation but were at an impasse. However, not one participant had attended the session with the topic as a considered area of focus. The participants attended of their own volition and there is an understated openness to the task at hand. Laura expressed:

It was through work, and it is unusual to be offered anything. With what happened over the last year (Covid), it was something I felt I needed.

### **Emotional Engagement**

The moment of insight seems connected to cathartic emotional release. A release, where emotional energy is unlocked from past concerns and expressed in the present. Although the physical response to the emotion was tears, the participant remained steady and coherent, able to move through other emotions such as laughter. The heightened sensation seemed to be positive, a response to a moment of insight which perhaps previously was too difficult to consider. Sylvia expressed:

It was an important moment for me, and it does. It touches me (start of tears).

### **Characteristics of the space**

The characteristics of the space, and the qualities of the EFC coaching team were highlighted by the participants. A picture is painted of a space where there are no expectations or judgements being made. The focus is one of 'working with', and a sense of choice; participants being empowered from within themselves rather than from being directed or controlled. Dipaly expressed:

The people that ran it were calming and (lots of emphasis) very welcoming, and again there were no expectations from any of the coaches about what it was, and they didn't put words in anybody's mouths. They didn't say what you will feel is this, so what you will do is this. There was none of that..... There were no expectations of me.

## **Theme 2: Personal development from the experience**

This theme highlights the suspension of analytical thought, providing a potential feedback loop between observation, experience, and subconscious or transpersonal. The personal ownership of the insight delivering a deep sense of knowing, which created closure in a personal situation. The insight occurring from being in the moment, an embodied experience, expressed as moving towards oneself or getting to know oneself.

### **Learning from Life – A Living Metaphor**

The participants experience with the horse is narrated as the trigger for insight. The situation they had been contemplating in their lives prior to the session arrived unbidden and found its own solution in the reflection of walking with the horse. There is no reference to conversation with the coach or other participants, no verbal analysis of a problem. Where the coaches are mentioned, it is due to an observational remark rather than discussion. The understanding from the experience seems to reflect a fluidity between the participants internal world or sub conscious, and their external actions.

In addition, there are two distinct elements, the first is the very strong voice the participants use when explaining the spontaneity of the insight, and the second being the clarity of the decision made in that moment. Decisions which they take personal ownership of, without any over thinking or discussion.

Sylvia was considering re-engaging with relationships after a painful divorce and was unsure if this was what she wanted.

There was this point where she (horse) didn't come with me, at the end as I was going back to the group and the lady said to me ' Lift your head up' I'm going to cry now because it is quite, it is quite emotional and those words were really, really important.

My situation wasn't particularly brilliant and so in a sense I kept my head down. Don't want to engage in that. Don't want to sort of almost look up and catch anyone's eye, or vice versa. So, it was sort of a reflection of that. And it was at a point where I was beginning to wonder whether it was time. You know that I could. So that moment coming up was quite poignant.

Laura drew parallels between her anxiety and the horse, with the experience culminating in a moment of insight between her way of being and the relationship with her children.

I had no control (of the horse) and I thought gosh. Gosh, maybe that's what I've been like as a mum my whole life, and that's why my children are so kind of like, I don't really know which direction to go in.

I think it captured my being, in that situation, being watched by other people. Not having the confidence in knowing what I wanted to do and will need to do.

Probably the biggest thing for me, is showing my confidence, become more confident myself and show my confidence, which has changed since that session.

### **Presence – State of Being**

The participants reported presence or being 'in the moment' as their state of awareness in which the insight arose. There was also a change in language, with reference to moving to oneself or being yourself, with the concept of being yourself becoming the base to the whole experience. Alexa:

It was just a really lovely opportunity to just be yourself. I had this overwhelming desire just to be there in the moment. I just, I just wanted to be in that moment.

Laura took personal ownership stating:

It's a good way of taking a look at yourself and getting to know yourself.

To learn about ourselves through the simple act of trying to concentrate in the moment.

Sylvia expresses her own embodied presence expressed as being shown by the horse:

Not that a counsellor would be telling me what to do, but helps me talk about it, but Lexie (horse), showed me. Quietly.

## **Theme 3: Sustained change**

This theme connects the role of learning and personal empowerment through a change in being, and how the experienced lived metaphor has become a personally motivating and memorable experience.

### **Self-Learning**

The concept of learning seems to highlight a personal change in perspective. It may be that when one moves through a moment of insight the understanding that is encountered is perceived as a personal lesson. This is particularly noticeable through the following excerpts.

