

*Who We Are:
Toward a Unified
Theory of Coaching*

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Abstract

One of the greatest needs of the coaching profession is a deeper theoretical foundation that supports the coaching profession as an independent and autonomous profession. This includes theoretical support for a particular View of Man, the Nature of Interpersonal Life, an Explanation of Human Change, and the Deeper Purpose of Life that the coaching profession envisions.

Such a theory needs to be internally consistent and have broad explanatory power regarding these fundamental assumptions of the coaching profession and the application of coaching techniques. The theoretical perspective offered by the Arbinger Institute and the work of Dr. Terry Warner offers such support within the context of a deep and profound philosophical tradition.

The present article examines basic assumptions made by the coaching profession and an underlying philosophical perspective that supports those assumptions. As such, it offers much to the coaching profession as it searches to define itself as an art and science of human and cultural change.

The phenomenon of self-deception has perplexed scholars in philosophy and the human sciences for centuries. Simply put, it is the problem that humans seem to create problems for themselves and yet resist specific solutions to those problems. Self-deception enters the life of every human, coach and client, and its solution points to several key learnings for the coaching profession that illuminate where to apply skills, where to look for results, and what gets in the way of successful coaching interventions. This paper will focus on the concept of Way of Being as a fundamental and determining cause of self-deception and will be discussed as it related to coaching process and practice.

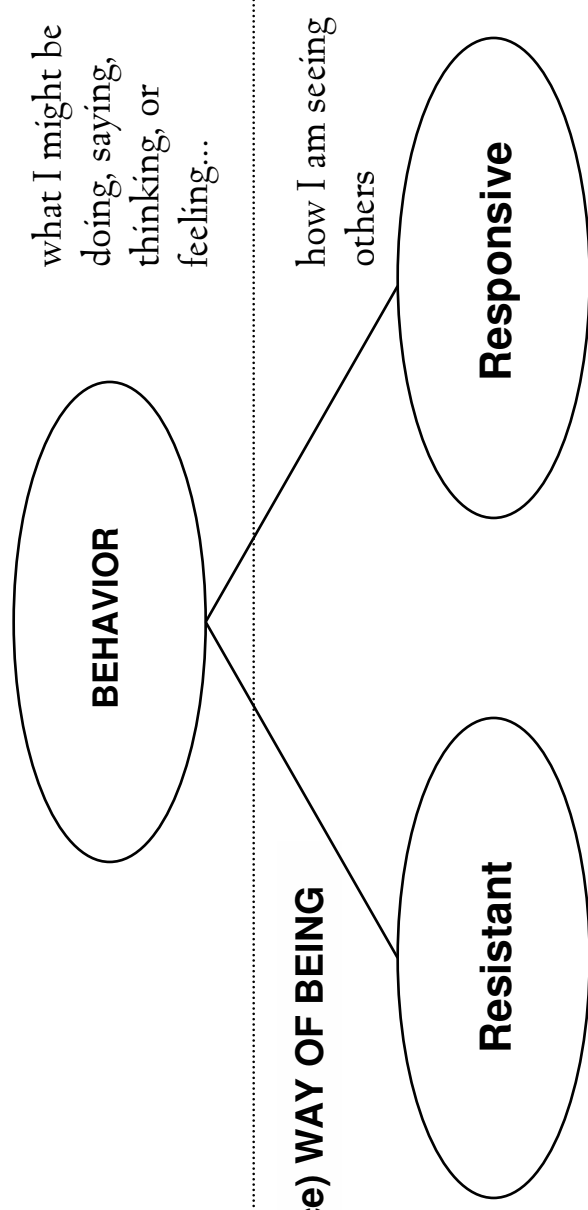
Problems in Coaching

- Coaches seek to help clients change, and do all they can to facilitate learning and action.
- But often, coaching skills and strategies fail. *Clients resist change.*
- Most solutions to these failures of skill are also on the level of behavior or skill: we seek a behavioral solution to a behavioral problem.
- Human beings are more than just our behaviors. We are beings in relationship.
- Neglect attention to our relationships, and we begin to see others as less relevant and less important than we are. We *resist* others, and this creates resistance *in* others.
- Most client failure to change results from this distorted way of seeing others. It is a problem of way of being, not behavior.
- Coaching needs to address way of being to be fully able to help clients to overcome resistance and progress towards change.

