

# COACH

# Link

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Advancing the art, science and practice of professional coaching



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# Action methods in coaching:

## bringing vitality and immediacy to our work

Jenny Postlethwaite, PCC introduces us to Action Methods and how you can use them in coaching to deepen your clients' experience... and outcomes.

**K**aren\* and I are sitting together in a café. We are deeply immersed in coaching her through a work situation that she is struggling with. The table between us contains what looks like a random scattering of spoons, sugar bowls, coffee cups, salt and pepper shakers; the everyday miscellany of a café table. As we talk, the waitress approaches, "Let me clear this for you" she says, picking up a spoon. "Noooo!" Karen and I cry out in unison. "You can't take that spoon", says Karen, seizing it back and replacing it carefully on the table, "that's my boss!"

My guiding purpose as a coach is to have people become more unified in their being, with spontaneity, to enable their adequate functioning in the world. The integration of Action Methods into my professional practice has enabled this, contributing deeply to my professional and personal vitality, immediacy and effectiveness.

Action Methods is a form of learning that integrates thought, feeling and action, utilising concepts and techniques drawn from the work of Dr JL Moreno. Complementary to a broad range of modalities such as coaching, facilitation, training, counselling and therapy, used in both 1-on-1 and group settings, Moreno's work provides a meta-theory for accessing spontaneity in work and life.

### Belief in the creative genius

At the heart of Action Methods is the belief that innate within each of us lies a great creative genius – a creative genius that can rise up and meet a new challenge, or develop a fresh response to an old problem – but at times our genius, our spontaneity, our creativity is blocked. We get stuck in old problems and old habits, sometimes without even realising it.

If our clients can access their inherent spontaneity and creativity and bring that to the situation they are facing, then our work together is much more vital and immediate, more effective and rewarding.

The concepts and tools that support are this relatively simple yet profound.

### Show, don't tell

The cornerstone of Action Methods is concretisation – a 'show, don't tell' approach – generating an experience that unifies thought, feeling and action, thus deepening and enriching learning and change outcomes.

Karen's difficult situation is 'made concrete' on the café table. Each object represents someone or something relevant to the situation and each is placed in specific relationship to each other. Perhaps close by, perhaps far apart, facing this way or that, immediately providing a visual and systemic perspective from outside the situation. This enables Karen to access a new awareness, not dominated by her cognition, nor bounded by the limitations of her verbal narrative.

*"Spontaneity enables its carrier to take full command of his creative resources. It operates in the present, now and here and propels the individual toward an adequate response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation."*  
JL Moreno

### Role Theory

Also at the heart of Moreno's method is the concept of **role**. A role is the way in which we behave in response to other people, objects or situations in specific moments. Some roles – referred to as coping roles – maintain the status quo. They may keep us safe, but nothing changes. Others – progressive roles – enliven us in the here and now, enabling us to be spontaneous and creative, producing a satisfying response to a new situation or a new response to an old situation.

Working to identify these roles can greatly assist the client to 'warm up' to the reality of their situation, the nature and quality of their relationships with others, and to their own spontaneity and creativity. It can bring energy and humour to a situation hitherto experienced by the client as debilitating or demoralising.

During a coaching session, a client's role relationships can be identified and more fully experienced both from their own perspective and

that of others in the system, using the technique of role reversal. Karen is not just talking about her boss, she is coached to take up his role herself, moving as he moves, expressing himself and interacting as he does. In doing so Karen gains a fuller experience of being her boss and seeing the world as he sees it.

Helpful new progressive roles can be explored and developed. As another example, Audrey\*, in conflict with a colleague, described herself as a *Frightened Bunny* and instead aspired to be a *Tenacious Tiger*. Audrey's self-naming of these roles was deeply affirming for her. They provided a truthful representation of her current reality and an enlivening metaphor for the future she was working toward.

