

Personal Excellence?

The only way to achieve it is through using your strenghts AND your weaknesses

An interview with Jan Ardui by Simonetta Lombardo (2008)

A coaching style that is tailor-made, that uses everything in the client's personality and history, it doesn't throw anything away and uses both excellence tools and failure areas, because "sometimes making mistakes is what you are best at". Jan Ardui is somewhat like a great cook: to make a great dish he uses what he finds in the pantry; in plain terms, what is in the mind and experience of his coachees, the strengths and weaknesses of their special way of being. And it is in this last aspect, in the ability to accept and make good use of our "weak" part, that lies one of the greatest peculiarities of Ardui's coaching model.

In the kitchen of the Belgian coach and trainer one learns how to negotiate the shifting grounds of change and stability, of complementary opposites, of the search for improved performance intended as improved ability to be oneself and to be comfortable in one's skin.

The paradoxes are only apparent, as he explains in his courses and as shown in practice by his professional life.

Since 1999 Ardui has been honing his own specific model of corporate counseling which combines psychology, systemic thinking and some traces of Oriental philosophy. To talk about this coaching process – a method which has been applied successfully in major international companies as well as in professional training courses – we met him in Rome, during a break in between work commitments, for a long interview that discloses some of the contents of a book on these subjects.

What are the cornerstones of your coaching model? Can they be summed up briefly?

First a few words about the goals. There are some universally recognized principles in coaching: it is a process through which an expert helps another person to improve his/her performance in a specific field. A higher level of effectiveness is reached when an individual or a team becomes able to perform better: winning more often, in the case of a sports team, or winning more easily; achieving more ambitious results or achieving them effortlessly.

But there are other essential elements that need to be added before you can start talking about coaching, starting with the definition of the specific area of intervention, i.e. the context, and then the role identity. Well, in football you train players, in business managers, in schools teachers and

in the psychoanalytical field therapists, not just people in general, in every area of their existence.

Coaching is a process aimed at helping an individual or a team to reach a higher level of performance, or I should say, a level of excellence. So it's not simply a matter of enhancing existing strategies, the ones that a person is already using. Reaching a higher level means improving a person's alignment. In other words it means increasing their ability to be fully themselves, acting according to what we could call one's true nature.

The essence of the coaching model I use in my professional life and that I teach in my courses is in a nutshell: reaching a higher level of performance coincides with the ability of feeling more relaxed. Actually, to get better you need to make an effort to improve and at the same time you need to do what you feel comes most natural.

This sounds like a paradox: making an effort to be yourself.

That's right, reductively it sounds like we are talking about two polar, antithetical terms. In fact, the coachee does not perceive this process as a conflict, but as a generative connection. After all, you simply need to ask yourself what excellence is. When you are very good at something you are at the same time very disciplined and very free. Successful coaching needs to hit the optimal combination of these two elements, effort and being natural, elements apparently impossible to combine. This is what today I refer to as the dynamics of generative complementarity.

It may help to look at some examples. Nietzsche too urged people to “become what you are”, but in the practice of coaching it does not seem so obvious.

Generative complementarity is what you achieve when you ride as bicycle. To do it you need to put together two polarities that are apparently impossible to combine, movement and stability. It's the movement that makes you stable, but the two things are seen as opposites. People in companies complain that everything moves so quickly that they can't reach a point of stability, as if the two things could not go together. The truth is that all successful companies need to be run like a bicycle, in a profitable, unstable balance.

When you are coaching, and you want to take your client to a higher level of excellence, you start with the idea that the person or team can do better, that therefore they need to change things. At the same time, the message you are giving to the coachees should be: what is there, what you do easily and naturally is already enough.

So we are talking about a blurred boundary, like that of a moving balance. The request to change that comes from the coachee and which is at the basis of their choice to go into coaching is focused on the fact that what is there is not enough.

So a coach should certainly respond to this request seriously, working on what is not good enough, not excellent or that might even be missing altogether. But simultaneously, the focus must also be on what is naturally there and on how the person can use it.

This means blending together two elements that need to be mastered simultaneously: being aware of what is missing and can be added and at the same time focusing on what is already naturally present and how it can be best used.

Also, as a coach one needs to develop a kind of wisdom in order to understand that there are things that can be changed and so must be worked on, and things that cannot change and so need to be accepted. You have to be able to make a distinction between the two, aware that you are acting in a sort of blurred area. In order to change you need to use what is already there, and using what is already there means not changing: a wonderful, vital paradox, a cutting edge on which you need to be able to play.

How can you make the best use of something that is perceived by the client or by his/her environment as a flaw, a shortcoming, a problem?

I will give you one of the easiest examples. Is shyness an obstacle for a leader? Rather than giving a scholarly answer, for a coach it is essential to be able, together with the client, to find a way to use this quality in exercising leadership.

What is shyness actually, and what does it produce? Shy people have an unpleasant sensation when too much attention is placed on them. Can a leader use this characteristic, if he/she has it? Definitely, for example by actively shifting the attention towards other people, towards his team.

