

Bringing a psycho-spiritual perspective to executive coaching – the challenge of being accessible and relevant

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last year or so (with business partner Paul Elliott) I have been setting up a coach development programme that is underpinned by Psychosynthesis as the core coaching psychology. In doing so, we have been facing up to the challenge of talking about something in the organisational and business world that is variously described as a psycho-spiritual (and sometimes a transpersonal) psychology. This working paper explores this challenge, seeks to uncover the underlying issues that make this tricky territory and will hopefully open up a dialogue around ways to take this forward.

PSYCHO AND SPIRITUAL...

There was a time not so long ago when using any 'psychological' language within organisations could be difficult. I would sometimes come across strong reactions to taking an explicit psychological perspective or asking leaders to self-reflect and think psychologically. Terms such as psycho-babble, touchy-feely, wishy-washy and soft-stuff were variously used to imply that that the inner world of how people think and feel, what goes on within our minds both consciously and unconsciously, just wasn't as relevant to business as the outer world of observable behaviours, measureable results and practical actions. To some extent behaviourally oriented psychologies such as NLP and CBT were more acceptable within this old epoch.

Nowadays the relationship between the inner and outer worlds is more established, partly through the popularisation of notions such as emotional and social intelligence, as well as with the rise of the more scientifically underpinned wave of neuro-psychology. The power of narrative (which speaks to feelings and subjective perspectives) to influence human beings (rather than just factual argument) has become well established. More importantly, the general agreement of what good leadership involves has broadened and deepened to not just include human skills and personal development, but an acceptance that emotional intelligence and psychological awareness are part of this territory.

So, as Jeremy said to me when I suggested writing about this topic, the problem is not with the *psycho-* bit, but with the *-spiritual* bit.

Part of the problem is that 'spiritual' is one of those fat words that can mean quite different things to different people at different times. It will certainly vary in meaning according to both the context and perspective of those using it. Thus the term tends to bring a certain amount of baggage and

that is often where the problem lies within an organisational or business context. Using the term *transpersonal* can be less problematic but that is mostly because people might not know what it means.

To get to grips with this issue I will approach it from three different directions, but first I will say a little about why I think this is important and worth exploring.

WHY BRING A PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL PSYCHOLOGY INTO THE ORGANISATIONAL DOMAIN?

As implied above and as we all know, the organisational and leadership world is constantly changing and evolving, sometimes imperceptibly or gradually and sometimes clearly and quickly. I am frequently amazed to observe the capacity of human beings to adapt to new circumstances, confront new challenges, take on new ways of looking at things that only yesterday seemed alien or irrelevant.

What I see today in organisations is that the 'personal' has become very much part of the territory – partly in a positive and overt way, e.g. organisations wanting people to bring their whole selves to work; their energy, resourcefulness, ambitions, passions and purposes; and partly in a less positive or shadowy way, e.g. leaders working under enormous pressure to produce results to the point of unhealthy levels of stress or experiencing very personal inner crises (e.g. of identity and meaning – who am I and why am I here?) that are intricately connected with their role as leader. Issues of work-life balance can be faced by people at every level of an organisation as are ethical conflicts that are not openly talked about.

As executive coaches I would suggest we are all now used to working with personal and psychological dimensions alongside the business and practical. Boundaries (e.g. what is business-personal and what is personal-private?) are fuzzy, shifting and becoming increasingly multi-dimensional and complex. The questions this raises are:

- How much of the whole person do we include or can we work with as coaches?
- How much of the territory is appropriate or relevant to the leaders role or to our contracts as coaches?
- How qualified, comfortable or capable are we to work in this whole territory? Do we have a language, let alone a methodology and the tools for dealing with this territory and the issues it encompasses?

Different coaches will have different answers to these questions depending upon individual experience and learning journeys.

BEING EXPLICIT VERSUS IMPLICIT

Of course there are two points of view to consider within this topic:

1. First the coach's, i.e. you and I as members of APECS and how we talk about our professional practice of executive coaching.
2. Then there are the executives or leaders who are our clients.

