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**The British Eclectic Model of Coaching: Towards professionalism without dogma. Hardingham, A. International Journal of Mentoring and Coaching, IV (1), (2006).**

# The British Eclectic Model of coaching: Towards professionalism without dogma

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The growth of coaching in the UK over the last ten years has been explosive (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2004). One consequence of that explosive growth has been tremendous diversity in what is offered and bought under the general heading of 'coaching'. We are making serious and necessary efforts now to 'professionalise' coaching. Two very different responses to the unplanned and largely unstructured diversity of coaching provision are evident in that process of professionalisation. One I shall call the 'elitist' or 'purist' response, which adheres to a specific approach, tightly specified and held to be superior to many others being offered. I do not mean the term 'elitist' to imply criticism; there is a lot to be said for specifying a distinctive offering in a crowded marketplace, providing buyers know enough about the alternatives to choose that specific offering wisely. For example, I might choose a hypnotherapist to coach me to overcome my fear of flying. I would know with a degree of precision what I was buying, and the nature of the expertise my coach was going to supply. I would also be able to investigate typical success rates, numbers of sessions required, and alternative suppliers of hypnotherapy.

This response to the currently uncontrolled diversity in coaching is not however the one I favour, nor the one which I wish to explore in this paper. I favour what has been called the 'eclectic' response, which embraces the whole range of approaches, tools and techniques available, and allows the individual coaching practitioner to select those which she can use most effectively and those which offer most to her client at any one time. This response is growing in popularity in the UK, and builds on a tradition of eclecticism in this country (David Megginson, 2005, personal communication).

It was David Megginson and David Clutterbuck who first used the term 'British Eclectic Model' in print, in their 2004 text *Techniques for Coaching and Mentoring*. They advocate it as a unifying framework. The British Eclectic Model recognizes that there are powerful meta-models which frame some coaching and mentoring practices and which could provide a complete coaching framework on their own, but that an eclectic approach protects against the risk of being a coach who 'offers a solution in search of a problem'. If the only tool you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. Earlier references than Megginson and Clutterbuck's to a generally eclectic approach can certainly be found, as for example in Kiel, Rimmer, Williams and Doyle's 1996 text, *Coaching at the Top*, in which they describe their approach as '[drawing] from the frameworks of humanistic, existential, behavioural, and psychodynamic psychology and [choosing] our techniques eclectically to fit the client, the situation, and the need'.

So in this paper I shall attempt to capture the essence of this so-called British Eclectic Model (which is by no means unique to the UK), as currently practised. I shall explore the benefits it offers coaches when applied intelligently and ethically, and the risks it runs. I shall draw some conclusions on how to use it to the greatest benefit for clients of the coaching process, and on how coaches can be trained, educated and developed to be 'eclectic'. I shall conclude with a short case study to demonstrate the British Eclectic Model in practice, and to give the reader a sense of the kind of coaching process and outcomes that it produces.

## What is the British Eclectic Model of coaching?

The British Eclectic Model is an approach to coaching which synthesizes tools, techniques and frameworks from a range of approaches to helping people initiate and sustain goal-directed personal change. The coach maintains a focus on the client, the coaching process as a whole, and the client's context, and in response to what he observes in relation to any or all of these elements he selects a way of working with the client that seems to him appropriate and likely to be effective.

It may immediately strike the reader that the coach needs to be at a reasonably advanced level of skill to do this successfully. It is probably true that developing coaches start by sticking closely to a single approach and then move on to the ability to 'mix and match' which is at the heart of the British Eclectic Model. It is only when they have a degree of 'unconscious competence' in the basic skills that coaches have sufficient spare attention to make informed choices in real time about which activity to engage in next.

What is the range of approaches from which the eclectic coach draws? The simple answer to this question is that any activity that is judged by a competent and ethical coach to be likely to be helpful is a candidate for inclusion. The activities do not have to have a particular theoretical pedigree, nor indeed, sadly, any particular evidence base of demonstrated success. As the conference for which this paper was produced bears testament to, the evidence base for coaching is insufficiently established generally for that to be a reasonable requirement.