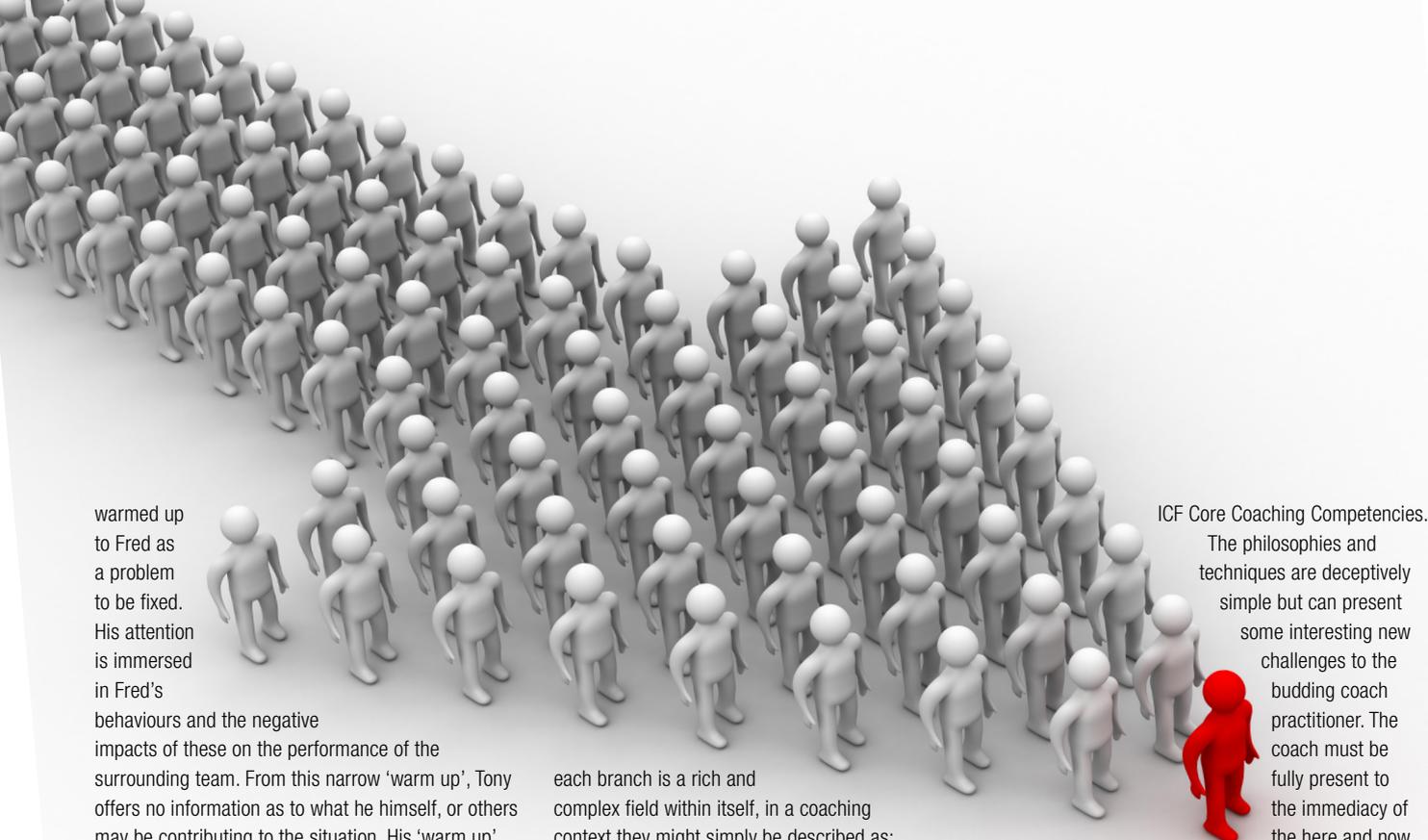
Tim\* is struggling to address the poor performance of team member Alan\*. Coaching supported him to see he has been a *Soft Hearted Conflict Avoider* with Alan and to identify his preferred progressive role of *Firm And Fair Accountability Holder*. He then began to explore *in action* his unique way of being in that role, a rehearsal of sorts, for future real life interactions between them. Reversing roles with Alan provided Tim a fuller, embodied experience of how things might unfold between them and to play with and shape his developing role of *Firm And Fair Accountability Holder* in response.

As well as naming the specific roles that have emerged in a specific situation, the coach can also work with a client to understand the patterns of their role system. This lifts the focus of the coaching from a specific 'issue' to considering the client's overall development.

### What is warm up?

Warm up is the key to unlocking the doors so that you and your coaching client experience yourselves flowing with free choice rather than acting out narrow roles in constrained situations. In simple terms, warm up is a process of giving attention to someone or something. Roles emerge according to what we give attention to.

During a briefing session for a new coaching assignment, Fred\* is described to me by his manager Tony\* as insensitive, uncaring and egotistical. Tony is



warmed up to Fred as a problem to be fixed. His attention is immersed in Fred's behaviours and the negative impacts of these on the performance of the surrounding team. From this narrow 'warm up', Tony offers no information as to what he himself, or others may be contributing to the situation. His 'warm up' makes it difficult for him to intervene effectively with Fred.

As I hear this I personally 'warm up' as a *Curious Systems Explorer*, eager to understand Tony's thinking and feelings from his perspective, whilst at the same time holding my own objectivity and taking a systemic view.

Recognising and effectively working with 'warm up' in the here and now moments of a session is my critical contribution as coach. It underpins my own and my client's spontaneity and capacity to respond freely, rather than from rigid conserves. For the session to be effective, I need to facilitate an appropriate 'warm up' in both of us, to bring forth the roles most suited to meet the client's purpose. A variety of Action Methods techniques, such as doubling, mirroring, role reversal, interview for role and social atom mapping, are available to me to help deepen warm up and access spontaneity.

### Four Branches

There are four branches within Action Methods, each of which works through a particular lens, providing different perspectives and tools for the coach. Whilst

each branch is a rich and complex field within itself, in a coaching context they might simply be described as:

- Psychodrama – working with the purpose of an individual;
- Sociodrama – working with the collective purpose of a group, for example, a work team or group of individuals with a common concern, such as a community action group;
- Sociometry – coaching to deepen the client's awareness of the nature and quality of their relationships with others;
- Role Training – coaching to develop progressive roles and to strengthen a specific role in a specific situation.

### Coach Competencies

Action Methods are a natural fit for a professional coach looking to extend their development and bring greater vitality and immediacy to their practice. And, they are naturally harmonious and consistent with the

ICF Core Coaching Competencies. The philosophies and techniques are deceptively simple but can present some interesting new challenges to the budding coach practitioner. The coach must be fully present to the immediacy of the here and now

moment – warming up the client to physical action, to expressing their thinking and their feeling, to being aware of their body, and slowing the client down in critical moments, moments of discomfort, or triumph, or the emergence of something new, so they might experience how it truly is for them. The coach must also move beyond the verbal question and answer dynamic which characterises many coaching conversations, working in the unknown with whatever thinking, feeling and action emerges in the client in the moment, rather than leading the client through a structured process. ■

For those of you warmed up to the topic by this article, visit [www.actionmethodsinfoaching.com.au](http://www.actionmethodsinfoaching.com.au) for further information.

\* Client names have been changed.

**Jenny Postlethwaite, PCC**, is the founder of Reach Coaching ([www.reachcoaching.com.au](http://www.reachcoaching.com.au)), a boutique coaching and OD consulting business. She also provides coach supervision and, in collaboration with colleague Rollo Browne, offers training in Action Methods In Coaching. Jenny is currently studying toward professional accreditation as a Sociodramatist.



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