We might use a psycho-spiritual language to talk about what we are doing amongst ourselves but use very little of it with our clients, with whom we will tend to vary our language according to their context and what feels appropriate to their awareness and interests. This is fair enough and I know some coaches who hold a psycho-spiritual context for their work but never use that kind of language directly with clients. Others coaches may feel that clients will benefit from explicitly exploring this dimension or perhaps want to be comfortable in talking more openly about where they are coming from.

Below I am going to explore three perspectives which can shed light on the issue. The first is the psycho-spiritual perspective, the second is the developmental perspective (and the third is a psycho-social-historical perspective).

THE PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

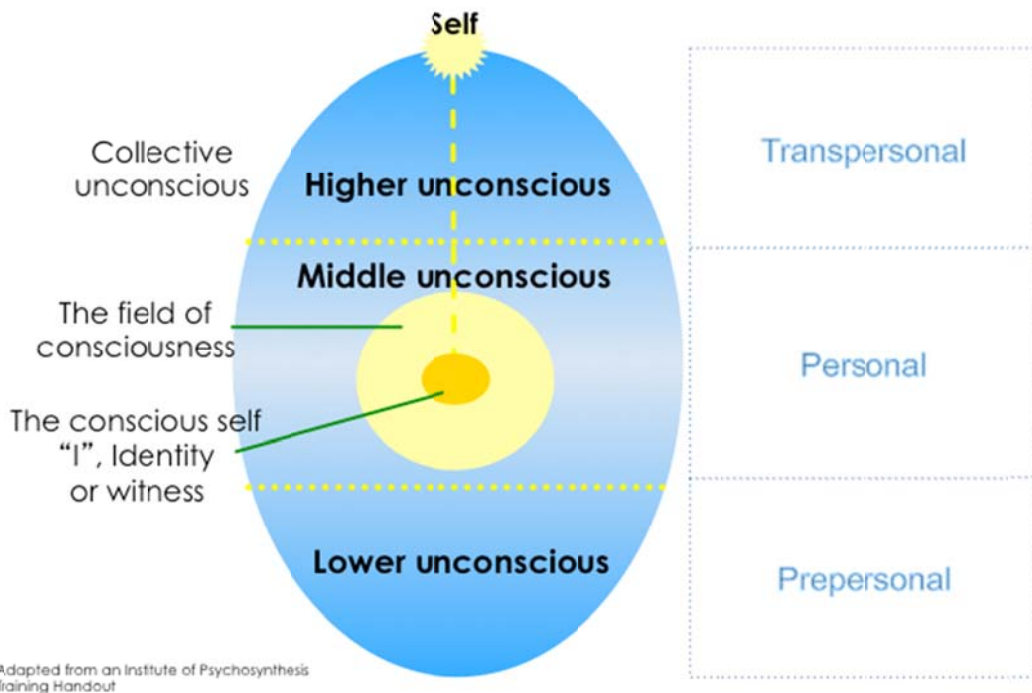
This paper is partly about my experience of using Psychosynthesis as a core coaching psychology to help us as coaches in working with the 'whole' leader. Personally I have chosen to work with Psychosynthesis because it seems to me to be a more inclusive or holistic psychology by including the higher unconscious or superconscious in its map of how the human being work. I draw upon others including Gestalt, TA, NLP and developmental psychology, but I find Psychosynthesis the best container for them all.

Psychosynthesis provides a context, method and set of tools for working with people and can be described as is an integrative, holistic and depth psychology that builds upon the foundations of psychoanalytic, Jungian, humanistic and developmental psychologies. By holistic, we mean a psychology that includes the whole human being, the self in all its dimensions, all levels of consciousness and unconsciousness including post-rational or transpersonal levels of self-experience, both healthy and pathological states. Within this context, the focus of Psychosynthesis as a working methodology is on how to help people realise their full potential and actualise themselves in the world, as well as how to address issues of identity, purpose, meaning and values. It also provides an approach to help negotiate crisis in whatever form it appears in people's lives.

