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Erica J. Gloss

University of Pennsylvania, ericagloss@gmail.com

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A Hint of This and a Pinch of That: Theories That Inform Coaching and Consulting

Abstract

This paper explores five theories that inform the academics and practice of organizational consulting and executive coaching: multi-dimensional executive coaching, adult transformational learning, emotional intelligence, cognitive behavior theory, and positive psychology. I discuss themes within these theories including the use of self as a tool to understand organizational environments, examination of the individual through the lens of systemic forces, establishment of positive perspectives, and the importance of qualifying and quantifying coaching outcomes. I argue that by using these theories and themes as intervention frameworks and processes, consulting and coaching models and practices can be flexible, grounded in construct, and organizationally integrated in terms of the client and the coach.

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A HINT OF THIS AND A PINCH OF THAT: THEORIES THAT INFORM COACHING AND CONSULTING

ERICA J. GLOSS

Organizational Dynamics Graduate Studies
University of Pennsylvania

This paper explores five theories that inform the academics and practice of organizational consulting and executive coaching: multi-dimensional executive coaching, adult transformational learning, emotional intelligence, cognitive behavior theory, and positive psychology. I discuss themes within these theories including the use of self as a tool to understand organizational environments, examination of the individual through the lens of systemic forces, establishment of positive perspectives, and the importance of qualifying and quantifying coaching outcomes. I argue that by using these theories and themes as intervention frameworks and processes, consulting and coaching models and practices can be flexible, grounded in construct, and organizationally integrated in terms of the client and the coach.

A HINT OF THIS AND A PINCH OF THAT: THEORIES THAT INFORM COACHING AND CONSULTING

For over twenty-five years, I have been chopping, measuring, tasting and checking in with my Mom-Mom Sibby to find out if I got it right. Mom-Mom Sibby never uses a recipe. What is so amazing about her cooking, which goes beyond the delicious and unique outcomes of each meal, is the purity of her method and design during the cooking process. Each signature dish is prepared using authentic Mom-Mom Sibby style; however, each time you step into her kitchen it is a genuinely new experience. She absorbs the essence of her environment and senses the energy of her guests so that each feast is distinctively and appropriately crafted to reflect a moment in time.

As a child, I never questioned why sometimes her apple-raisin kugel called for twice the raisins it did the last time we made it, or why her sweet and sour meatballs needed more onions for one holiday but more brown sugar on another. As I became a young woman with a kitchen of my own, my frustration mounted as I failed at every attempt to extract an exact recipe from my grandmother's brain. She would constantly ask me, "Who are you making it for? What time of year will it be? Where will you buy the ingredients?" For her, an exact recipe depended enormously on the answers to those questions. My grandmother's cooking is not great because she uses the freshest tomatoes in her sauce; quite honestly, she usually cooks with what needs to be used up in the refrigerator. It is great because she knows how critical it is to use every aspect of the meal and the events surrounding the meal as data for creating a flawless one-of-a-kind recipe.

As the family story is recounted, Mom-Mom Sibby did not always have the ability to cook this way. She learned through experience to trust the process by experimenting with various ingredients over time. What has made her a driving force in my life is her prevailing adaptability and awareness of the dynamics in her environment, both in possibility and limitations, every time she fires up the oven. As a result of my learning process

in DYNM 722: Making Meaning from Experience and Establishing Frameworks, I was able to integrate the teachings from Mom-Mom Sibby over the last quarter century and the elements of the five theories discussed during class that most impressed me. In doing so, I hope to hone my own skills in the coaching and consulting field well enough to know how and when to alter the recipe that will become my own coaching model.

While examining the theories presented throughout the semester, I was drawn to different aspects of each theory and could envision how four specific themes within each theory-guided approach could be tailored to my own use, both personally and professionally: 1) the use of self as a tool to understand organizational environments; 2) the importance of analysis of the individual through the lens of systemic forces in a family, organization or culture; 3) the employment of optimistic perspectives as a means to commence meaningful communication; 4) the utilization of measurement methods in quantifying and qualifying coaching outcomes.

