INTERNAL COACHING DISCUSSION FORUM

Discussion Paper 04

Is It Possible for Coaching to Be Culturally Neutral?

Coaching models were built around an assumed coachee: autonomous, verbal, goal-directed, comfortable with silence. Culture is one of the ways real people depart from that assumption. Neurology is another.

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September 2026

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Coaching, as a profession and a practice, grew out of specific soil. Its foundational models were developed in North America, Western Europe, and Australasia, within societies that tend to value individual autonomy, personal goal-setting, self-disclosure, and direct communication. The GROW model assumes a coachee who wants to set personal goals. The nondirective tradition assumes a coachee who is comfortable leading the conversation. The emphasis on self-awareness and reflection assumes a psychological orientation that is far from universal.

None of this makes these models wrong. It makes them situated.

What would neutral mean?

The word carries at least four different claims. Coaching might be called culturally neutral if it contains no culturally situated assumptions; if it works equally well across cultures; if it avoids imposing the coach's values on the client; or if it can be adapted to fit different cultural orientations.

A model can satisfy one of these and fail another. A coach can avoid imposing their values while working within a model that assumes a great deal about how people think, which meets the third test and fails the first. The first is the demanding one. Neutral would mean free of culturally situated assumptions. Coaching does not meet that standard.

The cultural assumptions of coaching

The assumptions behind GROW and the nondirective tradition are culturally specific. In collectivist cultures, personal goals may be secondary to family or community obligations. In cultures with strong hierarchical norms, a coachee may expect the coach to give advice and find a nondirective approach confusing or unhelpful. Where indirect communication is the norm, the directness expected in contracting and goal-setting may feel uncomfortable. Where fate, faith, or acceptance play a larger role than individual agency, the action-oriented emphasis of most coaching models may feel misaligned.

Carr and Seto (2013), in action research with 14 internal coaches in the British Columbia Public Service, found several of them recognising this tension. As one put it: 'We have assumptions in coaching. What is the agenda of coaching?' Another noted that coaches tend towards a control orientation, believing that individuals can and want to effect change in their lives. This view, the coach observed, may not fit for clients oriented towards humility or acceptance.

The coaching profession, in other words, has a culture. And like all cultures, it risks treating its own assumptions as universal truths rather than as one set of orientations among many.

The assumed coachee

Goals, autonomy, disclosure, agency: those are assumptions about what a coachee values. Coaching makes a second set about how a coachee works: that they are verbally fluent, comfortable with ambiguity, able to tolerate silence without anxiety, and able to translate insight into action on the timetable the model expects. Put both sets together and they describe a person. Call that person the assumed coachee. No such person exists, but the models behave as though they do.

Culture is one way real people depart from this figure. It is the departure the coaching literature has examined most closely. Neurological difference produces departures that are just as consequential and considerably less often discussed. Because they are read as individual traits rather than group norms, they are more likely to be treated as deficits in the coachee than as limits of the model. These are not two separate inclusion agendas. They are the same problem seen twice: a model built around an imagined standard coachee, meeting people who are not that coachee.

The Cultural Orientations Framework

The Cultural Orientations Framework, developed by Philippe Rosinski (2003, as cited in Carr & Seto, 2013), identifies 17 cultural dimensions organised across seven categories. Rather than categorising people by nationality or ethnicity, it maps their preferences across dimensions such as control versus harmony versus humility, individualistic versus collectivistic, competitive versus collaborative, doing versus being, and hierarchy versus equality.

Each dimension describes a spectrum, not a binary. A person's profile reflects preferences that may be shaped by national culture, organisational culture, professional culture, family background, or personal experience. Naming difference is what makes the framework useful, and it is also what makes it risky. Any framework that sorts people into dimensions can harden preferences into categories. A coach who has learned the vocabulary may start classifying instead of listening.

Rosinski also identifies three stages of ethnocentrism relevant to coaching practice (as cited in Carr & Seto, 2013). In the first, cultural differences go unnoticed. In the second, they are noticed and judged negatively. In the third, they are acknowledged and their importance downplayed. What drives this, on his account, is not hostility but a lack of awareness. The goal is a fourth position, where difference is neither ignored nor minimised but actively engaged with as a source of insight.

