

Taking Your Coaching to a Higher Level

©Gwen McCauley, 2008

*This article is reproduced with the permission of the author, **Gwen McCauley**. This article may be reproduced provided permission has been granted by Gwen McCauley and it is reproduced in its entirety with appropriate acknowledgement of the author, the source and a web link to www.ouicoach.com.*

This article is based on an earlier one called "On Being Coach" that I wrote way back in 2004. At that time I explored a distinction between 'doing' coaching and 'being' coach. For me the difference lay between engaging the coaching art as a series of activities to be undertaken with breadth of knowledge, mastery of skills and techniques, and advice based in acquired wisdom, compared to engaging coaching as a process of on-going Self discovery, where the coach has potentially as much to learn from each engagement as does the client.

In the years since I wrote that article, I have become even more committed to the power inherent in shifting from a 'doing' coaching to a 'being' coach perspective. And I've discovered from many conversations with certified coaches that making the shift doesn't necessarily seem like an easy or comfortable one for many. Certainly my life transition coaching certification process focuses a lot on this distinction and those who achieve that designation with me are deeply comfortable with adopting a 'being' coach approach.

However, I am aware that there are a lot of you practicing coaches who are seeking to increase your skill level beyond where your initial certification took you. I also know a number of trainers, managers, supervisors, facilitators and mediators who are seeking to bring more of a coaching perspective to their interactions with clients.

This article is written for those of you who are searching for ways to become more potent coaches, to better meet your own needs for on-going Self growth while supporting your clients in their discovery process and for being able to bring an attitude of play and curiosity to your coaching process. This article is not designed as a comprehensive response to your development needs, but rather as a starting point for you to consider what else might be possible.

Not all the language is the same

Virtually all coaching is based in using language to explore life's issues and challenges. But not all language is equally potent in its ability to address and explore underlying issues. We know from Logical Levels of Thinking that there is a predictable structure to thinking and that by paying attention to the inherent structure of your own thinking and that of your client (based on their natural choice of language) you can much more powerfully intervene and create potent, virtually instantaneous results.

In Figure 1 you see the 7 Logical Levels of Thinking model as developed by Louise LeBrun. This version of the logical levels model has evolved from the world of cybernetic theory. What is cybernetics you ask? It is: *"the study of human control functions ...involving the application of statistical mechanics to communication engineering."* In other words, cybernetics is an effort to understand how human communication operates through scientific understanding. Or, as stated in Wikipedia's entry on Cybernetics: *"Its focus is how anything (digital, mechanical or biological) processes information, reacts to information, and changes or can be changed to better accomplish the first two tasks."*

Early cyberneticists such as Gregory Bateson became aware that when giving commands to smart machines (the precursors of computers) some words seemed to be inherently more powerful than other words. What was that all about, they wondered? In exploring the phenomenon they discovered that there is an implicit hierarchy in language, and therefore in thinking. The higher up you take your thinking, the more inclusive and powerful it becomes because it includes all lower levels. Now while there is a hierarchy to this model, it isn't like a ladder where you have to go up and down in a step-by-step fashion. We all use all of these levels of thinking all the time. We learn to do this so young in life that we've long since stopped noticing our facility to dance through logical levels. Indeed, as we age we start to excel at skipping levels or getting habituated or deeply masterful at one or two levels and sometimes ignoring the rest.

You don't have to learn how to think at these various levels of thinking because you already are good at them all. Rather what this model is useful for is helping you to deconstruct your existing underlying thinking simply by paying attention to the type of language you use and mapping your words and expressions to the logical levels model. You can do this by mindfully listening to the words that come out of your own mouth or by listening closely to what people around you say.

One proviso might be useful here. Do not get seduced by the content of someone's speech. It doesn't matter a whit in working with this model what anyone has to say about who did what to whom. That's content. Rather what you can begin to notice is the higher order patterns implicit in the words used based on the types of questions they respond to. By paying attention to which level you are thinking at you can go higher or lower when the results you're getting with your current level of thinking aren't getting you the results you want.

One thing that I really like about logical levels of thinking is that you don't have to pay attention to everything you say, only to those things that you hold as problems, concerns, issues or 'not workings' in your life.

