

# LEVERAGING CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN COACHING

Sally Bernham, course director of the Certificate in Coaching at the University of Cambridge's Institute of Continuing Education, and coach Alexandra Terhalle reflect on a unique intercultural coaching programme.

Just before the coronavirus crisis hit the world, a group of coaches from across the globe spent three days in the beautiful surroundings of Madingley Hall at the University of Cambridge, UK. Their discussions were part of the Leading and Coaching Across Cultures programme and focused on exploring and experiencing together how an understanding of cultural diversity could enhance coaching practice. The programme is a collaboration between the Institute of Continuing Education at the University of Cambridge and Professor Philippe Rosinski, the author of *Coaching across cultures* and *Global coaching*, whose work has been influential in bringing the intercultural dimension into coaching. The programme complements the accredited coaching programmes the institute offers and sits within the portfolio of short courses of continuing professional development for coaches at the Institute of Continuing Education.

## JOINING THE CULTURE CLUB

Culture is always an important influence in coaching relationships. Sometimes that influence is obvious; at other times it is subtle, but always a factor. Seeing culture as an opportunity rather than a barrier to be overcome enables coaches to enhance the impact of any coaching intervention. Integrating a cultural perspective into coaching offers an alternative way of addressing complexity in our interconnected, ever-changing global environment.

Intercultural coaching is less about recognising cultural differences in order to work more effectively with clients from different cultures, and more about recognising the possibility of leveraging culture as a force for change. Intercultural coaching is a dynamic process that opens possibilities and invites coaches to consider the cultural dimension at play in their practice through reflection. As such, it could be said to be relevant to all coaches, not just those working in overtly cross-cultural contexts.

## EXPANDING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural diversity is traditionally conceptualised as external (such as visible differences like ethnicity, gender or age) or internal (such as cultural preferences regarding time management, communication, thinking or organising). While useful, this distinction may be more interconnected and complex than it seems. Intercultural coaching offers an expanded conceptualisation of cultural diversity that distinguishes between the explicit (manifest) and implicit (hidden or latent, but nevertheless potentially available to the team). From this perspective, cultural diversity is always present, even when latent or implicit. Embracing this expanded notion of cultural diversity is a wonderful opportunity to systematically weave a cultural perspective into coaching and leverage the rich potential of cultural diversity.

The programme brought intercultural coaching to life in a very tangible and impactful way. The group discussion was an opportunity to both understand and experience how cultural differences can become a creative and unifying force. Through intercultural peer coaching, group presentations and action learning, participants were encouraged to question and identify their own cultural assumptions and beliefs – which is most often the core difficulty in cross-cultural interactions – and discover ways in which they could leverage them. Such dynamic and experiential learning allowed students to play an active role in the workshop and experience differing cultural orientations like time management, communication patterns and modes of thinking. They were able to see real life examples of the ways in which cultural differences manifest themselves, and discover creative ways to maximise opportunities to embrace and make the most of the diversity within the group.

Participants said the programme helped them look beyond the traditional view of cultural diversity, and that following it they were able to apply key learnings immediately to their coaching practices, and to their teams and organisations.

## COACHING CONVERSATIONS FOCUSED ON CULTURAL ORIENTATION

The three-day programme also provided the opportunity to become certified to use and administer the Cultural Orientations Framework (COF)<sup>1</sup> as a practical way of understanding and leveraging cultural differences within coaching. The COF assessment is a self-assessment tool which facilitates the understanding of salient cultural characteristics for individuals, teams and organisations and enables coaching conversations focused on exploring cultural diversity.

**FIGURE 1. Cultural Orientations Framework (COF)**

<b>SENSE OF POWER AND RESPONSIBILITY</b> Control/Harmony/Humility	<b>TIME MANAGEMENT APPROACHES</b> Scare/Plentiful Monochronic/Polychronic Past/Present/Future
<b>DEFINITIONS OF IDENTITY AND PURPOSE</b> Being/Doing Individualistic/Collectivistic	<b>ORGANISATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS</b> Hierarchy/Equality Universalist/Particularist Stability/Change Competitive/Collaborative
<b>NOTIONS OF TERRITORY AND BOUNDARIES</b> Protective/Sharing	<b>COMMUNICATION PATTERNS</b> High context/Low context Direct/Indirect Affective/Neutral Formal/Informal
<b>MODES OF THINKING</b> Deductive/Inductive Analytical/Systemic	<b>OTHER</b> Customised supplemental COF dimensions

The COF assessment examines two aspects: an orientation represented on a horizontal axis that reflects an individual's preference; and a vertical axis that represents the extent to which an individual is currently capable of deploying that orientation.

Clearly, there are advantages in this approach for practitioners whether from a leadership, coaching or interculturalist background in being able to systematically integrate the cultural dimension into their work. In our disrupted and uncertain multicultural world, now more than ever there is a strong case for learning from cultural differences and integrating multiple perspectives to address common challenges.

The next Leading and Coaching Across Cultures course and COF certification programme will take place at the University of Cambridge on 2-4 March 2021. For more information, visit [philrosinski.com/events](https://philrosinski.com/events)

## ABOUT SALLY BERNHAM



Sally is an experienced executive coach working mainly in the university sector with senior leaders and executive leadership teams. She is course director of the Certificate in Coaching at the University of Cambridge, Institute of Continuing Education, and a coach supervisor.

[sab228@cam.ac.uk](mailto:sab228@cam.ac.uk)

## ABOUT ALEXANDRA TERHALLE



Alexandra is a University of Cambridge-certified coach and is the relocation and executive coach for Relocate Global.

[www.alexandraterhalle.com](https://www.alexandraterhalle.com)

*Sally and Alexandra were co-facilitators with Philippe Rosinski at the Leading and Coaching Across Cultures Programme in March 2020 at the University of Cambridge's Institute of Continuing Education.*

1. [www.COFassessment.com](https://www.COFassessment.com)