In psychosynthetic terms, drawing upon Roberto Assagioli's map of the psyche, we can look at the whole human being in terms of,

- **the *prepersonal* domain** (our lower unconscious and often repressed parts from our past as well as our instinctive nature, or Id as Freud might say),
- **the *personal* domain** (our personality and ego, our everyday sense of self and experience of ourselves, our middle conscious and unconscious but reasonably accessible mind) and
- **the *transpersonal* domain** or higher consciousness and unconsciousness, which can also be described as our spiritual dimension and is generally talked about using terms such as being, presence, self, soul and spirit, as well as purpose, meaning and values.

Assagioli quotes from the Journal of Transpersonal Psychology on what the transpersonal might include; '*meta-needs, ultimate values, unitive consciousness, peak experiences, ecstasy, mystical experience, being values, essence, bliss, awe, wonder, self-actualisation, ultimate meaning, transcendence of the self, spirit...*'



Assagioli also argued that the more traditional (e.g. psychoanalytic) psychologies are essentially ignoring the higher conscious and unconscious, and are therefore being partial and less than holistic in their treatment of human psychology. Once one begins to accept the existence of this higher domain of human consciousness, even though the evidence for it comes primarily from gathering subjective and inter-subjective data (which can be hard for the traditionally rationalistic and objectively biased business world to accept), it is becoming increasingly difficult to argue that it should all be left at home (or under the carpet) and not be recognised or engaged with in the work domain. Ken Wilber also contributes to the debate from this perspective, most notably with his take on the pre-trans fallacy, in which he shows how the lower and upper domains of consciousness and unconsciousness can get confused. His words

The pre/trans fallacy simply says: in any recognised developmental sequence, where development proceeds from pre-x to x to trans-x, the pre states and the trans states, because they are both non-x states, tend to be confused and equated, simply because they appear, at first glance, to be so similar. Prerational and transrational are both non-rational; pre-conventional and post-conventional are both non-conventional; pre-personal and transpersonal are both non-personal, and so on. And once we confuse pre and trans, then one of two unfortunate things tends to happen: we either reduce transrational, spiritual, superconscious states to prerational, infantile, oceanic fusion (as did Freud); or we elevate infantile, childish, prerational states to transcendental, transrational, transpersonal glory (as the Romantics often did). We reduce trans to pre, or we elevate pre to trans. Reductionism is well-understood; elevationism was the great province of the Romantics.

(from the Introduction to the Third Volume of The Collected Works of Ken Wilber)

THE DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE (WILBER AND LALOUX)

Another way to approach the 'spiritual' question is from a developmental perspective. Ken Wilber does this very well and I will attempt to briefly summarise my understanding. In his AQAL (all quadrant all level) model Wilber distinguishes between the four essential perspectives (subjective, objective, inter-subjective, inter-objective), the various developmental lines (e.g. cognitive, emotional, social, strategic, spiritual, spatial, etc.), developmental stages within these lines (e.g. as described by Laloux as thought paradigms - Reactive, Magic, Impulsive, Conformist, Achievement, Pluralistic and Evolutionary) and states of consciousness (e.g. sensation, emotion, concrete mind, abstract mind, intuitive mind, psychic, subtle, causal, non-dual), etc. This immediately gives us multiple meanings of 'spiritual'. Spiritual can be used to describe both a developmental line as well as the levels of consciousness beyond our day-to-day mind (e.g. psychic, subtle, causal, non-dual).

Within the spiritual developmental line, spirituality can look very different at each developmental stage, e.g. at Conformist, Achievement, Pluralistic or Evolutionary levels, as I will explore below. And if that wasn't enough, Wilber also explains (in *Integral Spirituality*) how spirituality has essentially different dimensions when viewed from the first person (subjective), second person (inter-subjective) and third person (inter-objective) perspectives.

