

Ontological Coaching by Aboodi Shabi

"We don't just need a new map; we need ways to change the mapmaker." – Ken Wilber

Blind to our Blindness

Developed by Fernando Flores, Rafael Echeverria and Julio Olalla, and drawing on the work of Heidegger, Merleau Ponty, Humberto Maturana, John Searle and John Austin and others, ontological coaching is based on an exploration of the clients' interpretations of the world and their way of being. By its very nature, this approach to coaching is a philosophical one and supports coachees in a reflection of who they are, rather than simply setting goals and achieving them (although that can be a part of ontological coaching, too).

Another distinction of ontological coaching is the emphasis on the transpersonal element: we are not individuals growing up in isolation, but are shaped, as we will see, by the world we are immersed in. As ontological coaches, we take a systemic perspective and claim that an individual cannot be effectively coached without some understanding of the world and the systems which the coachee inhabits.

The guiding principle of ontological coaching is well summed up by James Flaherty who writes:

"Each person's actions were fully consistent with the interpretations he brought, an interpretation that will persist across time, across events, across circumstances. Our job as coaches will be to understand the client's structure of interpretation, then in partnership alter this structure so that the actions that follow bring about the intended outcome." (Flaherty 1999 p.9)

It is this "structure of interpretations" with which is our focus in ontological coaching.

As humans, we usually take our interpretations and ways of being for granted. For example, if an individual sees the world as dangerous, he is likely to be risk averse and say no to opportunities; similarly if someone sees life as an adventure, she is more likely to say yes to opportunities and to take risks. Our ways of seeing, and of interpreting, the world will have been shaped by the narratives in which we have been immersed. Most of the time, these narratives are transparent to us: they are not consciously seen; we have grown up in discourses that have shaped us all our lives, even before we were aware of ourselves or of the world. Therefore, we don't say, for example, "I have learned to see the world as dangerous, and that makes me risk averse"; instead we might say, "the world is dangerous, and I have to be careful." In other words, *it appears obvious to us* that the world is dangerous and that we have to be careful, rather than something to investigate further.

It's so obvious that we don't see our 'being'. In other words, we are blind to our blindness. From time to time, we need someone "outside ourselves" to help us see what we cannot see – to reveal our cognitive blindness. We can say that an ontological coach is that someone.

The Observer

Ontological coaching seeks to challenge our presuppositions and helps the client to recognise that what we think of as 'the truth' is usually nothing more than learned narratives. Our narratives are usually expressed linguistically – in the things we say and in our beliefs and values; but they also have an emotional and somatic dimension.

In addition to listening to the coachee's concerns and goals, an ontological coach will also be curious about how the coachee is being. You could liken this to paying attention to the music and rhythm of a song, as well as to the lyrics. An ontological coach will observe how the coachee uses language, what emotions are shaping her or his interpretation of the world, how she or he moves through space, all the time facilitating the coachee's awareness of what she or he was previously blind to. The coach will also be curious about what the coachee may become.

The aim of ontological coaching is to facilitate the transformation of the coachee, generating new possibilities that were previously unavailable or invisible to the coachee, and to allow new learning to emerge. As Julio Olalla and Rafael Echeverria have said: “Ontological coaching is a process aimed at producing a change in a person’s soul, which only happens when we are willing to observe, question and be curious enough to change the self that we are.”

In the work of Newfield Network (the coaching school established by Julio Olalla), we call the coachee’s structure of interpretations the “observer”. As human beings we take action, which produces results. Normally, when we don’t like the results we produce, we look at the actions we take and try to change them – we might do more, we might do less, or we might try a new action. But, if we do not look at the observer that we are, if we do not question our structural interpretations, then we are likely to simply produce more of the same. We also say that this observer occurs in three domains, language, emotions and body.

Three domains

By *language* we mean the stories we have learned about life, the narratives in which we live, the values we have; for example, “the world is dangerous”, “it’s important to be independent”, “you can trust people to be helpful”, “money is hard to come by”, etc. We learn and absorb these from the world around us and they become part of who we are.

