

The Key To Think presents:

New Maieutic

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CHAPTER 3

The Sphinx and the Detective

If you kept in mind that anecdote of procedural interrogation disguised as coaching which I described in the previous chapters, probably you began to think to all the times that such a thing happened to you. You may have recalled some unpleasant situation.

For what I can recall, my first experience of this kind dates back to first grade school. During tests times, the teacher used to call us kids by surname, to then ask shortly: “Did you Study?”. The irony is that in those cases I was always sure of my answer: not only my first years in school were the most interesting (it was all new to learn for me); I also was in good terms with my teachers. So, I was gladly studying, therefore I was rarely unprepared for test. (Alas, the very same question would have been hard to answer, few years later).

On the contrary, I recall how I was panicking when my mom caught me on misdeeds, harsh in inquiring me: “What did you do?”.

I was more comfortable in answering a binary question (those that have two answers, like “yes/no”) rather than some creative one. The reason is that in such a stressful situation, it could be that in the first case I knew that I knew, acknowledging the opportunity to do good on the test. In the other one, I was not sure whether I would be scorned or not (it depended by the gravity of my “crime”). The point I am trying to make is that a binary question reduces the possible number of responses to a scarce handful, while the other type opens the doors to the infinity.

We already considered how the settings that precede the dialogue can have either great or nefarious effects on the conversation; we also observed how the emotional experience of the individual, during the learning moment, must be interesting, stimulating and above all, useful. In a similar fashion, the famous Italian literate *Alessandro Manzoni* expressed this concept in a digression on the values of art, especially on literature, in the famous letter to the Marquis D'Azeglio. The case treated by Manzoni proposed few famous key points against the classic mannerism adopted by literature and philosophy, which in turn was founded on an outdated set of values for the society of that time. The suggested three key values for the reader's experience were the following:

- Real as Subject: the events described are true or probable.
- Interesting as Medium: the plot and the context shall involve and amuse through an understandable language.
- Useful as Purpose: there is a learning moment within the leisure time. Manzoni originally conceived such circumstance as of moral elevation.

By virtue of those three key points, the author is remembered as one of the greatest of Italian literature and among the fathers of modern Italian language. Although nowadays the average reader might find his masterpieces terribly boring, there is an important lesson about the way we are able to focus our attention and energy on something.

To transpose those values for a coaching conversation, I retain that we can give them the following interpretation:

- Real as Subject: facts and experiences of our interlocutor, his/her feelings, and opinions.
- Interesting as Medium: the conversation focuses only on the client, through techniques that stimulates the dialogue and the thinking process.
- Useful as Purpose: the mission of the cycle of conversations is to resolve a real problem and create goals that our client is motivated to achieve.

Let's now analyze those factors one by one, in the context of learning through dialogue.

Real as Subject

The subject of the conversation is and remains our interlocutor; the object, his/her goals or issues.

At this point, we will not consider mentoring relationships. Those kinds of relation prompt us to distribute knowledge previously acquired by sharing past experiences. Such knowledge should be considered *relative* (otherwise subjective), because our past actions are result of our situational perception in a given context. On one hand, they are outcomes of personal solutions: everyone can resolve events successfully in different ways; on the other, choices aren't exclusively a derivation of pure logic in the decision making. It is demonstrated that rationality has a certain ascendant in problem solving, but the more complex and stressful are decision to take, the more our emotional mind plays a determinant role in prosecuting a specific plan of action. In a nutshell, our emotional curriculum gives form to our character and influences our scale of values. Therefore, to put in practice subjective empirical solutions such as those proposed with mentoring, may reveal unproductive.

If instead we take the client experience as dialogue's core we can discern and then analyze facts and his/her opinions, without the risk of a "creative block" that could be caused by our proposition of action plan. This way, not only we will have a clearer idea of the events, especially of the way our pupil perceives and acts on them. Making our way in this ocean of data is possible to transform a conversation in a moment of growth. So, the mission is not so much to teach the other about the "best" way of doing, but to promote a dynamic of thinking that is infinitely stronger and meaningful. The power of active listening is then correlated to the necessity to let the subject extrapolate the best way to succeed in something. Through this personalized optimal experience, we will be able to offer incredible value up to its realization.

