

# Who We Are: Toward A Unified Theory of Coaching

The Arbinger Institute

## **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 (2002) and the work of Dr. Terry Warner (1986) 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.

Most coaches would agree that the primary goal or heart of coaching is client growth and change. Clients come to us because they wish to be different than they are, or to achieve results that they are striving for or have previously been unable to achieve. Our obligation as coaches flows from this prime directive: we work to focus all our energies on our clients' growth and change.

Coaching training offers us models to understand clients and the change process, as well as skills for guiding the conversation towards clarity around the changes desired and the actions it will take to get those results. Despite our training, however, coaches often fail. Clients sometimes do not change, or change in ways that are insufficient or unsatisfying when compared to their expectations or desires. Another way to say this is that sometimes, clients fail to grow and change, and coaches fail to focus effectively on that objective. Here are some examples:

- a. a client seeking to have a better spousal relationship is mired in her self-doubt and fails to take action; eventually, she stops scheduling calls and does not respond to the coach's invitations to continue the relationship;
- b. a coach takes on a client struggling with money management at a reduced fee and continues the coaching despite the client's regular late payment, all the while resenting the client for his inability to progress to a better financial situation;
- c. a coach finds their client is unable to take significant steps toward marketing their business. Considering the lack of effectiveness that the coach is experiencing he focuses more and more on the goal not being achieved rather

than examining the client's fears and obstacles that are preventing further progress.

- d. A coach is knocked off center by what appears to be a "psychotherapy" issue that is presented by the coaching client. Focusing on feelings of inadequacy or a need to "get rid" of the client, they are not able to focus in a helpful way to clarify the issue within the coaching process or facilitate an appropriate referral.

All too often, we lack the opportunity as professionals to talk about these failures, or we talk about them in an unhelpful way, that is, in a way that does not help us to change and progress. The solutions we seek are behavioral (learning new skills), or strategic (changing coaching focus), or even relational (firing a client or referring her to a new coach or helper). However, coaches are often left with a feeling of dissatisfaction over solutions at this level. Coaches know that there is a deeper level of interaction we must attend to, but we don't always know how to look there.

There are good reasons for these coaching (and clienting) failures, as well as the failure to find solutions for these problems. They link to a failure to understand who we are as humans, how we change, and what impedes change. This failure is built on common assumptions running deep in the currents of modern psychology and popular culture that have unfortunately been adopted into coaching theory without reflection or critical examination. The present paper will show an alternative understanding of coaching based in a comprehensive solution to an age-old problem in the human sciences, and explore how this solution

applies to, and resolves, some of the thorniest problems coaches and clients face as they walk together on the road to change.

### ***Life in Relationship***

Humans are beings in relationship. Our lives are in relationship. All we know, do, say, and think exists in a social context. We develop the capacity for language only with the nurturing presence of others. Our thoughts, feelings, aspirations, all are created in language, in a social context. Our personalities, distinct though they may be, are distinct *from* one another. We are inseparable from others. A further exploration of this relational nature:

“...we are what others have made us, by means of the processes of socialization. What we do is what we are silently guided to do by the expectations of intelligibility and propriety the assimilation of which has made us the persons that we are. We do it in order to acquire legitimacy in the estimation of others. This is true even though we may never realize that such expectations are the sources of our desires and choices—even though we misguidedly may feel we are acting from inner convictions without regard to what other people think. For we acquired the convictions as part of the process of social construction in the first place.” (Warner, 1986)

Coaching has not completely taken into consideration this understanding of who we are, and to the extent it hasn't, coaches unknowingly encourage clients to focus on themselves, without consideration of the social context.

Considerations of what a client wants to change, actions s/he takes to achieve

these changes, and what s/he will require of others during the change process are all implicated.

Just how important the social context is for the human individual can be illustrated by the following example. Consider a client who comes to coaching seeking to improve communication with her employees. The coach might help her to develop new skills and plan for regular meetings. But imagine that at one of these meetings, using her new skills, the client doesn't really care about the people she's communicating with. How will her employees receive her efforts to change? Would her work on skills and strategy have the impact she desired? Would the coaching have worked?

To what degree do individual efforts to change depend on humans' social context? In the example above, it seems that despite attention to behavior and strategy, change depends on something deeper. Our imagined coaching client carries with her a set of attitudes and beliefs about others, which, despite the most seemingly correct behaviors, are still seen and felt by others around her. As humans, we sense what others feel about us, and react primarily to that rather than the outward or surface behavior.

### ***Way of Being***

This sense of what others feel about us is what we call "way of being." It is the way in which we encode our social reality. It is also the "something deeper"

that influences the degree to which efforts to change will be successful. We suggest that there are basically two fundamental ways of being: responsive and resistant.

