

Consulting without hints - Doing coaching in a professional field

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Abstract

Coaching has been a word frequently used in the business context, but also in other fields during the last couple of years; **it seems even that** everything seem to be given “coaching label”: There is wellness coaching, finance coaching, traditional consulting that is named “coaching” now, lifestyle coaching and much more.

For the author coaching means systemic-constructivistic coaching. The difference that makes the difference, between systemic-constructivistic coaching and all the other forms of coaching is:

that it takes place in either of the seven fields in the professional – organizational – private triangle;

that it takes place as consulting without hints.

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When I speak about coaching I always mean systemic-constructivistic coaching. For me, the difference that makes the difference between systemic-constructivistic coaching and all the other forms of coaching is

- 1) that it takes place in either of the seven fields in the professional – organizational – private triangle (see picture 1)
- 2) that it takes place as consulting without hints.

The seven fields of systemic-constructivistic coaching – Consulting “without hints”

Systemic-constructivistic coaching takes place either

1. *in private life (e.g. “How can I optimize my partnership?”),*
2. *in professional life (e.g. “What would be my optimal career?”),*
3. *in the organizational field (e.g. “Which strategy is most effective?”)*
4. *between private and professional life (e.g. “How can I optimize coordination of my private and professional life?”)*
5. *between professional life and organization (e.g. “How can use my assets for organizational purposes?”)*
6. *between organization and private life (e.g. “Which kind of organization fits best to my private needs?”)*
7. *or between all the three fields (e.g. “How can I coordinate my private life and my professional career plans best for the organization’s purposes?”)*

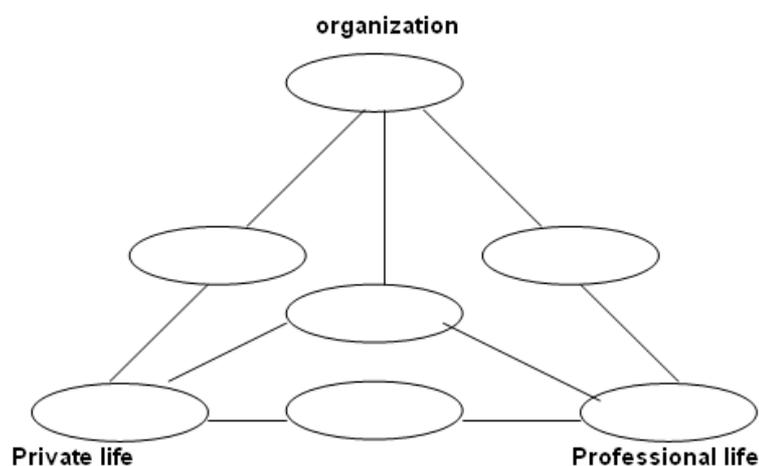


Figure 1. Why “Consulting without hints”?

Well, we are used to get and give hints every day; but we also are used to the fact that they are often not so much “wanted” and seldom lead to the results intended. Above all in business life we have that experience to often: We think that we have to think instead of others (employees, clients, even bosses).

Systemic-constructivistic thinking implies that we never can understand somebody else (von Foerster, 1993) and that everybody thinks differently – having different experiences, goals and mindsets (Maturana and Pörksen, 2003). So the only way to help people is to support their self-reflection – to help people create alternatives in thinking and acting; to increase their numbers of choices (von Foerster, 1993).

It further implies – among others – that we invent our reality and future every day according to our experiences and expectations (Maturana, 2001); that we cannot see anything “objectively”, but are always part of the world we describe (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002); and that “doing” replaces “being” – so that things follow what we do, and not what “there is” (Maturana, 2003).

In brief, coaching without hints focuses on helping people to go on in their world – and this can be of paramount importance above all for leaders who find themselves in the midst of a complex, unsure world where they think to be responsible for all answers needed. Burn out syndroms with the leaders, an increasing lack of adaptation and change of the system and employees never feeling responsible are often the consequences of “leadership by hints” – and burn out syndroms, an increasing resistance against change and organizations giving all their responsibility in the hand of consultants, but getting back to their own “eigenbehaviour” (von Foerster, 1998) are the logic consequences of “consulting by hints”.

If we are confident in the people’s ability to find their tailor-made solutions, we cannot only learn from them, but also help them in a sustainable way.

The general mindset of “consulting without hints”

Consulting without hints relies on five general elements:

Lethology

The word “lethology” was found by Heinz von Foerster (von Foerster and Bröcker, 2002). It is a positive way of talking about “not knowing”. That makes sense if everybody finds his own solutions that cannot be foreseen or prepared by anyone else. If we want to be good at consulting without hints, we may not “know” anything, or in other words, have no hypothesis on what is or should be (de Shazer, 1996).

