

Constructivism and Expectation Management

—

A Bakhtinian Perspective on Coaching

by Nina Sueße

submitted to Inkonstellation 03/2021



This text, including all illustrations, is the intellectual property of the author and may only be shared or adapted for non-commercial purposes, requiring attribution.



Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

For questions please contact the author at nina@winkler-suesse.de.

Proposition 1: Reality is an island

Each and everyone of us has a unique life. In that life, we make experiences. Some of those experiences are very unique. Other experiences we share with many people, for example a first day at school, or the daily commute on the bus. What makes our collection of experiences individual is not (just) *which* experience we make, but also the *sequence* in which we make them. As one of many scientists, Bourdieu¹ suggests that early experiences (e.g. in childhood) are the most important experiences we make, because they build the foundation of our understanding of reality, upon which all later experiences are built.

To put this into a simple story: Imagine a group of people living on an island. The island is covered by coconut palms, out of which the people make all they need for living. Their diet is based on coconut. Every child grows up to appreciate how important and wonderful coconuts are. But one time – lo and behold – somebody from the island stepped into the water of the surrounding ocean, and was bitten by a fish! The children grow up with that story, and are warned away from the water: It's dangerous!

On another island nearby, people get all they need to live from the ocean, and they love the ocean very much. But once – lo and behold – somebody walked under a coconut palm, and was hit by one of those dangerous fruit! Ever since, people warn each other to stay away from the palms.

Each island has made different experiences, and these shape the islanders' understanding of reality and how they act upon that understanding in everyday life.

Now imagine somebody builds a bridge to connect the islands, and during the grand opening ceremony people from both islands will meet for the first time. To make a good impression, each party brings a gift that is meaningful to them, something symbolic – for instance a coconut or a fish...

We can imagine how a misunderstanding might happen on that bridge when gifts are being exchanged. A key source of conflict in our daily lives is built on the assumption that what is good and sensible on "our island of reality" is equally good and sensible for other people on their islands. But the more diverse our pre-experiences are, the more likely we are to construct reality differently and misunderstand each other.

Systemic coaching addresses this issue in two ways:

- First, in the attitude of the coach to support the coachee in finding their own way around their own island – and *not to impose the coaches' understanding of reality*.
- Secondly, systemic questions gently direct the coachee's attention towards a *change of perspective*. For example, circular questions ask for the perspectives of other people in the social system of the coachee. In a subtle way, this allows the coachee to draw on the constructivist attitude lived by the coach as a resource to examine their own construction of reality from different angles.

1 Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Proposition 2: Managed expectations pave the road to collaboration

A branch of scholarship situated between sociology, political science and linguistics is founded on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and evolved around the idea of *dialogism*². One person says or does something, another reacts. Then the first reacts to the reaction. More people can be involved. There is a back and forth motion in the dialogue, in which earlier interactions lay the foundation for further interactions. What was said first has an impact on what can be said second³.

Over time, common patterns of responses (“How was your day?” “Good. How was yours?”) become habitual. They generate expectations of what (usually) comes next. This is simply a process of learning from experience, and developing expectations based upon that experience. In that way, experience can be seen as our constructions of the (imminent) past, and expectations are our construction of the (imminent) future⁴.

We consider processes as stable, if our experience of what just happened is similar or identical to what we expected. Conversely, we notice change as a mismatch of our experience and expectations. Change forces us to reconsider our expectations, which means the same as to say: change forces us to question our understanding of reality.

Something is new, unaccounted for. It does not fit the world as we knew it.

Example: Team Development & Feedback

From a leadership perspective, guiding one’s team in a time of change implies a need to set new collective expectations. It requires **expectation management**. This is a collective learning process of determining who does what when, and which clues (“Let’s do a team meeting”) lead to which actions for whom (“I’ll set up the video conference” / “I’ll get the numbers to present”). Effective teams can reduce alignment time by establishing a team culture of routines and mutual understandings. Therein, expectations can become subconscious patterns that guide everyday interaction effortlessly.