There are a number of approaches which form the mainstay of the eclectic model. First, and probably foremost, are the approaches which derive from psychology, and these can be grouped into four main areas: behavioural, cognitive, person-centred, and psychodynamic approaches. We should also recognize the important influence of brief solution-focused therapy, and of strategic family therapy, which are themselves linked to each other and to a variety of other therapeutic approaches. There are a couple of other important hybrid psychological approaches which we also need to recognize here: sports psychology and NLP (neuro-linguistic programming). These hybrids are important because they have contributed significantly to the eclectic 'toolkit'.

One of the interesting things to notice as we try to 'disentangle' the various contributors to the British Eclectic Model is that psychology itself has become increasingly 'eclectic' in its practical application. NLP is perhaps the most extreme example of this, positioning itself not as belonging to any particular school of psychological thinking but rather as the study of human excellence, wherever and however it occurs (see O'Connor and McDermott, 1996). This tendency towards eclecticism in psychology when it is focused on delivering practical and measurable benefits to people is intriguing. The less diversely resourceful approach of a purist may not be as helpful to people who are in the middle of trying to solve complex practical problems.

Within the British Eclectic Model are also approaches which derive from organization development and management theory and practice. I would include as examples here Peter Senge's work with his colleagues at MIT on systems thinking and the learning organization (Senge et al, 1994), and also Cooperrider's method of 'appreciative enquiry' (1995). Coaches also make frequent use of tools such as SWOT analysis (ten Have et al, 2003), Kurt Lewin's 'force-field analysis' for planning effective change (Lewin and Gold, 1999) and of course William Bridges' framework for managing transitions (Bridges, 2003). Management theory and practice is rich in techniques which help people to understand better what they want to achieve and plan intelligently to get it.

Finally we need to recognize the contribution of adult learning approaches to the way in which coaching is conducted. Adult learning principles such as self-direction, relevance, and respect (Rogers, 2002), pepper the coaching literature. The central issue for coaching of 'transference' – how knowledge and skill gained in a learning environment can be retained and applied in the everyday environment – in other words, 'will the client actually do anything differently?' – was first explored in depth as part of research into adult learning.

Having now detailed many of the approaches contributing to the British Eclectic Model, the only thing I can be sure of is that I have certainly omitted at least one important source of influence. For even as I write, creative and resourceful coaches are discovering new ways to facilitate their clients' change.

## **What makes an activity eligible for inclusion in a coaching context?**

The next question is: are there boundaries round what the British Eclectic Model can and cannot incorporate? My view is that there are no absolute boundaries. Others certainly share that view. Rosinski writes, for example, 'Coaching is the art of choosing an effective approach in a given situation, of creatively combining technical tools, models, and perspectives to address specific challenges, and of devising innovative processes to serve coachee needs' (Rosinski, 2003). Flaherty writes that 'coaching is a principle-shaped ontological stance...any activity [is] coaching when the ontological stance is [appropriate]' (Flaherty, 1999).

Put simply, it is the intent of the coach and the context of the coaching which determine the eligibility of an activity. The intent must always be to support another in 'reaching her goals' (Flaherty, 1999) and in no way to manipulate or otherwise control. The context which must be taken into account includes: the expertise and characteristics of the coach, the culture of the coachee (and I am using 'culture' in its broadest sense), the coaching relationship as a whole, and the organizational and/or societal context in which the coaching is taking place. If an activity is used with integrity, and with sensitivity to the coachee's context, the worst that can happen is that it will prove ineffective, and even then there will be learning from that, sometimes more than from a 'successful' application of technique.

Meggison and Clutterbuck (2004) present useful practical advice which reflects these principles. '[The] coach should use the technique openly and in consultation with the coachee; and ... the technique's intended effects should be discussed and agreed before embarking on it.'

## **How does the coach select the right tool for the job?**

Whilst the coaching literature abounds with descriptions of tools and techniques from all the sources we have identified and more, there is little guidance on how to choose one technique, or even one approach, over another in a given situation. The British Eclectic Model implies 'mix and match'. But how to mix, and what to match?