Findings from the research

Carr and Seto (2013) asked their 14 coaches to complete the COF assessment, participate in debriefing sessions, and then write reflective accounts of coaching experiences where culture played a role. The dimensions that came up most often were being versus doing, hierarchy versus equality, and monochronic versus polychronic. Four of the themes that emerged bear on the argument here.

The culture of coaching itself

Several coaches recognised that coaching carries cultural biases. The nondirective model assumes the coachee wants to lead; some clients prefer a more consultative approach. One coach described a client who wanted to be told what to do, and the tension this created with the coach's training. The coach had to cross over their own professional beliefs about what coaches do and do not do in order to offer the client something useful.

Cultural awareness in coaching is therefore not only about understanding the client's culture. It is also about understanding the culture of coaching itself, and being willing to adapt when the model does not fit the person in the room.

Similarity, mismatch, and what each costs

Coaches described sessions that had gone less well because of unrecognised cultural mismatches. One realised, by the third session, that they had been operating from their own agenda (going deep, focusing on presence and being) rather than the client's agenda (finding a new position quickly, focusing on doing). The client was going through the motions without engagement. Others described feeling disengaged from clients whose values differed from their own, and wanting to end the coaching relationship as a result. Cultural mismatch does not only reduce effectiveness. It can also undermine the coach's motivation to continue.

Shared orientation avoids that, and carries its own cost. Most coaches wrote about successful experiences where they and their client were aligned: the coaching flowed, trust built quickly, and the coachee was more willing to be open. Coaches also recognised that alignment can blunt challenge. As one put it: 'It is hard to steer someone to another direction when it isn't yours either.'

Insight from different orientations

Coaches found that when their cultural orientation differed from the client's, the difference could broaden the client's perspective. One described how their own increased cultural awareness helped a client increase his, resulting in greater acceptance of differences in the workplace. Another described helping a client move from their

preferred orientation (equality and collaboration) towards the opposite (hierarchy and competitiveness) because the client's environment demanded it.

If matching coaches and coachees for similarity optimises for comfort, it may do so at the expense of learning. Difference, handled with awareness and skill, can generate insight rather than only discomfort.

Adapting is learnable, and difficult

Adapting to a client's orientation required effort, not just intellectual understanding. One coach described working with an Aboriginal employee oriented towards collectivism in an organisation that expected individualism. There was, the coach noted, 'no middle ground that she could see or that was being offered.' Individual coaching could increase awareness but was not an organisational-level intervention. The systemic barriers remained.

Coaching has a limit as a tool for inclusion. It can help individuals navigate cultural tensions; it cannot, by itself, change the organisational systems that create them. When an organisation asks coaching to solve an inclusion problem without adapting its own arrangements, coaching risks becoming a mechanism of assimilation.

The limits of adaptation

The findings point towards adaptation as the answer: the coach adjusts to the person in the room. That holds for the cases the research covers, all of which involve a coach adapting towards something the client needed. It leaves open what a coach should do when the client wants something the coaching might reasonably resist.

Suppose a client comes from a strongly hierarchical culture and expects the coach to tell them what to do. Should the coach become more directive? Possibly, at least at first; a model the client cannot use serves nobody. But how far? At what point does adapting to hierarchy reproduce the power relations that coaching might otherwise help the person examine?

The client who moved towards competitiveness is the same difficulty in another form. That is responsive coaching. It is also, arguably, coaching in the service of an environment that might itself deserve challenge. Culturally responsive coaching could mean accommodating the environment, challenging it, or helping the client consciously choose between the two. Those are three different practices. The choice between them is rarely made explicitly.

Underneath both cases sits a question of fidelity. Organisations commission a coaching model and then ask coaches to adapt it. Adaptation has a point beyond which the thing being delivered is no longer the thing that was commissioned, evaluated, or accredited.

The same problem on a different axis

Neurodiversity-affirming practice starts from the premise that neurological differences, including autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, are natural variations in human cognition rather than deficits to be corrected (Doyle, 2020; Singer, 1999). These differences do carry difficulty. Doyle's (2020) biopsychosocial framing locates that difficulty in the interaction between a person and an environment, which means it can be addressed from either side.

The social model of disability makes this explicit. Oliver (1990) located disability in the barriers society constructs rather than in individual impairment. Applied to coaching, the model asks whether the problem in a session that goes badly with a neurodivergent coachee lies in the coachee, or in what the model assumed about how people think, communicate and engage.