Whenever we know nothing, we start to ask very astonished – like children: “So – how do you do that?” “How come that you are again and again in the same situation?” and so on).

Strictly using just systemic-constructivistic questions

Systemic-constructivistic questions are special forms of questions with several characteristics:

1. They are always opening questions instead of closing questions (so they require another answer than “yes” or “no”) and start with

- What
- Who
- With whom
- How
- Where
- Where to
- When

(not why, because why leads to defenses).

2. They are questions that lead the client to think (instead of “journalist questions” where the one asking is interested in getting an answer that the other one already knows); there is of course a difference between the question “When will you meet this person again?” and “How would you have to talk to this person next so that your colleague says “This is something very new and positive!”?”

3. They are positive and solution-focused instead of negative and/or problem-focused or analytical.

4. They are never suggestive questions (as e.g. “Don’t you also think that employees should be...?”)

5. They focus on the internal, not the external language (see chapter 3.5.)

Coming from “being” to “doing”

Adopting consulting without hints, we never ask how things are, but how we create them. We see each other as a part of the world and accept that whatever we see (subjectively) is a result of actively doing and pursuing something.

Whatever we can imagine is something we can do – as long as we have done it successfully in the past. That’s why we ask for positive experiences of having things done in the past and about how we would do that in the future.

Daily life/ Management language

Coaching is a method that originally comes from sport and management. That’s why we don’t use a sophisticated or psychotherapeutic language, but a daily life or management language – depending on the field in which coaching takes place. Often the language used by the coach has enormous influence on the competence given to the coach by the coachee and therefore also on the success of the coaching.

And there is a big difference between “using the right words” and “giving hints”. We don’t have to know anything of the client’s problems and of potential solutions – but we have to use a language that fits to what he expects.

Life consists of acting and reacting

Whenever we have a problem to be solved and whenever something should change we first think of the problem to be solved by others than us. We think that if only the others change, the problem would be solved at once and we would be the happiest people of the world.

Yet, systemic-constructivistic thinking implies that the only one to be able to change anything in the world is ourselves; and that we cannot change others (von Foerster, 1993).

And indeed, if we think of the world as a reverse acting and reacting, it doesn't matter where we start: We can start either at the other person to change (which is not very successful as people do not like to get forced into any change); or we can start at ourselves to change (and see which reaction by the others we can create). So instead of asking "What should he/ she/ they do differently so that things get better?" we ask "What should I do differently to make a change in the behaviour of others more likely to be realized?" (de Shazer, 1996).

From "problem solving" to "goal reaching"

There is a big difference between "problem solving" and "goal reaching": Very often we don't reach our goals when we just work on the problems to be solved (de Shazer, 2001); and seeing problem solving and goal reaching on the same scale, we get much more out of a conversation if we ask for the goals instead of asking for the problems to be solved, as the latter method allows us only to reach a neutral point (see picture 2).

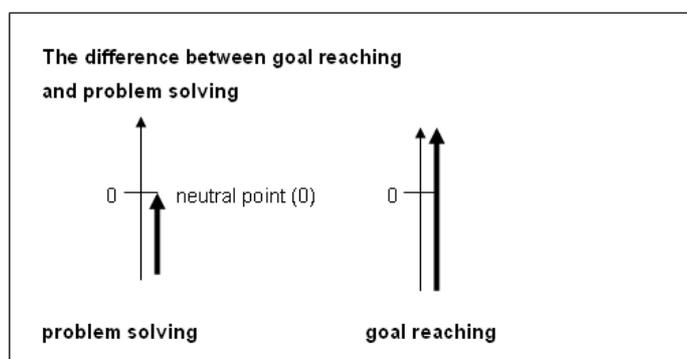


Figura 2. Key criterias of consulting without hints

Beside the mindset, in my opinion there are six main criterias that take place in every consulting process without hints:

The "most beloved goal" vs. the "second best goal"

There are goals which fulfillment we can reach by 100% - and there are others where we can't do that. Very often it is our goal in coachings to change others – but we can't influence the change of others. So we differentiate between goals which are so called "most

beloved goals” which are the once we mouth out first in a coaching session – but which often are not influenceable by us.

Whenever goals cannot be influenced by us, we have to work on “second best goals”: on “how we can deal with the unchangeable”. Of course these goals are mostly not so beautiful as the most beloved goals, but very often they represent the only way to change the situation.