Multi-Dimensional Executive Coaching

Ruth Orenstein's (2007) framework of multi-dimensional executive coaching (*MEC*) is guided by and rooted in the theoretical concepts of psychodynamic and organizational theory. Psychodynamics is a theory of psychological forces that underlie human behavior, with an emphasis on the interplay between conscious and unconscious motivations. Organizational theory is characterized by the study of organizations with the goal of meeting the needs of stakeholders through understanding common themes that can help maximize efficiency and productivity. The conceptual framework for *MEC* is concentrated into four fundamental premises: the relationship between the individual

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and the organization; unconscious forces; multilevel forces; and the use of self as tool.

Individual and Organization

Understanding the relationship between the individual and the organization has been influenced by the contributions of Daniel Levinson. Levinson asserted that individuals and their organization are “equal contributors to the roles that individuals accept in organizational settings” (Levinson, cited in Orenstein, 2007, p. 26). His concept was a shift from previous theories that treated individuals mechanically as replaceable parts on an assembly line. Psychodynamics posits that individuals are influenced by continuous conscious and unconscious forces within themselves when assuming a role in an organization; organizations interact with and also battle with their own conscious and unconscious forces (Orenstein, 2007).

Unconscious Forces

The second premise of *MEC* is that unconscious forces play an active role in any dynamic relationship. Carl Jung was the first to introduce the concept of individuation, “the integration of both unconscious and conscious into a wholeness that represents the uniqueness of the individual” (Jung, cited in Orenstein, 2007, p. 28). Since these forces constantly impact behavior, it is important for the coach and client to become aware of the existence of unconscious forces in our daily lives and in the workplace.

Multilevel Forces

Simultaneous multidimensional forces exist at all levels of the organization and they affect the organization itself and each individual within it. This theory of intergroup relations and organizations, established by Alderfer (1986), identifies intrapersonal forces, intragroup forces and intergroup forces when discussing the transactions between individuals. As *MEC* theory seeks to understand how an individual within an organization interacts with these various groups, it is important for a coach to be

aware of emotions and behaviors triggered by membership or lack of membership in various

groups because of race, gender, class, generation, or task groups.

Self as Tool

The premise of using self as tool illustrates the balancing act the coach must play between involving herself in the dynamics of the organization in order to understand fully the forces at play and detaching from those dynamics in order to understand the situation and help the client (Orenstein, 2007). Use of self is the ongoing process of self-reflection, self-scrutiny, and analysis of the emotions being evoked within the coach that can be used as a diagnostic tool in the coaching process.

MEC theory and its approach are flexible in the sense that the coach is always collecting data, analyzing factors, exploring resistance and alternatives, and using various techniques for interventions. Meanwhile, there is a very clear process that is the foundation of the coaching engagement. Whatever else may transpire during coaching, the process will almost always include the entry, assessment, feedback, objectives-setting, coaching, final meetings, evaluation and follow-up (Orenstein, 2007). Clearly defined objectives-setting with the client as well as with the client’s manager start all parties on the same page. The individual coaching sessions take place after formal feedback is given to the client. In *MEC*, formalized 360-degree feedback for a client is created when the coach gathers data surrounding the concepts of strengths and the overuse of strengths and leadership style, using tools such as interviewing and observation. Next, an analysis is developed based on themes and trends in the data that will provide the client with insight into their own behavior. A coach will then share these findings in both an oral and written platform. It is critical when working with executives to have an outcome evaluation in order to assess the efficiency and effectiveness of your methods as a coach and the degree to which the individual being coached was able to meet the objectives agreed upon at the outset of the engagement. This process may include a

number of outcome evaluations from meeting with the client's manager to discuss the original objectives and determine whether they were subsequently achieved, to validating the outcomes through additional 360-degree interviews conducted well after the conclusion of the coaching engagement as a way to measure sustainability.