The two 'lowest' levels of thinking in this model are the ones we use most of the time and are the ones that are easiest and safest to use in general conversation. You know you are thinking/speaking Environment level thoughts when they respond to the questions **Where? When?** E.g. *"Where did you go on vacation*

*this year? "When do you want to get together for coffee" "Did you know that last week Sally ran away to the city with Brad?" Behavior level thoughts respond to the question **What?** E.g. "What on earth did you do that for?" "What are you cooking for dinner tonight?"*

These are bus stop conversations; ones you can have anywhere with anyone. They are the stuff of soap operas and cocktail party conversations. They can be pleasant and they certainly are necessary in order to keep a family organized, a work team moving forward or a business meeting flowing. However, if you want to create any type of change, developing a response at these low levels of thinking is unlikely to make it happen. Another example is in order. Let's say you are in a meeting designed to change a problem that keeps coming up. Perhaps it is something like: *"we've had several customer complaints that our associates are rude on the phone. We have to correct this situation."*

Typically, we'd created a behavioral level response to this behavioral level complaint. *"Let's give them some coaching so that they know how to be more respectful, and they can deal better with customers"* would be a typical response.

This is an example of developing a solution at the same level of thinking as the problem. If you have been in organization for more than 5 minutes you know intuitively that it is highly unlikely that this solution will resolve the issue. It doesn't take into account the larger context within which the customer complaint arose. For that you'd have to explore at least at the Capability/Strategy level of thinking by asking **How?** based questions.

How broadly based is this issue – is one employee involved, one shift, one department, or is it widespread? How robust are our customer support strategies? How much training have we provided to our front line employees? How much attention are we paying to recruiting people with a bias for customer service anyhow? How would resolving this issue improve our bottom line? How would resolving this issue improve our customer satisfaction ratings?

Asking these larger questions will help you to ascertain if a single strategy, a series of strategies or no action at all is necessary. It might be that the volume of customer complaints is so small compared to the volume of interactions your employees handle that it isn't worth dealing with.

Figure 1: **7 Logical Levels of Thinking***



The Predictable Structure of Thought

*As developed by Louise LeBrun based on Gregory Bateson & Robert Dilts.

The Power of moving upwards

Let me give you another, more personal example. Let's say that I know I have a behavioral level issue in life. Let's say I think I eat too much. If I try to only develop a solution at a behavioral level of thinking it is unlikely that I will be successful in eating less because my thinking isn't expansive enough to develop potent solutions. My 'solution' thinking would sound like: *I have to stay away from food, or, I just have to push away from the dinner table when I'm still hungry, or, I have to go on a diet.* All laudable 'solutions' but I can tell you from years of engaging that kind of thinking, none is likely to result in a lasting change to my eating habits.

In a way this situation describes that famous Einstein quote that says "you can't solve today's problems with the same level of thinking that created them."

Were I to raise my thinking up one level, however, a whole new context for my overeating may become evident. I know I've gone up to that **Capability/Strategy** level when I ask myself "*how do I know that I'm eating too much?*" or "*I feel stuffed-to-the-gills after each meal*" or "*my clothes are getting tight*". These are all responses that reflect the next higher context that my overeating behavior sits in.

In fact, in being able to explain my motivation to myself, there's a good chance that I'll go up 2 levels of thinking to **Beliefs/Values/Attitudes**. "*Because I am gaining weight and I don't believe that's a good thing*" or "*Other people make jokes about my ability to put so much food away*" or "*I hate feeling stuffed-to-the-gills after each meal*". Notice that at this higher level of thinking there are implied sets of values or judgments about my perception of the world at play. Developing a response at this level would be far more powerful and likely to create a sustained change, or at the very least to remove my on-going Self judgment. I'd begin to consider (or if I were a coach in this type of conversation with a client I'd begin asking) "*does it really matter to me what others think of how much I eat*" or "*is my belief that gaining weight is not good for me strong enough to overcome my competing belief that eating a lot is good/useful/pleasurable.*"

Now if I were to raise my thinking even higher, say up to **Identity** level, I might begin to explore "*Who can I become if I stop eating so much*" or "*If eating were to no longer define who I am in the world, I wonder who I could become*" or "*I wonder what my world would become like if concerns about eating weren't even a conversation I need to entertain.*" Notice how this shift has moved me into a realm where immediate answers are unlikely. My questions are more of the nature of inquiry: big, speculative questions that may have numerous answers that require my being willing to explore them.

