It is a whole system perspective but it is the "beyond that" that scares the hell out of some people because it includes the spiritual realm. However it needn’t scare them. A brief look at the history of coaching is helpful.

Coaching, like counselling or psychotherapy, is based upon the principles and beliefs of the psychology of the time. The term coaching was first widely applied to sports teachers. The prevailing psychology then was cognitive-behavioural which seemed to lend itself particularly well to sport because sport was seen, at that time, as mainly about behavioural action. That turned out to be a misperception, but the methodology of the sports coach still has not changed, and it is very different from what is now understood by the term coaching as applied in life or at work.

Life and workplace coaching began to emerge in the seventies and was based upon the predominant progressive psychology of the time, Humanistic psychology with its emphasis on the value of self-awareness, and the idea that self-awareness itself was largely curative. Most coach training today is rooted in humanistic principles with contributions from Transactional Analysis, NLP, Appreciative Inquiry and other adaptations that are similarly based.

Transpersonal psychology, meantime, had long been waiting in the wings. Carl Jung and Roberto Assagioli, both students of Freud, were the fathers of Transpersonal psychology but their child could not find its feet until whole system thinking challenged scientific reductionism, and spirituality escaped from religion. Some fear based resistance to both of these developments persists, academia remains fundamentally reductionistic, and has been slow to embrace the Transpersonal, however it will have to in time, for evolution is inevitable!

Early Transpersonal coaches drew mainly on Assagioli’s psychosynthesis principles, maps and models that lend themselves very well to application in a coaching environment. The need now is for many more coaches to upgrade their coaching skills to include the extremely valuable and effective transpersonal techniques that are available. However three important questions inevitably arise.

1. Why should a coach who is already doing well and getting good results, invest in learning new methods?
2. Can a coach, who is not embarked on their own transpersonal journey, effectively guide a coachee on theirs?
3. Where can a Humanistic coach learn more about Transpersonal coaching?

The transpersonal perspective recognises the vast untapped resource in the wealth of human experience and human potential. People have always expressed a yearning for something far greater than themselves and a knowing that it exists and yet is unknowable. There is no limit to the dreams and aspirations of not only poets, philosophers and playwrights, but of ordinary people. Is this just neurosis, as Freud would have had us believe, or are we touching a deeper part of ourselves that is connected to, and indeed a window into the whole universe?

Assagioli claimed that when we experience this, our super-conscious realm, it is as real as our everyday consciousness on one hand, and our lower unconscious on the other, as parts of our total being. He suggests that the super-conscious contains a wealth of creative ability, of innovation, of peak experiences, of joy, of intuition and of insight that are not easily accessed in the limited linear way our rational minds normally work. He devised techniques to guide people into these realms and to help them access their deeper or higher qualities.

These techniques can be used in a therapeutic context for emphasising the positive aspects of our psyche to overwhelm the negative, but they are not new, and have long been used in Eastern philosophical traditions to foster psycho-spiritual development, and expand human consciousness beyond the boundaries of our physical form.

These techniques can be simplified and used in briefer interventions very effectively in the coaching context for the development of vision or creativity, or of talents, or of higher personal qualities such as wisdom or compassion. The processes often include visualisation, guided or spontaneous imagery, or free drawing and the detailed debriefing of the experience. While the use of these techniques frame the coaching, their form is free flow and it does not transgress the principle that following the coachee’s agenda is paramount.

At the peak of the ever permeable perimeter of our super-conscious is what Assagioli calls the Self, otherwise variously described as the Higher Self or the Soul. It is both individual and universal at the
same time and, occasionally by some people, spontaneously experienced as a momentary sense of oneness of all life and a cessation of time. Such an experience is relatively rare should not be seen as the goal of coaching, but merely as an indicator that soul-consciousness exists.

A little closer to home is a more readily accessible part of ourselves described by Assagioli as the “I” which is who we really are beneath all the masks, roles, labels and defence mechanisms behind which we hide in our daily lives. The “I” is a representation of our Soul and in the most advanced transpersonal work, building a conduit between the “I” and the Self can be undertaken thereby helping the “I” to become a manifestation of the Soul on earth – a very high state. This is the alignment between the personal will and the Will of God, as expressed in Christian terms, and in lay terms, being “on purpose”.

One of the goals of transpersonal work is to help people identify, accept, and gain mastery over their own masks, labels and defences and then at will to step aside from them, to stand clear as the conductor of the orchestra, neither a player in it, nor a victim of it. Assagioli attributed certain qualities to the “I” such as constancy, identity, calmness, non-judgemental, self-directed, but his descriptor was always “A state of pure Consciousness and pure Will”.

Coaches will recognise that those two words equate to Awareness and Responsibility which is the goal of any good coaching. The transpersonal has always been quietly hidden even in basic coaching. When I coach you to be more aware and more responsible for a task or for your development, I am also coaching you to become a little more of your “I”, or who you really are. This place is the heart of true leadership and real benevolent power.

If this point needs any reinforcement, I refer you to Jim Collins’s research on Leadership in his seminal book, “Good to Great”. He examined the leaders of over 1000 major successful corporations, and divided their leadership styles into five categories. Only eleven leaders fell into the top category, level five, and their predominant qualities were humility and will or passion, which once more coincide exactly with Awareness and Responsibility. So whether we come from outside through research or from inside through transpersonal experience, the conclusion is the same. Developing the “I” or finding who you are is invaluable.

Transpersonal coaching is also well equipped for the increasingly frequent and distressing issue for people, particularly in the corporate world, who experience a growing, or indeed a sudden, sense of meaninglessness in their work. Meaning is something that we ascribe in hindsight. However, purpose suggests intelligent intent or an implicit script. The transpersonal perspective holds that every human being has a life purpose and that fulfilment comes with discovering what that is and then manifesting it. There are a number of Transpersonal methods that coaches can use to facilitate someone to find their purpose, and to align their lives accordingly and this does not automatically mean a dramatic life upheaval.

It might appear from this that a Transpersonal coach hypothesises a set of spiritual beliefs and seeks solutions that conform to them. That is a vast over simplification, but it contains an element of truth, so does that earlier question hold? Can a coach use transpersonal techniques successfully if they are not themselves on a spiritual journey? Well, learning the techniques may kick start your spiritual journey anyway and they won’t do you any harm. “Acting as if” is a half way place, for example, “If you had a life purpose, what would it be?” is a very powerful question. The jury is out.

A second question was, “Why should a coach who is already doing well and getting good results, invest in learning new Transpersonal methods?” In response to that, my questions would be, “Can you afford not to when others are?”, “If that is the next frontier, is that not where you want to be?”, “What do you have to lose?”. “What are you afraid of?” Be careful, you might just find out who you are!

And the final question was, “Where can you learn more about the use of the Transpersonal in coaching?” Several schools of coaching now include the Transpersonal, for example Performance Consultants, The School of Coaching in London and, of course, OSCM in 2007.

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