

From “Me” to “We”

The relationship perspective

By Patrick Williams, EdD, MCC

Those of us in the profession of coaching perform most of our coaching one-on-one with individual clients, and sometimes with teams or small groups. As a psychologist (until I switched to coaching full-time), my therapy clients always brought their whole family to the therapy room, *even if they weren't present*. I believe that as coaches, we need to take a strategic and systemic view of our clients' significant personal and professional relationships when we coach them. We humans, after all, are relationship beings.

In my graduate studies in psychology and in my professional continuing education, I learned from systemic theory. Simply stated, we are all connected and intertwined within the systems (families, work teams, and

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community) we are part of. All human systems are interlocked. They affect and are affected by one another.

The important news for coaches is that we also are in various relationships, which may affect, for better or for worse, the quality of our coaching. Are you getting coaching or some other assistance (such as therapy or

personal growth training) so that the relationships in your life are the best they can be?

A shortage of listening

Coaching has evolved in a fast-paced culture where people often feel disconnected and where listening is in short supply. A recent article in the Washington Post (by Shankar Vedantam, Friday, June 23, 2006) stated the following: “Americans are far more socially isolated today than they were two decades ago, and a sharply growing number of people say they have no one in whom they can confide, according to a comprehensive new evaluation of the decline of social ties in the United States. A quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal troubles, more than double the number who were similarly isolated in 1985.”

This comprehensive new study paints a sobering picture of an increasingly fragmented America, where intimate social ties — once seen as an integral part of daily life and associated with a host of psychological and civic benefits — are shrinking or nonexistent.

Whereas nearly three-quarters of people in 1985 reported they had a friend in whom they could



confide, only half in 2004 said they could count on such support. The number of people who said they counted a neighbor as a confidant dropped by more than half, from about 19 percent to about 8 percent.

This is bad news for society, but good news for coaching. Coaching has become, for many, a significant opportunity for meaningful conversation that does not exist elsewhere to any large degree. One of our jobs as coaches, then, can be to coach our clients on creating and nurturing new and existing relationships throughout their life. According to the research cited above, we live today in a kind of *crowded loneliness*.

If we take the perspective of viewing our clients' lives as a nexus of all the relationships they have, we greatly enlarge the scope of our coaching. Margaret Wheatley in *Turning to One Another* (Berrett-Koehler, Berkeley, 2002) says that, "Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals who can go it alone."

We humans are really relationship beings. As difficult as it sometimes is, we truly want to be in positive

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relationships. We only isolate ourselves when we feel hurt or fearful, but being alone is not our natural state. We may live in an undesirable state, keeping many relationships superficial or conflictual, even though that is not what we really want.

In Relational-Cultural Theory, as taught by recently deceased Jean Baker Miller, M.D. and her staff at Wellesley College, "the central tenet ... is that people develop through and toward relationship, which occurs within and is influenced by cultural context. Above all, RCT asserts that people need to be in connection in order to change, to open up, to shift, to transform, to heal, and to grow" (quoted from *The Development of*

Relational-Cultural Theory by Judith V. Jordan and Linda M. Hartling at <http://www.wellesley.edu/JBMTI/>).

Outcomes of a growth-fostering relationship

Miller has also posited her theory that key relationships need five good things. According to Miller, "Growth-fostering relationships empower all people in them. They are characterized by:

1. A sense of zest or well-being that comes from connecting with another person or other persons.
2. The ability and motivation to take action in the relationship as well as in other situations.
3. Increased knowledge of oneself and the other person(s).
4. An increased sense of worth.
5. A desire for more connections beyond the particular one."

As coaches, we co-create conversations with our clients about fulfillment, meaning, purpose, passion, and excellence. These conversations comprise all we aspire to as humans and all that catalyzes us to exist in relationship with others — our political and social structures, our environment, and our global village. These conversations also support us to utilize and benefit from our collective potential. Coaching that ignores the relationship between the individual and everything else will be contributing to problems created by isolation and individualism instead of assisting in the power of connections and purposeful growth-fostering relationships.

Whether we as coaches provide the primary authentic relationship a client has in his or her life, or whether we're one of many, we have an opportunity to model, create, and support a level of consciousness in relationship that's increasingly rare in our world. Being committed to continually expanding our own consciousness will allow us to pass on the benefit of that growth and wisdom to our clients. •

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