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# COACHING STYLES REVOLUTION

Seven organizing forces behind great coaching

By David Morelli, PhD, MBA

If I asked you, “What’s your coaching style?,” how would you answer? If you’re like most coaches, you’d likely say that you deeply listen to and empathize with your clients. You’d probably add that you help them grow and change through coaching. You might even talk about your niche. But what style is that?

What if I asked you, “How does your coaching style compare to other coaches?” Would you be able to answer easily?

Until now, we haven’t had a shared language for understanding our own coaching styles and those of others. And certainly not one that’s based on research.

When I started my PhD, I’d been coaching for 20 years. I had taken my coach training with some of the founding members of the International Coaching Federation (ICF). I thought I knew what coaching was and how to do it.

But in approaching my doctoral work, I decided to set aside my personal experience and investigate what’s known and unknown within coaching and leadership research. I relied on peer-reviewed, empirically valid academic literature for rigor. In the process, I discovered a surprising fact: leadership styles are the most-researched topic in management literature.

What are styles? A style is the combination of one’s behavior and the intention behind that behavior. Transformational leadership, authentic leadership and servant leadership are some of the more familiar leadership styles. But styles didn’t exist in coaching literature. Then, I started to wonder, “Do coaches have styles? And if so, what are they?”

## THE RESEARCH

I used these questions to guide my research, which included interviews with 16 top coaches – a former coach at Google, a bestselling author in coaching, the founder of an ICF-accredited coaching school, and others. These coaches had an average of 18 years’ experience in coaching, including 14 years coaching executives. I asked them to describe their coaching interactions: what specifically they did during sessions and why.

While I could have chosen to read about established coaching methodologies, I chose to study coaching in the wild. I didn’t want to rehash coaching school philosophies or potentially biased beliefs about coaching. Instead, I wanted to know what successful coaches actually do. What are their behaviors, and why do they choose various approaches?

My interviewees said things like, “I hold others accountable because I’m trying to get them to make progress on meaningful goals.” Or, “I’m empathizing with them because we all need to feel accepted, just as we are.” These quotes held key information about the potential existence of styles.

By categorizing 2,235 relevant quotes from the interview transcripts, seven coaching styles clearly emerged. They are now known as the RESPECT Coaching Styles, based on their acronym.

## THE STYLES

Here are the seven RESPECT Coaching Styles and how each tends to work, including an example question:

**Rallier** helps coachees accomplish more by focusing on achievement, motivation and accountability. E.g., “What important goal do you need to set right now?”

**Educator** works with coachees to identify knowledge and skill gaps, then helps them apply learnings, ideas or frameworks to fill them in. E.g., “How could you apply that insight in this situation?”

**Strategist** supports coachees in problem-solving and planning, often helping them identify patterns. E.g., “What are the key steps to resolving this issue?”

**Provocateur** is about helping the coachee identify the uncomfortable truths about decision-making, actions, or misalignments. E.g., “What could potentially go wrong with that plan?”

**Explorer** uses curiosity to expand the coachee’s thinking and creativity by helping them discover new ideas and perspectives. E.g., “What’s truly possible here?”

**Confidant** connects to the humanity of the coachee through empathy, vulnerability, and authenticity – helping them feel truly seen and heard. E.g., “How are you truly feeling underneath the layers of shoulds?”

**Transformer** supports coachees to become their best selves through finding the gifts and opportunities in themselves and their present experiences. E.g., “What untapped potential within yourself do you need to finally embrace?”

After discovering these seven styles, I compared them with the ICF Core Competencies and their descriptions. I found evidence of all seven styles repeated within the 63 bullet points describing various competencies and their characteristics.

## A SURPRISING DISCOVERY

Next, I created the first research-backed coaching styles assessment to measure

the frequency and expression of these seven styles. I discovered something that surprised me.

After running hundreds of coaches through the RESPECT Coaching Styles Assessment, I found that most coaches frequently use some combination of just three of the seven styles.

This showed that coaches have style tendencies – unless the coach consciously works to expand their repertoire. For example, in my doctoral research, the coach with the least experience used the fewest styles. The one with the most experience showed deliberate use of all seven styles, and this coach had been coaching for 37 years.

Until now, we haven’t been able to see ourselves in the mirror. There has been no way to reflect on what we do and don’t do from a styles perspective. And given the confidentiality of our work, we haven’t been able to compare our style preferences to those of other coaches.

“You can ask yourself, “Which styles do I most frequently choose, and why?” Then you might ask, “Which styles might I avoid, and why?””

So, how might we expand our use of styles? Besides taking the assessment yourself, one way is through style awareness. You can ask yourself, “Which styles do I most frequently choose, and why?” Then you might ask, “Which styles might I avoid, and why?” This may lead to some useful insights.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING & SUPERVISION

One increasingly popular way to improve as a coach is through mentorship or supervision. When you understand your own style preferences as a coach, you also need to ask, “What are the implicit style preferences of your mentor or supervisor?”

If your mentor or supervisor has preferences or biases towards certain

styles and against others, how might that impact the feedback you receive? You can see the inherent problems in not having had a shared language and understanding of styles.

To take this a step further, I’ve done some preliminary work with coaching schools and their founders using the RESPECT Coaching Styles Assessment. Based on the data, it seems coaching schools have style preferences built into their training. Each appears to favor some combination of three of seven styles, just 43 percent of the possible style expressions. And the implications for coaches/coaches-in-training who gravitate toward coaching styles not favored at their particular school is profound.

Finally, coaching is meant to be a tailored interaction to serve the needs of the coachee. It’s not meant to be an interaction limited by the style preferences of the coach.

For this reason, I believe that the seven styles are a powerful tool for

understanding our own coaching styles, for expanding beyond our own preferences, and for learning to use a full range of styles.

I offer the seven RESPECT Coaching Styles as an empirically supported foundation for how we coach, supervise and train others. Without it, we unconsciously approach our craft in invisible, yet substantially disparate ways. With this foundation, we can better recognize the organizing forces behind every question, statement, or pause we make. And ultimately, we can be more choiceful and more effective in our interactions. The time for a shared understanding has arrived.

Therefore, it is my hope that this coaching styles research changes the coaching world forever. •