Dipaly is clear about their own personal learning:

In my mind even to this day. My mind goes back to the session, to realise that, I don't even want to say what I've achieved but what I've learned, what I did learn from that really.



Laura also found a level of personal learning:

I suppose, just that it, it helps you to recognize what's within you and what things you could change to take a different direction in life.

Finding out stuff about myself, because you know the animals not talking to me. It was finding out myself through my own actions what I need to change. So, it's like self-teaching in a way, self-empowerment. I'd like to do more.

### **Change in being**

The learning from the session seems to be a holistic, self-empowered learning, resulting in a long-term change in being where the physical encounter can be recalled, retaining the developmental journey.

Alexa is clear about the impact the session has had on her life:

It was actually life changing and I can't stop thinking about it. It was just such a lovely experience. I am so grateful.

Laura has used the understanding in the session in her wider life:

I'm starting to believe in myself, but I do get some things right, but also it doesn't matter if you get something wrong.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how coaching, through equine facilitation, repeatedly achieved Aha moments and how coaches learn from this? The findings indicate that insight obtained during EFC can be understood in terms of the Aha! moment of insight as positioned in prior studies outlined in the literature review.

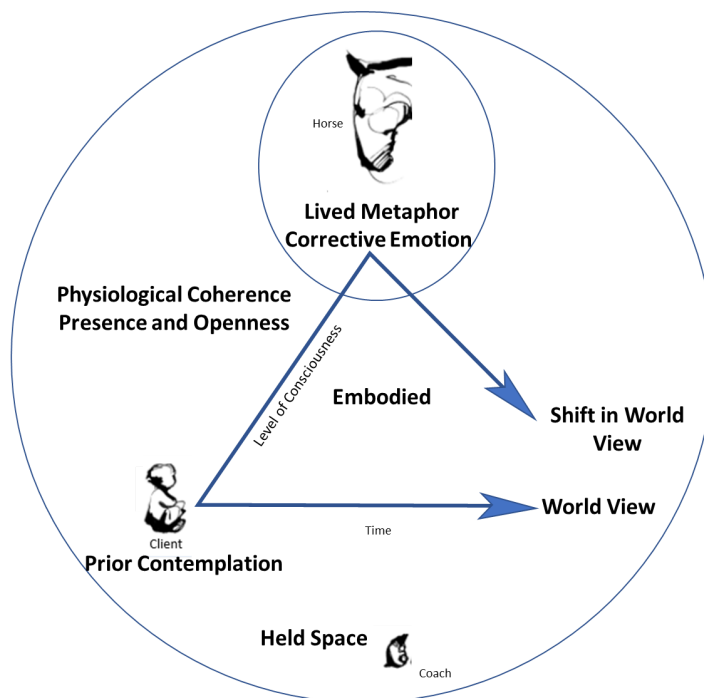
The findings place emphasis on the link between the internal state of the individual and their external being in the world. With insight arriving in the moment where the internal habitual way of thinking is turned aside, and a higher level of mind or a change in the mind is achieved. This inner sight is achieved not through coercion with the external world but is influenced by the state of the individuals being within it. The state of being referred to is that of space and openness within the individual, the release of psychological boundaries enabling access to knowledge, which becomes expressed through metaphor. This is experienced by individuals as being present, in the moment and moving towards oneself. The outcome is that the insight is the clients own finding and as such is held as learning, resulting in enduring personal transformation.

It is important to highlight that insight has not occurred through problem solving thinking. It would seem the clients enter a state as described by Blackmore (2003, p. 284) 'a state where the distinctions between conscious and unconscious processing disappear'. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describes this as a flow state, a highly desirable optimal state of experience. As an embodied experience there is also clear connection with the emotional and non-verbal felt sense, the wisdom of the whole being (Heron, 1992). As Gendlin (1962, p.11) expresses the clients were 'experiencing' the actual moment the 'raw, present, ongoing functioning' between their internal state and their external being in the world. This is expressed as metaphor, which seems to be the language of the unconscious as it looks to reorganise the actions and reality around itself to generate change. Dix (2016) argues that metaphors are the structured images of our embodied being in the world and is a locus and means for transformative learning.