Consider the assumed coachee again, this time against what is known about neurodivergent cognition. The nondirective tradition relies on open questions and tolerated silence. For a coachee who processes language sequentially, or who experiences ambiguity as threat, an open question with no frame may not feel spacious. It can land as a demand without instructions. Specificity here is an accommodation, not a lapse into directiveness.

Goal-setting models assume that motivation follows from a chosen objective. Monotropic attention, described by Murray et al. (2005), works differently: attention flows strongly towards a narrow set of interests and is difficult to redirect by intention alone. A coachee whose attention works this way is not failing to commit to the goal. The model risks mistaking an attentional architecture for a motivational deficit.

Rapport is assumed to be built through eye contact, facial responsiveness and conversational reciprocity. Milton's (2012) double empathy problem reframes what happens when these are absent. The breakdown is mutual rather than one-sided: the neurotypical coach misreads the autistic coachee at least as badly as the reverse. Coaches are trained to read the room. That training was calibrated on a narrow sample.

Contracting assumes the coachee can describe what they need from the relationship at the point when they know least about it. For a coachee who has learned that describing their needs invites judgement, silence at contracting may be the accumulated evidence of that rather than an absence of need.

Much of the coaching literature on neurodivergence focuses on the coachee rather than the coach, although supervision, accreditation and assessment processes carry their own assumptions about written reflection, verbal fluency under observation, and the pace at which insight should arrive. The evidence base is thin either way: Doyle and McDowall (2019) reviewed coaching as a disability accommodation for dyslexic adults and found the practice widely used but barely theorised.

Rosinski's three-stage pattern has a close analogue here. Coaching can ignore neurological difference, notice it and judge it negatively, or acknowledge it and downplay its relevance. The fourth position, engaging with difference as a source of insight, requires the same adjustment on either axis: the model changes to fit the person rather than the person changing to fit the model.

Implications for internal coaching programmes

Culture and neurology point in the same direction: towards programme design rather than individual coach competence. Coach training can include explicit engagement with the assumptions the model carries, and it should. But a well-trained coach working inside a programme whose session length, contracting templates and evaluation criteria all encode the assumed coachee will still be working against the design.

Design decisions are where the assumptions are least visible and most durable. Session length assumes something about processing speed. Evaluation criteria that reward demonstrable insight within the session assume insight arrives on that schedule. Contracting templates assume a coachee who can answer the questions on them.

Accommodations encode assumptions in the same way. Where they are available only on request, the coachee must disclose a diagnosis to receive an agenda in advance, a written summary, or a session that runs to a different rhythm. That places the burden of adaptation on the person with the least power in the relationship. Many of these adaptations would serve coachees who have never asked for them, which is an argument for making them design defaults rather than concessions.

Matching is the one place where the evidence cuts against comfort. Carr and Seto found developmental value in pairings where coach and coachee brought different orientations. Whether organisations should act on that, and how far, remains open: the same difference that generates insight can also generate a coachee who does not return after the second session.

Cultural self-awareness is not acquired in a module. It developed, for Carr and Seto's coaches, over time and through supervision. Those who understood their own orientations were better able to work with their clients'.

Questions for discussion

1. What assumptions does your organisation's coaching model carry about the people it coaches? Are they ever made explicit?

2. Carr and Seto's findings suggest that difference can generate insight as well as discomfort. Should organisations therefore deliberately match coaches and coachees across difference, or would that introduce unnecessary risk?

3. Where does your coaching provision assume verbal fluency, comfort with silence, or the ability to reflect in real time? What would change if those assumptions were relaxed for everyone rather than accommodated on request?

4. If a client expects the coach to be directive, how far should the coach adapt? At what point does accommodating a client's expectations stop serving them?

5. Cultural difference and neurological difference are treated here as two instances of the same problem. Does that framing hold in your experience, or do they require different responses?

6. If culturally neutral coaching is impossible, what should coaches aspire to instead?

References

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About this series

This paper is part of the Internal Coaching Discussion Forum, a six-session discussion series for L&D, OD, and talent leaders running from May to November 2026. Each session explores a question about what it takes to create a coaching culture, drawing on published research, named case studies, and 25 years of practical experience. Format: 20 minutes of content, 40 minutes of discussion, via Zoom. Details and registration at tombattye.co.uk/forum.