MEC in Practice

The theory-guided approach in *MEC* employs three of the four themes introduced above: using the self as tool; always looking at interactions between individuals and their behaviors through a systems approach; and using specified methods to identify measurable change.

I believe the most significant theme in *MEC* is the use of self as tool. I have begun to work with this concept by keeping a journal, using the cognitive method of self-reflection, "retrospectively examining one's reactions to a particular event or situation" (Orenstein, 2007, p. 106) to make sure I capture what is going on inside myself when I speak to others about a particular situation occurring in their lives. This method has helped me tremendously by removing me from the judgment perspective and allowing me more time to be empathetic and respectful. As part of my coaching model, I plan to integrate this concept into my process by listing the emotions I experience during each coaching meeting or interaction I have with the organization and client. I will then connect each listed emotion with specific details or events to understand what is going on in the organization and with my client. I will spend time reflecting on my own biases, experiences, and group memberships by listing my thoughts about these areas and going through an exercise of saying them out loud as a form of providing honest feedback to myself. I have a tendency to have a fleeting thought about a bias or a quick pang of emotion about my lack of membership with others and then dismiss the thought without truly allowing myself to identify or label it for what it is. The act of having to say out loud somewhat uncomfortable and hurtful thoughts about myself and others, will allow me to own my mental judgments and aid in freeing myself from them, thus breaking down the barriers they cause.

Adult Transformational Learning and the Concept of a Disorienting Experience

The second theory we discussed in class was the education theory of adult transformational learning and the concept of a disorienting experience. Developed by Jack Mezirow (2007), transformative learning theory is the "process of effecting change in a frame of reference" (p. 5). This theory is based on the idea that adults have a specific view of the world created by their childhood experiences, and it is through this very personal filter that we continually interpret and evaluate our environment. A frame of reference contains cognitive, conative, and affective components and has two dimensions: habits of mind and point of view (Mezirow, 2007). Our habits of mind, of which Mezirow identifies six (epistemic, sociolinguistic, psychological, moral/ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic) are the "broad predispositions that we use to interpret experience" while a point of view is "a cluster of meaning schemes" (Mezirow, cited in Cranton, 2006, pp. 22-24). In other words, our habits of mind are abstract habitual thought patterns, oftentimes unquestioned or unconscious, which were created from our individual experiences and childhood beliefs about the world.

Because these filters are unconscious, it is not until we experience disorientation that we question and examine our frames of reference to determine if they should be refined, refuted, and reevaluated (Cranton, 2006, p. 36). Transformative learning can occur only when adults have the capacity to be critically self-reflective and exercise reflective judgment. Mezirow describes three types of reflection – content, process, and premise – all of which can lead to transformation in an individual. Content reflection is the act of reflecting on the problem. Process reflection is asking "How did this come to be?" Premise reflection is the act of "challenging the basis of the problem or issue" (Mezirow, cited in Cranton, 2006, p. 38) and can change the lens through which we see the world, forever altering our habits of mind.

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Transformative learning comes about when we choose to think critically about our assumptions and reflect on our interpretations about what is happening in our lives.

The theory of adult transformational learning is grounded in the concept of individual and personal learning and growth. Its foundations do not analyze or interpret individual behavior from a systems perspective but rather require the individual to spend time reflecting and becoming aware of their own emotions and critical of their own assumptions and judgments. They must then use that information to change their frames of reference in order to work more collaboratively and effectively with others. The idea of reframing is critical to adult learning and we must break down the barriers our unconscious habits of mind have forced upon us. Being aware of the concepts in adult transformational learning is key to growth, both personal and professional. When we fail to check out our own assumptions, we may lose invaluable opportunities to enlighten and broaden our minds and our lives. Embarking on self-directed learning, learning from others, and incorporating new information that does not always fit comfortably in our pre-formed frames of mind help us to expand and grow as individuals and as a society. The disorienting dilemma, which can occur as one specific event or over time, is what jolts us into confronting our ways of thinking. It forces us to reframe our beliefs and sometimes flawed logic, and hopefully to emerge on the other side of disorientation possessing greater wisdom and openness.

