

Spirituality in executive coaching: entering the transpersonal space



Dominique Munz introduces transpersonal coaching into organisations. Here, she outlines what coaches can learn from ancient wisdom traditions.

'I have a successful career, but now I am in my mid-40s, and I don't see any next step that motivates me. Really, I don't know why I would want to move up the ladder.'

I hear this – or words to this effect – from many people, including those who approach me for coaching services. Clients tend to come to me for coaching to explore the next steps in their careers, and for a broader exploration of what they might need for their personal and professional growth. They also want to discover what gives them meaning and purpose in their working lives and how they can move towards a life built on that foundation.

I share here how I work with such clients on meaning, purpose and spirituality. I consider these separate concepts. What they have in common, however, is that they all transcend the limited frame of our ego-personality and point us to something greater than ourselves. It is in this sense that I use the word *spirituality* – as '...the human need to connect with something greater than oneself'.¹

In recent years, meaning and purpose and, to a lesser extent, spirituality have emerged in public discourse. The prevailing business culture still discourages integration of these concepts in career and leadership choices. When I offer the hypothesis: 'Could it be you are on some type of spiritual quest?', the general response tends to be that the word *spiritual* doesn't resonate... it is more about meaning and purpose and 'what I do with my time'.

Researchers Stuart Allen and Louis Fry write that 73% of executives consider themselves strongly spiritual or religious.² In his book, *Psychotherapy and Spirituality*, author William West notes that 60% of the general population have mystical experiences in their lives.³ Yet, most don't speak about it for fear of ridicule. 'Something greater' is clearly meaningful to many of us personally, yet we lack a language to talk about it – at least within a business context.

I mainly coach in a corporate business context, with high-pressured individuals who function successfully in organisations where spirituality is loaded with negative stereotyping. Attributed extremes in the culture range from 'dreamy' to 'dogmatic' and even 'fundamentalist'. As coaches, we can reinforce this habitual frame of thought or we can acknowledge by our presence and action that meaning, purpose and spirituality are valid human concerns. It is my experience that coaching sessions become more effective if we do the latter.

I carried out research in the context of an MSc dissertation in executive coaching at Ashridge Hult, where I introduced transpersonal psychology as a valid, faith-neutral theory to

frame meaning, purpose and spirituality in the context of the human developmental journey. I explain here why I believe that transpersonal coaching is more impactful than coaching that operates from a more limited model of the personality. I then share practical experiences and tools that work well for me and my clients.

Transpersonal psychology: a frame that frees us to experience meaning, purpose and spirituality

Transpersonal psychology goes beyond mainstream psychology in how it looks at the human psyche. Its core assumption is the reality of a spirit centre in every individual. This inner self is the director, controller and monitor of our lives.⁴

Within our pragmatic and materialistic culture, this view is marginalised, and the existence of such an inner centre is denied or excluded from discourse. If we assume that this inner centre is also our place of connection to the larger cosmos, and we consider how difficult society makes it to truly value this centre, it becomes understandable that many of us feel disconnected from meaning and purpose. The connection has been buried and neglected.

We can frame this experience of reconnecting as 'spiritual', or we might call it connecting to 'our higher purpose'. Whatever words we use, we are aiming to (re)connect to something greater than our ego-personality.

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Transpersonal psychology can free coaches from the self-imposed taboo against exploring spiritual topics in executive coaching

Transpersonal psychology can free coaches from the self-imposed taboo against exploring spiritual topics in executive coaching through a model of the psyche that acknowledges and integrates meaning, purpose and spirituality. Focusing on the human experience and refraining from formulating dogmatic content allows coaches to explore such experiences freely without getting hung up on denominations, profession of faith or terminology.

Applying transpersonal psychology in coaching

If a coach determines that connecting to the spiritual core matters, they can integrate this into client work. In my case, integration happened through a piece of action research into the question: '*How do I create an environment that supports transpersonal learning and meaning-making in clients?*' I accompanied six individual coaching clients over six months. Presenting issues ranged from the practical ('finding a new job') to the transcendent ('finding new

meaning in my life and work'). As the relationships deepened, meaning, purpose and spirituality featured more prominently. Even so, I noticed a tendency in myself, and even more pronouncedly in my clients, to avoid discussing these topics.

