

Point of View

# The challenges of cross-cultural coaching: recent experiences and observations

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This article is a summary of our reflections from a wide range of cross-cultural coaching experiences which we have encountered both in our own executive coaching practices, but also as tutors on the Professional Certificate in Coaching and MSc in Coaching & Behavioural Change. In all these situations, we are gathering information not only from one-to-one cross-cultural coaching relationships, but also in working with groups of developing coaches from different cultures and whole groups of a specific culture.

Our reference points for this article are specifically a coaching programme recently run in Singapore, including Singaporeans, German and Canadian participants, a bespoke coaching programme run for an international pharmaceutical organisation involving 9 different European nationalities, programmes in South Africa, Greece, New Zealand and Denmark and many open enrolment programmes run at Henley with individual participants from all over the world.

We are using the term 'culture' here to primarily refer to nationality. With this, comes a whole range of beliefs and behavioural norms for individuals, but also in our context of business coaching, norms for organisational behaviour and the cultural norms of the country itself.

We have found that it is very important to have a clear understanding and appreciation of these higher level contexts within which an individual coachee is operating in order to be able to coach in the most effective and sustainable way. An individual may have the ability to be hugely flexible about changing their behaviour to achieve specific goals through working with their coach, but the changes need to be sustainable at the systemic level, once they are back in their 'real world'.

Before going on to look at our break-down of the key challenges of cross-cultural coaching, we would like to put forward a few more thoughts and observations which inform this break-down:

One of the main challenges facing tutors on any coaching programme is the definition of the subject. People in the UK come to coaching programmes with their own understanding of what coaching is and often comment that they are very surprised to find that there are as many definitions as there are delegates in the room! When you add cultural differences into the mix, it is very obvious that exploring definitions and expectations is an important place to start your engagement with 'coaching'.

Despite numerous books and articles on coaching being available in the market place, we consistently find that many people come on to our coaching programmes with a generalised version of coaching which is far more in line with mentoring. This is also a prevalent view of coaching in a number of different cultures – we have recently experienced this, for example, when working with the Singaporean coaches.

Some cultures have a mentoring philosophy, which is based upon cultural wisdom. This is the wisdom of sharing knowledge and experience, often passed down from generation to generation, older to younger, respectfully and with honest, paternalistic intent. It is quite normal in many Middle/Far Eastern societies for the old and experienced to mentor and guide the young and inexperienced. Passing on knowledge and wisdom is seen as a duty.

Many organisations in the UK and the northern hemisphere have adopted coaching and mentoring programmes, but here seniority and age are not

necessarily criteria for qualifying as either. Where coaches from the UK and the northern hemisphere are looking at engaging in coaching relationships with coachees from the Middle/Far East, this element needs acknowledging and exploring as part of the initial discussions. It has proved essential to establish a clear understanding of the expectations of the coaching relationship up front and that the prospective coachee (and their organisation) is comfortable with this. This is obviously particularly the case if younger coaches are being proposed for older, or more senior, coachees.

This tussle with the definition of coaching as being different and separate to mentoring, and being willing and able to coach accordingly, is one which seems to be universal to coaching, and not specific to any particular culture. However, it does seem to be more deeply entrenched in certain cultures, and therefore is the one area we feel is important to highlight here. Coaching is positioned as a process by which the coach enables the coachee to find their own solutions to their issues. Mentoring is about using your knowledge and experience to give your mentee your ideas about what might work for them.

The key question that coaches ask themselves when teasing out the difference between the two activities is 'How do I put aside all my experience, age and knowledge and NOT tell people what they should or shouldn't do, when I KNOW. Don't I have a moral obligation to do this? Isn't this where my value to them lies?'

We have found that it takes a focused piece of personal development to explore this issue for yourself as a coach, and to become confident that the other things a coach can do for a coachee are equally important, maybe more so, and above all, different. This can involve developing a solid understanding and expertise in the coaching process, rather than relying on your initial personal resources and experience. If the expectation of a more mentoring purpose for a coaching session is in place from a cultural perspective, it is vital that this assumption is surfaced, explored and resolved before the coaching work starts for real.

As we see it, the challenges of cross-cultural coaching can be broken down into the following areas:

- **The need for the coach to have a very clear understanding of their own culture, and how this could play out in a coaching relationship**

All coaching relationships are a dynamic relationship between two people. As the coach, it is your responsibility to manage your own state, so that whatever is going on for you in terms of your responses to the coachee, this doesn't get in the way of the coachee achieving what they want. It is important, therefore, for the coach to have a sufficient level of self-awareness around their own cultural issues so that they don't get caught out with an inappropriate instinctive response to something the coachee says or does.

- **The need for the coachee to be willing to explore their coaching issues in relationship to any cultural issues which are part of the bigger system**

The coach needs to take responsibility for drawing the coachee's attention to the bigger picture in which they operate. It can also be useful to remember that the coachee will always be the expert on their own culture, not you – so it's perfectly ok to ask for information. It is then the coach's job to help the coachee make the connections between what they want from the coaching and how the cultural aspects of their context need to be accommodated.

## Dr Patricia Bossons



Patricia Bossons is the Director of the Henley Centre for Coaching and Facilitation. She started the coaching activities at Henley in 2004, and is now Programme Director for the MSc in Coaching and Behavioural Change, and the Professional Certificate in Coaching. She is also the Subject Area Leader for Coaching. Patricia is a Chartered Psychologist by background, and works extensively in the Executive Education area of the Business School, both in the UK and internationally. Her latest interest is in taking the coaching initiatives developed at Henley into other cultures and in developing an active research base around coaching. She holds a PhD in Personality and Learning Styles, and runs an annual Coaching Conference at Henley.

- **Developing a coaching environment where different perspectives from different cultural insights becomes useful and informative, rather than provocative and confrontational**

This is about how the coach sets up the relationship at the outset, by acknowledging any cultural differences, and contracting with the coachee to use these as sources of information, rather than competition around which set of beliefs is the 'right' one. The coach needs to genuinely believe that the coachee would not be better off seeing things from the coach's own cultural perspective, and that there isn't a hidden coach's agenda.

- **The paramount importance of building the coaching relationship and establishing rapport**

If the relationship is solid, everything else can be managed. The coach can help with this by checking out their own intent towards the coachee, especially in relation to the previous point. Mutual respect for differences is highlighted in the cross-cultural coaching arena, even more obviously than in same-culture coaching relationships.

- **The importance of contracting around the whole of the coaching work**

All of the above points can be acknowledged and explored before being summarised by the coach and coachee as part of their initial contracting around the coaching work. This then gives a point of reference, and permission to re-visit it, if things get complicated later on.

- **The importance for the coach of being in supervision with an experienced cross-cultural coaching supervisor**

As a coach, there is only so much you can prepare for and anticipate. Cross-cultural coaching can be a rich mine-field of potential challenging moments. To stay resourceful as a coach, and thus of maximum value to your coachee, it is essential to be able to share any experiences which have you confused, unsettled, puzzled, or any of the other emotions that a coach can start to carry around with them. Coaching supervision is the place to take these things, and a supervisor with cross-cultural experience can be particularly useful in these situations. It is worth noting, however, that it is coaching supervision you are looking for, not cross-cultural mentoring from someone with experience of the particular culture you are working with. That might be helpful as well, but it is not the same thing.

Our experience of high calibre business men and women training as coaches in Singapore, for example, has been highly rewarding and educational for us as tutors because of the way in which people have been able to adopt the universal benefits of a robust and cross-culturally useable model of coaching. The model itself is transportable into any culture, but the tutors' awareness of the cultures involved has shown itself to be of paramount importance.

## Point of View

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