Coaching the Unconscious

Abstract

Behavioral experts accept that the unconscious mind drives our thoughts and actions. The concept of moving from Unconscious Incompetence to Unconscious Competence is part of many behavioral theories in people development. This concept has a foundation in the Vedic scriptures of India. In this article, the author, who is an internationally credentialed professional coach and a trainer of coaches, presents an alternative viewpoint to the commonly borrowed Western theories. This is an original coaching model he uses with executives in his coaching practice, with consistent results. The author hopes that this model would inspire Human Resources practitioners in the Learning & Development filed to adopt more innovative interventions for executive development.

From Freud to Frauds

Several coaching models try to disassociate themselves from psychology, since psychology is about therapists, therapists are about the past and coaching is all about the future. In fact, International Coaching Federation and other credential bodies warn coaches not to practice psychological therapy.

Unfortunately, the reality for most humans is that the past drives the future. Without knowing what in the current behavior of a person is driven by one's past conditioning, no effective coaching may be possible.

The very fact that coaches try to change behavior patterns, which are embedded by past experiential conditioning, makes it imperative that they understand how these behavior patterns evolve. Otherwise they would be struggling in the dark. To understand how these behavior patterns were created, coaches need to understand psychology.

Good coaches need not be professionally qualified psychologists, nor do they need to be involved in psychoanalysis, or practice therapy with or without qualification, but they do need to understand basic principles of psychology.

Various schools of psychology overlap one another with unclear boundaries, and yet claim to differ from each other. Let us look at some celebrated models.

Freud[i], without argument, fathered modern psychology. One may love or hate his sex-centered concepts of human psychological development, but one cannot ignore him. Single handedly, he made the world conscious of the unconscious.

Freud's psychodynamic[ii] approach, reflected in psychoanalytic therapy, bases treatment of mind related disorders on the belief that behavior and personality are influenced by unconsciously held childhood memories. To Freud, all such memories seemed centered on sex. Carl Jung[iii] developed the unconscious factor further, while separating it from the sexual Freudian overtones, with his concepts of archetypes, collective unconscious and spirituality. Popular assessment tools, such as Myers Briggs[iv] that many coaches use, developed from Jungian principles.

Over time, practitioners of the Freudian/ Jungian model adopted social approaches to the core models. Freud's unconscious Id developed into Jungian archetypes, and further expanded into culture and relationships.

Later day Behavioral models of Pavlov[v] and Skinner[vi], differed by focusing on alteration of behavior in treating disorders. By changing environment, through reward and punishment, the therapist sought to change behavior. Origin of behavior, whether conscious and unconscious, was not considered as important as the environment supporting the behavior.

The cognitive model of Albert Ellis[vii] and Steve de Shazer[viii], focused on thoughts and the process of thinking and how these affect one's emotions and behavior. Followers considered these to be more scientific approaches and solution-focused.

The humanistic or person-centered approach of Carl Rogers[ix], along with Maslow and others, moved away from the psychotherapist as the knower of all things to the client who has the power to unlock his potential and solve his/ her own issues. The non-directive approach of Rogers positioned the counselor as the catalyst to create self-awareness in the client. Gestalt, psycho-synthesis and transactional analysis models also use the humanistic approach. Many coaches today follow this model, at least in principle.

Bandler and Grinder developed the NLP[x] (Neuro Linguistic Program) approach in the early seventies to address communication and behavioral disorders. Psychologists may disapprove of NLP, but many NLP techniques work extraordinarily well. Anthony Robbins[xi] is a good example of a coach who has modified NLP to change mental attitudes.

These outlines, by necessity, are incomplete and simplistic. The idea is to show that a common thread in many of these differing psychological approaches is the role of the unconscious mind in driving behavior.

A simple and useful way to look at the unconscious is to compare it with a powerful but separate processing unit that drives our brain computer, but one whose configuration we are not aware of. The conscious mind, in contrast, would be the operating system of the computer, which is far less powerful but known. The unconscious mind is as operationally important, perhaps even more than the conscious mind.[xii]

The difference between various psychological approaches is the method used to recover the unconscious information. These may range from Freudian analysis, through conscious introspection and sub conscious meditation, to regression and hypnosis of the unconscious.

There are inherent dangers in probing the unconscious. There have been cases of psychiatrists charged with planting ideas in client minds, while attempting to recover unconscious data, resulting in tragic results[xiii]. Almost everyone who has some knowledge of hypnosis knows how dangerous a technique this can be and how this is fraudulently misused for publicity.