Despite its apparent simplicity, this is actually the strategy that shy leaders use. The underlying assumption for this kind of coaching model is that everything is useful, can be used, recycled in the system: both what we consider to be objective “strengths”, the positive and efficient part, and what we are led by social and personal conditioning to think of as “weaknesses”, the apparent obstacles where most of our power usually lies.

So there are no characteristics that can be considered objectively negative for a manager or leader, there are excellent people who are extremely lazy, who can use this laziness to operate at very high levels, for example by doing nothing that is not absolutely necessary.

In other words, everything has a use. After all it's a simple concept, but our mind is used to thinking that if something doesn't work you have to get rid of it, instead of asking ourselves: how can I use it? This is the key element of this model of coaching. You don't throw anything away, you use everything you have.

Coachees need to change, coachees need to be truer to their nature. But in practice how do you achieve this dual perspective?

Precisely by switching on the two perspectives. Focusing on what the client is doing wrong, on what the person doesn't see or doesn't grasp, because there is always a strong association with what is missing and therefore it is difficult to see what is not there from inside the system. As a coach you have to be able to get people to face their own limits, looking at what they do, analyzing their mistakes, what happens or does not happen when they don't reach a goal. It is then necessary to define what needs to be added, the tools, the techniques. And above all you should not allow clients to escape their responsibilities, or allow them to indulge in laying the blame on others, on the workplace, on society. You need to get the person to face personal responsibility.

Now comes the real challenge, which is to look for the things that the coachee can do perfectly well and then canalize these resources. How can it be that the same person who is in front of you, clearly having a hard time coping, will later be the same person who organizes and leads company meetings, directs his staff team, liaises with the management? How does one do that, who is the person who reaches that level of performance? Like we said before, everything we need is already there, you don't need any extras.

If as a coach you can master these two polarities you can achieve extraordinary results. After all we are all able to come to terms with apparently opposed perspectives. For example as parents, in the relationship with our children, we can and have to handle the combination between unconditional love and severity.

So, generative complementarity. Is this the key element of your coaching model?

The elements that make the difference, in terms of my direct practice and of the theoretical model that I have developed, are at least three: organizing principle, spiraling and reflective feedback.

Let's try to explain them.

The organizing principle, PO, is the identity of an individual or of a company: every person, group or system has one. It is the set of fundamental elements, so important that without them the system would not exist. Let's go back to our bicycle. In this case the organizing principle is the relation between movement and stability. The organizing principle is basically a stable and repetitive dynamic that has the function or ability to organize a system. Every activity – like every person – has one. What is the essence of cooking? What is the atmosphere you feel

inside a person's home? Being able to define this is another way of capturing the organizing principle. Actually, this is something we often perceive with our unconscious mind and when they ask us to explain it we are unable to. The atmosphere in a home is connected with everything that's in it, without distinctions: it is the language of totality. By identifying the organizing principle, we in fact find the generative complementarity. And this is not a simple relationship but an actual dynamics.

But in order to capture the organizing principle, you need to work with spiraling and reflective feedback. The first is a process in which the coach takes the liberty to ignore things: a moment of open, full circle exploration of the coachee's experience and personality during which, through a wide-ranging investigation, the coach takes the time to cover as much as possible of the complexity in that given field or context, without excluding any possibility beforehand. So reflective feedback, which is neither positive nor negative, is a way of identifying what is there without any judgment, without any preconceived idea about what should be there.

What is the purpose of the organizing principle in this context? We said that coaching is always linked to a context and a role identity, while the organizing principle is the deeper, and therefore transcontextual identity.

Becoming what you are means getting closer to your own organizing principle. A tree cannot help being a tree, as humans we have developed an awareness that has separated us from the natural flow. The organizing principle is a concept that totally reflects the thinking of Gregory Bateson (1): it's the connecting pattern, which connects even things that are very distant from one another. Looking for the organizing principle also allows the coach to make a lot of new connections. The organizing principle contains the excellence but also the limits of a person, that's why in coaching we model both of them and look for the connection between the two aspects.

Would you like to tell us more – step by step - about the phases of your coaching approach?

I start with a contract between the coach and coachee: we think we can reach a specific result by a given time, and this will be proof of the fact that we have reached it. I also include some "witnesses" who can certify all of this, usually in a company this is the person who requested the coaching. For sports coaches the proof is clear: if you were losing matches and now you are winning, it means you did your work well. In other contexts it is not as clear and straightforward. The work starts with a lot of observation and analysis. A football coach takes the time to see how the team plays, to analyze how the system works. This corresponds to the spiraling phase,

during which among other things it is important to open fresh perspectives in order to shake up the system's stability. Trainers sometimes do not allow the star players on the field. The important thing is to take nothing for granted, there are no taboos nor – as the Flemish say – ‘sacred homes”, untouchable places. There are two reasons why you do this: to open up a system that had become rigid and to create strong credibility for the coach. It shows, in other words, that he can change things, that he has the power to do it, that he is free. That is why sports trainers change teams every couple of years, so that they won't become enmeshed in the system. If you've been inside a system for too long, you won't be able to open up new perspectives and therefore to reach new levels of performance.