In the responsive way, we see others as they are, as people with hopes, cares, goals, and problems just as important as our own. We know others have these needs and concerns because *we* have them as well; we know others are people because we are people. In the responsive way, others are as real to us as we are to ourselves.

We don't always see others this way, however. In the resistant way of being, we see others as objects, as having a different status from ourselves. We deny their humanity by minimizing (or sometimes exaggerating) their concerns, cares, aspirations, and challenges. If we see them at all, it is an incomplete (and therefore untrue) picture we see. In the book *Leadership and Self-Deception* (Arbinger Institute, 2002a), the responsive way is referred to as "out of the box" and the resistant way as "in the box." Other Arbinger publications refer to the distinction as "heart at peace" vs. "heart at war" (Arbinger Institute, 2002b). Martin Buber (2000), the twentieth century philosopher, referred to this distinction as "I-Thou" vs. "I-It."

One way to penetrate further into understanding the resistant way of being is to consider three possible ways we can see others as objects. First, when we reduce others to means to some end, we see them as vehicles. Their importance to

us comes not from their personhood, but rather from the degree to which they will be useful to us in achieving a goal. We can also see others as obstacles, as impediments to our wants and desires. Finally, we can see others as irrelevant to our wants and desires. In this case they are not relevant or important enough to consider as persons with an equal status to our own.

Is to focus on way of being and its impact on growth and change to deny the importance of behavior? Taking action, making plans, and uncovering motivation are all essential to making change. Way of being, however, is more important, in the sense that any action we take is in relationship; others sense how we feel about them, and react primarily to that sense. When we are resistant toward others it provokes resistance. Any action we take is always in relation to others, and it will have resonance in the social context. Resistant actions provokes resistance in others, and therefore is less likely to result in positive growth or change.

Another way to think about the distinction between behavior and way of being is this: there are two ways to do almost any behavior. We can be motivated to exercise, for example, because of responsive thoughts about others, or because of resistant thoughts. We might exercise because it helps us to be alert and focused at work and gives us energy to spend with our family. We might also exercise because it reinforces habitual ways of feeling better than others, more fit

and more energetic. These two ways of being give rise to two motivations that feel worlds apart and have profound implications in the coaching process.

### ***Coaching and Way of Being***

In coaching theory and practice, way of being is largely unrecognized.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between behavior and way of being.

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At the top of the figure is “Behavior”, with a line drawn below it. Below the line two ways of being are illustrated, “Responsive” and “Resistant”. This figure illustrates how way of being is “deeper than behavior”. Why? As discussed above, almost any behavior can be done in either a responsive or resistant way. In addition, since way of being is what people respond to in us it is also more important than behavior. This distinction of “above the line” (behavior) and “below the line” (way of being) is a very important distinction that is often misunderstood.

Consider values, for example. Values are understood 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.

But 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 guide to a fulfilling life.

One coaching philosophy goes so far as to say this:

“Values are not morals. There is no sense of morally right or wrong behavior here. Values are not about moral character or even ethical behavior... (Whitworth, House, Sandahl, Kimsey-House, 1998)

If we accept the social nature of humans, as well as the manifestation of this nature in two ways of being, values *cannot* be void of their moral content; they are always an expression of one of two ways of seeing others. Values are dependent on way of being, and in that regard they are “above the surface” with

behaviors. To consider the effectiveness of using values to help a client to change requires first considering whether or not values are held in a responsive way.

Coaching skills and competencies are likewise dependent on way of being. Consider to what degree the ICF competency "Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client" (International Coach Federation, 2001) depends on the coach seeing her clients as people. Way of being, in fact, is the key to understanding why some coaches succeed here and others fail. Intimacy and trust are in relationship. There are two ways to ask powerful questions, two ways to engage in direct communication, two ways to plan and set goals.

### ***Self-Focus and Way of Being***

If coaches accept the social reality of life, and how this reality is grounded in our way of being towards others, what are the further implications for coaching? First, clients *do* certainly need to spend time and resources pondering what actions to take and what they wish to achieve, but to do so (and to be encouraged to do so by a coach) without regard for the social context is to believe that the others they are in relationship with are unworthy of the *same* focus. It is to believe and practice that others are unworthy of being seen as having an equal status to their own.

This self-focus is always an invitation to clients to war with themselves, that is, to deny the importance and personhood of those around them, to deny a

reality that people usually can sense and feel in every moment. It is also an invitation to war with others, as people around us are always presenting themselves, their complicated personhood, to us. It takes effort to constantly deny the humanity of others, effort that clients could otherwise expend in change and growth. Consider the degree to which the coaching profession has suggested to clients that the path to success and happiness is through self-focus, to the exclusion of focus on others.