The theme I find most meaningful in adult transformational learning theory is once again that of helping the client use him or herself as a tool. The concept of self-reflection and self-scrutiny is a key to positive movement beyond a disorienting dilemma. I believe that as working adults, we are so consumed with putting out fires and checking off tasks that we spend very little time connecting with our inner selves and evaluating our own assumptions and feelings about life in general. Most people tend to take their personal opinions and viewpoints of the world for granted and fail to check in with themselves every so often to see if beliefs established decades ago are still valid. As a

coach, I plan to assign journal-writing homework that will compel my clients to take time to reflect upon and connect with an experience or a disorienting dilemma. By providing an opportunity during our session to discuss thoughts that came up as part of that journaling assignment, I can use the exercise to ask reframing questions about their situation to help open their minds to other points of view and allow them to question their own assumptions. The act of journaling will force my clients to carve out space and allow them to connect with themselves emotionally, letting their thoughts flow from the unconscious to see what images, memories and, ultimately, realizations or conclusions come about. I will weave this type of activity into a more structured coaching process by taking ten or fifteen minutes at the end of each coaching meeting as an opportunity to discuss their journaling experience.

Last, I will encourage my clients, when appropriate, to look critically at their current work situations and determine whether any dynamics at play in the workplace are essentially mirroring relationships from their pasts. Oftentimes people can unconsciously react to interpersonal conflict out of habit through the utilization of old thought patterns and opinions. For example, if your boss reminds you of your father, you may unconsciously let what happened between you and your father as a child play into how you react to your boss. I will help clients realize that they have the choice to reframe their beliefs in favor of bringing about positive outcomes. It is in these moments that people find freedom from a disorienting dilemma and can move beyond painful memories of the past.

I am critical of only one area of adult transformational learning theory: its lack of structure and formalized assessment tools. Apart from journaling, I would find it difficult to use this theory in coaching except when framing my own questions to my client to help them see a situation differently. Furthermore, while transformational learning theory discusses learning from others in order to change one's frames of reference, the theory does not take into consideration the unconscious forces of the organization or system in which the individual

exists. I feel the theory leaves little room for context-based reasoning on the part of the coach. Nonetheless, it is extremely important for adults to understand how we learn and the need to consider our habits of mind as a way to broaden our understanding.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence theory stems from branches of behavioral and communications theory and grew from the belief not only that intelligence includes cognitive aspects, such as memory and problem solving, but also that there exist a multitude of intelligences, quite independent of one another. In addition, this theory holds that, “intelligence is the aggregate or global capacity of the individual to act purposefully, to think rationally, and to deal effectively with his environment” (Wechsler, 1944, p. 3). While the idea of multiple intelligences and social intelligence has been discussed and refined by the psychology community since the 1920s, it was not until the late 1980s that Salovey and Mayer (1990) clearly defined, studied, and measured the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) and created the cornerstone four-branch model for EI.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined EI as “the subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and actions” (p. 189). Their model consists of four areas of development necessary to enable an individual to understand and express their own emotions, to recognize the emotions of others, and to regulate and adapt appropriate behaviors to affect their environment and relationships with others. In *Emotional Intelligence in Practice*, Salovey, Caruso and Mayer (2004) describe the four-branch model comprised of: perceiving emotions; using emotions to facilitate thoughts; understanding emotions; and managing emotions (p. 448). Perceiving emotions is the capacity to identify emotions accurately. It can be achieved through awareness of physical changes that accompany those emotions, such as blushing, heart racing, and sweaty palms. Using emotions to facilitate

thoughts is redirecting and prioritizing thinking based on associated feelings. It is the ability to use your emotions to promote and facilitate problem solving and creativity in a positive way. Understanding emotions is the ability to find messages within emotions, to identify complex emotional blends, and to notice how and when emotions and feelings progress or transition. Finally, managing emotions is the ability to monitor and reflect upon emotions in oneself and others. It is the capacity to estimate the effectiveness of possible outcomes based on the actions taken once an emotion occurs.