The conceptual diagram (Figure 1) draws the themes together. I am aware that these themes are a representation of this study's understanding and are a result of my own synthesis pertaining to this discussion. The diagram starts with the client at their base level of consciousness, and without interaction they would stay at this level of understanding, or world view (hence the arrow forward). The client is attending a session under their own volition with a desire and openness to experiencing something new. However, some prior contemplation will have taken place with regards to the problem. The rising side of the triangle represents the physiological shift and change in state of consciousness whilst working with the horse in a state of presence. The lived metaphor taking place at the apex of the interaction as the internal world of the client engages with the actions in the external world. The downward arrow from the horse represents the continuum at which the Aha moment of insight arrives marked by a corrective emotion. The result of the horse-human relationship is the client with a changed world view. The entire situation happens in a held space, which is supportive, open, caring, and non-judgemental.

**Figure 1: Conceptual diagram to aid understanding of insight**



## Conclusion

The horse in EBC has a significant role. The findings have shown the horse as the central element in the participants experience, the foundation for the lived metaphor, the catalyst for participants to be present or in the moment, and the role as authentic other. Importantly, the horse also seems to have an additional role of providing a positive impact on our physiology.

EBC in this respect represents an opportunity to understand how insight is achieved when interacting with another consciousness that does not have human psychological boundaries. As such, the role the horse undertakes provides vital pointers as to how insight could be achieved by coaches.

The indication is that the key lies in the coaches' personal boundaries in terms of their presence, self-knowledge, and the space they create. Coaches who wish to provide the best for their clients can see their own personal conditioning, can liberate themselves from their own boundaries and as a result gift their presence, their openness to experience, then they enable the client to access their

own understanding of good in relation to a situation. The coach becomes the doorway to enable others to understand more clearly from their own level of mind. This points towards the coaches need to know thyself, know your own conditioning, to support another beyond their present understanding. This finding breaks down into four key points.

Firstly, that the coaching relationship is important, not as a skill, responsibility, or process but as an opportunity for the client to open to an authentic state of being. The opportunity for this lies in the coaches' presence. His Highness the Dalai Lama (2009) insists that the greatest gift you can give someone is your presence. Here the foundation of your presence is grounded in the state of how you perceive the 'other', encompassing how open you are to experience, and if you are willing to offer your-self to receive in return. Presence not only in action but also internally in feeling and thought, to be open and physiologically coherent.

Secondly, a coach needs to see the mind within the moment, actively engaging awareness that one can behave differently towards any single thing in life. A coach who imposes their level of understanding into a situation hampers the client's ability to access insight. The coaches' ability to see their personal conditioning, function of habits, beliefs, and values, to have self-knowledge, and how it may interject becomes key. Bachkirova (2011, p.192) asks 'how can one liberate others if you yourself are not free?' And points to the role of genuine self-recognition to silence critical self-models and to let the whole organism be creative.

Thirdly, the findings reference the characteristics of the space, the non-judgemental factors, with no form of power or control taking place. Here we consider the impact of the coaches own openness and creativity on the coachee's understanding. Louis (2018) in their study of space and power relationships suggest the coaching space may be either a generator, supporter or analyser of power and that coaches may be perpetuating specific rationales or ideologies without realizing it. The phenomenological approach of EFC does not drive for solutions, the focus is on working with the experience and embodied feeling of what has occurred. Bachkirova (2011) also highlights the potential beneficial elements of no boundaries, no power or control over another to aid insight.

Lastly, coaches who do not work with horses may also benefit from working with mediating artifacts or creative aids to engage the use of metaphor and a phenomenological approach. In addition, coaches also need to consider how they respond to emotions and their knowledge of embodiment to engage their own feelings and observation.

For teaching institutions and academia, this study increases awareness of the need to engage novice or practicing coaches in their understanding of internal awareness. Self-knowledge for the coach does not seem to be a central topic in the coaching profession, not as an idea of the client and 'the self', but as a question of how real or awake is the practitioner to their conditioning. The practitioners may also need specific training in meditation, how to increase personal self-knowledge and understanding of presence.

This study has gone some way towards addressing the real world, or natural situational factors, surrounding insight, and perhaps these may add to the theoretical studies of insight. The research led to a closer understanding of the role of the horse in EFC and this allowed the wider concept to emerge regarding the role of the coach as the supporter and influencer of insight. It became clear that the effectiveness of coaching could be improved through the deepening of the coaches' knowledge of themselves. I hope to persuade coaches, researchers and institutions to consider the role of the internal world of the coach within the delivery of effective practice. The literature and training tend to focus on the external factors of applying the right approaches at the right time in a change process. Yet, the balance must be found with the internal psychology of the coach, that a coach who 'Knows Thyself' is of benefit to others and aides the delivery of effective practice.

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