Interesting as Medium

Conversations are a highly dynamic form of communication. Hence is important to keep in mind how many factors play a role within a dialogue. We often forget that we

communicate more with our choice of words, voice pitch, and facial expression than with the concept we pretend to communicate.

The coaching conversation is our medium. We need to provoke thoughts, pushing the other beyond the comfort zone, prejudices, and the partiality we are all victims when we cannot dominate our ego. But a conversation is valuable only if it really matters to our interlocutor; that means, if the coachee is determined to carry on with the planned actions in such conversation and being able to pursue them in autonomy.

Clearly, there is a dilemma in defining the commitment and the interest of the client because he can show conviction during the session for then being unable to conclude anything. If a series of conversation proves fruitless, then we have a problem.

We cannot forget that the time spent doing coaching has not an end in itself. Nobody is willing to give away time and even money in a promising activity that is initially promising but does not bring results. In this perspective, the coach should be able to keep on check the curiosity of the other through communication tactics aimed to a progressive application of decisions. This means that over time, in relation to a topic and on a way to a more specific course, our coachee will need to spend more time on the active resolution of the initial propositions than chatting about them; and the duration of conversation progressively decrease – or their frequency dilated, as needed. What is initially time for discovery shall become a moment of transformation and continuous improvement in action. This premise is equally valid for two main categories:

- in case of *performance coaching*, where the goal is to increase pre-existing competences;
- in case of *development coaching*, where we attend an introspective revolution and a change of perspective in facing specific situations through a process of growth.

All of this is possible keeping in mind several factors. There are many coaching methodologies, all equally effective as long as the coach is able to adjust them to his client and context. Of the many variables in game, I am eager to share my personal

categorization in key factors, divided in direct and indirect, that have a specific role in meaningful conversations.

Direct Factors <i>(with immediate action)</i>	Indirect Factors <i>(variable, with influence in long-term)</i>
<p>Verbal Communication: words concepts semantics</p> <p>Non-verbal Communication: body language voice pitch mood</p>	<p>character habits stress mentality bias derailment factors</p>

The appendix at the end of the book includes a series of questions that vary according to the listed factors.

Useful as Purpose

The measure of success of our meetings with clients widely depends from their goal. Therefore, the utility of the sessions is inherent to both the form and the content of the conversation. If we fail in that, we will be entangled in a pleasant, but possibly inadequate chat.

If the usefulness for Manzoni is of a moral kind – the art is a medium of spiritual elevation, for those who makes it and those who benefits from it – in our case, as professionals, we will have a *cognitive* kind of goal. Differently from educators, that discuss a pre-existing knowledge to grow young minds, our purpose is to sharp the cognitive skills in function of this knowledge and skills that are already acquired. They might be already on a high level but misaligned in relation to the resolution of a problem or accomplishments. The individual awareness and the achievement of a higher grade of concentration needed for our client’s purposes (including

mindfulness) are the trajectory in which coaching falls as highly effective cognitive tool.

Our task is to access and grant access to an ensemble of meta-skills that can be resumed in the “ability to master any competence”. Since traditional schooling systems fail to educate students through such process, professionals of this sort reveal to be necessary and more and more required. That is also true for groups of people that need to work on their capability of coordination, communication, and teamwork.

As the Sphinx (but also not)

My negative experiences as subject of approximate attempts of coaching made me understand two things: first, that less enigmatic and complex we sound for the other, higher the effectiveness of our questions; and second, that context is essentially more important than what we ask.