Scientists may believe that they have made vast progress in understanding how the mind works, and perhaps they have. Yet, we do not have a common understanding of even what the word 'mind' means. While we do know how that mind intelligence is spread over every one of a hundred trillion cells in the human body, many of us continue to believe that all intelligence resides in the brain. Even today, the concept of Howard Gardner's[xiv] multiple intelligences has not been fully understood and accepted by our educational institutions.

Vedic Fundamentals

Let's now see what the non-scientists had to say about the mind and its states.

The Hindu Vedic scriptures, probably 5000 years old, talk about four states of the mind consciousness. In a 2 x 2 matrix, this is simplified as a mix of thinking and self-awareness.

AWAKE	DREAM
AWARE	DEEP SLEEP

The top two boxes represent thinking states and the bottom two non-thinking states. The left boxes represent different degrees of self-awareness and the right boxes represent unawareness.

For instance, when we dream we do think, but we are not conscious of our identity. The moment we become conscious, we awake from the dream state. While a dreamer may dream of being attacked, he never gets injured in the dream!

In the deep sleep state, we are neither aware nor do we think. In the Awake or waking state, we believe we are aware and we think.

The fourth state is a strange one. It refers to a state of awareness without thoughts. In the Vedic culture this was the state all wise ones aspired to, the Buddha state. In Sanskrit, this state is called Turiya or the Fourth State. Gurdjieff based his Fourth Way[xv] on this.

All great Vedic philosophers, especially Shankara[xvi], point out that we are not really aware when we are awake. Shankara calls the 'awake' state 'maya' or illusion. It's not that maya is not real, but it is not the permanent reality. True reality, according to Shankara, arises when one is beyond thoughts. Contrast this with Rene Descartes[xvii], who says 'I think, therefore I am'. Shankara says, 'when I stop thinking, I am'. East and West don't meet.

True meditation or dhyana as it is called in Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga[xviii] is staying with one thought, as different from concentration or dharana referring to staying with one sensory location that is often mistaken for meditation. Sustained meditation leads to the Fourth State of true awareness. This state is experiential. No amount of dry logic can convince one, who has not experienced it, of its existence.

In our normal waking state, we live in 10% consciousness. In the aware state, we live in 100% consciousness.

Vedic scriptures outline the process of moving from ignorance to awareness. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, a collection of about 200 aphorisms, is all about how to integrate body, mind and energy to become fully aware.

Sanskrit also offers the perfect word for a Coach. Acharya, the word commonly used for a teacher of spiritual, moral, behavioral and temporal values, literally means 'one who walks with you'. An acharya shares the journey without prescribing.

Perhaps I should start using a new word, *Coacharya*, for an enlightened coach who co-creates the client reality.
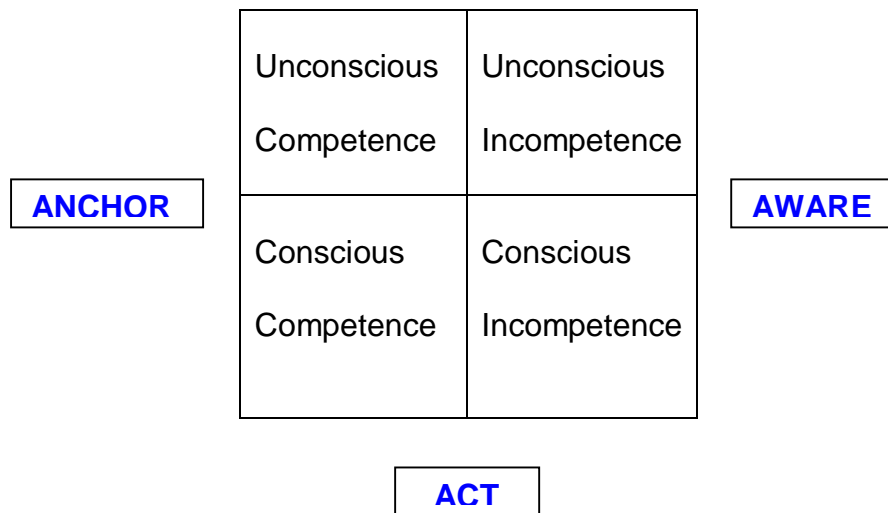

AAA Model

My own corporate career worked its way through ineffective mentoring, as I have described in an earlier article[xix]. A coaching approach would have been far more effective in helping me with behavioral issues that I had.

In a separate research paper[xx], I have been able to verify that most executive development issues at middle and senior management levels centered on behavioral issues, rather than experiential issues. Traditional mentoring approaches, which impart a senior person's experiential knowledge to some one less experienced, are not of much help in such cases.