Taking the question even higher to the ***Spirituality/Connection*** level I might begin to ponder *“What else becomes possible, what new areas of attention will surface for me if food ceased to be a focus in my life?”* or *“If I were to think about eating as a metaphor rather than a reality in my life, I wonder what I might discover about this insatiable hunger I seem to have in life?”*

It is not at all unusual for people to begin to squirm when you get to these higher level inquiry levels. We are so accustomed to having answers, and having access to answers quickly that they tend to evoke discomfort in individuals. If you are leading a group exploration into these higher realms you can anticipate a lot of uneasiness, attempts to deflect the conversation or to bail out of the process. But the good news is that your own or a client's discomfort is a sign that you have moved into the most potentially potent areas for exploration. Genuinely new solutions tend to get formulated from the speculative explorations that occur at these levels.

So I encourage you to stay present to your discomfort and encourage your clients to develop a resilience in the face of such discomfort because the potential rewards are so great. Indeed, a huge part of the coaching certification and coach-coaching I engage in is helping people become ‘comfortable with the discomfort’ these two upper levels of thinking engender.

You'll notice that we haven't yet talked a lot about “Choice”, I think the most critical level of thinking this model presupposes. For me, choice is included in every other level of thinking because I believe we always have choice in life. However, given that we can only ever choose in the now, in the current moment, our choices become extremely critical to the consequence that we call the quality of our life when we notice that we can either choose from the past or from the future.

Let's go back to my ‘I eat too much’ example. If I choose to restrict my exploration to Beliefs/Values/Attitudes thinking I am guaranteed that whatever the future holds for me it is merely an extension of what already exists in my life. Now that may be just fine. However, if I suspect that it isn't enough, or if I know that I am looking for a response that is totally new for me, I must choose from one of two higher levels of thinking in order to create a different future.

Let me give you an example from business. Before FedEx came along there was a long-standing postal/courier industry and everyone in that industry pretty much knew what was possible in terms of revenue to be made, types of packages that could be delivered, turnaround times, service levels, costs, etc., etc. Had the folks who started FedEx created a new company based on those existing beliefs/values/attitudes, we would have had one more delivery player.

But right from the beginning they asked themselves “if we didn't look backwards for what the future could be but instead asked ourselves ‘what is possible in a

world without limits (actually in the FedEx case it was: I wonder what could be possible if we took advantage of this computer world we're stepping into)', I wonder what kind of new business we'd end up creating." Now I don't know if they intentionally set out to create a whole new industry or just a new business model for a business. But this is typical of the revolutionary results that get created when we take our thinking up to Identity/Spirituality levels and let ourselves explore without expecting immediate answers.

I believe that all the great leaders in the world, regardless of their field of influence, tend to spend a lot of time in those upper realms of thinking. Whether it is Churchill, Gandhi, Mandela, Winfrey, Roddick, Branson, Smith (the FedEx founder) they don't settle for 'we are X' but wonder 'I wonder what we could become if ...'. Once they have some clarity about the 'if' all the lower level stuff starts to fall into place because the higher level thinking becomes the yardstick by which to measure.

I encourage you to begin to play with Logical Levels of Thinking by listening to the language of others and of yourself so that you can begin to notice all the information being provided in the language used. Then try raising it up one level only.

In my experience, as much as we are inclined to want to rush up from low level thinking to the very high ones, these tend to land as verbal assaults and tend to generate hostile or defensive responses. If a client says *"my boss is a pompous ass"* which is a Behavior level comment and you jump right up to *"tell me why you believe your boss is an ass"*, you are likely to get a lot of back pedaling, 'oh I didn't really mean that' or similar responses.

However, if you were to say: *"That's really interesting. I'm curious to know how you determine that your boss is an ass"* you are likely to elicit a laundry-list of behaviors that define that behavior to this client. Let's say the client responds *"Because he's always bragging about his latest trip and how difficult it is to get a really good 5-star hotel these days."* Then you have an opening to go one additional level higher and discover something about the client rather than his boss. This is important because you can never change another person. All you can do is change your experience of a situation or person. *"So tell me, what is it about his need to brag that is so difficult for you to listen to?"* In responding to this question the client must reveal the structure of his beliefs. *"Well everybody knows that it is disrespectful to lord your success over other people"* or *"He's rubbing my nose in the fact that he has a more important life than I do"* or *"He's just trying to make me feel like a bit player"*.

It doesn't really matter what the client's response is, it is a door opener for you as coach to invite the client to see other ways to think about the situation. *"Isn't that interesting"* you might say. *"What if his bragging is a way of convincing himself that he is worthy and has nothing to do with you?"* Or *"Have you ever noticed*

before that you have a rule that says you need to be modest about success? I wonder what would happen if you considered changing that rule."

