DECOLONISING COACHING

Last year established itself as a watershed moment for those working for progress on issues related to social justice, and human and planetary wellbeing. Coach and thought leader Charmaine Roche picks up the theme of anti-racism in relation to our responsibility as a profession, which has a significant, influential presence in workplaces across the globe.

Coaching is already in the process of evolving in response to a number of crises posing existential challenges. The cornerstone principle of coach neutrality has come under scrutiny in the work of academics, practitioner researchers and thought leaders in the field, and by the unprecedented rise of coach activism – the Climate Coaching Alliance being the most visible example.

I am currently engaged in a PhD, and the reading and thinking around my research focus – 'The ethics of coaching for social change in oppressive contexts' – has brought me here. The essence of my focus is an exploration of how we as coaches can use our influence to co-create spaces that become emancipatory for those who feel marginalised and excluded. In relation to coaching and structural racism, I will concretise this in two ways: firstly, by looking at how this plays out in the allocation of resources; and secondly, by looking at how structural racism has become embedded in the guidance available for coaching black and ethnic minority coachees in the workplace.

UNCONSCIOUS BIAS IN CORPORATE GATEKEEPING

Since the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, there has been a realisation in the coaching community that, by acting as gatekeepers, some have been complicit in a system that keeps non-white coaches out of corporate coaching pools. Questions are now being asked about the use of so-called chemistry sessions, where like is matched with like, a practice which perpetuates such exclusion. I recently woke up to this when I was unexpectedly invited into a corporate coaching pool by an HR gatekeeper who had been encouraged by a white coach to make it more diverse. In this way I have been given potential access to work that, relative to what I can normally charge as a sole entrepreneur, is generously remunerated.

It does not matter if such gatekeeping is carried out unconsciously or not. The outcomes are the same: exclusion and a disparity in the earning potential of coaches of colour. This unconscious gatekeeping is based on assumptions that I find do not play out in the work I secure as an independent coach.

Given that I live and work in the UK, my clients are mainly white. In terms of gender, I coach roughly 50/50 male and female. What attracts them to me is my coaching approach, not my colour. The people I work with are not looking for someone 'like them' but someone with whom they can work, someone who will challenge them in a safe and secure space.

COACHING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

As coaching evolves it is important to be aware of the dangers of taking on a form of words without understanding its spirit or acknowledging its source. There has been a proliferation of the term 'coaching for social change' (CfSC). Just as, in the wake of the BLM movement, businesses are clamouring to tick the 'diversity' box, coaches and coaching companies seem to be rushing to tick the 'social change' box. When I googled this phrase in October 2019 for my literature review, very few sources came up. Google it now and a proliferation of sites boast the term without anything seeming to have changed in the fundamentals of the services offered. CfSC needs to be protected from assimilation into the marketplace as yet another commodity in service of high performance and business excellence at the expense of challenging structural inequities and inequality. To protect it from such appropriation, which neutralises its power, we need to understand the theoretical roots of CfSC and the lived experiences from which these theories arise.

As coaching evolves it is important to be aware of the dangers of taking on a form of words without understanding its spirit or acknowledging its source.

To my knowledge, the first practitioner-researcher who used the term coaching for social change, and whose work defines it, is the Egyptian coach Hany Shoukry. His definition of social change is shaped deliberately to avoid the danger of neutrality contained in most sociological definitions that use words like 'change' and 'progress' without contextualising them in relation to social justice, human rights or ecological security. He defines social change as 'change that makes society or workplaces more humanising and thriving, towards what would seem more just, ecologically sustainable, inclusive, empowering and peaceful.'[i]

In building his theory and practice of coaching for emancipation, Shoukry draws on his experience of coaching under a dictatorship and from coaching in the UK, where he did his PhD and also where he observed both the obvious and subtle ways in which oppression operates here. As theoretical underpinning, Shoukry turned to liberation social psychology and the pedagogy of liberation[ii] that emerged out of the struggle against colonialism and imperialism.

It is imperative for any coach, irrespective of colour, to be aware of the contribution that liberation social psychology can make in supporting anti-racist work or any form of liberatory work, for example when coaching women stepping into leadership positions in workplaces dominated by patriarchy. Positive or behavioural psychology or systemic coaching approaches on *their own* are not sufficient for this task as they all remain silent on the role and use of power employed by oppressive ideologies; on the link between the psychological or cultural impacts of oppression and politics; on economics and the history of domination; on oppression; and on the histories of resistance and liberation – all of which affect the populations for whom these histories are lived experience.

This is what defines the work of coaching for social change – or, to be unambiguous – coaching for social justice. This is as true in wider social contexts as it is in the workplace.

COACHING IN THE RACIALISED WORKPLACE

Another example draws on work done on the decolonisation of the psychological sciences in respect of the dominant approaches used to support people coping with oppression.[iii] I have applied this critique to the context of coaching. The guides that coaches currently use for working with issues of race or racism need some re-examination. Having enthusiastically adopted these approaches in the past, I now find myself looking at them critically for the first time.