For now in this paper, I will focus on what spirituality looks like at the different developmental stages, as described by Frederic Laloux, that will get us to the heart of the problem of using spiritual language in organisations. I will not provide a full introduction to the Laloux model as this has been covered and discussed often within the APECS community over the last year or so.

POSSIBLE EXPRESSIONS OF SPIRITUALITY AT DIFFERENT DEVELOPMENT STAGES OR PARADIGMS

- **Conformist:** in this paradigm 'spiritual' is usually tied up with the whole traditional or conventional religious piece, which for the largely secular organisational and business world in the UK is mostly a no-no and an immediate turn off. Talking about spiritual levels of experience or awareness, our connection with spirit, or spiritual issues of purpose and meaning can be seen as a back door into the territory of religious faith, belief or practice.
- **Achievement:** there is a flavour of 'spiritual' that emerged out of the Human Potential Movement in the seventies and eighties that has actually become quite well accepted and absorbed within the mainstream organisational and business world. It was speaking directly to the modern individualistic and achievement oriented paradigm in terms such as 'realising your full potential to be the best you can be'. Examples of this were EST, NLP, Steven Covey and Tony Robbins, which are all about helping people realise their potential, harness the power of the unconscious and connect with purpose, meaning and identity. Few people realised that language such as 'making a difference' originally started with EST and other such movements. Much of this human potential material has gradually become part and parcel of the performance oriented coaching approach, e.g. see John Whitmore's 'Coaching for Performance'.
- **Pluralistic:** 'spiritual' can also come wrapped up with the whole post-conventional, alternative culture and new age consciousness thing, including the 'spiritual but not religious' position. In worldview terms this lines up squarely with the pluralistic or relativistic paradigm (also called Cultural Creatives by sociologist Paul Ray). The trouble is that elements within this paradigm are often set against the modern achievement or materialistic paradigm that precedes it (e.g.

which becomes a people versus profit conflict), but which is still largely dominant in business as well as many other organisational sectors. So apart from enclaves such as HR, the spirituality that comes in these alternative clothes is usually treated with suspicion by mainstream leaders. To a large extent much of the therapy world (which used words such as wounding, healing, harmonising, etc.) is also aligned with this perspective (as opposed to psychiatric or conventional psychoanalytic which is more centred in Achievement rationalistic), as is the wider field of healing and alternative medicine.

There is another flavour of pluralistic 'spirituality' which has been more successful at making itself accessible and gaining acceptance within today's organisations, which I will label **Eastern-spirituality influenced consciousness development**. This is the home of meditation and other practices that have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of mainstream Western society and in recent years have become more widely accepted in the form of Mindfulness, particularly as a practice seen to have practical benefits for all sorts of people within organisational settings. The point of these 'mindfulness' approaches is that they have managed to focus on the practice and its benefits rather than any associated traditions, beliefs or philosophies (which people can buy into as an optional extra). Mindfulness in coaching is becoming a well established practice or set of techniques and is usually well accepted by clients as useful and relevant.

- **Evolutionary:** by exploring the critical conditions and characteristics of Evolutionary organisations, Frederic Laloux points towards some of the key agenda's that potential evolutionary leaders might bring to coaches – e.g. how to initiate self-managing teams, how to model wholeness and authenticity within organisations, how to help an organisation's evolutionary purpose emerge. I would suggest that these sorts of agendas require the help of coaches who are able to bring a psycho-spiritual perspective, who can engage in the language of identity, purpose, wholeness, authenticity, relationship, trust and transparency in a relevant and adaptable way. Coaches might also need to play a role in helping their clients develop and evolve towards the Evolutionary worldview or paradigm. The role for coaches here is to sense and support their client's desire to grow and develop beyond conventional notions and boundaries.

Also as systemic thinking becomes more commonplace within the organisational context, organisations are giving more attention to environmental and ecological perspectives which are held within a context of global consciousness and connectedness and might be seen as expressions of an 'evolutionary spirituality'.

BRINGING 'SPIRITUAL' INTO THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

Now let us return to the problem with 'spiritual' in the organisational context.