The existing literature is rather silent on these points. Beyond general exhortations such as to 'be aware of the underlying assumptions about learning [in the different methods]' (Zeus and Skiffington, 2002), for example, and to '[integrate] the cultural dimension' in choosing how to work with a client (Rosinski, 2003), the literature leaves it largely up to the coach to judge which techniques to use in response to which dimensions of work required. Those books which present an eclectic range of techniques (such as Hardingham (2004), and Meggison and Clutterbuck, 2004) tend to group techniques from all the

different approaches together, choosing to categorise them by type of coaching work undertaken rather than by originating approach. So, for example, you will find as recommended techniques for 'developing self-awareness' a contribution from the world of psychometric assessment, a technique from the psychodynamic approach, one from management theory, one from a creative thinking self-help book, and a use of 'parallel process' – a direct application of a method from psychoanalysis (Hardingham, 2004).

So whilst there are many frameworks for matching tools and techniques with type of coaching activity to be undertaken, there do not appear to be frameworks for deciding approach. Why might a coach, for example, decide to use a technique which had its origins in cognitive psychology rather than a behaviourist one? Why would she ask at a particular time 'What does success mean to you?' rather than 'Can you describe how you will know when you have achieved your goal?' And the decision which question to ask is not trivial: the first question leads to an exploration of belief systems which may change the whole orientation of coaching, the second to a behavioural specification which can be used immediately to focus on and measure progress.

I think there are two primary reasons for the paucity of advice on this point. Firstly, choice of technique must be a matter for the coach's judgement. To catalogue in a prescriptive way all the dimensions to which the coach must attend as he makes that judgement would be impossible. Many relevant dimensions are in any case totally situation specific. For example, perhaps my coachee has had a 'bad experience' with a hypnotherapist. However apt an Ericksonian-style story (Rosen, 1982) might be to the issue that coachee is wrestling with, a wise coach is unlikely to go down that path, for such stories and the way they are told are firmly rooted in the practice and philosophy of hypnotherapy. To use such a method would show insufficient regard for my coachee's sensitivities.

The second reason why we will not find a great deal of guidance on which approach to use when is that the vast majority of coaching tools and techniques are themselves hybrids. For example, a coach may take a complete history of a client at the start of a coaching relationship. Superficially, this would seem to be heading down a psychodynamic path (Jacoby, 1984), as the client describes her family of origin, important childhood experiences, and so on. But the coach may simply listen respectfully – a 'client-centred' approach (Rogers, 1951) – or use the information from that history to identify the distinctive competencies the client brings to her current dilemma – a 'solution-focused' approach (O'Connell, 1998), to name just a couple of alternative directions the coaching may take.

It seems to me that the important thing is for coaches to understand as much as they can about as many of the tools and techniques they use as possible. If they match that level of deep and broad understanding with a similar level of appreciation of their client and his context, they will be well placed to mix and match to good effect.

And here is a final, and, it seems to me, significant, benefit of the British Eclectic Model. It encourages an exploration of all the different contributing fields, an exploration which, through comparison and contrast, educates developing coaches in what specific tools and techniques are for, where they come from, and what assumptions they rest on. I only fully understand a hammer when I have also learned to use a mallet and a screw-driver.

## What are the benefits of an eclectic approach?

I have already mentioned many benefits of the more creative, diverse and resourceful style of coaching which follows the eclectic model. In theory at least, an eclectic approach enables a technique to be selected which fits the client's requirements exactly, rather than requiring the client's issue to be framed to fit a particular approach. (In practice of course an eclectic approach in the hands of an unskilled coach may just mean that a different 'wrong' technique is selected for every occasion. At least if the only tool you have is a hammer, it will work on nails when nails come along. If you have the complete toolkit but no idea how to use it, you will have trouble even with nails!)

Another important benefit of the eclectic approach is that it does not assume a high level of knowledge of different approaches and their consequences on the part of the client. The client and coach can work together to discover which techniques (and hence which approaches) work best in that particular coaching relationship. If the coach is skilled and flexible enough, the coaching may come to follow a single approach predominantly – but that approach will have been chosen as a result of mutual exploration and experimentation by coach and client, not because the client 'just happened' to choose a coach who was an expert in a particular approach.