In the context of ontological coaching, we use *emotions* to mean that which pre-disposes us to act. In our approach, we are concerned with emotions in the philosophical sense – how emotions shape our way of being or our capacity for action. For example, if I am resentful I will act differently at work, than if I am grateful. If I am sad, I will have a different pre-disposition for action, than if I am angry or joyful, etc.

By *body*, we mean the way we move through space. Some people move through space quickly and efficiently, which results in them getting things done; at the same time, however, they might be less available for connection. Others might move more slowly, take their time, and be available to connect with others; but they might not get things done or they might lose focus on the task because they prioritise relationship. It’s important to note that neither of these two examples (and there are many other polarities we could explore) is ‘good’ or ‘bad’; rather they lend themselves to certain outcomes. Again, these ways of moving through space are learned. We can observe this when we look at how people from different cultures move and interact physically with the world and others, as any trip to an international airport will reveal.

We learn in all three domains. We learn stories and narratives about the world from our families, from the culture around us, etc., but we also learn emotions and how to move through space. We can say that all of this learning, happening throughout our lives, forms the “structure of interpretation” described by Flaherty above.

Narratives

To return to the previous example of the individual who sees the world as dangerous, we might perceive that, in terms of language, he might have certain narratives about the world that he learned from life – perhaps he grew up in a conflict zone, or there was a lot of anger at home, or he might have been told that ‘you can’t trust people’ or ‘life is hard’. Maybe he grew up in a family with violence and learned to hold back and lie low to avoid being seen in order to stay safe. Now, if we watch him move, we might notice that he is hesitant, holding himself back when he meets a group of people, for example, or looking around nervously when he ventures an opinion. In the emotional domain, he might be fearful or timid, or anxious – maybe there was a lot of fear at home, or in the culture at the time. All three domains together produce a coherent picture of someone who is unlikely to take much risk in life, and will tend to hold himself back. The individual may have become successful at feeling ‘safe’, but, from another perspective, he could also be seen as missing out on numerous opportunities and possibilities.

The coach's role is to help the coachee to uncover her or his structural interpretations and how these structures have shaped them; and then to open new territories for learning that were previously unavailable or invisible to the coachee – or as Flaherty puts it to alter that structure, in partnership with the coachee, in order to produce new results.

Lightness and curiosity

This requires a mood of lightness and of curiosity in the coach. A coach needs to be curious about the self in front of us – what stories have they learned, what interpretations do they live in, how have they been shaped by their lives? This requires the coach to leave behind all assessments and judgements about how a coachee should behave, or about the right mental attitude to have, and simply to be willing to find out how the coachee got to be the human being that presents itself in the coaching session. It also requires a particular mood in the coachee, which is a willingness to take a look – to be open to questioning ways of being that they have hitherto taken for granted.

Transforming the self

Having raised awareness, the coach works with the coachee to identify new ways of being – almost literally how to build a new structure; to go beyond the old learned self and to discover new ways of being that were unavailable to the “old self”. Another way to see this is that, having realised that who we think we are is largely a function of what we have learned, we can now embrace the possibility of learning something new; that we literally learn to be a new self by the practices that emerge out of ontological coaching conversations.

When the coachee transforms at the level of the soul, the actions taken might be very similar, but because the being that takes those actions is different, she or he might produce totally different results. As Proust puts it: “The real journey of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

References and further reading

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About the author



Aboodi Shabi has been a pioneer and leader in the UK and European Coaching community, and is one of Europe's most experienced coach-trainers. He was a founding co-President of the UK ICF, serving the profession at all levels internationally. He has worked in the field of personal development for over twenty years, and in coaching and coach-training since 1996. In that time, he has worked with thousands of coaches and leaders across the world.

Aboodi has led workshops and seminars for coaches and executives across Europe, and in Asia, and South Africa. He is also an invited facilitator on mastery in coaching for various European coaching schools, as well as being a regular speaker on the coaching conference circuit across Europe, and a regular contributor to coaching magazines.

Aboodi currently leads Newfield Network's coaching programme in Europe.

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