Listening to Story through a Developmental Lens

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Originally published in *ICF online Coaching World ezine*, Summer 2013

Human beings are storytellers and meaning makers. Adult development theories, which assert that adults move sequentially through distinct stages, offer a way to understand why your clients tell their stories the way they do. It enables you to get the story *behind* the story. Is your client at the center of the story, blaming others and justifying why she is right? Or is the story behind the story about an individual who's striving to be successful, overcoming challenges to her goals and seeking balance in her life? Maybe your client's story is attentive to context, as she tries to learn more about who she is and test her own assumptions. Each of these examples is representative of a different stage of adult development.

As a coach, you listen to your client's stories through your own meaning-making lens. Are you trying to "pull your client up" to your stage of development when that might not be what they need or want? Are you unintentionally holding your client back because they are at a later developmental stage than you?

Adult development is progressive. At each successive stage, a person has access to broader, more encompassing choices. This is important for you to know so that coaching interventions are meaningful and relevant to the client. Fundamentally, an understanding of developmental stages allows you to meet your clients where they are. In this article, we outline five reasons to consider adult development as a theoretical framework for your coaching practice.

Adult development theories … are evidence-based.

Over the past four decades, data has been collected from tens of thousands of individuals on how they make meaning of their experiences; i.e., how they tell their stories. The two primary ways to assess an individual's stage of development are a sentence completion test, such as the Maturity Assessment Profile (MAP) or an interview-based instrument, such as the Subject-Object Interview (SOI). Today, these tools and others are being pioneered in the field of leadership development by notable researchers including Jennifer Garvey Berger, Susann Cook-Greuter, Bill Joiner, Stephen Josephs, Otto Laske and Bill Torbert. And that's a strong reason for you to consider this theoretical framework: It is evidence-and research-based, highly applicable, and practical.

… define transformation.

Theories of adult development give you a concrete, specific way to define transformation. When clients develop new skills, competencies and/or knowledge without changing the way that they make meaning of their experience, it is referred to as "growth." When clients change the way they make sense of experience by taking a wider view, evincing the capacity to see more complexity, seeing in genuinely new ways and demonstrating the ability to tolerate more ambiguity, it's called "transformation." When you have at least a hypothesis about whether the client's work is growth or transformation, it enables you to better discern the necessary balance of support and challenge, and thereby meet the client where he or she is.

… reframe resistance and minimize self-criticism.

How often have you judged a client as "resistant?" Clients who are, in the words of developmental psychologist Robert Kegan, "in over [their] heads" are being asked to perform in ways they do not yet have the capacity for and might not even understand. In other words, what you see as "resistance" might instead be evidence that your client's capacity to see, understand and take action is not the same as your capacity—evidence that you are expecting too much. Understanding the hallmarks of meaning-making for each developmental stage further enables you to meet clients where they are, as opposed to where you think they ought to be. This, in turn, invites compassion for your client. And, by offering clients stage-appropriate assignments, you might find that their resistance dissolves.

On the other hand, if a client is at a later developmental stage than you, you might dread sessions for a different reason: You don't know what you can offer a client who seems to "have it all together." You might even wonder why in the world they chose you to be their coach. In such situations, the masterful application of foundational coaching principles—deep listening, creating a safe space and asking powerful questions—is critical to be in service of the client. Sometimes, you might even want to consider referring your client to a later-stage colleague.

… aid selection of stage-appropriate tools and practices.

We tend to offer our clients coaching tools and exercises that align with our own stage of development. Think about your own go-to tools. Do you use values-clarification exercises? Goal setting? Meditation practices? Journaling? Frequently, tools well-suited to clients at one developmental stage will be rejected by clients at another stage. Coaches need the ability to discern which tools and practices will work for each client, and recognize the futility of a one-size-fits-all approach.

… help you identify—and market your services to—your "ideal client."

Who are the clients you love to work with? There is a high probability that there is a relationship between your ideal client, their challenges and struggles, and your own developmental stage. Knowing your stage helps you speak to your own sweet spot as a coach, brand yourself, and discern which clients you are most suited to working with, and ultimately attract the ones you will best serve.

Learning about this theory can help you hypothesize where you are developmentally. (See " Learn More," on page xx, for a list of resources.) It's also worth your while to take the same assessments you arrange for your clients, such as the MAP and SOI.

For coaches who seek a new framework for understanding the stories that their clients tell, or a new way to understand their own way of narrating the world, adult development theories can illuminate new and previously inaccessible coaching opportunities, expand practitioners' appreciation for the journey that all humans are on, and deepen respect for each person's individual progress along that path.

Author Bios
Barbara Braham, PhD, MCC, teaches courses on adult development for the Georgetown University Leadership Coaching Program, as well as several internal coaching programs in the public and private sectors. She is certified to score and debrief the Maturity Assessment Profile (MAP) and also teaches the

two-year MAP scoring certification course with Cook-Greuter. She uses this theory on a daily basis with her executive clients, and is the author of 11 books, including "Finding Your Purpose."

Chris Wahl, MA Ed, MCC, is the creator and former director of the Georgetown University Leadership Coaching Program, where she continues to teach as well as offer courses in adult development through the Institute for Transformational Leadership. Chris studied adult development with Dr. Otto Laske and Dr. Susann Cook-Greuter, and she is certified to score and debrief the MAP assessment. Chris teaches adult development at George Mason University and at the University of Maryland Smith School of Business, where she applies the framework to distinct contexts. Chris and Barbara offer deep-dive courses to coaches who wish to deepen their learning and application of the theories of adult development.

Books
"Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership," by Bill Torbert, Susanne Cook-Greuter, Dalmar Fisher, Erica Foldy and Alain Gauthier (Ingram Publisher Services, 2004)
 "Changing On The Job: Developing Leaders for a Complex World," by Jennifer Garvey Berger (Stanford Business Books, 2011)
"In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life," by Robert Kegan (Harvard University Press, 1998)
"Leadership Agility: Five Levels of Mastery for Anticipating and Initiating Change," William B. Joiner and Stephen A. Josephs (Jossey-Bass, 2007)

Web Resources
www.bbraham.com
www.cook-greuter.com
www.interdevelopmentals.org
www.mirogroup.net