I had hardly begun to integrate the knowledge, worldview and skills I had gained through my committed spiritual practice of over 15 years into my coaching practice. It took significant inner work to summon the courage to bring what really matters to the centre stage of coaching conversations.

In coaching, I began to inquire more actively when a client mentioned meaning, purpose, and/or spirituality. I find that clients often signal that they are ready to inquire into their connection with 'something beyond myself'. It is my job as their coach to find the language to engage with them on their quest.

Negotiating entry into the transpersonal space

Co-creating shared language to explore meaning, purpose and spirituality in human existence requires careful attention in coaching. I call this process 'negotiating entry into the transpersonal space'.

When gauging a client's readiness to move into the transpersonal space, I pay attention to 'pointer words', such as *meaning*, *purpose* or *values*. I also often notice an increased use of metaphors and mental images. My job, then, becomes to hold my client's awareness on the images and intuitions, though we are culturally and socially conditioned to move towards a more 'productive' and 'practical' topic.

Sometimes, at this point in the coaching relationship, anxiety arises. My hypothesis is that the client feels they are about to enter unfamiliar territory. In addition, the social pressure to conform to a 'business code of behaviour' is heightened in the co-created relationship between executive coach and client. A coach then needs to contain her own and the client's anxiety, so that the client feels safe enough to move into unknown transpersonal territory.

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One size does not fit all in the transpersonal field. Our tools need to honour our intuitive wisdom, rather than rely on our analytical skills

Some clients hesitate. In such cases, I find a Gestalt approach of exploring 'here and now' responses most helpful. I might pause and say: 'I notice a slight hesitation on your part – I am curious about what's happening here'. More often than not, a story about the client's beliefs unfolds. I often encounter a fear of drifting into 'esoteric' spheres and losing touch with everyday life. However, upon inquiry, stories about difficult childhood experiences involving organised religion might emerge.

If, moving through all that, a coach can hold their ground in their own values and experiences of the transpersonal, clients can start to explore the judgments and labels they attach to spiritual and transcendent aims in their life. Eventually, they can move on to a definition of meaning, purpose and, in particular, spirituality that is more experiential and personal.

As I have become more proficient in holding the transpersonal space, I have noticed that discussion moves quite quickly to include issues concerning meaning, purpose and spirituality. The more firmly the coach can hold the transpersonal space in their own awareness, the easier the negotiation with the client.

Working with the transpersonal space

One size does not fit all in the transpersonal field. Our tools need to honour our intuitive wisdom, rather than rely on our analytical skills. Methods must be soft and playful and allow the unexpected to happen. Within the framework of limited coaching sessions, I have come to concentrate on a few favourite interventions that work well for me: working with inner images and inner voices.

When I work with inner images, I usually tap into what is emerging in the moment, inviting a deeper exploration of spontaneously occurring images and associations. One of my clients repeatedly talked about how his boss was building up a 'shadow organisation'. The internal political struggles weighed heavily on his shoulders. We both felt pulled to do a stakeholder analysis. Rather than doing this, though, I invited him to close his eyes and explore the inner image of this 'shadow' he kept mentioning. Once he looked inside and explored the landscape that emerged, he realised that he had placed himself with the sun at his back – so that wherever he looked, he saw his own shadow in front of him. Surprised, he experimented with moving around, and realised that he needed to move himself if he wanted to look at something else other than shadow. We explored how he could turn towards the sun. Fully? Just a little? Through this inner vision, he found a surprisingly simple way to solve his dilemma – in only 10 minutes. Much more expedient than a stakeholder analysis!

Voice dialogue is another method that works to tap into crippling psychological and mental structures. It involves helping the client listen to inner voices or automatic thoughts. One client heard a voice tell her she would die in poverty whenever she wanted to resign from the job that she hated. I invited her to listen attentively to what the voice said. She found some joy in that and even produced a piece of art picturing the voice in the form of a demon. She realised that this demon helped her stay safe and in good standing. She also realised that he was taking up too much room in her decision-making process. She resolved to collaborate more consciously with the voice. Now, she listens attentively to the voice, considers what it has to say, and then decides. This process has been very playful and highly effective.