Since the development of the four-branch model, the theory has been further expanded. There is now a four-quadrant concept of EI that is comprised of two types of competencies necessary for achievement in this realm. These competency concepts refer to the idea of developing personal competence in EI through self-awareness and self-regulation, and social competence through social awareness and social influence or relationship management (Kunnamatt, 2008). The importance of emotional intelligence has gained wide acceptance in the workplace and is extensively used by consultants to measure, predict, and enhance performance by leaders. While some may believe that this highly monetized and seemingly trendy concept has been diluted and fed to the masses, there are still many researchers who continue to study and observe the competencies of emotional intelligence and provide empirical data surrounding this theory.

EI in Practice

Executive coaches must understand the links between successful leaders and managers in the workplace and their levels of emotional intelligence. George (2000) points out the following:

Studies have shown that leaders who are high on emotional intelligence may instill in their organizations a sense of enthusiasm, excitement, and optimism as well as an atmosphere of cooperation and

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trust through their being able to develop high quality interpersonal relationships with their followers (p. 1042).

Emotional intelligence theory incorporates two of my four themes: the use of self as tool (by the client), and the development of an optimistic perspective by reframing one's thinking. It is essential for me, in both my personal and coaching roles, to possess the competencies of EI. Being aware of one's own strengths and limitations and remaining open to feedback are important for anyone seeking meaningful and authentic relationships.

I have been working on the area of self-regulation. As a mother, wife, community member, student, consultant, and soon-to-be-new-mom again, I constantly need to exercise my adaptability and flexibility muscles, tenets of this area of emotional intelligence. A recent bed rest experience forced me to look at my situation and find alternative approaches to achieving my goals and completing daily tasks while remaining calm and free of stress. Similarly, as a coach, it is imperative that I remain flexible and adaptable as well as develop organizational and political awareness (fourth quadrant of emotional intelligence) in order to navigate alongside my client through the facets of their organization.

I intend to use EI self assessment tools with my clients when I believe that bolstering their competency in this area would make them a more effective leader. Part of the process would consist of encouraging my client to maintain an optimistic approach to their own learning, the second important theme I value in emotional intelligence theory. This can be achieved throughout the coaching process by asking the client to recognize their strengths in specific competency areas. Part of their assessment will be to discuss scenarios where they demonstrated appropriate self-awareness or relationship management, for example. I believe starting from a place of self-appreciation will open the doors for communication and support efforts to reduce limitations.

Cognitive Behavioral Theory

Cognitive Behavioral Theory (CBT) integrates action and thinking. Behavior theory argues that learning occurs through an observable association between a stimulus and a response. The most well-known behavioral theorist, BF Skinner, described reinforced or operant conditioning, which is the process of behavior modification when the behavior is a result of a consequence. Cognitive theory describes the importance of the thinking and choice in determining behaviors including our perception of the meaning of events. Cognitive theory was pioneered by Albert Ellis, who subsequently developed Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) (Anderson, cited in Ducharme, 2004, p. 214). REBT explains how thoughts, oftentimes maladaptive and irrational thoughts, can be understood as causes of mental and physical illness. The key to becoming "better" is to change one's belief system.

Ellis created the ABC theory of personality, which is the concept of an antecedent or an activating (A) event, a behavior (B) that occurs from that event, and finally the consequence (C) of that event. If you can understand your thoughts about the event, then you can change your behaviors and therefore the consequences that come about due to your future behaviors. As aspiring coaches, we can question our clients about their beliefs about an event so they may become aware of irrational thoughts that could be contributory factors to engaging in unhelpful behaviors.

