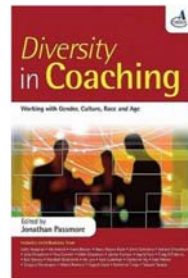


Book Review

Diversity in Coaching: Working with gender, culture, race and age
Jonathan Passmore, Ed. (2009),
London: Kogan Page.



I welcomed the opportunity to review this book as it is one of few titles focused on the culture-concept in coaching. Coaching almost certainly needs to respond to shifts in demographics and to the impact of globalisation – these key factors have been largely unexplored so far by the coaching community. *Diversity in Coaching* points to the pressing need for coaches to attend to the complexity of environments characterised by cross-cultural teams across multinational companies and national borders, whilst calling for leaders to embrace individual differences regardless of gender, culture, race or age.

The first of three sections sets the scene for diversity in coaching practice with chapters on Europe (drawing on the Bresser report, 2008), North America and Australasia. The second section offers experiences from global executive coaching practitioners in Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRIC nations) and Japan, the Middle East and South Africa. The third section focuses on ethnicity in the United States and United Kingdom and includes chapters on gender and age.

Throughout, the chapters are well-referenced, delivering academic rigour. However, not surprisingly perhaps given its relatively fledgling status, the book seems to lack a clear definition of ‘cultural coaching’, rather it is describing it as aiming “to promote understanding, respect and cultural sensitivity in individuals, teams and organisations,” (p.48); “the extent to which the coach is culturally informed,” (p.65); “a more international way of coaching,” (p.25). The book also does not draw an overarching conclusion; each chapter is autonomous, reflecting the experiences of 21 international practitioners, causing repetition on occasions.

The first section provides a good overview of cultural theories and an introduction for those who may not have considered the impact of culture in the coaching relationship. It may have benefited from an up-front explanation of the existing tensions between meanings of culture, from something that people belong to collectively to what is held internally for individuals; affecting thoughts, feelings, perceptions, behaviour and in turn, management style. My own research suggests that in coaching, these meanings have been largely unexplored. The tensions are further explored in the introduction of the Universal Integrated Framework (UIF) model (p.12) developed by Law *et al.* (2007) and later chapters (3, 14).

Section two of the book is insightful. It brings real life coaching experience to bear in diverse marketplaces around the world. Each chapter paints its own portrait of the social, historical, economic, political and racial context and explains how this might impact the approach to “culturally appropriate” coaching, drawing upon literature and offering case studies where appropriate.

Section three offers excellent chapters on gender and life transitions. Indeed, it could be argued that a coaching kitbag is not complete without an understanding of the theories of adult development and transitions. Also addressed in section three are the issues of racial minorities: ‘coaching black British coachees’ and ‘coaching black American coachees’ (chapters 12 and 13). There is the pertinent suggestion (p.192) that a coach must accept the paradoxical situation that “it

is critical to consider race in order to get to the point where race does not matter.” Dealing with paradox was one of the core qualities of a cross-cultural coach identified in my own research.

Along with the advances of globalisation, a person’s cultural profile – or cultural self - may be complex: born in one country, educated in another, work in another, have family resident in yet another, and so on. These global citizens may have conflicting goals and values and, being ‘caught between cultures’, are likely to represent a challenge for coaching for generations to come. The book does not, however, appear to focus hugely upon the impact of ‘serial expatriation’ or the evolution of ‘global citizens’ and ‘melting pots’ (by 2050, the total “minority” population is projected to represent 54 percent of the total U.S. population, according to the US Census Bureau).

The need for coaches to be self-reflective is explained and a useful exercise is offered (p.32) for coaches wishing to examine their own social identity before embarking on a cross-cultural engagement. The authors do not always indicate where they are currently resident, or how much time they have spent living and working outside of their own cultures. An American and a Brit living in the UK and coaching an Indian person for example, are likely to have differing perspectives.

The book does not appear to contemplate the possibility that cross-cultural coaching may *not* be applicable for all coaches. My own research suggests a need for coaches to have experienced extended or repeated tenures outside of his/her own culture in order to have acutely well-developed qualities; such as questioning one’s own cultural assumptions or the ability to tolerate ambiguity. As Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997, p.20) state, “*a fish only discovers its need for water when it is no longer in it. Our own culture is like water to a fish.*”

In summary, the book illustrates the diverse nature of coaching practice worldwide. Whilst providing many models, techniques and processes it does not, and indeed should not, claim that any one approach is ‘the best’. The book does not go so far as to suggest that concepts of self differ across cultures and therefore differing psychological constructs such as responsibility have different meanings in different cultures. But it does reiterate throughout the need for an alignment to cultural beliefs and goal setting in the coaching process that must be culturally appropriate. This is an approach that will surely contribute towards the building of trust across cultures.

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References

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