Finally, the British Eclectic Model avoids imposing a particular philosophy of how human beings develop and change as a by-product of coaching. Each of the several approaches drawn on is likely to be based on a different philosophy, so the client is exposed to many philosophies as part of the eclectic coaching process and in all likelihood not over-influenced by one. As the 'medium is the message', if a single approach is followed, the risk is that the most potent influence of coaching on the coachee is a covert one. If my coach is, for example, skilled only in 'Inner Game' methods (Gallwey and Kriegel, 1997), I may come to believe as a by-product of being exposed exclusively to 'Inner Game' methods that I can only change aspects of myself that I am aware of. Yet systems approaches tell us that change can also result from responding unconsciously to change in others, psychoanalysis tells us that change can result from re-experiencing the past, and strict behaviourism tells us that awareness is an unnecessary construct!

## What are the risks of an eclectic approach?

There is a risk that the British Eclectic Model becomes in practice a collection of disparate techniques, none of which are understood by the coach nor experienced by the coachee in any depth. After all, most of us would agree that a person may have several 'episodes' of coaching in his life. There is an opportunity to experience different approaches in full in distinct episodes, rather than have many approaches sampled in a single episode. Many approaches, such as solution-focused work, cognitive approaches, and psychodynamic approaches, benefit from one or more sessions entirely devoted to their use. Too much eclecticism could rob the client of some very useful experiences.

There is also a risk that the focus of coaching begins to be on 'finding something that will work' rather on supporting the client in a process of change and development which has its own pace and rhythm. Techniques must remain secondary to relationship, as so many authors and researchers in the field of coaching and other related fields have emphasized. Perhaps the renowned family therapist Salvador Minuchin put it most succinctly in his classic text 'Family Therapy Techniques':

The goal is to transcend technique... Only a person who has mastered technique and then contrived to forget it can become an expert therapist.'

(Minuchin and Fishman, 1981)

Paradoxically, an adherence to one specific approach can enable the coach to be more free from attending to technique in the moment of coaching than does a commitment to eclecticism. The eclectic coach may have to divert too much of her attention away from the client and towards making choices about interventions, rather than be able to relax into a well-trodden path which by its very nature limits the field of choice.

Finally, there is a risk that techniques will be used without the client being clear where they come from and what their effects are likely to be. Whereas commitment to a single method usually begins with an explanation of the principles and disciplines behind that method, if a single technique from a general method is used, its origins may never be fully understood by the client. So she may be less in charge of the application of that technique, more in the position of having the technique 'done to her' than of participating equally in exploring what it has to offer. This runs counter to the very essence of coaching: to enable another to act more, and with more creativity and self-direction.

## **How can we get the best from the British Eclectic Model?**

My experience as a coach, and as a trainer and supervisor of coaches, suggests to me that to apply the British Eclectic Model effectively requires a long and sustained period of development. It is important for coaches to be exposed to, and have the opportunity to practise, a number of different approaches in some depth before they are able to weave them together in a way that enriches and does not obstruct the coaching relationship. Many very skilled coaches who I know and have worked with began with a strong grounding in one particular approach, often learned in a different context from coaching. They subsequently became curious about other approaches, and developed their understanding and skills in those, without of course losing their comfort with their 'first love'. I can think of skilful coaches who began as psychotherapists, hypnotherapists, NLP Master Practitioners, family therapists, OD specialists, business executives, to name just a sample; they achieved a level of excellence in the practice of those disciplines; and they have subsequently gone on to expand their repertoire of ways of working with coachees and moved outside a purist framework. I can think of other skilful coaches who have always operated with a degree of eclecticism, even to the extent of having several different careers (I would number myself amongst these), and have continued to develop their repertoire throughout their coaching practice. But they have studied and understood each approach from which they draw techniques in its own right: they do not just collect 'techniques'; they explore methods and philosophies behind techniques.

In other words, the British Eclectic Model requires a cumulative process of professional development, where periods of immersion in a particular approach are interspersed with periods of integrating techniques from all approaches learned so far. The coach will of course be moving in and out of 'conscious' and 'unconscious competence' all through that process, but if we believe with Flaherty (1999) that the coach needs to be learning herself to be effective for her coachee, then this is an advantage rather than a cost.