Beck combined behavioral theory with cognitive theory in the late 1960s, creating the bases for what we now understand to be CBT and its role in coaching. Beck looked at three specific levels of consciousness when developing problem solving techniques for CBT: full consciousness, which is defined as the place where rational decisions are made; automatic thoughts, which are "private cognitions that flow rapidly in the stream of everyday thinking and may not be carefully assessed for accuracy or relevance" (Clark, Beck, & Alford, cited in

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Wright, 2006, p. 174), and schemas or core beliefs, which are our deepest level of cognition, the shadows that are formed by lifelong experiences. As coaches, “by helping clients to recognize their idiosyncratic styles of problem-perpetuating thinking and using reason and reality-testing to modify them, they [can] learn to think about their thinking (known as metacognition) in more helpful, balanced and adaptive ways” (Neenan, 2008, p. 4).

CBT in Practice

CBT and its approaches to therapy have been widely adopted in the coaching field wherein clients are encouraged to identify and re-evaluate self-defeating thoughts and engage in more effective ways of thinking, and therefore behaving (McMahon, 2007). The techniques used in cognitive behavioral coaching (CBC) are rooted in the concept of guided discovery through client-driven analyses of their situation with the help of Socratic questioning by the coach. Coaching in this area is more issue-focused and examines a specific event and developmental need of the client (Ducharme, 2004). Once the critical activating event or situation that is causing the client’s distress has been identified, it is important to use cognitive restructuring to replace negative or maladaptive thoughts with positive ones. Another key aspect of CBC is the assignment to the client of homework that will keep them engaged and encourages ownership of the process. CBC can induce demonstrable behavior change through objective-setting and homework that must be completed by the client through self-observation, self-reinforcement, and self-maintenance.

CBT demonstrates one of my themes very clearly: an identifiable behavioral outcome or measurable change. As part of the objectives-setting discussions with my clients, I will incorporate the use of Socratic questioning, the act of asking a “series of open-ended questions to help promote reflection” (Neenan, 2009, p. 249) or a way to probe thinking at a deeper level about events and behaviors. This allows the client to get to the core, the fuel behind their choices, which is also known as the critical “A.”

This “A,” based on Ellis’ “ABC” theory of personality (A being the activating event) and its critical component is the “client’s subjective account of the most troubling aspect of the situation [or activating event]” (Neenan, 2008, p. 6). Getting to the heart of what a client perceives to be a negative situation initiates the process of changing maladaptive beliefs and thus changing behaviors and outcomes. In addition, I will always offer ways to go deeper and maintain the momentum of our work by assigning homework that will emphasize and elaborate upon the changes we are fostering.

Not long ago, I was able, by using CBT, to help a friend after she was diagnosed with high cholesterol. She found herself powerless to make the necessary behavioral changes in diet and exercise, even though she knew logically they were important. I used Socratic questioning to engineer a discussion about her maladaptive beliefs about people who have high cholesterol. We finally identified the critical “A:” confronting the diagnosis would mean admitting she was old. Through research and talking with her peers, we worked on reshaping her mistaken assumptions about age, physical appearance, and life expectancy of other people with high cholesterol until she realized that her beliefs were unfounded. We finished with her affirming her will to live and agreeing that changing her diet would be not only imperative but also empowering.