As a coach, I developed my own model of coaching, combining whatever I understood of my own legacy of Vedic knowledge and inputs from more modern psychological approaches, as well as learning from actual coaching experience.

I call this the AAA model with three pillars of Aware, Act, and Anchor. I have found this to be effective in leading people out of behavioral issues.

ANCHOR	Unconscious Competence	Unconscious Incompetence
	Conscious Competence	Conscious Incompetence

AWARE

ACT

I believe that most, if not all, behavioral issues have an unconscious base of emotional causes, though they may be interpreted rationally. These causes are called by many names such as mind blocks, emotional traps, and limiting beliefs. Collectively, one can term them as Unconscious Incompetence. Bringing these unconscious blocks to conscious attention is the first step in getting rid of them.

What is hidden below needs to be uncovered before one can understand what it is. If the client has a behavioral problem arising out of short temper, as long as he is not conscious of it, it can never be addressed. Bringing it out in the open as an emotional block allows the problem to be recognized and acted upon. This is the first process of becoming Aware.

Awareness moves one from the mind state of Unconscious Incompetence, where the problem remains unknown, to Conscious Incompetence, where the problem stand revealed.

The next step is to act upon this awareness. Action provides a solution to correct the problem. The client finds a way to overcome the block. Action

helps the client to move from Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence.

A person with a behavioral issue realizes that it's a problem and also discovers its nature. With this awareness he seeks tools to overcome the problem and acts on them. For instance, a person who is easy to anger recognizes this as an emotional block and also realizes what the triggers are. He then practices deep breathing or counts to ten each time he feels anger. By practising simple meditation and creating body awareness, the client can feel the anger in the body before the emotion arises to cloud his thoughts.

The final step is to ensure the problem does not recur. To sustain action, one needs to embed or anchor the behavior change that has been initiated. This moves one from the Conscious Competence state of corrected behavior into the perpetual habit state of Unconscious Competence. One no longer has to think about what needs to be done, as in the state of Conscious Competence. The mind body system takes care of it automatically when the action is anchored into Unconscious Competence.

Where's my problem?

An intelligent question at this stage would be: If the Incompetence is Unconscious, if the problem is hidden, how would the client know he has a problem?

Good question. People around the client would generally know. The family, friends and colleagues at work are usually the victims of our Unconscious Incompetence such as emotional blocks and limiting beliefs. In the work environment, this affects both one's own work and team performance, therefore limiting organizational potential.

Various professional assessment techniques including 360 degree feed back for inter personal interaction and psychometric tests for intra personal attitudes help in identifying the problem area. Personally, I find 360 degree feed back sessions most useful, when I do them personally. Impersonal online 360 feedback sessions that organizations use to save costs may help with organizational development programs. They do not help as well in resolving behavioral issues.

Once the Unconscious Incompetence is identified with the help of people around the client, who share the client's interest in getting over his behavioral handicap, the coach can move with the client to the next step of Creating Awareness.

Creating Awareness

Key factor in creating awareness in the client is the self-awareness of the coach. The coach's ability to be present, focused on the client and client alone, listening with attention and questioning with empathy, and to be able to build trust and respect with the client are crucial.

The coach has to be here and now, in the mode described as mindfulness. Coach should be non-judgmental. These are fundamental qualities in any coaching situation, but especially important in leading the client from Unconscious Incompetence to Conscious Incompetence.

I find emotion playing a big part in many mind blocks. Most mind blocks and limiting beliefs are not rational. Had they been they would have been perceived by the conscious mind and resolved. Emotional blocks can stay hidden. Often, they are programmed by the mind to stay hidden to avoid more traumas. Delving into this tricky space requires some experience.

Self-awareness can be created through a combination of yoga, meditation, Johari Window[xxi], Maslow's Need Hierarchy[xxii] and NLP tools! East can truly meet the West and benefit both.

Initiating Action

In some cases, if the client is self-aware, committed and action oriented, the mere awareness of a negative behavior can help change his behavior. However, in most cases the coach needs to help the client in action to move from the conscious recognition of the Incompetence to Competence by shedding the behavior.

Any action to reach Conscious Competence must align with the value systems of the client. Otherwise, additional unconscious blocks will be created in different ways, impeding any progress in behavioral change. How does one determine one's values?

Most people, when asked about values they believe in, talk about integrity, honesty and truth. They may rarely practice these. These are not values they believe in, but values they believe they must have. What then are your true values?

Reflect upon your happiest moments in life. Why did they make you happy? What needs did those moments fulfill? What were the underlying beliefs for these needs? Think and think again.

We rejoice when our actions match our values. To sustain any action in changing behavior, that action must align with our value systems.