This sounds like the description of a strong shake-up in the coach's system of beliefs and references.

To create a learning context — which is basically the context where coaching takes place — you need to produce a certain level of frustration, sometimes make a stop, a jump to reach a new level of competence. At the same time, you cannot be too destructive, otherwise you will get no results. In other words you need to destabilize the existing system, break old rules, taking the system to a more complex organizing principle: this is the only way to improve work. Through the spiraling process, the coach breaks the existing connections and, more importantly, makes the invisible visible. In other words, you get the system to a point where it is impossible for things to remain in its old configuration.

Let us remember that the more you recognize and govern the complexity of the system, the higher the level of excellence that becomes possible. When you lay out on the table what was once hidden under the rug, you enable greater complexity. If you only look for the organizing principle of excellence, you are cutting out too many important elements. Limits are part of the system, but the system does not take them into consideration.

To improve your performance you have to learn to be more yourself. And the more complexity you can embrace, the more you will be yourself.

Therefore performance and alignment are inseparable components in your model. But aren't there leaders or managers who function extremely well even though they are denying a part of themselves?

There certainly are. But this is where we see the difference between excellence and performance. If there is alignment there is continuity in the performance and therefore excellence. Performance without alignment carries in itself the seed of destruction: it becomes a kind of psychological doping.

To sum up, the steps of the coaching model I have developed over time are: spiraling, grasping the organizing principle made of excellence and limits. After that, a coach is ready to start thinking about what can be added to improve the performance. What is added can never be an “I must”. This process cannot be based on the idea that if you do not change you won’t perform well, it cannot be based on a dictatorship of change.

To make myself clear, if I fear something I should not try to get rid of that fear, but understand how I can use it to become more skilled, more experienced, better at what I do.

The journey that takes you somewhere must be consistent with where you want to get to. You can’t make peace with war. What does that really mean? That you are already what you want to become, that you already have those features. You can only have what you already have.

Judith DeLozier says that NLP or coaching are ways of reconnecting with what you had forgotten.

There’s a story I can use as an example. I was coaching a manager in a large automobile company; she had the tendency to do very little work. She was extremely good at starting an activity and delegating it. During the coaching process we found a connection that was at once metaphorical and practical: she was an expert at preparing finger food to serve with drinks. Exquisite, little things that were made to leave you with an appetite. This was at the same time the recurring pattern and the organizing principle of her life: this woman does not like to do great things. Through this discovery, she was also able to understand why she quickly lost interest in what she was doing, and also why a lot of people knew her but she was actually not very visible in the company.

What did she need to add? First of all, awareness. Before the coaching experience, the mechanism was: “I don’t want to do it, you do it”. Afterwards it became: “This is what I want to do. I think you can do the rest better than me.” Too subtle? It’s the small differences that make the difference.

Another case: a top manager in a bank, a very ambitious man, extremely disliked in the company because of his arrogance and incredibly skilled at giving clients accurate proposals that made them feel like the kings of the universe. I found out with him that it was not the clients who were important, but his ability to make them shine. The actual people, both clients and colleagues, were not important to him. His personal pattern revolves around the idea that he can be at the same time helpful and totally opportunist. In this case, like in all the others, there was no need to change anything, only learn to make good use of what was already there.

Where did you draw inspiration to develop this coaching model?

There are at least three different sources. Firstly there is the Gestalt background, where there are traces of the organizing principle, of “sticking with what you have”, of the need to confront

people and associate them. Neuro-Linguistic Programming was useful especially in two respects: in the way subjective experience is modeled, in understanding how people are able to do what they do and in the awareness that problems are solved only by adding resources to the system rather than by eliminating some. However, my greatest source of inspiration was the work of Gregory Bateson. The connecting pattern is his way of talking about the organizing principle, coaching is actually an instrument used to look for the pattern, to find the similarities. Then there was my personal fascination with and curiosity about the way people function, and also my ability to put up with the stage of not knowing, of feeling lost, to reject compromises and accept all of the complexity. The modeling work I did with HP manager in the year 2000 was highly inspiring for my coaching practice; one of the ideas I drew from my work there was that excellence is related to discipline and freedom, another of the key elements of my model. I also understood that leaders can handle different perspectives at the same time, even when they appear totally contrasting. I know we are close to Zen Buddhism, but this is an inactive inspiration, I could say a non-functioning one.

How many coaches in Europe are now using this model in their activity?

I have trained approximately 200 people, especially in France, Belgium and Italy, but I don't know how many of them are actually using this process. What I can say with certainty is that the model is developing. I think it is essential to develop group coaching, there is still work to be done on the concept of organizing principle. Next I would like to integrate into the process also some specific attention to people's hobbies, a personal area where everyone can best express one's freedom but which also requires an incredible effort in terms of discipline.

1) ***Gregory Bateson*** (1904 — 1980), British anthropologist, sociologist, linguist and cyberneticist, is one of the greatest thinkers of the 20th century.

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