Self-Focus and Coaching

- To what degree does the success of coaching depend on how coaches view human beings and their relationships?
- Does coaching encourage clients to focus on themselves in a way that suggests others are unworthy (or less worthy) of focus?
- To what degree do a person's efforts to change involve her or his social context?
- What relationship results are we helping clients to produce when we encourage them to focus on themselves?
- What is the social cost of self-focus?
- If coaches do not help clients choose their way of being, how are they helping them to choose the resistant way?
- How can coaching conversations include the reality of the client's needs *and* the equally legitimate needs of others in the client's life?

Way of Being



what I might be doing, saying, thinking, or feeling...

(below the surface) WAY OF BEING

how I am seeing others

Resistant

Responsive

I see others as **objects**:

They appear **less real** to me than I do to myself.

Their cares and concerns matter **less** to me than my own.

I actively **resist** their humanity.

I see others as **people**:

They appear **just as real** to me as I do to myself.

Their cares and concerns matter **the same** to me as my own.

I actively **respond** to their humanity.

The Choice of Two Ways

- There are two ways of being: the resistant way, in which I see others as *objects*, and the responsive way, in which I see others as *people*.
- We can see people as objects in three primary ways: as *vehicles*, as *obstacles*, or as *irrelevancies*.
- Way of being is the expression of our social nature. It is a brute fact of human existence.
- Way of being is *deeper* than behavior: it is what lies below (and determines) our actions, thoughts, and feelings.
- Way of being is *more important* than behavior, because people respond primarily to how we feel about them rather than what we do.
- The choice between the two ways is present in every moment.

A Story About Values

Coaches understand values to be individual signposts that point clients to what it means to them to live a fulfilling life. It would seem that values, being unseen until expressed in behavior, are deeper and more important than the behaviors that would bring them to fruition. Said another way, it would seem that values determine behavior.

However, there are two ways to hold a value. We can ponder and act on our values seeing others as objects, or seeing them as people. One of our colleagues for years held a value of "truth" as a guide for his actions.

He discovered after considering the two ways of being that he had always held this value resistantly, as a tool to justify the primacy of *his* truth and the inferiority (and sometimes the nonexistence) of the truth of others. Consider what this person's impact would be on others when acting in accordance with his values. Would he have been on the road to fulfillment?

Values can actually be weapons, as well as guides to a fulfilling life. The choice lies in the two ways.

Life is in Relationship

- Human beings are by nature social beings.
- We are what others have made us through the processes of socialization.
- Everything we think, say, do, and feel exists in this social context.
- Though we are individuals, we are not *merely* individuals, not in the way modern culture assumes.
- Coaching theory and application have largely failed to account for this social context.
- This failure has resulted in coaches encouraging client self-focus at the expense of client results and well-being.

Exercise is in Relationship: Applying Way of Being to a Change Initiative

Consider: I have a problem maintaining a regular exercise routine. Isn't this my problem?

Yes. And like all of my problems, I have it among others.



If I am to exercise, I am the one who must begin to exercise. In this respect, it is about me, and I may find profit in wondering what about me has kept me from exercising in the past.

However, I must always remember: nothing about me is merely about me. For my desire to exercise (or not) is a desire I feel (or don't) in the context of a life with others. Motivation can come either from Responsiveness or Resistance. I feel motivated or not among people.



I may find it more helpful to wonder: What about how I have been with others has kept me from exercising in the past?

For example: When I exercise (or not), I do it, or not, in the context of others. That is, I exercise (or not) in the context of others' hopes, desires, and concerns for me and my hopes, desires, and

concerns for them. I also do it (or not) knowing which "me" — the exercising or the non-exercising me — is most helpful and alive with others.