In some cases, I invite clients deliberately into their inner world – particularly when an otherwise accomplished individual struggles with a specific area in his life. A man in his 30s revealed that he repeatedly struggled with finding his way to a fulfilling work life. As he seemed to turn in circles, I invited him to close his eyes. I asked: 'What do you see when you look inside yourself and think about your professional situation?' He described a foggy clearing, and I asked him to describe the fog. The client attributed two qualities to the fog: it was confusing, but it was also safe – it offered protection from the 'world out there' with its unknown qualities, risks and potential challenges.



Understanding the double dual nature of the dissatisfying situation he had created for himself helped him look at the situation differently.

All these interventions can be considered transpersonal because they draw on an intelligence beyond our intellectual knowledge. They could be seen to be trying to create a more integrated personality.

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May we create a world where we can move with ease from spiritual aspiration to bottom line!

What is the value of transpersonal coaching?

Personally, I have suffered from having suppressed spiritual experiences and intuitive forms of knowing. I also see clients, colleagues and friends struggling with a similar abyss between their values and their behaviours. Often, they don't know how to bridge the gap. Developing an outlook on life where both intuition and intellect have a place is part of the reconnection many look for.

As part of my dissertation research, I sent a questionnaire to the six clients to assess the impact of the transpersonal elements of my coaching. Five responded and highlighted the transpersonal work as the most transformational and important moments of their coaching. Based on this admittedly small sample of clients (and many other, less systematically evaluated experiences), I hold that coaching from a transpersonal space is more effective in many cases.

I hope that transpersonal coaching can slowly – session by session – help to create novel ways of integrating meaning, purpose and spirituality into our everyday lives. It seems to me that the price of excluding them from our public conversations has resulted in a society that is affluent yet struggles to find meaning in everyday life. This strong focus on the material world translates into destructive attitudes to nature, and a short-sighted economic system.

What can you do to get there?

I suggest interested coaches might look into three areas:

First, develop an understanding of the transpersonal field. This understanding can take the form of any spiritual path, preferably one that values experience rather than dogma. This process requires curiosity and courage, as you will explore the boundaries of the socially constructed reality. This step needs to be solidly constructed. Your experience needs to reach deeper than what most popular mindfulness trainings offer.

Second, develop clarity about the map of the transpersonal you have constructed, and always remember that it is only a map. It is important to learn to speak about matters of the mind and soul in a universal language.

Third, work as strictly phenomenologically as you can. Staying close to the present moment with 'what is' is the most natural way to enter the transpersonal space. If you are doing that, you will suddenly start to notice just how many small hints from intuitive and non-linear intelligence you start picking up. We usually filter these hints, zooming in on the 'practical' linear issues. These signals of the transpersonal are fleeting – such as a little voice in your head or a sensation in your heart or elsewhere in your body. Or they can be quite impressive, as in the following client example: a client contracted with me to work on her career advancement. In the first session, she had a vision of an angel floating in the sky. How tempting would it have been to dismiss or ignore this phenomenon? Instead, we focused our session on it. The client concluded that her next career move should align with her spiritual values (as represented by the angel), rather than align with conventional measures of success.

I have argued here that purpose, meaning and, in particular, spirituality, are still considered taboo in executive coaching. I have discussed how transpersonal psychology allows us to situate the search for purpose, meaning and spirituality within the context of human growth, and therefore helps coaches to ease the taboo around these topics in business and executive coaching. I have also shared some interventions I use to work productively in the transpersonal field and highlighted that clients tend to find the transpersonal moments the most transformational.

I extend an invitation to seasoned coaches to pay renewed attention to how you work with meaning, purpose and spirituality. May we create a world where we can move with ease from spiritual aspiration to bottom line! ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dominique Munz is an executive coach and founder of Threein, a company specialising in transformational coaching primarily for senior managers and leaders. She holds an MSc in executive coaching from Ashridge Hult. Her key interest is integrating spirituality and transpersonal work into executive coaching. She is working on a book on the topic.

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