

Finding our way home: coaching's search for identity in a new era

David B. Drake*

Executive Director, Center for Narrative Coaching

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Coaching is at a crossroads as it moves into its second decade as an emergent profession. In some ways, its future will depend in part on its search for a past. As such, this paper offers an historical framework based on Peterson's (1991, 2004) work on the evolving relationship between science and practice in psychology across three eras – the preprofessional, the scientist-practitioner, and the professional – and a fourth era, the postprofessional (Drake, 2005), which began in 1990 with the identification of systemic evidence as an explicit basis for practice. Lessons to be learned from these eras by coaches are identified while recognizing that coaching is, in many ways, an unprecedented phenomenon that requires new levels of thinking. The second half of the paper lays out the possibility that a fifth era is dawning – the era of the artisan – in which coaches are seen as master craftspeople skilled in an applied art. The role of evidence in a new era is explored as part of a larger goal of helping coaches and coaching evolve and, in doing so, find their way home to their deepest calling and contribution.

Keywords: coaching, profession, era, artisan, evidence, practice

Introduction

'Psychotherapy is an undefined technique, applied to unspecified problems, with unpredictable outcomes. For this technique we recommend rigorous training.' (Victor C. Raimy, 1950)

This tongue-in-cheek remark could just as well have been written about the state of coaching. Even so, a drive to bring coaching into the fold of evidence-based practices (EBP) is increasing. Forces at play include pressures for Return On Investment (ROI) measures from organizations that utilize coaches, evaluation of coaching competencies by certification bodies, and differentiation and credibility in a crowded market. To respond to these pressures and to advance the field of study, coaching professionals must increasingly engage with others in critical questions about its past, present and future.

Otherwise, if practices continue to be based largely on market response and personal preferences, coaching is likely to fail in the long run. If this happens, it will become a 'would-be scientific discipline ... a tangle of knowledge rather than a clear-cut field of science' (Staats, 1991, p. 910). To avoid this fate, coaches need to deliberate on the central question, 'What is coaching (e.g. an industry, field, profession, philosophy and/or set of tools) and what are the implications of our

*Email: ddrake@narrativecoaching.com

answer(s)?' In answering these questions about its identity, coaching can learn a lot from the evolution of related professional practices, e.g. family medicine's debates as to whether it is 'an ethos, a set of role traits, or a gatekeeper' (Stein, 2006, p. 256).

This paper offers a framework for this search (described below); it is based on Peterson's (1991, 2004) work on the evolving relationship between science and practice in psychology across three historical eras: the *preprofessional*, the *scientist-practitioner*, and the *professional*. A fourth era, the *postprofessional* (Drake & Stober, 2005), is added with the contention that it began in 1990 with the identification of systemic evidence as an explicit basis for practice in medicine and psychotherapy. As the field of coaching searches for productive ties to these four eras it is important to make distinctions about what can be brought forward from them and what cannot.

In doing so, it will be important to recognize that the field of coaching is, in many ways, an unprecedented phenomenon that requires new levels of thinking about its practices and its profession. As such, the second half of the paper lays out the possibility that a fifth era is dawning – the era of the *artisan* – in which coaches are seen as people who are skilled in an applied art and master craftspeople who can adapt, as necessary, the mediums through which they deliver their work. As coaching matures, those who continue to excel, will do so by weaving together the strands of science and practice at higher levels. This paper will focus on why and how evidence matters in this new era. The goal is to help coaches and coaching evolve and, in doing so, find their way home to their deepest calling and contribution.

Four eras in the relationship between science and practice

As the field of coaching seeks a place within the broader scholarly and professional landscape, it is useful to draw on Peterson's (1991, 2004) delineation of three eras in the evolving relationship between science and practice in psychology professionals (date ranges mine): (1) *preprofessional* (1880–1945); (2) *scientist-practitioner* (1945–1970); and (3) *professional* (1970–1990). It is proposed here that a fourth era, the *postprofessional* (1990–2007), began with the introduction of evidence-based practices in psychology and medicine. Even as the field of coaching develops closer ties to these four eras, e.g. the rise of coaching psychology as a subset of a larger domain, overall it struggles to confidently position itself relative to these eras and its sister professions.

