Base Metal...

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Alchemy of Coaching

Introduction

Models and analogies are both widely used tools in coaching, and Paul explores both this month, looking at awareness, development and elite sport in the context of building and harnessing mental capacity.

Paul and Ray **The Alchemy team**

'Spare' capacity and Conscious Competence

It has struck me several times recently, while watching elite sport of various flavours, that there is something common often referred to in athletes performing at the absolute top of their game – they seem to have spare mental capacity over and above what we assume or expect. The act, for example, of driving a Formula 1 car on the limit around a complex racing circuit, adjusting settings on the steering wheel, is beyond most of our capacity. Yet some of these drivers seem, at times, to also be able to analyse strategy, to plan overtaking moves based on the activity of another driver, or even to watch the big screens. Where does this 'spare' capacity come from, and how might us mere mortals develop something similar in our own professional lives?

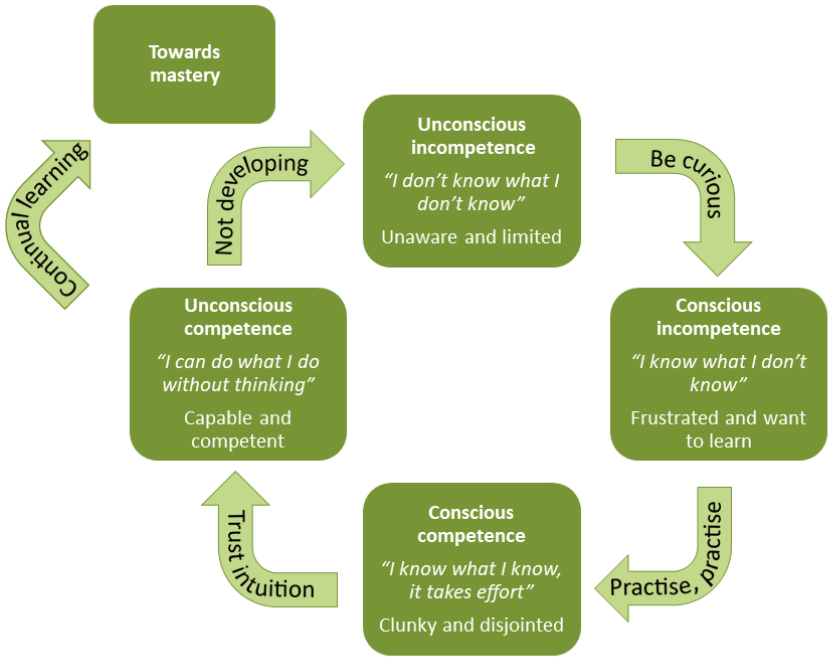
The easy answer to this question might be to simply cite experience. The more we have done and the more experience of real situations we have, the more able we are to utilise this capacity in real time at a high level, and it seems self-evident that this must be true. However, it doesn't seem to me to be enough of an explanation. Simon and Chase's 10,000 hour conjecture[1] clearly has currency, but gives very little assistance as to how one might develop aside from simply 'more hours'.

This raises too the question of how much we can usefully ascribe to 'instinct', and how far such instinct is a function of experience. Leaving physicality aside, how often do we hear sports pundits or team managers talking about talent (as opposed to ability), describing someone's 'snooker brain' or 'raw speed'. One of the challenges of a coach (of whatever sort) is perhaps to enable and facilitate individuals to find ways to tap into whatever this underlying 'talent' might be, and realise it in the most effective way.

Over a long period, we have developed a version of the Conscious Competency model that might go some way to capturing what might be going on here, and indicate a route for individuals wanting to develop in this area (notice in particular that the experience piece suggested by Simon and Chase only features in this model between Conscious Incompetence and Conscious Competence).

In a sport like Formula 1, continuous development and learning is a constant race, for teams as much as drivers, as to not develop means to go backwards in relation to your competitors, which is that arrow that breaks out of the circle at Unconscious Competence. The risk for many there is that without an awareness of and effort into continual learning and development, we end up back at the beginning of the cycle in the 'unaware and limited' box.

1 Simon, H. A., & Chase, W. G. Skill in chess: Experiments with chess-playing tasks and computer simulation of skilled performance throw light on some human perceptual and memory processes. *American Scientist*, 61 (4), 394-403 later popularised by Malcolm Gladwell.



I'm also struck by the arrow between Conscious Competence and Unconscious Competence in the diagram: developing both the means and the confidence to trust one's own intuition is an important part of individual development, and one that as coaches we would do well to support in our coachees.

If as coaches we can find ways to create this 'spare capacity' in ourselves, what might we use it for? I would suggest that in the same way that certain top drivers seem able to watch the race on the big screen while also being part of it, thinking about how to observe the coaching session while also participating fully in it might be a fruitful avenue of inquiry. Could you allocate a small percentage of your mental capacity to an 'over the shoulder camera' that is one removed from your coaching self (and therefore able to notice more widely), but also informing your own decision making about how to act in the service of your client?

Book review

Alchemy Coach Development Guide no 10: Individual Learning.
These short guides on specific coaching topics have been designed to support and enable coaches to develop their own skill and expertise, containing both content and exercises to facilitate personal and professional growth. This coaching guide explores several perspectives on adult learning, informed by theory and models, to assist both a coach to work on themselves, and provide potential resources for coaching clients.

This is part of a set of 20 guides, all available from the Alchemy website.

Thoughts, ideas and quotations

"The value of experience is not in seeing much, but in seeing wisely." **William Osler**

"The only thing we have learnt from experience is that we learn nothing from experience." **Chinua Achebe**

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