

Show your coachee all the corners of the room

The art of paradoxical coaching

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The challenge

Each person is a barrel full of contradictions. Coaching offers the ideal stage for polarities to manifest themselves. Every issue of any significance requires a solution that incorporates both sides of the coin. According to relationship expert, Esther Perel, for example, long term partner relationships are characterized by a good mix of proximity, security and safety on the one hand, and distance, adventure and risk on the other. If you are only inclined towards one of the two poles, it will result in an instable and eventually untenable situation.

One-sided, 'either-or' choices are never sustainable. The art of paradoxical coaching is to precisely invite the coachee to appreciate the power of opposites, to regard the tension between them as a positive force and to play with both in a dynamic balancing act.

The challenge, for both coach and coachee, is to learn to deal with polarities in a balanced and flexible way. Many people struggle with polarities. The coach can help the client to identify polarities, to learn to value both sides, to bring them into balance and integrate them. For the coachee, this struggle with polarities can assume different forms:

- **Chronically off balance.** The coachee is captured in a one-sided pattern where there is no room for the balancing opposite pole. For example, always wanting to appear strong and not show any vulnerability. A situation like that costs an excessive amount of energy to maintain. A burn-out may be lurking around the corner. How can this necessary opposite pole be given an acceptable and workable place and form?
- **The pendulum swings.** The coachee swings back and forth between the extreme positions of a polarity and has difficulty finding a balance. For example, Helen oscillates between the desire to please others while completely ignoring her own needs, and sudden explosions of

extreme assertiveness where she draws her boundaries in an almost aggressive manner. Clearly, she allows things to go too far, and her corrective action is disproportionate. How can she learn to better manage both poles?

- **Trapped in dilemmas.** The coachee is trapped in a dilemma, because he/she feels that he/she has to make a clear 'either-or' choice, when in fact a 'both-and' choice is also possible. For example, 'should I opt for the generalist role of project leader or an in-depth role as a subject matter expert?' 'Should I help my stubborn teenage son to make the right choices or let him figure it all out on his own and learn from his mistakes?' How can you help the coachee to crack open the situation and see a wide range of possibilities?
- **Compartmentalized.** The coachee has both opposite poles in him/herself but lives them in strictly separated roles or situations, and cannot yet apply them in an integrated manner. For example, Paul is flexible, creative and entrepreneurial in his free time, but acts quite rigid, conservative and risk-avoiding at work. Robin feels tough and self-assured when he's riding his Harley, but extremely reticent and unsure when he has to call one of his employees to order. What is needed to be able to tap into those sources of creativity and self-confidence in other contexts?
- **Hidden talents:** The coachee has strongly developed a specific, partial aspect of himself, where the opposite quality has been left in the dark. Sarah has always suppressed and minimized her spontaneous and exuberant side, because it was 'inappropriate'. But now she has to motivate a sales team, more than just boring spreadsheets are needed to mobilize the energy. How can she now apply in a constructive manner this concealed and previously 'inappropriate' talent to the full?

As a coach you also have to be able to strike a good balance in your own way of working:

- **Situational action.** Because you must apply very different styles and approaches depending on the objective, the situation and the client. For example, one client requires you to work in a strongly structuring, directive manner, and the other mainly requires you to let him find his/her own way.
- **Self-awareness.** Because as a coach you may also be stuck in a polarity without being aware of it. The risk here is that you project this onto the coachee and therefore selectively perceive the situation. 'It is remarkable how many of my clients struggle to claim the space they need in a relationship and feel stifled by their partner.'
- **Empathy.** As a coach you must be able to tune into a broad spectrum of perspectives (and corresponding opposite poles). This is also true for all sorts of 'negative' and socially undesirable characteristics. Even if aggression is not part of your life, you must be able to empathize with people for whom this plays a significant role. You develop empathy, among other things, by tapping into your own dark side (e.g. envy, greed, aggression, selfishness, superiority, lust...) and by seeing its underlying positive value. In short, discover the Putin in yourself!
- **Self-reliance.** A paradox that many coaches will recognize is that of steering your client in the desired direction vs. providing the space to discover it him/herself. Ultimately, your aim is to increase the self-reliance of your coachee. Being aware of the interplay between your own view on the situation and the self-discovery of your client, increases your professionalism as a coach.

By consciously learning how to cope with polarities, the coach and coachee find more balance, broaden their spectrum of action, increase their flexibility and ability to switch, allowing them to tap into their latent potential.

The approach

But how do you do that? The following three principles are important here:

1. **Equality:** see both opposite poles as fundamentally equal, even if, at first sight, the opposite pole may have a strong negative charge. Dig deeper into this negative manifestation and discover the underlying positive value. Aggression is often a hardened form of (suppressed) assertiveness; xenophobia a perverse form of an authentic underlying need for identity and safety.
2. **Awareness:** be aware that polarities are at work in yourself and in your relationships with others. Sometimes you are trapped a specific polarity without realizing it. You always end up doing the dishes at parties, not because you like it, but because unconsciously and from a deep-seated sense of responsibility, you fill in the gap that others leave behind.
3. **Black, white and many shades of gray:** discover that there are more possibilities than just the extremes or diluted compromise. You can also look for creative combinations where both extreme poles are simultaneously present, generating a creative tension. Or you can let them blend into a new quality that is more than the sum of the parts, like 'loving neglect' or 'empathic strictness'.

One very powerful method you can use as a coach is a constellation exercise where you invite your client to explore his/her polarities as physical positions on the floor. It comes literally down to daring to explore every corner of the room, including the dark ones. This provides much more space and enables your client to fully inhabit 'the room' of his/her potential.

[Ivo Brughmans](#) is a philosopher and management consultant. In his previous book [The Art of the Paradoxical Life](#) ('De kunst van het paradoxale leven', Lannoo, 2013) he developed the 'both-and' perspective as a radical alternative to our current way of living. In his latest book [Paradoxical Leadership](#) ('Paradoxaal leiderschap', Boom Uitgevers Amsterdam, 2016) he applies this 'both-and' thinking to organizational and management issues. See also www.paradoxical-leadership.com.