What is the problem with the use of 'spiritual' language from this developmental perspective? We need to consider both the worldview or paradigm of the sender and recipient of a message containing a 'spiritual' reference, as well as the particular mindsets, attitudes and dispositions of the recipient towards the spiritual territory, including any inherent religious faith or beliefs.

- What lens is the recipient looking through?
- And which paradigm do they perceive the message to be coming from?
- What baggage (see above examples) does this bring with it?

This can quickly become rather complicated! So to keep it simple: the majority of executives and leaders will be looking primarily through an Achievement-oriented lens, and will most likely be uncomfortable with messages coming from either the Conformist or Pluralistic perspectives, unless they happen to resonate with particular mindsets or beliefs that they also hold. They are more likely to be responsive to Achievement-oriented human potential messages, although there are aspects of delivery style that can equally be a turn off with these (see Tony Robbins TED talk on the Six Human Needs).

How is the typical Achievement-centred leader likely to respond to spiritual language framed from the evolutionary paradigm? First of all, in one-to-one interactions, the skilled evolutionary coach is going to adapt or tailor their language and message so that it can be received by the recipient, so the problem can be disappeared or minimalised in this way. But what about in groups or larger audiences or with written communication such as what we put on our websites? Here the evolutionary speaker might convey a message which speaks to the evolutionary-spiritual terrain (e.g. wholeness and collective purpose as transformational principles, individual transitional crises of meaning or direction, etc.), but which is aware of the developmental spiral and accordingly uses language which can relate to other leadership paradigms.

THE SOCIAL-HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

From this perspective the problem can be seen as this – the Western Enlightenment helped achieve a separation of church and state (which later evolved into a separation of religion/spirituality and secular-society/business) which has worked well enough for the modern Western world until now but has come at the price of a corresponding spilt in our consciousness (e.g. between heart and mind) and the way we think about and organise our lives. Even in the US which has stayed a much more religious country than the UK, the separation of one's personal and business life is seen as important.

I say that this has worked well enough until now, but the evolutionary process is gradually challenging conventional boundaries between personal and business, or private and work lives, and agitating towards more and more of the human being coming back into the work or organisational environment. Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence are now being followed by Spiritual Intelligence...

Bringing heart and soul into the workplace is not a straightforward challenge, however, and many organisations may need to go through more transformation than they realise in order to make people want to do this. The question leaders should be asking is whether their organisation is a fit place for people to bring their heart and soul into. Are people able to trust the organisation with their whole and authentic selves? But that discussion is for another paper.

There is also a cultural dimension to this (both organisational and national). Below I include two examples that I use when working with mindsets to illustrate that different people see these issues differently:

Some people	Because they believe that	Others believe that doing this	And they	Because they believe that	While the first group believe that doing this
Talk freely about personal issues to people they have only recently met	Sharing personal issues freely is open and friendly	Is superficial and insincere	Only talk about impersonal issues to people they have just met	Being impersonal with strangers is polite, discreet and honours the depth of closer relationships	Is cold and distant
Mix business and pleasure	Life is a continuum, it is good to know the people you work with	Means life is taken over by business, you become a workaholic	Separate their business and private lives	Everything has its time and place, personal time should be respected	Puts life into compartments, is unnatural, schizophrenic

BEING ACCESSIBLE AND RELEVANT: FINDING A ‘WHOLE PERSON LANGUAGE FOR EVOLUTIONARY LEADERSHIP

The future task at hand as I see it is therefore to find a way to talk about and work with the whole human being (and thus include the transpersonal or spiritual dimension) in a way that bridges or heals this split in human consciousness within society and is accessible and relevant to the organisational and business worlds, without the alienating impact of some unnecessary baggage.

This is what we are attempting to do with our Psychosynthesis Coaching Certificate Courses and through our work with organisations, but its not easy! And I *know* there are many different pathways to working in this territory – what’s your experience? How do we take this forward? Is this a real problem or just an intellectual one? Please offer any thoughts and engage in this discussion!