Each of us has certain hopes, dreams, problems, and challenges in life. The truth about each client's life is just that: the client has important needs, and so do his family members, his colleagues, and his neighbors. Each of these people is a person. To suggest to a client that his needs and goals are more worthy of focus than those of others around him is to distort this reality: others have goals just as important to them as his are to him. Self-focus is distorting because it suggests that the client is *more* worthy of focus and help than are others in his life. The question is not *whether* to focus on self or focus on others. We *cannot* focus on ourselves without simultaneously focusing on others in a way that suggests they are unworthy (or less worthy) of focus. There is, in this sense, only one deep choice: to focus on the world and ourselves resistantly or responsively.

We are in relationship, as are our efforts to change. The only question about where to focus attention in an effort to change is *how* to focus on others and ourselves. One way, suggested above, is to focus on ourselves in a way that holds

others as less worthy of focus, less human than us. We can also focus on others and ourselves in a second way, the responsive way. The challenge for individuals seeking to change is this: How can we fully account for others while striving for our own goals? Aren't these mutually exclusive possibilities? Coaching theory in its present state does not adequately resolve this paradox either in theory or in coaching practice.

### ***The Problem of the Resistant Way***

The sort of "self-focus" suggested by coaching, therefore, is a misnomer, in that clients *cannot* focus exclusively on themselves at all. They are always simultaneously focusing on themselves and others, either in the responsive or the resistant way. Coaching that encourages a self-focus that puts the client's needs above those of others in her life, is coaching that invites the client to enter and live in the resistant way of being.

In the resistant way, I not only resist the personhood of others, but I also resist an essential reality about myself: that I am a person who is always in relationship with others who are no less human than I am. This is the deepest truth about humans, the core of who we are. It is a brute fact. To maintain a self-focus that denies this truth requires a set of distortions known to modern psychology as self-deception. In future papers, we will explore self-deception and its impact on client change and the coach's effectiveness.

Way of being, then, is the deeper level on which many coaching problems exist, and where most solutions to these problems lie. Coaches looking at situations where clients fail to change, for example, might ask themselves where a client has been applying solutions at the behavioral level when s/he could profit from considering to what extent s/he has been seeing others in a resistant way. A coach might also examine how s/he has been seeing her/his client, and to what extent the failure of her/his coaching skills is due to a problem in her/his way of being. Any time, for instance, a coach is more focused on her/himself than on her/his client, s/he will not be doing her/his best to help a client to achieve results.

A coach might also help a client to see how a lack of results is due to the same failure: applying efforts to change while maintaining a superior (or sometimes, inferior) and therefore distorted attitude towards the needs and concerns of others.

### ***The Prevailing View***

This view of humans and what lies at the heart of change is fundamentally different to predominating currents in popular thought, psychology, and coaching. Below we consider three assumptions that help form the basis for many coaching approaches, and offer alternative views derived from the understanding of way of being.

**I am fundamentally an ‘I,’ and the task of life is to become the best and happiest ‘I’ I can be.  
(Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 18)**

This assumption denies the social reality of humans and understands them to be autonomous individuals with completely independent will and means. But life, and every human as s/he lives it, is always in relationship. Any effort to become the best “I” I can be is an effort to deny our social nature, which results in resistance to others through an insistence on the primacy of our individual existence over that of others around us. Humans do indeed have individual will and means, but these are always embedded in a social context.

Our suggestion:

I am always either “I-it” or “I-you,” and the reality of life is that happiness depends on how I am with others (Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 36).

Therefore, I am most successful as a coach when I help others choose to be at peace with others, being the best “I-You” they can be.

**I have needs that must be met if I am to be happy.  
(Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 20).**

While it certainly is true that we have individual needs, others do as well. Our happiness is not necessarily a function of meeting our needs first, or at the expense of others’. In fact, to address our needs in such a way is to foster the unhappiness that results from distancing ourselves from our social nature.

Our suggestion:

I am most happy when I am alive to others' needs (Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 36). Therefore, I am most successful as a coach when I shine light on my clients' aliveness to others' needs.

**I am happiest when I try to feel good about myself.  
(Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 22).**

Trying to feel good about myself, we focus on ourselves. Focus on ourselves, and we focus on others in a way that suggests they are less worthy of focus. Do so, and we condemn ourselves to seeing others in resistant ways. To see others resistantly is to see an unreal world. We cannot choose happiness in the face of this distortion.

