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the magazine of professional coaching



Are We Prepared for the Shift?

Moving from the metastory of individualism towards deeper and broader consciousness

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We are living in unprecedented times where the collective narrative – the metastory – of our world is shifting, and it is profoundly influencing what clients are bringing into coaching sessions. The issues they present are no longer just about career advancement, relationship improvement or achieving personal goals. Increasingly, clients are grappling with deeper questions about life and their place in it.

As coaches, we must ask ourselves: Are we equipped to handle this evolution in what our clients need from us?

THE METASTORY OF OUR TIMES

As coaches, we are all aware that we human beings create narratives about who we are and our place in the world. These stories are shaped by our beliefs, values, past experiences, families, culture and various other systems. They influence our thinking, actions, interactions – essentially everything we do and think.

Beyond our own individual narratives, the meta narrative or the prevailing collective story of our times is greatly influencing how we think and what we do, whether we are consciously aware of it or not.

In the current metastory, we face unprecedented uncertainty and systemic instabilities (in finance, politics and healthcare, to name a few). In the backdrop of our daily lives are global issues like climate change, pandemics, wars, technological disruptions, polarization and extremism of all kinds, and these often lead to intolerance.

The prevailing metastory tells us that we are separate from each other, that we don't rely on each other. It promotes hyper-individualism and drives us to be self-sufficient and self-reliant. It perpetuates scarcity thinking and the belief that we have to make sure we get our piece of the pie before others get theirs, because there isn't enough for everyone. This contributes to the growing pandemics of loneliness and depression.

Through a bombardment of daily messages, this metastory also tells us that we need more to be happy—whether it's a better job, more money, more profit, material possessions, etc. This pursuit of "more" has become the solution to our dissatisfaction, even though deep down, we sense its falsehood. We experience temporary satisfaction from achievements and things, but we're soon on to searching for the next thing.

Of course, the collective story of these times is more nuanced and complex, but these are some of the big themes currently running in the background

and creating challenges for ourselves and for our clients now. They influence how we think about our future and the decisions we make today, how we parent, how we lead, and even how we think about meaning and purpose in our lives.

AN EVOLUTION IN COACHING

While clients still seek to improve their careers and relationships, they are increasingly presenting bigger and deeper questions in response to the metastory. They're experiencing feelings of overwhelm and burn-out from the constant drive to generate results that never seem to be enough. They're having trouble finding joy and lightness amidst greater instability and uncertainty. They're more readily sharing feelings of resignation, confusion, worry and sadness. They are concerned for their future and the future of their families and organizations and realize that more of the same isn't working.

They are increasingly bringing what I call the big existential issues of life, even if they don't name them as such and this shift marks an evolution in coaching. This isn't just a trend; it's a fundamental shift in the coaching landscape.

These existential issues require coaches to have the awareness and capability to help clients explore questions they have about life, such as: What is purpose? How do I live a more meaningful life? What's my place in the universe? How do I live authentically with all the pressures and expectations?

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This requires us as coaches to help clients explore the limitations of the self they think they are – in other words, helping and supporting them in exploring who they are beyond their external identities and circumstances, integrating higher states of awareness or consciousness into daily living, and developing all aspects of being human (including the transcendent dimensions).

Some would call this spiritual coaching, but that term can often be confusing or misleading because it is frequently associated with specific religious practices or beliefs. Instead, this inquiry encourages clients to explore their own inner landscapes, understand their place in the larger world, and discover their own deeper truths to guide their lives.

Others might call it existential coaching, borrowing from Howard Gardner, an American developmental psychologist known for his theory of multiple intelligences. Existential Intelligence refers to our capabilities to engage with deep existential questions.

The label isn't important, lest we become tempted to turn this into yet another coaching specialty. Being able to create this kind of coaching container for our clients is foundational and fundamental to our work as coaches, rather than a specialty. We want to be able to connect the dots between our clients' individual concerns, the influences of the larger metastory and beyond – to a place where coaching delves into the often unseen but no less influential dimensions of human existence.

EVOLVING THE PROFESSION

Coaching originally emerged as a profession largely in response to our longing for safe space and authentic connection to reflect on all aspects of our lives without judgment or shoulds. Creating this kind of conversational space was a bold move.

However, over time, our profession has become overly influenced by the Cartesian worldview (as many professions have), emphasizing rationality, reason and science as the primary path to knowing and understanding. The effects of this worldview can be seen in the way medicine often reduces patients to mere symptoms to be treated, how education frequently prioritizes standardized testing over creative thinking, and how business decisions are often driven solely by data and metrics, sidelining human values and intuition.

The premise that things can be understood through careful observation and analysis has shaped the development of coaching's standards and competencies. While this approach is useful, when taken too far, it can lead to an overly simplified and rigid view of coaching. Coaching done well involves some structure, some process and a whole lot of openness to the unknown. Evidence-based methods are important, but they can sometimes overlook the aspects of coaching that can't be easily measured or observed.

But we human beings are not simply the rational beings that Descartes posited. We are emotional, spiritual, kinesthetic and interconnected. We are irrational, illogical and messy at times. The

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danger for our profession lies in the pendulum swinging too far towards the analytical and measurable, potentially leaving out the soul, spirit and mystery that are integral to our clients' experiences.

MOVING FORWARD

The ICF's (International Coaching Federation) Thought Leadership vision of coaching as a tool for societal transformation is inspiring. To achieve it, we must transform ourselves. We need to evolve our own perspectives and consciousness to disrupt the status quo.

Our coaching must reflect the deeper and broader contexts in which we all live, helping clients transcend the rational, the known and the observable. We must challenge ourselves to work with the full complexity of what it means to be human, including the unseen and less knowable forces that shape our and our clients' lives.

As coaches, we have a unique opportunity – and responsibility – to rethink how we think about coaching. By loosening the constraints of the Cartesian framework and fully embracing the wondrous complexity and mystery of being human, we open a space for transformation and help create the possibilities for change that brought most of us to coaching in the first place.

It's not easy to do, but worth the effort since it will not only help transform ourselves and our clients, but also our societies! ●

Make the Shift

To evolve yourself and your coaching try these ideas:

IDEA 1

Do a deep dive into your own beliefs. Every belief you have is a conclusion about how things are and that limits what else is possible.

IDEA 2

Explore how the metastory of our times is negatively impacting your own thinking and actions. Awareness is a first step in breaking free from its impact.

IDEA 3

Tell the truth about where you are struggling with your own existential questions. Are there any territories you won't enter with clients because of it? What can you begin to practice to create a boundless space for inquiry?

IDEA 4

Seek out colleagues who will lovingly challenge you. Neither life nor coaching is a solo sport.