I might consider whether, and to what extent, my desire to exercise (or not) is due to either Resistant or Responsive attitudes I am having toward others. Perhaps I am motivated to do or not do because of certain blaming ways of seeing others or certain self-justifying ways of seeing myself that I need the world to confirm. Perhaps I see myself, others, and the world the way I do because of my need to feel justified in how I am being in the world.

I might also consider that time spent exercising is time I spend either with, or away from, others. And although there are two ways to be with or away from others, that act of being with or away extends its own social invitation. What will be the social price of my exercise or failure to exercise? How will others in my life feel about that price I am willing to pay or not pay?



So yes, any exercise routine is necessarily about me, but because I am necessarily with others, questions of exercising or not exercising are necessarily about others as well — or more precisely, about *how I am being with others* in my exercise or lack of exercise. If I am who I am with others, then I am in exercise (or in lack of exercise) who I am with others.

If I am feeling the need to exercise, then perhaps I should consider: From motivation to execution, in the context of my life with others, how would a Responsive exercise regime look, sound, and feel?

Looking at a Problem Through Way of Being

I. Questions to Ask

The following are some coaching questions we can ask clients (and ourselves) to ponder the social context of an area we are seeking to improve.

- In what ways am I focusing on myself (my "I") in this area?
- How might I be separating or distancing myself from the reality of my relationships with others in this area?
 - Who am I not focusing on when I focus on this area?
 - How has my self-focus impacted my way of being with others?
- In what ways does my choice to improve this area of my life reflect my need for self-justification? How might that impact my motivations for change here?
- Might I be repeating any habitual patterns of being with people in seeking to improve in this area (or in the way I seek to improve)?
- When I think of and act in this area of my life, are there any ways in which I see others as objects (vehicles, obstacles, irrelevant)?
- With whom will my efforts to improve in this area lead me to interact? How have I been in the past with these people? How will I need to be if my efforts to improve are to succeed?
 - Whom am I avoiding or resisting in this area?

- When have I succeeded in this area (or a related area of my life) and how has this been a product of my way of being with others?
- Whose help might I need to improve in this area? Whose help might I be resisting?
- Whom do I know who has improved in this area of her life? What might I learn from her experience? Why might I choose not to do so?
 - Who would say I need to improve in this area? Why?
 - Who might say I might not need to focus here?
 - How do I use this area of my life to fight the "I-You" of me?
- What relationships might need to improve before I can tackle this area? Which ones might improve because I make a change here?
- What will I need to do to see others as people as I undertake the efforts required to change?
- What will I need to do to improve my underlying way of being in my life in general?

2. A Simple Structure

Here is a simple reframe on how to think about a problem that takes way of being into consideration.

"I am in <<this area of my life>> who I am with others."

ex. "I am in losing 40 pounds who I am with others," or
 "I am in getting my finances in order who I am with others," or
 "I am in adding 10 clients who I am with others."

Coaching Skills and Way of Being

Coaches can use the way of being diagram to examine their use of coaching skills and strategies and discover where they might need to improve not on the behavioral level but in their way of being. Here are some ways to do just that.

For any skill or strategy, ask these questions:

- Is <<this approach>> dependent on way of being?
- How? How is <<this approach>> in relationship?
- Are there two ways to <<practice or do this>>?

For example, consider how asking powerful questions is dependent on how we are with others. Ponder the two ways: what do powerful questions sound like in the resistant way? In the responsive way? How might I have used questions resistantly? How might I change?

THE ARBINGER INSTITUTE

The ARBINGER Institute is a management consulting firm and scholarly consortium of world leaders in the problem of self-deception. Arbinger assists individuals, families, and organizations to solve the problem of self-deception and achieve greater peace, productivity, and satisfaction.

More information on Arbinger programs is available online at www.arbinger.com.

THE ARBINGER HELPING PROFESSIONALS NETWORK

The ARBINGER Helping Professionals Network is a group of therapists, counselors, coaches, and others who assist individuals, families, and organizations to apply the solution to self-deception. AHPN members are dedicated to being an out-of-the-box place in their one-to-one helping work. The AHPN trains coaches and counselors in the study of way of being and its practical implications for every day life and work.

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