

## What Relevance Does Adult Development Theory Have For Coaching? - Dr John Derry



This article discusses the relevance of knowledge about adult development to the practice of coaching. I have been inspired to write it by two papers and a recently published book by Otto Laske (2004, 2006a, 2006b), and the further reading provoked by these. I hope this brief introduction will stimulate others to learn more about adult development theory and the sound body of supporting evidence from research, and consider the very significant implications this area of work has for our practice of coaching, and how we train people to be effective coaches.

Let us hypothesise for a moment that one purpose of coaching is to help the individual move from one stage of adult development to the next. This would imply that coaches must have a good working knowledge of these stages and be able to identify the stage their client currently inhabits. It would also follow that individuals at one stage would not be able to utilise higher stages of thinking, so that a coach who is at the same developmental stage as their coachee would not be able to help them move to the next stage, and a coach at a lower stage of development than their coachee may actually impair progress. In that case, coaches would need to know their own developmental stage, to avoid coaching people at a higher stage than themselves, and to seek developmental help for themselves through coach-mentoring or supervision. This in turn suggests a new role for supervision or mentoring of established coaches, and a new way of measuring the effectiveness of coach training programmes – by assessing how much they help trainees move to higher develop-

mental stages.

In fact this is more than a casual hypothesis. This is Laske's central thesis.

Laske describes adult development as a kind of “hidden dimension”, observing that adults tend not to pay much attention to their own development, except when a personal crisis or transition prompts them to think again. He calls his approach “developmental process consultation”, adapting process consultation (Schein, 1998) by adding knowledge from research into adult development, particularly the work of Kegan (1982, 1994). Process consultation is based on the assumption that only the client knows what will really work in tackling their problems, where the job of the consultant (or coach) is to work with the client to understand their own mental processes sufficiently that the appropriate solutions are discovered. Laske argues that all forms of process consulting, including coaching, depend on understanding how the client makes meaning of their world – how the client's internal mental processes construct the external world they experience. Applying Kegan's theory of human development (Kegan, 1982), in which different stages of development can be defined by the way in which the individual makes meaning of their world, the process consultant needs to help the client understand their own stage of development and how this determines both their view and experience of the world. As mentioned above, such work is only feasible if the con-

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sultant (coach) has a thorough understanding of adult development stages, and a method for establishing both their own stage of development and the client's. So what are those stages?

In Kegan's theory there are six stages of human development, stages zero and one pertaining to childhood, and stages two to five occurring over the adolescent to adult life span (Kegan, 1982). The stages are distinguished by the extent to which the individual makes meaning of their world in terms of being an independent self and/or of wishing to be included with others around them. A teenager at stage two, for example, might only view the world from the perspective of meeting their own self needs. At stage three the focus shifts to the community or group within which the adult lives: the individual's needs are subordinate to those of the community and their image of self is framed in terms of others' needs and expectations. At stage four a new sense of self develops through increasing self-determination and self awareness, distinguishing the individual more clearly from the community and moving the focus back to the independent self. Stage five adults have shifted their focus outwards again, having a self-awareness that is both self-generated and based on how others experience them.

Kegan describes these shifts in focus in terms of a model he refers to as "subject-object relations": at each stage the individual is *subject* to that way of making meaning of the world, and uses the meaning-

making of the earlier stages *objectively*. In the transition from one stage to the next, the current way of making meaning becomes differentiated from the self's perspective and is then integrated as a way of meaning-making that can be used (as an object) by the self. The individual is then subject to this new stage of meaning-making and cannot view this frame of reference (their "centre of gravity" as it is known) objectively – it is simply the way in which their world works.

Of particular relevance to coaching is the understanding that transition from one stage to the next may be accompanied by some difficulty and disturbance of the self and its functioning, due the loss of the old stage (way of making meaning of the world) and the formation of the new. This may well be a time when coaching can help smooth the transi-

tion, and when individuals might seek coaching.

Kegan argues that only a minority of adults reach the fifth developmental stage. His research (Kegan, 1994, p195) reveals the following: in a professional, highly educated population a few individuals appear to be making meaning at stage two or are in transition to stage three; 15% are at stage three; 33% in transition between stages three and four; 40% at stage four; and only 7% in transition to stage five. In a small sample more representative of the general adult population, 36% were at stage two or in transition to stage three, 12% at stage three, 31% in transition to stage four, 18%

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at stage four and only 3% in transition to stage five. It would be very interesting to know the distribution of stages of development in the population of coaches.

Laske's suggestion that a coach cannot safely help an individual who is at a higher stage of development than their own is independently supported by Chandler and Kram (2005, p.560). This is because one is subject to one's own developmental stage, and so cannot be aware of it without external help. Our way of making meaning within each stage is just "the way the world is", and we cannot appreciate that there may be a different, higher stage view, until we start seeing glimpses of this during the transition process. This applies as much to coaches as to their clients.

So can developmental stage be measured? Laske uses a method developed by Kegan and his colleagues (the 'subject-object interview', see Lahey, *et al*, 1988) as part of his developmental process consultation, the findings being integrated with two further assessments of cognitive and behavioural development. I wonder whether this very comprehensive assessment process is practical in most coaching situations. The subject-object interview alone involves an audio-recorded semi-structured interview lasting about an hour, which is then transcribed, analysed and systematically scored, either by a group of students supervised by an experienced trainer, or by a qualified developmental process consultant. Such a comprehensive assessment at the start of each coaching assignment undoubtedly provides

a very rich understanding of the coachee's current situation and developmental needs, and the assessment and feedback process itself is likely to be developmental, but it requires a substantial investment of time and expert resources. Perhaps it is more realistic for coaches to have a full assessment of their stage of adult development during training, and as part of continuing accreditation and supervision. Indeed Laske describes the application of his conceptual framework in the programme of coach education used at the Interdevelopmental Institute, constituting what he calls evidence based coach education (Laske, 2006b).

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An interesting application of Laske's approach would be in evaluating the effectiveness of coach training programmes. Learning to practice coaching is surely significant from an adult development perspective, so it

would be instructive to measure the change in stage of adult development of participants from beginning to end of the course. This would achieve two purposes: learners would appreciate their own development and carry this awareness forward into their practice, and training providers would have an objective measure of their effectiveness in producing the changes that are associated with learning to be an evidence-based coach.

There is another approach to the application of adult development theory in coaching, using a simpler assessment tool than the subject-object interview. The Leadership Development Profile, developed by Torbert

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*et al.* (2004) is based on expert analysis of responses made in a sentence completion form. As noted by Chandler and Kram (2005, p.562), this may be more practical for routine use in many coaching situations, though it appears to be less comprehensive than the full Laske developmental assessment process.

The insights into coaching provided by adult development research and theory are

fascinating. I hope this article has introduced readers to some stimulating ideas. If you would like to discuss any issues further please contact me.

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Otto Laske's Interdevelopmentals web site is at <http://www.interdevelopmentals.org>.

For more information on the Leadership Development Profile see <http://www.harthill.co.uk>