

Coaching to the Human Soul

Ontological Coaching and Deep Change

Volume I: The Linguistic Basis of Ontological Coaching

By Alan Sieler

Introduction

Becoming a profession

As a new field of human service, coaching (in the form of Organisational Coaching and Life Coaching) faces the challenge of establishing itself as a fully-fledged profession. Like other professional practitioners, as well as providing service that is valuable and beneficial, it is important for coaches to be able to demonstrate that their practice is informed by a methodology with a robust theoretical basis.

According to an ancient Chinese expression, “Theory without practice is foolish; practice without theory is dangerous”. In the absence of sound theory and practice, there is a risk that coaching could be marginalised and trivialised, and it will be seen as a fad, which anyone can do by attaching the label “coach” to themselves. If this happens, it will be a huge blow to the potential of coaching to make the world a better place by enriching people’s personal and professional lives. This book is designed to advance the cause of coaching by introducing a particular approach to coaching, called Ontological Coaching, which has a substantive and readily applicable theoretical framework.

The basis of this framework is *a new practical understanding of human beings and human interaction*. This understanding is built around two key questions: “What is it to be a human being?” and “What does it mean to live and work well?” These are no longer questions for philosophers in ivory towers. They are questions that now touch every part of our lives, in times in which the speed of change and the pace of life seem to be accelerating and show no signs of abating. All too often, our experience of daily life can be one of uncertainty and confusion and, at times, bewildering complexity. The net result can be that in our attempts to cope we find ourselves living and working in a manner that is less than we desire. Somehow, the quality of our existence seems to be significantly compromised.

It is believed that we are at a major transition point in the history of Western civilisation, characterised by continually rapid changes in technology, values and key social institutions, which can have a deeply unsettling, even turbulent, impact on how we live and relate. This profound historical shift *demands fundamentally different ways of thinking and perceiving*. New ideas based on old ways of thinking are not new ideas.

Recycling old ideas and dressing them up in new ways will not work. The very question of what constitutes thinking is now “up for grabs”. A substantial shift in thinking is required to effectively navigate the recurrently turbulent waters of everyday living.

Ontological Coaching offers a different way of thinking and perceiving. This approach to coaching provides a basis for generating substantial positive shifts in how we live and relate in our personal and professional lives. In short, the theory and methodology of Ontological Coaching is not only a basis for effective action, but also for building a more meaningful life.

A new discipline for coaching

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the integration of significant developments in the fields of philosophy and biology produced a new discipline. As a substantive and coherent body of knowledge, this discipline provides a new understanding of human beings and human interaction, which is relevant and applicable to everyday living, working, learning ... and coaching. The general name for this discipline is *Ontology*. More specifically, it has been named *Ontology of the Human Observer*. The resultant coaching methodology and coaching practice is *Ontological Coaching*, which is equally applicable to Organisational Coaching and Life Coaching.

Ontology is the study of being, and is an inquiry into the nature of human existence. This especially includes a concern for the quality of our existence, much of which is the quality of co-existence in our everyday personal and professional dealings with each other. According to Vaclav Havel, former President of Czechoslovakia, “man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being”.¹ If this is the case, it is increasingly urgent that *our being become a major focus of learning*, so that we may feel more connected with our individual selves, each other and the environment.

Learning about our being is *ontological learning*. Ontological Coaching provides an avenue for connecting the relevance of our being to everyday living, working and learning. In a world of accelerating change, and increasing uncertainty, turbulence and confusion, questions about the quality of our individual existence and our co-existence can no longer be taken for granted. These questions encompass major existential issues of meaning, fulfilment, happiness and worthiness in our personal and professional lives. They touch on our deep concerns about relationships, and how to think, act and live together more productively and harmoniously. *These are issues of the human soul and this is the territory of Ontological Coaching.*

The human soul and organisational success

Issues of the human soul are not just “touchy-feely” issues dealing with the “soft side” of life. They are also issues that go to the heart of how well our organisations are functioning, and core concerns of performance, productivity and competitive success. There is a sharp edge to the so-called soft side of business, for when morale is low, there are poor relationships, communication breakdowns, and minimal enjoyment of work, organisational performance suffers, and long-term viability in the marketplace is threatened.

The human soul is the hidden side of business. Coaching to the human soul is about supporting people to be at their best in living, learning and working. Coaching to the human soul makes good business sense, for when people are at their best organisations benefit from their enhanced performance, productivity and creativity.

Ontological Coaching provides a robust theoretical and practical framework for dealing with the inevitable intersection of organisational and personal concerns. As a new way of thinking, it provides fresh ways of viewing problematic circumstances, generating innovative thinking and the production of effective strategies and practices.

Thoughtful organisational leaders are hungry for a new paradigm that will enable their organisations to flourish in the complexity of a rapidly evolving global culture. They are searching for something beyond conventional understanding. They want learning that will produce deep and sustainable change, which includes the necessity for *recurrent adaptiveness* in an increasingly unpredictable and competitive environment.