Diversity guidelines for working with black employees need an anti-racism lens informed by both research and the lived experience of these individuals, who suffer from daily micro aggressions in the workplace. Some of the guidelines for coaches working with diversity acknowledge the presence of racism and the social disadvantages arising from it, but then proceed to neutrally place the dominant ethnic group in relation to the minority ethnic group as just another ethnic group, and the tensions that arise in the workplace are characterised as a clash between majority and minority ethnic cultures fostered by ignorance. One example I came across generalises about the black coachee who fiercely keeps work and home life separate, or who refuses to socialise with work colleagues out of hours. This is seen as 'cultural' and as a 'self-limiting behaviour' that could damage the work progression and performance of black coachees. The coach is guided to encourage the coachee to open up and share more in the workplace or to create opportunities for socialising in ways more compatible with his or her cultural beliefs, on the basis that more openness will be conducive to greater cultural understanding.

An alternative reading is invited by liberation social psychologists: we are invited to recognise that the dominant culture may be infused with assumptions, attitudes and behaviours rooted in systemic racism. This perspective sees that a black coachee may have developed the behaviours described above as coping strategies to keep them psychologically safe in a hostile environment. They are not neutral properties of culture but developed forms of self-protection, resistance or refusal – in the same way that a woman executive may not want to conform, for all sorts of reasons, to a dominant male norm of socialising after work in pub or cafe, and made to feel unfriendly or distant because of this. While, in the short term, abandoning these strategies in favour of adaptation may bring rewards and success, in the long term it may compromise the individual's mental health and wellbeing. Working from this perspective, a coach would not only challenge the coachee to develop the psychological resources to survive or thrive in this environment but work to help the coachee and

the organisation to champion greater cultural sensitivity and actively promote anti-racism.

NEW COACHING FOR NEW WORKPLACES

Practice is moving on where research and guidance is lagging. In the preparation of this article I spoke to occupational psychologist Tinu Cornish. Specialising in diversity and inclusion in the workplace, Cornish was a coach when she wrote this chapter but, recognising that progress for black or other ethnic minority aspiring leaders is affected by the power dynamics in a racialised workplace, she now works exclusively as an occupational psychologist supporting HR departments to grow black and ethnic minority leadership talent in organisations. As a coach, black coachees would be referred to Cornish at the end of a competency process where the psychological climate and procedural process meant that no developmental work was possible. She now works with people of colour only when the organisation involves their line manager and a sponsor who will support and be an ally for the person in the workplace. This can promote systemic developmental change.

I have begun a collaboration with Jonathon Passmore (editor of *Diversity in Coaching* and professor of coaching at Henley Business School), on a research project that will become a chapter in my PhD, on the subject of race in coaching. It will look at the coaching industry as a potentially oppressive context through the question, 'what would it mean for the world of coaching to take an anti-racist position?' The global research is being supported by colleagues from a number of universities, including Mel Smith (Case Western, USA) and Patricia Bosson (Massey, New Zealand) as well as by the African Executive Coaching Council. The wider research project is split into four parts, reaching out to coaches of colour, coaching professional bodies, coach training providers and suppliers of coaching. My focus in on coaches and professional bodies.

I believe that it is time that handbooks and practice guidelines are upgraded to take into account the watershed moment of 2020, from which there must be no return to the former position of 'adapt or leave'.

ETHICS AS CRITICAL PRACTICE

My voice joins the many voices that are now active in the evolution of coaching, building on current best practice to bring it into the service of change for social justice and sustainability. As a minimum, this means, when contracting for our services, we own the right to raise these issues where we see them in ways that are safe for our coachees. We need to widen further our awareness to the settings where people can be subject to discrimination, prejudice or oppression, to see their stories within this context.

In a world where we are all subject to the individualistic, atomising dictates of our globalised economic models and toxic politics which mutate like a virus to keep a broken system barely functioning, we are all called upon to remain vigilant and critical. This is an ethical responsibility. Ethics as critical practice requires us to call out when the ideas holding sway are at odds with what is humane and just. That includes keeping a critical eye on the dominant 'truths' by which we practise our own art, craft and science of coaching.

New coaching for new workplaces does not need to wait for such new research to know what to do; asking, listening and responding are good places to start.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Decoloniality is a critical theory and way of being that challenges the power structures of class, race, gender and heterosexual dominance that originate from European colonialism. It recognises that colonial patterns of power and knowledge creation continue to dominate in post-colonial times through Eurocentrism and globalisation. It brings the voices and narratives of the marginalised and excluded into mainstream discourse.

Liberation social psychology departs from traditional psychological focus on the individual and the attribution of an individual's distress to within the individual. Liberation psychology seeks to understand the person within their socio-political, cultural and historical context. Therefore, distress is understood not solely in internal terms but in the context of an oppressive environment that psychologises and individualises distress.

CALL FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you are a coach of colour, resident in the UK, USA, New Zealand or Africa, and interested in participating in the research project described in this article, please contact Charmaine Roche at **charmaine@lifeflowbalance.co.uk**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Charmaine is based in the UK. She is an AC-accredited executive coach and director of Lifeflowbalance Coaching and Consulting Ltd, a company she developed after a 29-year career in education. She serves a diverse client group from school leaders to leaders working at c-suite level. Her PhD research into the ethics of coaching for social change in oppressive contexts inspired her podcast, *Speak Up Speak Out: Ethics Matter.*

i. Shoukry, H. (2017). Coaching for social change. In Sage Handbook of Coaching. SAGE Publications.

ii. Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin (1970).

iii. *Beyond adaptation: decolonising approaches to coping with oppression* (Phillips, Adams & Salter 2015). Journal of Social and Political Psychology