

The Three C's of Professional Practice

In recent years the professional coaching community has become somewhat obsessed with defining itself. At a time of ever impending legislation and increasing requirements for accreditation, there appears to be heightened sensibilities and competition between varying professions who offer 'interpersonal, talking help'. It is not therefore surprising that those engaged in coaching, the newest of those professions, have succumbed to the search for the Holy Grail – a definitive definition of what coaching is and isn't.

As a trainer and supervisor of coaches I have spent many hours exploring with students and supervisees "but is it coaching?"

Over the thirty years that I have been involved in change work with individuals the field has grown and differentiated. Any accreditation with which I am familiar will at some point test for the applicants understanding of the 'profession' as distinct from other professions.

For instance, much is written about the distinctions between coaching and mentoring; between coaching and counselling; and between coaching and therapy.

Wilson (2005) offers the metaphor of driving a car:

- A therapist will explore what is stopping you driving your car
- A counsellor will listen to your anxieties about the car
- A mentor will share tips from their experience of driving cars
- A consultant will advise you on how to drive the car
- A coach will encourage and support you in driving the car

Clearly there are some situations that would be better suited to a particular helping strategy. However, the search for precise definition of what any given practitioner does, presupposes that we could produce definitions that would be isolated and separate.

I am of the opinion that by far the majority of our clients couldn't care less. They may want to know we are capable of assisting them to get from where they are now to where they want to be, and all too often they don't even seem to check that out.

The attempt to draw distinct lines between consulting, mentoring, coaching, counselling and therapy, is of primary interest to those who are the practitioners.

Famously John Whitmore when asked "What is the difference between coaching and counselling?" replied "They are spelt differently."

All of the helping professions use the same core interpersonal skills and require some of the same competencies. There is far more overlap than there is difference, both in what we do and the issues that can be usefully supported.

To be perfectly frank in my less considered moments there is a part of me that does ask "who cares what we call what we do, if it works?"

I would like to suggest that a more fruitful discussion is concerning *how* we determine professional practice rather than *what* it is.

To this end my starter for 10 is to propose that the three vital ingredients in the process to decide whether to work with a client could be the three c's of professional practice – Contracting, Capability and Client's interest.

The best metaphor that I have for this is the legs of three-legged stool. Without any of them the thing falls over.

Contract

Much has been written about the importance of getting the contract right and then delivering what has been agreed. (Bluckert 1981; Fielder & Starr 2008)

Questions:

Is what we are working on what we agreed we would work on?

If not, is it appropriate and in our gift to re-negotiate the contract?

It may be that you have the professional competency to do what is needed and it would be in the client's interest – but if it is not contracted (or re-contracted) for, then we have no business going there.

Capability

Every professional body at some time defines the competencies for that profession. This is turning this on its head and asking the professional to use their 'internal supervisor' (Murdoch 2008) to check their own competency and capacity for doing the work.

Questions:

Am I competent to deal with this issue?

Do I have the capacity to address this issue appropriately?

If I am not competent (skill) or do not have the resources (time, energy) then I need to refer.

Client's best interest (and world)

Every client is part of a system and we need to ensure that what we do attends to the client's best interest in the ecology of that system.

Questions:

Is it appropriate for this client to work on this issue with me?

Is it appropriate for this client to work on this issue in this context?

Just because I can doesn't mean I should.

This may be the contracted issue and I am competent, but it may not be right to proceed. E.g. this may occur when both parties work for the same organisation and the issue is of a deeper or personal nature.

And if in doubt about any of these take the dilemma to supervision.

Like the stool, we need all three in place if we are to not *fall over* and are to be professional practitioners of *whatever we call ourselves*.

References

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