That’s why I focus on this point in every coaching session:

1. “Can you be sure you can reach the goal you have mentioned?” (i.e.: “Can it be 100% influenced by you?”)
2. If not: “Well, we can work on how to change this or that person. But do you think this makes sense – in the meaning of: “Will we be successful?” And if not: “Can we work instead on how to deal with that difficult and unchangeable situation?”

From acting in the “home system” to acting in the “consulting system”

The heart of every systemic-constructivistic coaching is developing a clear oral “contract” – in order to be clear about what should happen during the coaching (consulting system) in order to reach the goals indicated for the client’s “home system” (in which the coach doesn’t take part).

We get an oral “contract” when we ask, “What should we talk about here so that you can reach the goals you have indicated at the beginning of the coaching session?”

Asking for the “contract” gives us the opportunity to make a plan on what to focus on during the coaching session: We then have a clear task given by the client himself. Making a difference between the “home system” and the “consulting system” makes a difference that makes a difference between consulting without hints and other coaching forms.

From being associated with the problem to getting dissociated

Whenever we have a problem, we usually think about it all the time – we stick on it. Consulting without hints focuses on helping the client to be able to see his problem and him with the problem from some distance – either personally (“what would others – experts, people that have nothing to do with the problem – do in this context?”), geographically (“How would you see the problem and possible solutions if you were not in your office, but in Tahiti on a wonderful beach enjoying sun and sea?”) or regarding the time focus (“How would you see yourself acting optimally if you were 75 and looked back to your professional career as a whole?”).

From “not this” to “what else”

Many coaching clients give negative answers – telling what they don’t want to do any more, what they don’t like, what they would like to abandon.

Coaching without hints asks for the positive way of expressing oneself, asking the very simple question “What would you do instead of that?”

From the “external” to the “internal” language

We externally all speak the same language – as we use the same words. Internally though, the meaning of what we say differs from the meaning of any other person in this world. Doing Consulting without hints does not focus on what a person says, but what a person means by that, e.g. by words like “quality”, “success”, “a good day”, “interesting tasks” and so on – easily asked for by using the question, “What do YOU mean by that?”.

Phases of “Consulting without hints”

What’s the matter? (2 – 3 minutes)

We use about 2-3 minutes to listen to the problem the client tells – that’s enough!

Target (home system) and target criterias (2 – 3 minutes)

It is pretty hard for clients to express a positive target (goal) that they can influence by 100%. Mostly they say something like, “I would like to quit this job” or “I don’t want to experience the same as I had in the project two years ago” or “I want my employees to behave more reasonably”.

The task of the coach consists here in working out a goal

- which the clients can influence by 100% (see chapter 3.1.)
- and which he expresses in a positive way (see chapter 3.4.)

Oral contract (consulting system) (2 minutes)

I never work without an oral contract I feel able and willing to fulfill – see chapter 3.2.!

Finding solution key criterias (about 40 – 60 minutes)

Of course we could ask somebody for the solution he thinks of. But this is neither elegant nor (in most cases) a senseful question in the opinion of the client.

So I first ask for solution key criterias – using the question “How would you find out you have a suitable solution?” or “What are key criterias of a possible solution in your opinion?”

Knowing the criterias expressed by the clients, we can also ask for the criterias any other person mentioned before by the client could have.

This phase can be compared with making professional photographs – the quality lies in all the work to be done BEFORE somebody presses the button (e.g. choosing what to shoot, how to shoot it, aligning focus, distance, light and so on...).

Creating a solution picture (10 – 15 minutes)

Finally, the picture can be done. In Coaching without hints I usually introduce this phase – when everything has got clear, prepared and done in the opinion of the client – with a scale question (De Shazer, 2001; Radatz, 2003): “On a scale between 0 and 10, if 0 is you have no answer and no solution at all and 10 is that you already have the perfect solution – where are you right now?” And then we can start to play our “going upstairs game”: “What do you do differently if you are 1 point higher than you are now?” (not: “What is different?”, but: “What do you DO differently?”; not: “What do you do to get one point higher?”, but: “What do you do if you ARE 1 point higher?”). We go up the scale as long as it is useful for the client.

Working out measures (5 minutes)

In business life, we are used to finish productive processes by making measures. Often this is not necessary any more; but it can be helpful to indicate once more what the client will REALLY do (tomorrow, next week, next month, at once).

As you see from the phases, there is no coaching process interrupted in the middle because “the hour is over” or “it seems to be better to do that in our next meeting”.

If we assume that human beings are non-trivial machines (von Foerster, 1993), they would not stop thinking about the problem leaving your meeting if it is not solved. And coming to the next meeting, they will be in a totally different status.

So in my opinion it is in any case necessary to go further until the solution is found. My coachings last for about 1 ½ hours in average; and I have never ever experienced that the solution was not found in one session.

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