While important, major changes in systems, structures and strategies are insufficient in themselves. Attention to the inevitable role of people in the successful implementation of change is necessary. It is now widely recognised and accepted that the traditional concerns of business – performance, productivity, profit and competitive success - can no longer be divorced from human behaviour. However, *it is no longer sufficient to just focus on behaviour.* A deeper understanding of humans, and how this affects organisational concerns, is required. A more profound understanding of the drivers of human behaviour is sought after.

Thoughtful leaders are beginning to recognise the wisdom of what W. Edwards Demming said half a century ago: “Nothing changes without personal transformation”. Change is no longer just “out there” in the form of different strategies and work practices. Most importantly, it is “in here”. Deep change that generates ongoing adaptiveness is a phenomenon with *exterior and interior dimensions.*

A deeper practical understanding of human behaviour can be reached through paying attention to our being, or more specifically, our “way of being”. This can be thought of as our “inner behaviour”, which shapes our “outer behaviour”, and our effectiveness in the art of living and working well. *Way of being is the underlying determinant of communicative competence and behavioural effectiveness, and a source of deep change.* Ontological Coaching provides a precise approach for understanding and shifting “inner behaviour”, and is a powerful source of organisational transformation.

Outline of Volume I

This is the first of three books on an ontological approach to coaching. It is important to emphasise that these are not “how to” books, full of tips and techniques that can be read and applied like a recipe. You will not find “The ten best ways to ...” or “The five most important things ...” in these books. Coaching is not a mechanical process that can be done from a “cookbook”. Nevertheless, if you have not already had practical engagement with Ontological Coaching these books will enable you to begin to relate key principles and concepts to your everyday living, working and learning, as well as

gain an initial sensitivity to their coaching applications. If you are an accredited Ontological Coach, the books will consolidate and, in all likelihood, provide a basis for further learning.

Volume I covers the unique and powerful approach to language that is central to Ontological Coaching. Volume II, titled *Emotional Learning and Ontological Coaching* focuses on the crucial role of emotions for the development of professional competence in coaching. Book III, *Ontological Coaching as Artistry*, will explore a range of key considerations for effective in-depth engagement with coaching clients.

In this book, the linguistic underpinning of Ontological Coaching is explored in detail. The first three chapters set the scene for the approach to language that is one of the hallmarks of Ontological Coaching. In Chapter 1, the basic coaching model, and the essence of the coaching methodology, are outlined. Chapter 2 takes this further to develop a model of learning, and the concept of second order learning, that contains *the potential to bring about profound shifts in how people can live richer, fuller and more deeply meaningful lives* – individually and collectively. Chapter 3 is an invitation to step back, and look from a major historical perspective at the increasing relevance of an ontological approach to learning and coaching for coping with rapid change that is not likely to abate. Chapters 4-12 then provide specifics of a new understanding of language that is a distinguishing feature of Ontological Coaching. These chapters show how language can be used as a powerful technology for enhancing the quality of our individual and collective existence. The utilisation of specific linguistic tools opens new doors of possibility for more meaningful living.

Apart from Chapters 6 and 12, each chapter and Appendix A has examples of *Ontological Coaching in action*.² While it is difficult to capture the entirety of a coaching conversation in the written word, each example serves to demonstrate the application of specific aspects of the coaching methodology. In addition to the coaching examples, Chapters 3-11 also contain sets of questions that invite you to apply the relevance of what is being covered to your personal and professional life. These questions are formatted as “Reflective Activities” and “Self-Coaching Exercises”. Exploring your responses to these questions will enable you to build a first-hand appreciation of the relevance of Ontological Coaching for living, learning, working and coaching.

Welcome to Volume I, *The Linguistic Basis of Ontological Coaching*.

Notes

¹ Vaclav Havel, “The Search for Meaning in a Global Civilisation” in Walter Truett Anderson (ed), *The Truth about The Truth*. p. 234.

² These are reports of actual coaching conversations. Names, and occasionally circumstances, have been changed to ensure anonymity.

Excerpts from Chapter 12

Ontological Coaching, Language and the Human Soul

A generative interpretation of language

In this first of three volumes on Ontological Coaching the focus has been on the utilisation of language to facilitate profound learning and deep change. We have seen how language is one of three core domains of human existence. We have also seen that Ontological Coaching utilises a generative interpretation of language. According to this interpretation, language is seen to do much more than just describe reality; language is the fundamental means by which humans generate reality. This is a distinguishing feature of Ontological Coaching, and constitutes part of its robust theoretical basis. We have covered the specifics of a generative interpretation of language, and their relevance to everyday living and working, as well as demonstrating their coaching applications.

How we observe and interact with the world is very much shaped by our languaging. A practical understanding of the generative nature of language positions us to be able to *observe The Observer*, ie, to observe the linguistic process of how we observe. This takes us into the territory of Second-Order Learning, which is at the heart of Ontological Coaching.

Ontological Coaching, Second-Order Learning and deep change

Ontological Coaching provides a unique approach to learning and coaching. Ontology is the study of being, and can be regarded as an inquiry into the nature of human existence. The basis of Ontological Coaching is ontological learning, which means focusing on Way of Being as an avenue to enhance well-being and quality of existence. Our time in history, when the interrelated issues of (i) our well-being, (ii) ontological security, (iii) adaptive resilience and (iv) the nourishment and enrichment of the human soul have become more prominent, mean that ontological learning has become increasingly relevant.