One of the difficulties for coaching arises from the fact that it has emerged in a *postprofessional* context but without the explicit foundational components of other disciplines. Many in coaching have latched on to evidence-based practices because it is the standard of the day without due thought to the implications of doing so. In many ways, coaching has neither fully developed the means to become an evidence-based practice nor fully realized that a new era is on the horizon. While coaching has much to gain by developing a more solid footing, there is little to gain by trying to retroactively fit earlier paradigms. Coaching's future may be better served by transcending our historic squabbles in order to address the unique opportunities of our time. To be successful, coaching can draw on the lessons learned in medicine and psychology as well as recognize that its evolutionary path may be unlike any before it. In order to understand why this may be so, let us look briefly at the previous eras in psychology before turning to examine the implications for coaching.

The preprofessional era (1880–1945)

In this initial phase of psychology's development, the connections between science and practice were assumed to be fairly direct, unidirectional and linear. Psychologists entered their practices with little systematic preparation for professional work; they were primarily educated as scientists and came to the practice of psychology from other fields (Peterson, 1991). The migration of individual scientists like James, Freud, and Jung to psychology is indicative of a preprofessional era that is rooted in the basic sciences and lacking in a strong sense of a 'profession.' Their primary legacies were the establishment of the theoretical and philosophical building blocks of the psychological domain and early experimentation with their implications.

The scientist-practitioner era (1945–1970)

A reciprocal (though not equal) relationship between science and practice emerged in the wake of World War II. It was based on a belief that, once the right research was done, professional applications would routinely follow. As the emphasis shifted from basic to applied science, it became important for practitioners to 'think scientifically' in approaching professional problems. This stance provided psychology a place at the table in the rebuilding years after the war exemplified a profession's strategic response to the political, economic and social realities of its time and set the stage for an emerging profession (Corrie & Callahan, 2000) at an institutional level.

A key figure in this movement was David Shakow (1976) who saw the scientist-professional as a 'knowledgeable generalist, a person who, on the basis of systemic knowledge about persons obtained in real-life situations, has integrated this knowledge with psychological theory, and has then consistently regarded it with the questioning attitude of the scientist' (p. 554). Shakow's (Shakow, Hilgard, Kelly, Luckey, Sanford, & Shaffer, 1947) report for the American Psychological Association posited that a psychologist should be trained as both a scientist and a professional. The Boulder Model, emerging from a national gathering of clinical psychology training programs in 1949, built on this notion in arguing for a more integrated curriculum and training process (Raimy, 1950). Some, such as Albee (2000), criticized it as fatally flawed for its uncritical acceptance of the medical model. Even so, this era was important in shaping the emerging notion of a profession.

Professional era (1970–1990)

The expectation that professionals were to evaluate the efficacy of their interventions, use scientific methodologies they'd adapted, and be accountable for the quality of service they delivered (Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998) carried into this era. However, there was a shift in emphasis from the institution back to the individual as many in the field realized that the scientist-practitioner model was less about what one did or what role one played and more about an internalized professional identity (Corrie & Callahan, 2000). The view was that, while clinicians must still work scientifically, this was now defined in terms of strategy more than a reliance on established procedure (Shapiro, 2002). Peterson's (1991) work on *disciplined inquiry*, Stricker and Trierweiler's (1995) notion of the *local clinical scientist*, and Messer's (2004) call for *scientifically oriented psychologists* exemplify this approach. The application of

critical scientific thinking in local contexts was of primary importance (Trierweiler & Stricker, 1998).

With this new focus on role and identity, professions began to develop a systematic knowledge base composed of an underlying discipline or basic science component, an applied science or ‘engineering’ component, and a skills and attitudinal component (Schein, 1973). Professional expertise and experience were given greater prominence, and the emergence of humanistic psychology and client-centered therapies reflected the changing face of the field. There was also an increased attention to clients – and their outcomes and satisfaction – as the focus in interventions and as the beneficiary of research. It was a time of new levels of freedom, visibility, and responsibility for psychology professionals as both their science and their practices moved into the mainstream.

The postprofessional era (1990–2007)

The rise of evidence-based practices (EBPs) in psychology and medicine in the 1990s can be seen as a major marker for the emergence of a *postprofessional* era. Much of coaching’s stance on EBP has been built on definitions from the medical field, e.g. ‘Evidence-based medicine (EBM) is the integration of best research evidence with clinical expertise and patient values’ (Sackett, Strauss, Richardson, Rosenberg, & Haynes, 2000, p. 1). As Norcross (2001) noted in psychology, efforts to promote evidence-based psychotherapies were seen as ‘praiseworthy efforts to distill scientific research into clinical applications and to guide practice and training’ (p. 346). The increasing emphasis on evidence in this era was, in part, a result of the needs in large bodies such as governments, corporations and health care organizations for more objective standards for evidence to guide their policy, payment and practice decisions.