What you might be beginning to notice is that in working this way there are few right or wrong answers. You are modeling for your client a perspective that has few judgments, is full of possibility and that presupposes that 'reality' is different for each person in every situation.

The tough part about coaching this way is that it requires that you have become clear within yourself about your deeply habituated, preferred style of thinking. If you prefer the immediacy that answers generate, you are likely comfortable with explorations at Environment/Behavior/Capability levels of thinking. Not that there is anything wrong with these levels; they are the necessary levels of thinking to make things happen in the world. However, it means that if this is where you prefer to hang out there whole realms of thinking you can never get at if you restrict your coaching explorations to these lower levels. It may also mean that when you engage with clients who have a preference for higher levels of thinking, they'll likely experience you as confrontational and possibly even combative in your questioning.

I know that my own preference is for Beliefs/Values/Attitudes up, unless I am in implementation mode. I can recall times when I've worked for bosses who preferred E/B level thinking and I always felt like I was in the hot seat when in conversation with them. I also know that I can seem unclear, confusing, vague and fuzzy to clients who prefer lower levels of thinking. My job as coach is to develop enough flexibility that I can play all the keys on the coaching keyboard, and not just be restricted to the one area that I've learned to prefer.

I remember a time when despite my preference for big, open, non-specific thoughts I discovered the challenge of being responsible for implementation and working with a colleague who would quickly jump from 7th level thinking (Spirituality/Connection) right down to 1st level (Environment) thoughts. It always felt like such a jolt to my system and it took me a while to discover that he wasn't trying to tell me how to do my job, rather confirming for himself that his big, broad, conceptual thoughts could actually be manifested in the world.

For example, he might speculate that there was a whole new marketing approach that we could consider that would require a new product range to be developed. And then he'd drop into describing the web page that we'd need to create to promote this new concept. As the implementer I would be very aware of all the attitudes we'd have to re-shape and the strategies we'd have to develop before we'd even be in a position to decide if a web-based approach was appropriate. It took me a while to get comfortable with letting him bounce around in his thinking and to learn that there'd be lots of places for me to provide my due diligence! I wish I had been as familiar with Logical Levels of Thinking as I am now. We'd have had far fewer confrontations.

Start Paying Attention to Language

The one thing that you can do for yourself if you want to become a more powerful coach, or to introduce a coaching perspective into your work, is to start paying attention to language. Notice as you speak to clients what level of thinking your questions are presented at. Pay attention to the level of thinking they reveal through their responses or their descriptions of their problems and challenges.

I will be surprised if most of these conversations happen much beyond Capability/Strategy level of thinking, simply because it is the highest level of thinking that we have permission in general culture to go! Think about it, probing for someone's underlying beliefs is simply not done in business meetings, at parties, over coffee. Yet in a coaching situation I believe it is the minimal level you need to get to in order to help your client achieve powerful and lasting change in their life.

There is really nothing 'magical' about becoming adept at using Logical Levels of Thinking, although sometimes the results will seem like magic. My clients regularly respond as if I'd just opened the door to their soul when I use this approach in coaching. When, in fact, all I've done is mirrored back to them information they've already provided to me in terms of the structure inherent in their speech.

I've been proactively using this model for about a decade now. I have to laugh when I think back to my first tentative efforts. I frequently doubted myself and often relied on intuition to guide me in making sense of my logical level explorations. But slowly and surely as I played more, as I tried to explain the power of this model to clients and colleagues I began to get better (and faster) at it. Now it feels like a part of who I am and the lens through which I view the world. I can no longer not notice the volumes of information people are sharing with me every time they open their mouths!

If you truly want to become a more powerful coach and take your coaching to a higher level, you can quickly and easily by beginning to listen to language and by revealing larger and larger contexts by simply moving up logical levels.

Remember, all meaning is context dependent. Have fun!

Gwen McCauley will support you in transforming your life whether through 1:1 engagement, her Certified Life Transition Coach workshops or her Reclaiming Creativity, Retirement Readiness workshops or women's spiritual retreats. Gwen holds a BA in Anthropology and an MA in Human Systems Intervention. She has trained in Myers-Briggs, Open Space Technology, Appreciative Inquiry, Total Quality Management, Generative Leadership and LifeSong. Gwen is a WEL-Systems® Educator, a Quantum TLC™ Facilitator and an NLP Master Practitioner. Commit to a new future today!
www.ouicoach.com or 1-613-864-4557