Open questions in unpleasant conditions can inhibit the cognitive process rather than stimulating it. Scaring our interlocutor with a somewhat threatening tone or being ambiguous due to the wrong atmosphere puts at risk the ability to think critically and analytically. Doing so, we predispose our client to the wrong mindset (that broadly recalls the physiological *flight-or-fight response*). That’s what happens when we are kids we are scolded by our parents with rhetorical questions, such as “What did you do?!” – but also what happens when we are called to answer to a *de-facto* inquisition by our boss, who pretends to “coach” creating a psychologically derailing situation.

If you ever find yourself to have a job which includes people management, do yourself a favor: avoid tricking yourself with the presumption of using open questions to satisfy an obsessive desire of control. Put yourself in the shoes of those with whom you are going to communicate: this is important to avoid wasting time in an ineffective activity, and creating either dysfunctional professional relationships, either victims unsatisfied of authoritarian micromanagement. Indeed, such medium is often set aside, especially from the “old school” that perceives it as competency and

skills of Human Resources professionals. On the contrary, for decades business transformations expect the absorption of the coaching role among the responsibilities of the manager, in vest of supportive and involved “leader”, instead of a “boss” with a strong attitude to control. This kind of intervention is welcomed (and less feared) by the employees. There are cases in which this skills bundle will reveal useful even in extreme situations where is needed a mediation between the organization (with its culture, politics and strategies) and the workers (with their need to develop or safeguard their career and its stakes). This necessity keeps growing in big organizations, where they try to make coaching in a culture of continuous improvement. Let’s play detective less... And start to listen more.

If, on the contrary, you do not belong to this industry but you have some interest in the cognitive techniques treated in this book; if you consider them somewhat useful to improve in your field or to change some habits, better for you. The beauty of such instrument lies in its experimental soul; such theories are useless without regular practice of trial, error and understanding.

It is proven that certain questions are more effective than others in the coaching context because they influence solutioning more than a deep analysis of the problem. Although there aren’t sufficient psychometric evidences about their effectiveness, there are studies conducted on a kind of *solution-focused questions* (SFQs). Those are a strategic tool for the realization of our interlocutor’s goal. While apparently not having direct influence on his purpose and interests, not only such queries lead the individual towards the search for sustainable solutions, but involve him with motivation on planning future actions, of which is the sole to have control.

In the meta-structure of the conversation, the communication between parties is the most effective if the coach can avoid influencing it negatively due to personal factors or other distractions. Nevertheless, though the coach is responsible for triggering a meaningful conversation that is oriented to constructive developments for his/her own client, it is the latter who is accountable for starting them up and for their progress. That is, according to his/her personal interpretation of the dialogue. Without the narrative and consultive features which are typical of mentoring, the measure of the power of the conversation shall be found in the context created, in the

intrinsic ambiguity of the questions and in the empathic bond between the parties. All this, with other instances, stimulates imagination and triggers the growth moment, and possibly a positive pulse on self-confidence.

Beyond the desire to include this peculiar skill on our curriculum, we also need to consider in which direction the demand of specialized coaches leans forward, in virtue of the complex and dynamic social transformation that we are facing, from the rise of internet until the ongoing virtualization of industries. We can notice it from the change of trends in our society. Let's consider the ability to gather information: usually, its quantity clearly outweighs its quality. Furthermore, the speed with which the world moves negatively affects the level of inner maturity of individuals, since it takes more time to internalize thoughts and emotions than the stretched one needed to recognize them. This causes problems of an empathic nature, disinterest and disengagement and lack of that sentiment of self-realization. People disconnect from one another because they are unable to discern the needful and the good things and isolate the rest.

Aware of such possibility, those who are about to undertake this profession, or have just the intent to practice such activity in their life for passion, must take into account the ethical duty that lies in continuous learning and not leave anything to chance, researching on new discoveries in matter of communication and behavioral sciences that can bring priceless value to the practice straightaway.

Until this moment, I cared to illustrate a series of intrinsic values of the discipline. Generally, their application has more success when we are able to enter the best possible state of mind and adopting a cognitive approach that is entirely focused on the present moment, as we will see next.

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An introductory guide to
the philosophy of dialogue
for personal development
through coaching

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