Positive Psychology

Positive psychology is rooted in humanistic theory and was born out of the practice of focusing heavily on mental illness and what was unwell about people. Post World War II society had to contend with veterans with mental health issues, and psychologists during that era discovered that funding was more readily available to study that particular population. It was not until former president of the American Psychological Association, Martin Seligman, urged his colleagues to expand the field to include what is right with people that the theory of positive psychology was established. Seligman wanted “psychopathology investigations and treatment to include the study of

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excellence and the science of human happiness” (Seligman, cited in Foster and Lloyd, 2007, p. 30). Since the 1990s, positive psychology theory has continued to develop as people recognize the “imbalance in clinical psychology, in which most research does indeed focus on mental illness” (Gable and Haidt, 2005, p. 104). Key concepts oftentimes overlooked when we study only illness in patients and clients are the critical strengths and elements needed to prevent the illness from ever occurring.

Positive Psychology theorist, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, argues that people are at their happiest when they are involved in activities where they feel a sense of “flow.” Flow in work, leisure, or maintenance activities is when a person is interacting in the world on a level that is both challenging and involves employing a higher than usual level of skill. Due to the deepening of concentration in order to complete a task, “a person in flow not only forgets his or her problems, but loses temporarily the awareness of self that in normal life often intrudes in consciousness, and causes psychic energy to be diverted from what needs to be done” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988, p. 33).

Positive Psychology Theory in Practice

I realized that in order to avoid depression, anxiety, and feelings of isolation while on bed rest, it was imperative to engage in activities that promote a sense of flow, and therefore happiness, in my life. I refrained from watching any television or reading leisure magazines during the day, as I knew those activities did not require enough skill or challenge for me to feel fulfilled. Instead, I chose to refocus and complete mini research assignments and I took on additional work for my group presentation on emotional intelligence and found that the hours passed much more quickly than expected.

The “VIA” Survey of Character Strengths (“Via Signature Strengths,” n.d.) is one of the hands-on exercises we utilized in the classroom as part of our study of positive psychology. The survey is designed to identify

one’s top signature strengths out of twenty-four virtues and character strengths that are found across cultures. More specifically, the survey is a 240-item, self-report questionnaire using a five-point Likert scale to measure the degree of endorsement of each statement as it relates to the respondent. What I found so powerful about this instrument was the way in which it initiated conversations centered on what people are proud of in terms of their strengths. I intend to have my-clients take the “VIA Survey” assessment as a way to start the conversation about self-awareness and self-appreciation. I find it interesting and ironic that while I know my own children respond better to positive reinforcement rather than negativity or constructive criticism, it took this assignment to realize that adults respond in similar fashion. What appears so transformative about this theory is the idea that only a short discussion about a person’s strengths and asking them to discuss times when they employed such strengths can completely change the way they feel about themselves and put a spring in their step for the rest of the day! I felt the energy in our classroom change once we split into groups to discuss our VIA survey results as people began to recognize the importance and empowering nature of telling the world what they do. I also noticed the interconnectedness and emotions evoked in those listening to their colleague describe their strengths. It was an enriching and positive experience that I plan to replicate with my friends, family and clients.

The Five Theories at Work

Many concepts from these five theories were used recently when I assisted a client to navigate the process of being admitted to a graduate program. In addition to writing an application, my client was requested to appear before an admissions panel to convince them that she deserved a spot in their program. We discussed how, in order to overcome her anxiety, it was essential for her to employ self-awareness, recognizing how she was coming across to the panel and which behaviors would be more effective in this particular situation - concepts of emotional intelligence. She showed

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enormous courage in not allowing her nervousness to take over under the stress of the event. Once she had control of her emotions through techniques such as taking a deep breath, shaking out her arms, and holding her hands close to her body, she was able to hear her automatic thoughts, discussed as part of CBT, that were causing her to think irrationally, or “awfulizing” her situation. By calling on the concepts of cognitive behavior theory such as the recognition of those irrational thoughts and their role in creating nervousness, she was able to change her behavior and get to the critical “A.” In this case, her critical “A” was her subjective belief that the panel of admissions judges felt she was not smart enough or good enough to even be applying to the program. This irrational belief (as it turned out, she possessed all the requirements for admission) caused her to doubt herself and her abilities.