Conversely, if teams seek to (continuously) improve their patterns of collaboration, it is helpful to “gently disrupt” these habits by feedback rounds (What did go well, what did not? What do we want to keep, what do we want to change?).

2 Bakhtin developed a theory of culture that is based on the idea of dialogue and meaning as socially emergent, evolutionary in “moving beyond what is given”. Academic fields such as Conversation Analysis or Linguistic Ethnography, as well as cultural studies around subjectivity discuss similar issues. The following simplified explanation is based on my apprehension of these sources, found in full in my doctoral dissertation.

Fulltext link: [https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/caught-between-the-clocks\(2b72b5ea-3917-486e-a453-46ae84e07dce\).html](https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/caught-between-the-clocks(2b72b5ea-3917-486e-a453-46ae84e07dce).html)

3 Utterance 1 impacts utterance 2, but it does not determine what utterance 2 can be

4 The past of what we already made sense of (experienced) – whether a year ago or a second ago – in contrast to expectations (anticipations, imagination) or the future

Through regular feedback, we can pick up new impulses from each other and exchange perspectives to come to a shared understanding of reality (e.g. our team targets, roles, and processes). This shared understanding (or “team island”, team language, team culture) helps to orient and organize **collaboration** together.

Island Example: Feedback / Expectation Management

If - as a coconut islander - we have learned to appreciate a bit of fish once in a while, we could add a fish monger to our island to establish trade with our neighbour island and have access to fresh fish.

Expectation management could here imply setting up a system of communicating demand and supply quantities for fish and coconuts, so that fishers and coconut farmers know how much of their goods to deliver to the other island. For example, one could organize a weekly market.

(!) Market prices, from an economist’s perspective, are primarily a *feedback system* to regulate supply and demand.

Application: Coaching

From the idea that everybody has their own “island of reality” follows that we need to take into account that *what we intend to say* and *how that message is received* are two separate things. One consequence in the coaching process is that we might try to communicate more carefully, and seek feedback on our conversation partner’s understanding of what we said more often. It also implies judging very carefully (or not at all) and taking a critical distance to our own values and habits – being more conscious and open to the diversity of reality constructions out there.

As coach, we offer this “island idea” of constructivism to our coachees with the intention to help. Solution-oriented applications of a constructivist attitude are conflicts (interpersonal and inner), decisions or changes of attitude the coachee may want to achieve. Fundamental to any personal development is *the change in a coachee’s perception of reality* – creating alternative ways of seeing things – creating new ways of acting upon those things. Hereby the coachee consciously manages their own expectations.

Proposition 3: Culture is the yardstick of legitimacy

Let us now move from Bakhtin's contribution to linguistic and sociological theory to the political implications of his work.

The cultural conventions of how language is used can be more liberal (e.g. in liberal democracies, emphasis on free speech) or restrictive (e.g. in authoritarian regimes), and the policing of language-use and media (censorship) can lead to a cultural "centralisation". The understanding of reality that is shared by a group of people (e.g. a nation or an organisation) is shaped and maintained through conventions of language-use (national language, company mission statements, jargon). Institutions that are geared to multiplying conventions of language-use are schools and universities, dictionaries, newspapers or TV stations, social media etc. – whether they contribute to cultural centralisation or decentralisation depends on the diversity of understandings of reality they represent.

