

In practice relational leadership coaching



Samreen McGregor

is an executive coach who works globally with

senior leaders and teams across industries, helping them orchestrate transformation for themselves and within their organisations.

*Samreen is the author of **Leader Awakened: Why accepting adversity drives power and freedom, where she employs her 25 years of experience to demonstrate how a leader's understanding of their own life story can impact their thoughts, behaviour and values.***

What is the approach you use in coaching (the theoretical model, its premises/underlying beliefs or reasons for being developed etc)?

At the heart of my coaching approach is a relational philosophy. This involves the co-creation of a compassionate but challenging space to work on creating greater self-consciousness, using a systemic lens and generating curiosity of context, current reality and choices.

Inspired by Rogerian theory,¹ I interrupt my client's pace of life, so that together we can explore diverse elements of their realities. Gestalt theory underpins the spacious and safe container I create and hold, encouraging a holistic view, beginning with the 'here and now'. In my experience, integrating organisational lenses with a deep psychological perspective, neuroscientific understanding, and embodied awareness enables me to support and provoke gradual 'generative' shifts while we voyage through insight and

progress towards intentions (in service of themselves and their organisation). Given my own multicultural background, core threads woven into my work are cross-cultural themes, gender and identity-relevant questions, as well as power and politics found in the corporate arena.

The psychological basis of my work is informed by a diverse repertoire of theoretical study and research. Key underpinnings include: psychodynamic theory – the interplay between conscious and unconscious; Gestalt theory – theories of learning, the relationship between persona and environment as well as figure-ground relationship; and transactional analysis (TA).

I also draw on elements of existentialist theory: working with personal narratives, using imagery and metaphor to generate clarity and vigour so personal choice is conscious, agentic and decisive. Appreciative inquiry underpins an assumptive base I hold about growth and development, where the use of language and inquiry lead to outcomes.

At an organisational level, I am guided by the works of Edgar Schein on culture², Gareth Morgan on using metaphor to better understand less visible dynamics³, Peter Block on the stewardship model of leading⁴, and Simon Western on systemic thinking and eco-leadership⁵, among others.

From a business performance vantage point, I am guided by my understanding and application of the Theory of Constraints methodology.⁶ These lenses enable me to rapidly access the client's strategic and operational world, and a more mechanistic dimension to appreciate the more rational (post-industrialist roots of how business was seen to work).

Finally, studies in neuroscience, biomedicine and psychoneuroimmunology are transitioning a growing part of my practice into bridging 'behaviour and mindset' based work with embodied consciousness, mindfulness and health.

Why were you drawn to this approach/model and how did you go about becoming skilled/qualified in it?

I am privileged to have been a member of the original team who set up the pioneering Ashridge Centre for Executive Coaching (ACEC) in late 1990s at Ashridge, today an internationally recognised provider of standards for professional coaching. Through ongoing research, the ACEC runs a masters programme and postgraduate diplomas in supervision and executive coaching, combining practice with scientific validation, and continues to contribute rigorous, academic and ethical foundations for the executive coaching field globally.

I have been an executive coach for over 20 years – as part of wider leadership development programmes, contracts set up by client organisations via a sponsor, and of late, I tend to work on predominantly stand-alone contracts solicited directly by senior leaders and business owners. I remain an active executive coach with ACEC, an associate coach with various coaching providers and I also offer services to a wide array of clients through my own business, Turmeric Group Limited.

Do you work with a particular client group and how do your clients benefit from the fact that you take this particular approach to coaching?

My coaching work has transitioned towards senior leaders navigating the unprecedented pressures of the evolving complex socio-economic environment today. These include the backdrop of the recent COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the onset of inflationary pressures and threats of an anticipated recessionary period, triggered by the Ukrainian war, leading to acute pressures, anxieties and challenges for leaders.

The paradoxical nature of life as a leader demands a relentless work ethic but also an ability to maintain their wellbeing and quality of life. This presents as the drive to progress continuously yet the need to slow down and learn from mistakes and failures. Mastery of their technical and functional expertise stems from a tenure of professional application and education, but also a need to let go of what has become their comfort zone as they transition from doing to leading. They have to be ambitious but humble, courageous to make tough calls, but also embrace vulnerability in the absence of certainty; to embrace conflict but create harmony; invite difference but drive results; honour legacy but disrupt and reinvent the future. Such paradoxes dominate the energy and attention of leaders.

