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Coaching and Mentoring in the Asia Pacific

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Foreword

An overview of coaching and mentoring in the Asia Pacific region

Anthony M. Grant

Coaching is now pretty much a globally used methodology for enhancing performance, well-being, productivity and for facilitating positive change in corporations, government institutions, businesses and education settings. Indeed, it is hard to think of a sector of society that does not use some type of coaching methodology. For those of us who have been involved with the development and practice of coaching for some years, we have seen coaching throw aside notions of faddishness and hyperbole, and over the past 25 years we have witnessed the emergence of an evidence-based approach to coaching. We have seen the development of a solid empirical evidence base, as well as the development of conceptually coherent theories that can ethically inform our coaching practice. From both the empirical evidence and our own practical experience as coaches, we know that coaching and mentoring can be a powerful methodology for creating positive change. We have seen and experienced the positive impact of working with others in a supportive goal-orientated coaching or mentoring relationship. Although it may sound trite, we know that good coaching or mentoring can be a life-changing experience – and the empirical evidence is resoundingly supportive in this respect. This is wonderful. We have come a long way. But there is more to be achieved.

The fact is that most approaches to coaching have been developed from a Western perspective. For example, the origins

of life coaching sit firmly within the American self- help genre. Similarly, the notions of executive and business coaching have mainly arisen in American and European business contexts, and the cultural and theoretical influences on contemporary organisational mentoring follow similar lines, as David Clutterbuck and Tammy Turner's chapter so concisely outlines.

Although many contemporary approaches to coaching and mentoring incorporate aspects of Eastern philosophy, for example, acceptance and mindfulness practice, my impression is that the coaching and mentoring industry per se has tended to merely appropriate and adapt such notions to make them fit within a Western paradigm. I should emphasise at this point that I do not want to position cultural perspectives in a dichotomous fashion; 'us' compared to 'them'; 'East' compared to 'West'; or 'individualist' versus 'collective'. Such crude dichotomies can polarise, subjugate and dehumanise, producing the very antithesis of the coaching and mentoring mission.

However, different countries and different cultures do have different values, expectations and working practices. The kind of coaching or mentoring that might work well in a New York stockbroker's office may be of little value in coaching or mentoring under- resourced, bureaucracy- burdened social workers working with acute at- risk cases in impoverished areas of Europe. The same caveats about generalisations hold true for using Westernised corporate coaching and mentoring methodologies in the Asia Pacific region. It is both foolish and patronising for coaches schooled in Westernised approaches to coaching to assume that they can go in and 'fix' organisations globally. Of course, few coaches really hold such fixed or authoritarian mind- sets, but to date there have been few attempts to document the key issues to pay attention to when coaching in the Asia Pacific region, and there are few books that present a comprehensively curated anthology that can act as a practical guide for the ethically grounded and evidence- based coach or mentor. In a sense, such an endeavour has little chance of completely succeeding – not least – as Derrick Kon and Anna Blackman discuss – because of the vast differences in this massive region. Nevertheless, this book provides some

important pointers towards enhancing the effectiveness of coaching and mentoring in the Asia Pacific region.

Padraig O'Sullivan's chapter provides an illuminative example of how to best coach expatriate executives who are seeking to work in new cultural environments in the Asia Pacific region. His work reminds of us the value of bringing mindful reflective practice to such challenges. The skill set required to help expatriate executives acclimatise and adapt their existing leadership styles to unfamiliar cultural context is perhaps one of the more common applications of coaching and mentoring as Ram Ramanathan and others discuss.

A significant challenge for those of us who work in this region occurs when trying to develop the coaching and mentoring skills of the indigenous workforce. A key point that resonates for me throughout much of the book relates to fully utilising and, where necessary, working with aspects of the client's indigenous culture, rather than simply imposing pre-existing (typically 'Western') coaching values and mores onto the client's culture. Christopher Nunn adroitly discusses his experiences with working in the Pacific region and highlights how much importance is placed there on a nurturing, personalised leadership approach, compared to the transactional style we so frequently see in the Westernised commercial world.

Along similar lines, Akram Sabbagh and Vanessa Fudge provide us with a useful example from New Zealand, and focusing on how aspects of Maori culture which already echo coaching and mentoring methodologies can provide an effective foundation and framework for contemporary New Zealand coaching and mentoring practice. Similarly, Chérie Carter-Scott's chapter provides intriguing insights into the experience of coaching in Thailand, and Chérie's example of using the Thai concept 'sanuk' (meaning that everyday life should be fun) is a beautiful example of using specific cultural constructs to help the coachee reframe and rearticulate their goals. It seems to me that we all can benefit and learn from each other's cultures in many respects!

Charlie Lang's chapter neatly outlines the very real

challenges of cross-cultural coaching, and highlights a number of issues that many professional coaches will have faced. First, and this is an issue that has not as yet been discussed much in the coaching literature, are the opportunity costs that often flow from a poorly implemented coaching programme. Poorly implemented coaching and mentoring programmes can have the unintended consequence of increasing cynicism and resistance to subsequent change programmes. As far as I know there has not been any research into financial costs of poorly implemented coaching and mentoring programmes, but one can safely assume that they could be substantial on both financial and human capital levels. In Charlie Lang's chapter this issue was addressed by presenting the new programme as a 'Mentoring for Sales Leaders programme'. Second, as Charlie Lang concisely and forthrightly articulates, there are significant language barriers to be overcome. Indeed, it strikes me that it is not enough to merely translate the words of a leadership development programme or coaching technique from (say) English to (say) Korean or Japanese, we need to be able to capture the subtleties of the meanings embedded in the language and convey those meanings. In a sense such cross-cultural programmes go well beyond the transmission of technical methodologies. Rather, they involve a genuine recreating of coaching principles and the ability to rearticulate those from within a different cultural reality. This is not an easy task and this book will provide useful insights for those of us engaged in such endeavours.

As Doug MacKie neatly reminds us, we seek to help our clients identify and utilise their personal, cultural and collective strengths. Regardless of geographic location, good coaching and mentoring helps individuals, groups and organisations construct and move towards better futures and positive outcomes. In this way good coaching and mentoring truly can be a universal methodology for creating purposeful positive change; let's use it well.