The coach must first help the client establish the client's values. Once the client values are known, client can explore various possibilities to develop

actions to change the Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence in alignment with these values. The coach helps by expanding the universe of options through attentive listening, identifying client insights and asking the right open ended questions to challenge the status quo and develop alternative actions.

Anchoring Change

I generally work on anchoring the changes in parallel with initiating changes. The shift from Conscious Incompetence to Conscious Competence and from Conscious Competence to Unconscious Competence can often be done together. The coach must first ensure that the foundations of alignment of actions with values are in place.

In my experience, the most powerful method to embed changes in the Unconscious, in order to hardwire the Competencies in the Unconscious, is sub conscious visualization. Shakti Gawain[xxiii] and Joseph Murphy [xxiv] and others have written very well on this process and I would refer the reader to these experts for more details.

What I follow is a simple 5-step process.

1. Intent: Help the client establish an intent in line with his values to move to the desired behavior. The intent must be positive, going beyond one's own needs, realistic and as far as possible holistic. By holistic, I mean that one should not focus only on one aspect of a perceived change. For instance, the desired change must not only fulfill career aspirations, but also must be in line with health, relationship and such other balanced Wheel of Life[xxv] aspirations. The intent should also not be contradicted internally, and this can be verified through meditative contemplation.
2. Moving into a meditative state: Some call this a relaxed state, some a reflective state, and others an alpha state[xxvi]. Essentially, this is a state of focused thoughts, in line with dharana and dhyana, as defined in Yoga. In this state, the Unconscious mind is deeply influenced by inputs and competencies can be embedded well.
3. Creating a multidimensional dynamic visual reality: This is the fun part of anchoring. Established in a meditative state, one expands the intent into a much broader visual reality by visualizing what one would be really doing fulfilling the intent. The end state of the desired behavior, as reflected in outcome at work, personal life and in all aspects of life, should be visualized in glorious color, movements and sensory perceptions. The more vivid such visualization is, the deeper the hardwiring.
4. Letting Go: This may seem a bit mystic, but once understood very meaningful. The more we get obsessed with an outcome, the less one gets to focus on the process and details. If you are obsessed with a time line in a project, the quality suffers. Your mental health suffers. Once one has visualized the desire as an achieved reality, one should

let it go. One can visualize one's intent and the achieved reality encased in a pink bubble, as Shakti Gawain puts it so well, and see it float away.

5. Thanksgiving: Finally, express gratitude to that Universal Energy, by whatever name you may believe in it, for having made your desire and intent a living reality. Even scientists with no belief in God believe in an energy that's beyond our control. They also believe that gratitude is the noblest and the healthiest of all emotions, an emotion that heals instantly.

Though to the uninitiated this process may seem fuzzy, it's practical and effective. I have worked with dozens of hard-boiled executives, of all religions and cultures, and every one without exception has derived value from such visualization. There is nothing religious about these steps. They are about the individual and the individual quest for change.

Transformation Vs Transaction

Many coaching models stress upon an outcome, some times within each session. Coaching then becomes a transaction. The Coach's assumption is to identify a problem, diagnose it and help the client discover a magic pill, all in one session or in 12 as the case may be.

Coaches dealing with long standing behavioral issues know that it does not work this way. There can be no left brained SMART solution to a behavioral problem. The solution is a right-brained transformational one. Behavioral solutions arise from emotional blocks and need a catharsis.

This Aware Act Anchor model works through transformation. I am an engineer turned CEO turned entrepreneur turned businessman turned coach. It took me a while to accept that my natural left brained transactional SMART solutions do not work with most executive development issues.

I offer to this model to those of you who have the humility to recognize the limitations of your rational intelligence.

Application

I have used this model with over 50 clients, individually and in groups. Some had behavioral issues that threatened their career. Some had emotional issues that prevented them from trusting people and working effectively with them. In every case the client was successful in overcoming his issues and was able to move into the Unconscious Competence state.

I was also able to influence the clients to use this approach with others they work with, in what I told them was the 'Leading by Coaching' model. This too was successful. I can provide case studies upon request.

The single most important concern for all corporate and non-corporate organization around the world is the wastage of human potential. This model

offers a simple and practical solution to unlock the wasted human potential. I do hope many others are inspired to use this model in their own work and life spaces.

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Author Profile

The author, Ram S Ramanathan, has over 40 years of corporate experience, with 20 as CEO, Entrepreneur, Adviser to Governments, Angel Investor and Spiritual Seeker. Ram is now an internationally credentialed professional coach and coach trainer. He is also a speaker, author, strategic consultant and leadership trainer.

The author holds all rights to this article, which is part of a book that will be published in 2013.