Effects of the above uncertainties and adversities, driving rises in deteriorating mental health driven by 'unsurmountable' paradoxical pressures, demands a space where leaders can remove their shields, decompress and make sense of what will lead to personal agency, resourcefulness and resilience. Coaching has been an incomparable opportunity for leaders to make and use this space.

The shifting socio-political and economic context is a critical aspect about which I help clients to become more cognisant systemically. This is especially valuable in helping clients to reframe their understanding of personal challenges at a systemic level and in context with their past, present and future experiences.

A relational approach, supported by Gestalt and systemic lenses, helps leaders broaden their perspective, while becoming more precise about what is within their gift to influence and manage. The integration of heart, mind and body through embodied practices, resources leaders to transcend the unprecedented, volatile and changeable conditions impacting the organisations they lead, the people within them, and themselves (both professionally and personally).

What do you most love about being this kind of coach? Have you experienced this kind of coaching in your life and how does it resource you as a practitioner?

I cherish doing work that feels coherent with my values, with what is current and where it makes a meaningful difference. Having a deep sense of purpose, relevance and realism in work is really important to me. How clients show up (with genuine intentions and vulnerabilities) and the topics that unfold are congruent reflections of the challenges faced by people in businesses and society at large.

I take great care in cultivating intimate spaces that are co-creative, that encourage the brave practice of facing challenges, exposing vulnerabilities and working through those aspects getting in the way. I help to contain and give voice to what is depleting them of their energy and confidence, what is undermining their agency or even worse, what is generating emotional burdens (often repetitively over time) that carry the risk of detrimentally impacting their health and their relationships.

Having gone through significant transitions in my professional career as a practitioner, leader and founder, paralleled with personal adversities involving trauma, the work I do with my own coaches, mentors and supervisors has enriched my own abilities and agency as well as my practice. The congruence between the two is deep and rigorous.

Using myself as an instrument to illustrate, inspire and validate this work, has led to me being of service to clients. This does not come without critical ethical boundaries supported by ongoing personal development and supervision.

Could you share a tool or framework or aspect of this approach that other coaches might be able to use or draw on now in their work with clients?

I use and integrate a dilemma articulation tool to harness rational, emotional, intuitive and embodied content that unfolds and develops during the coaching process. This is particularly useful when it comes to making sense of the paradoxes that leaders grapple with daily over time. The evaporating cloud tool is designed to evaporate difficulties by resolving an underlying conflict. This process, devised by Eli Goldratt, articulates any challenge as a dilemma.⁶ Dilemmas are held in place by the (often unarticulated) logical connections between the needs and actions taken to fulfil needs, and untested assumptions. By going deeper and examining, we can reframe the situation and often resolve or manage the dilemma differently. Some of the underpinnings of a dilemma can be emotive and others intuitive, or even unconscious.

'Evaporating cloud' is named after a metaphor found in Richard Bach's 1977 book *Illusions*.⁷

The main characters remove storm clouds from the sky by thinking them away. His provocation is: *'If you really want to remove a cloud from your life, you do not make a big production out of it, you just relax and remove it from your thinking. That's all there is to it.'*

When skilfully applied, this tool helps to bridge more open and divergent work done in the coaching space with profound, pragmatic and lasting changes in perspective, behaviour and even mental wellbeing. ■

If people are interested in finding out more, what can they read or where could they explore it through CPD or fully train in it?

For learning how to use and practise the cloud:

Books

Scheinkopf L. *Thinking for a change: putting the TOC thinking processes to use*. CRC Press; 2002.

Schragenheim E. *Management dilemmas: the theory of constraints approach to problem identification and solutions*. CRC Press; 1998.

E-learning

Fedurko J. *Behind the cloud: enhancing logical thinking. Theory of Constraints (TOC) [ebook]* www.toc-goldratt.com/en/product/behind-the-cloud-enhancing-logical-thinking

I also share dilemmas demonstrating use of the cloud in chapter 4 of my own book: McGregor S. *Leader awakened: why accepting diversity drives power and freedom*. London: Rethink Press; 2022.

For more information, please visit: www.turmericgroup.com

REFERENCES

- 1 Rogers C. *Client-centered therapy: its current practice, implications and theory*. London: Constable; 1951.
- 2 Schein E. *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons; 2010.
- 3 Morgan G. *Images of organization*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications; 1997.
- 4 Block P. *Stewardship: choosing service over self-interest*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler; 1993.
- 5 Western S. *Leadership: a critical text*. London: Sage. 2019.
- 6 Goldratt E. *The goal*. Gower Publishing Company; 1989.
- 7 Bach R. *Illusions: The adventure of a reluctant messiah*. London: Arrow; 1998.