Developing coaches also need to be aware of which approaches are most consistent with their own values, beliefs and style. The British Eclectic Model is not about coaches who can use any technique available, but coaches who draw from a selected range of approaches, all congruent with their personal relationship with the coaching activity. So another essential part of an eclectic coach's development is development in knowing himself. Minuchin & Fishman (1981) put it well in describing the developmental path for a family therapist: 'Eventually a disconnected cluster of skills becomes an integrated style that fits with his person'. Perhaps the most important word in that sentence is 'eventually'.

Finally, it seems to me from the discussion of benefits and risks above, that it is essential that the British Eclectic Model is not applied itself in a purist way. The effectiveness of the coaching process should not be judged by how many different approaches the coach uses. Sometimes it will meet the needs of the coachee better to conduct a whole programme of coaching following one approach alone. Often, less is more. But the fact that that was done, not because it was the only approach the coach knew but because the coach and coachee selected that one because it looked to be the best, that is the difference between a purist and an eclectic approach.

### **From theory to practice: a short case study**

Andy is an executive in an international bank. He began a programme of executive coaching as part of the standard development package for the 'top 120' high potentials – those individuals considered to have the potential to make it to the Executive Committee in five years or less. I was appointed his coach, and this case study draws on notes I took during and after each coaching session with him. Andy gave his permission for this material to be used, and indeed offered to co-present it with me!

What Andy wants from his coach is 'challenge and support to articulate and realize his career and leadership aspirations'. He wants to explore the difference between being a manager and being a leader, and 'feels he could do better'. More specifically, he wants to articulate his distinctive characteristics as a leader and plan to use these more effectively in his current and future roles in the bank. His ultimate goal is to have a Managing Director or equivalent role in a corporate environment.

As his coach, I have used elements of the solution-focused approach (O'Connell, 1998), both at the start of his coaching and whenever new goals and aspects of goals emerge, to enable Andy to focus on what precisely he wants to change and to measure his progress towards his goal. Also, when Andy developed a tendency to ask me for advice, I chose the solution-focused approach to adjust the balance of responsibility-taking. Several times that approach has put Andy 'back in the driving seat'.

In the first session with Andy, I took a complete biography from him, including information about his family relationships and his entire growing-up, education and career so far. This is a typical starting point for me, and it generally forms part of the explicit coaching contract up-front with a prospective coachee. So it was built into Andy's expectations and it was one of the reasons he chose to work with me as his coach. I identified with him, as I had said I would, some interesting themes and patterns from his formative years which seemed relevant to his situation today (Lee, 2003). For example, he found some aspects of himself as a child which he decided could represent the foundation of real areas of distinctive strength for him as a leader. He is the eldest of four children. He is close to all his siblings, and 'made space' for them as they came along, one after another. Academically he is the most successful, but he is firmly grounded as a result of his family upbringing in the view that everyone is equal, that people have different talents, and that elitism and self-importance are inappropriate and unhelpful. I led him in an exploration of how he balances a drive to achieve with an equally strong drive to build and be part of his family,



initially, and later, teams and groups. Again the parallels with his family position and dynamic were striking to him as he recounted his history, and the sense of his leadership style continued to emerge. I moved between a 'client-centred' approach, simply listening and responding as he reflected on the personal and professional journey which had brought him to this point, and some interventions from a cognitive basis to expand his view of his own possibilities. For example, he had seen his 'lack of extremes', his 'balanced' approach to life, as a sign of moderated ambition and maybe lower leadership potential. Someone had sold him the idea of 'leadership spikes' – extremes of character which make a leader known and unique – and he thought he didn't have any; I asked him questions which led to his questioning that view. Maybe he did have leadership 'distinctions', even if he didn't have 'extreme' behaviours, he began to think.

This 'cognitive reframing' became a theme for several sessions. One of the reasons I use it is that Andy said from the start he likes to be challenged. And indeed, when he is challenged, it is noticeable that his energy levels and attentiveness increase.

I suggested using a psychometric questionnaire in the third session to help Andy further in his quest to differentiate himself, but he had taken such questionnaires before and did not want to do another at this time.