As her coach, I observed that supplying my client encouraging words and positively reinforcing her effective and valuable actions in this situation was clearly part of positive psychology theory. Her subsequent affirmation of the significance of the coach’s role in the process strengthened my belief in the power of positive psychology in coaching. After presenting her intellectual, fact-based, logical argument for acceptance, she finally shouted, “Why NOT me?” I knew in that moment she had reframed the experience. In earlier discussions she shared with me her previous patterns of self doubt and fear of authority, which typically caused her to back down. This time, given her ability to change her habitual thoughts, she had a transformative moment when she pressed “stop” on the unhelpful tape playing in her head. She made a conscious choice to change her behavior and therefore change the outcome. This new self assurance allowed her to proceed with conviction of her own abilities without letting fear and anxiety dictate her behavior. Further analysis of this experience sheds light on the impact one person can have on others involved. The way in which she chose to interpret her role in the experience relates to Levinson’s contribution to organizational theory described earlier. Understanding that every person in that room was influenced by the conscious and

unconscious forces at play as related to her individual role in the admissions process lent itself to the belief that by watching her experience, we are all forever changed in ways we may not ever realize. Not only was she able to modify her own behavior, but also she created a favorable outcome and deeply meaningful experience for those watching her reframe and transform. I will take the memory of this experience with me the next time I am confronted with a similar situation and remember that we all possess the power of choice. It is the knowledge of this power that builds strength in conviction.

Recipe for a Coaching Model

How do these theories relate to my Mom-Mom Sibby’s cooking? I can now fully appreciate her complexity, her passion, and her brilliance. Through the lens of my DYNM 722 course and an analysis of the five theories, I see how her cooking and teaching style is drenched in a mixture of both tradition and an appreciation for the present. I understand why it is equally important to have a grounded knowledge of theory as well as the ability to employ the self as a tool in the moment. Such an approach allows one to absorb the environment, the players, and the dynamics that interconnect these two elements, and adapt appropriately and meaningfully to each unique situation. My grandmother’s technique has also taught me that my role as a coach is that of asking open-ended questions and listening in order to absorb and empathize rather than solve and pontificate. She demonstrates, through her own questioning, the art of distilling information to capture the essential data needed to understand context. Finally, her ability to create a fabulous new meal from leftovers rather than giving up and ordering pizza shows how optimism and the power of choice are critically important in coaching. It seems only rational that if we spent our time creating positive outcomes using the resources we already possess from our individual and unique combination of strengths as opposed to using that energy to

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worry and agonize with such intensity as we tend to do over the negatives, we could experience a better state of being.

As I progress through the Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching program, my goal is to develop a coaching model that is both a flexible and grounded construct, integrating the external and internal influences occurring inside the organization, the client and the coach, allowing me to create a specific action plan tailored for each individual coaching encounter. One of the best ways I can continue to prepare myself for the role as an authentic and dynamic coach is to prioritize working on myself; to evolve continually in my own reflection, and to take ownership of my strengths and recognize limitations. I must live through my own belief system as illuminated by my analysis of major themes and theories that

inform coaching and consulting before I can guide others down the path on their own journey. So next time my grandmother tells me to add a hint more of this or a pinch more of that, I know that while it may feel unstructured or even counterintuitive, there is essential meaning and data that went into her request and *that* specific alteration may very well lie at the heart of turning a good meal into a spectacular one! Once one has achieved this, a recipe becomes more than just a list of prescribed tasks in the kitchen and a coaching engagement is elevated to an intricately woven dance combining arranged choreography and intuitive, insightful improvisation.

“We don’t see things as they are; we see them as we are.” ~ Anais Nin

Erica Gloss is a candidate for the degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics. An earlier version of this paper was written in partial fulfillment of the requirements of DYNM 722: *Making Meaning from Experience and Establishing Frameworks*, taught by Ruth Orenstein, Psy.D. Erica can be reached at ericagloss@gmail.com.

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