Coaching to Way of Being is the hallmark of Ontological Coaching. We have seen that Way of Being is regarded as a dynamic interrelationship between three spheres of human existence – *language, emotions and body*. We have also seen that Way of Being is regarded as the underlying driver of communication and behaviour. The quality of our behaviour shapes many of the outcomes we experience in life, and our outcomes or results are not just financial and material, they are also emotional, physiological and spiritual. Ontological Coaching supports people to experience shifts in their Way of Being

as an avenue to more effective behaviour and communication, and an enhancement of the quality of personal and professional life.

An ontological coach can facilitate profound and positive learning through ontological shifts, ie, shifts in a coachee's Way of Being. This requires new learning, and change, to occur in all three ontological domains of language, emotions and body. When this occurs a coachee becomes *a more powerful observer*,³ able to view himself or herself more constructively, enhance relationships, and see new possibilities and opportunities that previously were not available. In short, there is an expansion of how people can participate and engage with the world. This is the essence of Second-Order Learning.

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From the opening chapter you will recall Peter Senge's thoughts on learning. "Real learning means getting to the heart of what it is to be human. Through real learning we continually re-create ourselves."⁴ This is the fundamental offer of Ontological Coaching – to open-up powerful new areas of learning that produce deep change, enabling people to function more effectively and creatively, and indeed to thrive, in the midst of a turbulent world.

By facilitating shifts in Way of Being and observing, ontological coaches enable people not only to deal with the unsatisfactory circumstances that originally brought them to coaching. They can become different observers of themselves and of possibilities in life beyond the issues explored in coaching conversations. They are able to repeatedly observe and shift their own Way of Being, and be better positioned to deal with inevitable vicissitudes of life that are part of being human. The generative nature of Second-Order Learning enables people to re-create or re-invent themselves as observers.

The human soul

..... To be human is to live in meaning, and the soul is fundamentally about meaning. Meaning is reality, and this is the reality we live in as an observer. Repeating Thomas Moore's view of the soul from the opening chapter, the human soul "has to do with *depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance*. (italics added).⁵

From an ontological perspective, the soul is seen as being at the intersection of the three key ontological spheres of our existence – language, emotions and body. To be human is to seek continual enrichment and nourishment of the soul. In a fast changing world, in which previously stable frameworks of meaning continue to crumble and are not being replaced, we are faced with a crucial existential issue of building individual and collective meaning for ourselves.

Language and the human soul

To be human is to be a languaging being. In a generative interpretation of language, we can see that we generate reality and build meaning through language, which includes getting things done and impacting on the world. Humans are born into and exist in

language. How we live in language has much to do with the quality of our existence, yet we can be largely blind to the pivotal role language plays in:

1. how we individually and collectively observe the world;
2. the formation of reality;
3. the generation of meaning;
4. the effectiveness of our behaviour and communication; and
5. our happiness and well-being .

In a new understanding of language we have the opportunity to understand and to utilise *the subtle power of language* to accomplish all of the above. When we can see this, and appreciate the specifics of this extraordinary process, we have the possibility to utilise a fundamental aspect of human existence to shape the sort of world we live in. How we are in language has much to do with how we are in life. Yet, much of how we are in language can be hidden from us.

Ontological Coaching and the human soul

Using the distinctions covered in Chapters 4 -11, an ontological coach can respectfully touch the soul of the coachee, and be a catalyst for profound learning and deep positive change. The coach can enable the coachee to be an observer of how much of the quality of their existence is constituted in language.

The coach can support the coachee to become an observer of how their use of language has not worked for them – how it has been producing an inner reality that has compromised their well-being, their effectiveness and the quality of their existence. Crucial aspects of the inner reality of the coachee are: what deeply matters to them, the fundamental meaning they have of themselves, and what is possible for them in life. The coachee can learn how to use language to generate shifts in their own Way of Being, opening new possibilities for effective action and an enhancement of the quality of their personal and professional relationships.

Language is powerful but insufficient

In this volume we have focused on a variety of ways the coach can work with the coachee in the ontological domain of language. We have seen how the application of the specifics of a generative interpretation of language can be a powerful leverage for coachees to experience profound learning and important shifts in how they have constituted reality, and therefore experience deep change.

However, we have seen that from an ontological perspective, it is most likely that a shift in languaging is not sufficient for deep and sustainable change. Being human is a “package deal” in the integration of language, emotions and body. All three ontological domains of language, emotions and body need to shift for deep and sustainable change to occur. Throughout the coaching examples, continual although brief reference was made to the integral role of emotions and body in the coaching process. While this volume will open up new possibilities for coaching and self-coaching, it is insufficient. There is much to be explored about the potency of the existential spheres of (i) emotions and moods and (ii) the body to provide more depth to the theory and practice of

Ontological Coaching. This is the focus of Volume II, *Emotional Learning, Body Learning and Ontological Coaching*.

Notes

³ From an ontological perspective “power” is the capacity to take effective action.

⁴ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline*. p. 14.

⁵ Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*. p. 5