

## CROSS-CULTURAL COACHING: A THOUGHT PAPER

Workforces are becoming increasingly diverse. Globalisation is racing onwards, more national cultures are coming together at work, generational characteristics are becoming more and more clearly differentiated, women are more aware of opportunities at senior levels (even if for the moment numbers remain low), and technology is creating new skills groups. In this scenario leaders increasingly need to hone their cross-cultural effectiveness.

Executives who are taken by surprise at the impact or interpretation of their actions or words may not have taken cultural issues into account. In my experience their reactions to this surprise can range from irritation to passive aggression (or even simply aggression), which in turn can lead to conflict, disruption, ruptures in teams and jeopardised client relationships. Enhancing their capacity to work effectively in cross-cultural environments leads directly to raised performance levels for both leaders and their teams.

Cross-cultural coaching is about coaching to work with difference, enabling good people to become even better. When executives lead globally dispersed and multicultural teams, or are leading through international mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures, they have the complex task of managing cultures. Cross-cultural coaching addresses this complexity, calling on the coach's understanding of how culture manifests itself in the leadership task.

Geert Hofstede defines culture in his seminal work 'Culture's Consequences'<sup>1</sup> as 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another'. While Hofstede's focus was diversity across nations, his dimensions of culture can relate also to, for example, differences in gender, generation, organisation, sector and personal style. Global and multinational organisations feature many intersecting cultures: the institutional culture, the national cultures of its people, and the cultures associated with the ages and the genders of those people. In order to work effectively with difference, the starting point is to understand and be aware of oneself. Cross-cultural coaching means slowing down enough to become acutely aware of what is going on for the coaching client and others – the behaviours, the emotions, the interpretations, the assumptions, and the impact of the assumptions. It means taking a holistic view.

My cross-cultural coaching aims for the coaching client to significantly raise their awareness, to create new choices and to find new approaches. Clients typically become aware of the disparate parts of themselves, and this often acts as a catalyst: it leads to a sense of integration between those parts within themselves, to a greater ability to tap in to their capabilities, to understanding and managing others who are different, and to resolving conflict. Such conflict can be at several levels – conflict within the individual, differences with others, and divergences from the organisational ethos. I explore with the client both identity and culture, and I aim to open up possibilities for creative solutions to the challenges of working with difference within the context of the organisation's and the individual's purpose, values, beliefs, philosophies, policies, standards and brand(s).<sup>2</sup>

The Academy of Executive Coaching's Certificates in 'The Psychology of Coaching' and in 'Gestalt Coaching Skills'<sup>3</sup> have been key to the design of my approach. The nature of Gestalt means that within the structure provided by the coaching client's objectives the coaching addresses what emerges as important rather than following any prescribed process. This enables a responsiveness to the coaching client's underlying needs and meaningful experiential learning for them.

I facilitate coaching clients to make aware choices within a holistic perspective. I find Gestalt exceptionally well suited to the challenges of cross-cultural coaching, with its emphasis on the integration of disparities, its focus on awareness of self and others, acceptance of what is, and its open-minded philosophy, which offers valuable scope to draw creatively on all other approaches. The coaching relationship itself is an enabler of sustained change. As coach I listen deeply, using a focus on the here and now as a manifestation of the client's broader issues, and encouraging creativity and experimentation in the quest for fresh, more productive ways forward. I am person-centred in the manner of Carl Rogers<sup>4</sup>, system-focused (drawing on, for example, John Whittington's work on Constellations Coaching<sup>5</sup>) and anchored in mindfulness.

Also underpinning what I bring to cross-cultural coaching is my experience of living and working in non-UK cultures (notably Luxembourg, France and Israel) and of working with coaching clients in global and multinational organisations, in diverse cultures and with diverse teams and colleagues. My curiosity about the markers of cultural difference also contributes towards powerful interventions.

*"I began to recognise why others aren't quite the same and that what is obvious for me is not necessarily so for them."* SENIOR EXECUTIVE

Coaching clients tell me that they learn to listen to others more attentively, to accept 'otherness', and to make more of others' strengths. This presence and acceptance, underpinned by awareness of their own cultural assumptions and a greater respect for others' attitudes and values, means that they create sub-cultures of greater trust, more effective communication, healthier relationships and leadership that releases infinitely more potential.

LINDSAY WITTENBERG

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Culture's Consequences – Comparing Values, Behaviours, Institutions and Organisations Across Nations', Geert Hofstede, 2001, Sage Publications

<sup>2</sup> For more on international mergers and acquisitions see 'Perfect M&As: the Art of Business Integration', Paul Siegenthaler, 2009, Ecademy Press

<sup>3</sup> [www.aoec.com](http://www.aoec.com)

<sup>4</sup> 'On Becoming a Person', Carl Rogers, 1967, Constable & Robinson Ltd  
'Carl Rogers on Personal Power', Carl Rogers, 1978, Constable & Robinson Ltd

<sup>5</sup> [www.coachingconstellations.com](http://www.coachingconstellations.com)