Island Example: Cultural (De)Centralisation

The people on coconut island might have a school, in which all children are taught the story about the biting fish in the ocean. Let us assume for a moment that children who seek to test the story and wander off onto the beach are punished severely. Eventually, only the bravest children will go onto the beach, and perhaps only at night. Even if they go to swim in the ocean, they will be unlikely to talk about it. *Their voices are silenced.*

Now let us assume that on fish island children don't go to school, and while grandparents tell the tale of the person who got hit on the head by the coconut, children often run off to play among the palms. Occasionally, one gets hit by a falling coconut – and runs home crying. Perhaps the people who see the crying child will discuss the matter and invent a helmet to make it safer to play among the palms. They might also decide to build a school and teach all children to stay away from the palms. They might build a wall around the palms. In any case, a variety of options can be discussed. *Voices can be heard.*

Back to theory: If our understanding of reality was solely constructed by internalising the culture we learned from others (grandparents, teachers, ...), our image of the human being would be one completely subjected to culture (or social structure). Theories of structuralism⁵ have tended towards that somewhat bleak picture, void of such a thing as agency or "free will". These theories, however, struggle to explain cultural change.

If we assume, conversely, that next to cultural learning we observe our environment more directly, then changes in that environment or clashes between observation and culture open up a vast space for critical reflection⁶.

5 Compare to L. Althusser's understanding of „interpellation“

6 Compare to A. Gramsci's understanding of „organic intellectual“

From a coaching perspective, the advantage of a more liberal mindset lies in the openness to consider various solutions to a problem – an openness to “reconstruct reality” as is helpful. In this sense, coaching attitudes appear closer to the liberal end of the political spectrum (in the sense of supporting plurality). It may help the coach to reflect this point, in order to consider if their own “open” position is politically neutral – and to what extent it is opposed to a “centralizing” or authoritarian (dogmatic) position. This self-awareness may support a professional distance to the values and political position of a coachee.

This brief reflection opens up the question *in how far coaching is politically neutral?*

Before I return to this question, however, I would like to delve a bit deeper into the *connection between expectation management and politics*.

Above, I discussed the importance of expectation management for collaboration. If we think about a team setting now, for instance a change of leadership (new team lead): what could “expectation management” look like in this setting – and how can we think of politics here?

From a team lead’s perspective:

A team lead in a business context will have certain targets to fulfil. In that sense, expectations already rest upon our team lead. By the conventions of an organisation’s specific business culture, which include an understanding of what leadership is (*leadership culture*), there will be certain explicit and implicit expectations on the leader. Explicit expectations could be conveyed in a role description document or through a briefing between team lead and their manager. Implicit expectations may come from observations how other team leads do their job, the “air” or “hunch” of what a team lead ought to do.

Further expectations come from the team leads personal values, i.e. their own expectations towards their role. Additional expectations come from each of the team members.

First, there is a likelihood that not all of these expectations can be fulfilled. Some may stand in direct conflict. A *decision* needs to be made to *prioritise*. Secondly, it will already be part of the business culture *who* will make this prioritising decision (unilaterally or as a team), and by which *criteria*.

In “eye-level” relationships, the prioritising among various expectations happens in such a way that decisions can be mutually discussed, rather than imposed. For instance, whether tasks and goals for a team are set “*from above*” or *in discussion with the team* has a different impact on power relations within and beyond the team.

Decisions can be centralized in a hierarchy – or decentralized in autonomous teams. Coaching a team lead to reflect their own decisions and habits can (should) have an impact within this whole social system. And a social system is always already a political system, in which interpersonal relations have a dimension of power⁷.

7 Compare M. Foucault, J. Butler and many others

From a top management perspective:

Conventionally in many organisations (Laloux⁸ would describe them as “orange”), cultural development is seen as a top management task – albeit culture is meant to be lived by everyone. Setting expectations in the form of strategic goals, however, often remains a prerogative of management.

Strategy communication in businesses is comparable to political agenda setting in states. A strategy is equivalent to a political program in the sense that it directs the allocation of responsibilities (org chart), resources (budget) and sets expectations for outcomes (targets).

Where strategy is more explicit, culture is more subtle. What culture does, following political economist Antonio Gramsci, is to *legitimate and normalise*⁹ a political program. Political parties use cultural institutions (schools, media, etc.) to transmit a world-view (island) that legitimates their actions. Put the other way around, the sense behind political actions (e.g. legislation) is founded on a particular view of *how the world should be*.