Our suggestion:

I am happiest when I am responsive to others (Arbinger Institute, 2002b, p. 36). Therefore, I am most successful as a coach when I encourage them to seek the peace and clarity that comes from being responsive to others.

### ***Further Exploration***

What we have not addressed in this present paper are the full implications of the resistant way. If there are two ways of being, one without distortion and a second with, why would we ever choose the resistant way? And how do we choose? How do we start to see people as objects, and once seeing them

resistantly, persist in doing this? How do we stop? What are the implications of these questions for coaching? There is a need in the coaching profession for further theoretical development to address these issues.

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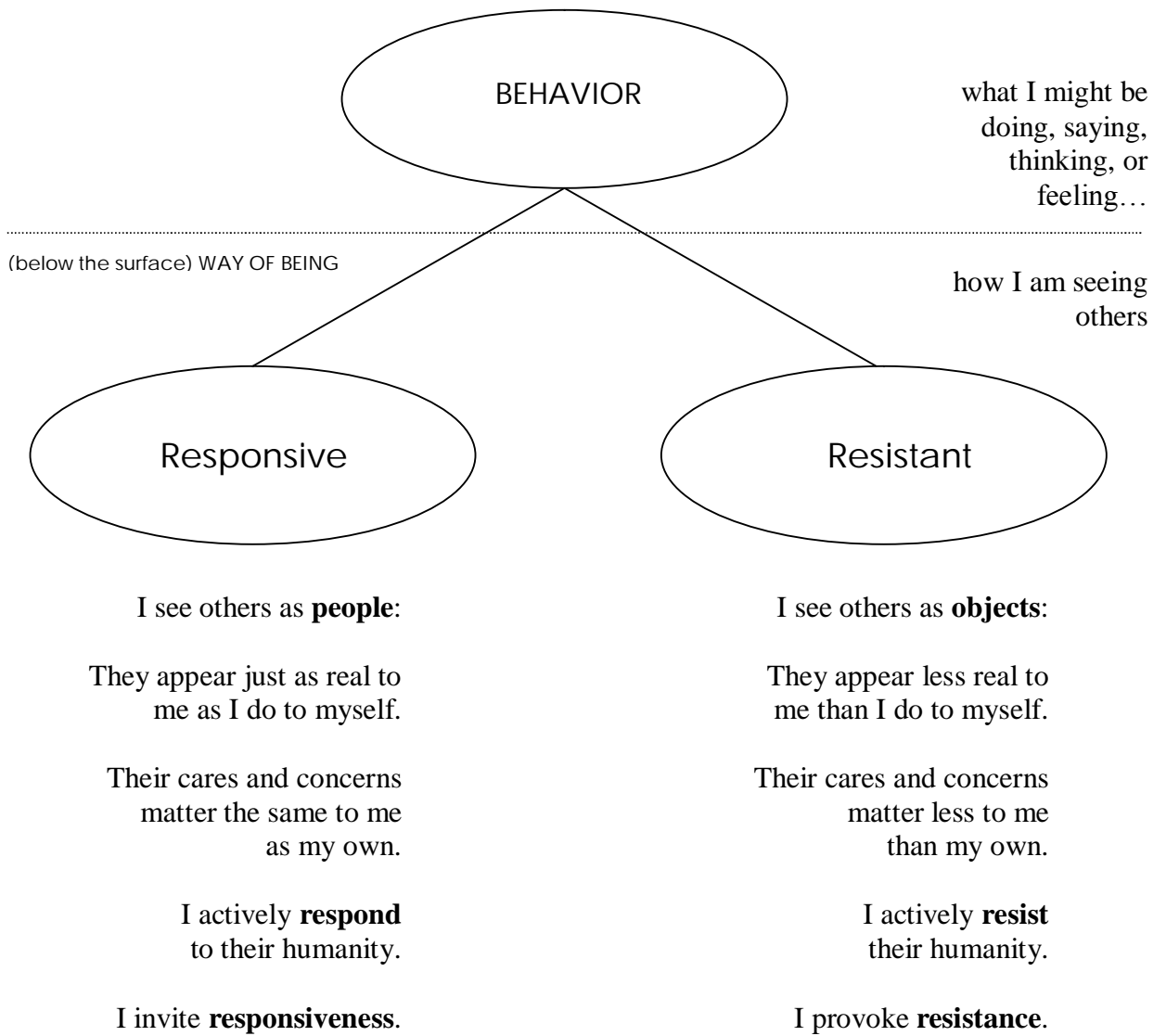
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**Figure 1: Way of Being Diagram**



(Arbinger Institute, 2002a)