Whilst on this journey with his coach, a new problem emerged for Andy. He began to feel blocked and bored in his current role. Now the focus for coaching was to find a new role in the bank. He wanted to do some practical and business-focused work to get out of a situation which was threatening his motivation and his relationship with the bank. I speeded up the pace of our work, and used some systems thinking tools with him to help him develop his plan of action (mapping the roles and the relationships connected with different opportunities (Hardingham, 2004), understanding how difficult it would be for him to develop further personally while his scope for leading was so limited by his place in the system). I also used a technique from NLP (meta-mirror – Hardingham, 2004) to help him prepare for a difficult conversation with his current boss in which he needed to elicit that boss's support to move on. That technique was in itself challenging for Andy as he had never done anything like it before, and it increased his sense of urgency about making changes. The meta-messages in the use of that technique at that time were 'Do something different', and 'There is no time like the present'.

Once he had found a new role, his opportunities to develop as a leader increased greatly. He now has profit and loss accountability for a unit of 60 staff. I have used a couple of business-based tools (force-field analysis (Lewin, 1999) and the 'Trust Equation' (Maister, 2000)), as well as some visioning exercises (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 2004), to enable him to clarify what he needs to do to realize the potential of his business unit and his potential as a business leader. Again, there is a strong theme in the coaching of breaking new ground and moving on, in recognition of the business imperatives and the new level of role. Andy is using coaching sessions to learn how to coach his own direct reports, and so the behavioural technique of 'modelling' (his coach models with him the kinds of conversations he needs to be having with others) has now come explicitly to the fore.

The coaching relationship has been sustained for 10 months so far, with a two-hour session on average each month. Two further sessions are planned.

## What can we learn from this case study?

The case study underlines a number of important pieces of advice for coaches wishing to apply the British Eclectic Model. First, the coachee will get most from this model if the approach selected at any time by the coach is a direct response to the coachee's need, his context, and how the coaching process is going. Different approaches impose different paces, they place more or less requirement for active guidance by the coach, they contain more or less confrontation, and so on. Each of these many dimensions of difference provide the coach with scope to respond more flexibly and appropriately to what is going on and to how it is going on.

Secondly, the coach needs to be aware of and also to make the coachee aware of the choices and the reasons for the choices. Then the coachee is able to make conscious use of the best an approach has to offer, or reject it because the coach has misunderstood what he needs at that point. It would be both unrealistic and unhelpful to imagine that the coach will always make a good choice. It is not the job of a coach to 'know best' but rather to enable the coachee to 'know best'.

Thirdly, of course the coach will have 'favourite' approaches and 'favourite' tools and techniques. These will probably be the ones she uses most often and most effectively, regardless of the nature of the coachee's need. So those of us who apply the British Eclectic Model should not be fooled into thinking we reach objectively into our vast repertoire of resources for the very best tool for the job.

A final and over-arching point needs to be made in this discussion of the British Eclectic Model. The case study reports a very successful piece of coaching. The client said he had gained 'far more than he had hoped for or expected'. The client organization has promoted this high potential executive further during the period of coaching, and has extended the coaching programme. The budget-holder has relayed to the coach that the organization is pleased with the outcomes it has seen. And the coach enjoys the coaching, finds it challenging often and puzzling sometimes, but feels she has made a contribution.

But as I reflected on the case study write-up, I became dissatisfied with the way it represents what went on. For the reason why this piece of coaching was successful is not to be found in the interweaving of tools and techniques according to the British Eclectic Model. The reason is to be found, I believe, in the nature of the relationship between the coach and client. It is to be found in the degree and style of engagement, the quality of mutual respect, the points of striking similarity and profound difference of view. It is to be found in the everyday coaching conversation with all its jokes, arguments and dead-ends. And the nature of the relationship is not captured in the case study write-up, nor could it be.

So the final point which needs to be made about the British Eclectic Model, or indeed any other model of coaching, is this. It is good to have an extensive and well understood toolkit drawn from different approaches. But maybe what is most important about having such a toolkit is not the range of tools in itself, but the fact that having such a range takes away our anxiety that we might not be able to 'think of something to do'. The release from anxiety enables the coach to be authentic and fully present, and that is the essence of coaching.

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