Island Example: Political Programs

After the bridge has been built, coconut islanders split into two parties: one advocates more trade with fish island. This “pro fish” party regularly hosts BBQ-evenings, inviting fish islanders and offering fish as a new dish to try. They tell a story of fish being tasty, and that therefore fish trade should be encouraged in the future. Their goal is to have a fish monger on coconut island.

A second party has formed around the islanders who are still wary of fish. They advocate for a fish ban to stop trade, based on their conviction that fish will be harmful. In order to gather supporters, this party hands out leaflets by the beach and near the bridge showing terrible pictures of islanders dying from fish poisoning.

→ Assume that both parties are serious and genuinely intend the best for their island's future!

Transporting this idea from state politics to a business context, we could say that company mission statements and values are strategically placed to support a certain way of running a company. They act as a beacon for all other expectations (like a lighthouse to ships), so that many people can coordinate their actions into a common direction.

Our team lead, for instance, can now orient their priorities based on criteria that help the team move into this common direction.

From a top management or government perspective, the issue is to set a common direction that allows for “moving forward together”. A certain degree of common expectations are necessary for a large number of people to collaborate and form an organisation (a nation, a system) in the first place. Too much centralisation however curbs the organisation's ability to discuss problems and to find new solutions - in other words, it prevents innovation.

⁸ F. Laloux „Reinventing Organization“

⁹ Raise a common understanding that something is „normal“, „to be expected“, „common sense“

From an individual's perspective:

What I described so far can be applied to real organisations and teams, but it can also be applied to our "inner team" (Schulz von Thun). Some of us may find that their "inner voices" are free to express themselves. Some may find that certain inner voices tend to be silenced. Some of us may find themselves internally ruled by a rather "dictatorial" voice.

A coaching process may here feel akin to an act of careful diplomacy, throughout which the needs and wants of these inner voices may find a more peaceful way of coexisting. As in the world out there, diplomatic support (coaching) cannot replace or induce an intrinsic motivation for peace. But coaching can establish a "save space" and "neutral ground" for peace talks to take place between the voices involved.

Here - again – appreciating the plural values (cultures) of each inner voice is important. And as with an external team, the inner team may benefit from some feedback between the voices, and a shared understanding of where the whole person wants to go.

To return to the question in how far coaching is politically neutral, I would suggest the following:

- In order to be able to act as a diplomat, a coach needs to be politically neutral.
- Diplomacy is always a political act.
- Constructivism (and therefore coaching) is generally opposed to dogmatism – hence it has a political leaning to the pluralist-liberal political spectrum.

Conclusion

To sum up the key points made above:

- different experiences in life lead us to develop different constructions of reality, including different values and expectations („islands“)
- given that we are frequently confronted with various (conflicting) expectations – from others and within ourselves – aligning on expectations is important to enable collaboration / restore „inner peace“
- culture acts as a legitimating force, supporting political programs or ideas of „how the world should be“
- culture can be centralised or decentralised, leaving less or more space for diversity and innovation

A key capability of coaching is to provide a safe space for expectations to be reflected and conflicts between expectations to be resolved. It is crucial for a coach to uphold a „constructivist attitude“ and professional distance between the coach’s understanding of reality and the coachee’s understanding of reality. This distance – and differentiation – is politically important in the coaching relationship: it ensures that the coachee’s culture / values become the yardstick of targets and progress – not the coach’s.

An important point of reflection I raised was the question: Is coaching politically neutral? Despite frequent claims and intentions for neutrality, the idea to change perspective and allow variety itself has a liberal leaning. Constructivism opposes dogmatism. A coach should be aware of this.

Further questions that could be asked in this line of reasoning are:

- Can coaching only be helpful when a coachee is able and willing to shift their perspective, their evaluation of reality and potentially their values?
- Conversely, is coaching unhelpful where dogmatic beliefs prevent such reevaluations?

Does coaching literally require an open mind?