While practitioners in this era had unprecedented access to research and aggregated information, they also experienced unprecedented demands from external forces on how they made decisions and accounted for their practices. As a result, the pendulum had swung again – the internal, localized knowledge as championed in the *professional* era made way for a greater emphasis on external, institutional knowledge in the *postprofessional* era. As a result, this era saw increased role diffusion and expectations and increased specialization and market orientation among health and psychology practitioners. At the same time, this was also the era of the emerging voice for ‘patient-centered medicine’. As the era moved forward, these shifts led to a more sophisticated understanding of the contextual and complex nature of evidence as well as greater debate about the accompanying political, technological and economic issues.

Where does coaching stand? Important lessons from the first four eras

The times in which we live call for a new understanding of what it means to be a professional and to participate in a profession. Coaches can learn a lot from their colleagues in medicine and psychology who have been wrestling with the potential – and pitfalls – of evidence-based practices for the past 17 years. However, the purpose of these explorations should not be to merely emulate what others have done and thereby prove that coaching is a ‘real’ profession. Rather, it should be to create

stronger and clearer ties to the disciplines on which coaching is built and to begin defining a new path for a new era. A key part of this process for coaching is to integrate the key lessons from the four eras even as it transcends them to meet the needs it now faces.

Preprofessional era

Coaches can benefit from a deeper understanding of and respect for the basic and applied sciences that underpin coaching. At the same time, coaching would gain more credibility if coaches would make more explicit and transparent the connections between their theoretical base, practice methods and client results. Unlike psychotherapists who draw on the science of psychology and contribute to its ongoing development, coaches need to intentionally make these connections (cf. Peterson & Hicks, 1996). Otherwise, coaching risks the problems that have beset family medicine in seeking a place at the table within the medical establishment, namely ‘to possess something of high status that is uniquely its own, not borrowed, not grafted’ (Stein, 2006, p. 257). The goal for coaching, then, is to be a primary activity rather than a derivative one. In order to do so, it needs to be more overt about its genealogy.

Scientist-practitioner era

Coaches can benefit from a greater proficiency as consumers, evaluators, and producers (Hayes, Barlow, & Nelson-Gray, 1999) of research and scholarship in guiding their practice. While the latter is the least likely for most coaches, all three are important in raising the bar on coaching and ensuring its ongoing survival and success. One step in this direction is to help coaches move beyond their attachments to the ‘culture of pragmatism’ (Jackson, in press) to articulate a broader epistemology of coaching – e.g. how do coaches know what they know, what assumptions do they bring as a result and how do these assumptions shape their practice? In true coaching fashion, coaches can benefit from naming the distinctions between science and practice made in this era in order to break through to a new approach that is more fitting for both the discipline and the times.

Professional era

In order to mature as a recognized professional practice, the proverbial ‘black box’ of coaching interventions needs to be explicated so that what occurs in coaching can be more openly and thoroughly studied. It would also encourage coaches to claim and evaluate their theories-in-use (Argyris, 1994) and help coach educators more fully understand mastery and how it is developed (cf. Drake, Brennan, & Gørtz, in press). While some have rightfully questioned coaching’s status as a profession (cf. Bennett, 2006), there is still much to be learned by taking the demands of this era more seriously in shaping coaching’s future. In doing so, coaching can build a stronger platform for itself in meeting Schein’s (1973) criteria for a profession – particularly the applied science or ‘engineering’ component. While coaching may never meet Schön’s (1983) more formal requirements that it be specialized, firmly bounded,

scientific, and standardized, we can embrace these aims as a source of strength for the tasks ahead.

Postprofessional era

One of the most critical needs for the coaching profession is to come to a consensus about its desired relationship to evidence and to the EBP paradigm itself. The attraction for many people within coaching to EBP as a model is understandable in that it provides language and tools with which to address many of the early limitations in the field and respond to Schön's (1983) call for reflective practitioners (cf. McGonagill, 2002). However, there is an urgent need to discern how the EBP framework best fits with and serves the coaching profession and how to resolve differences in opinion about what constitutes 'evidence' and what role it should have in practice. In order to be accountable for their practices and remain credible in a fast-changing world, coaches would be well served by a strong, inclusive and generative stance on evidence.

Early signs of a new era

Three issues in particular point to the need to move on from the *postprofessional era* as the primary referent point for coaching as it envisions its future. The first is a need within coaching to more openly address the challenges inherent in the fact that it was the first profession to emerge largely from practice (and the marketplace) rather than from science (and the academy). The second is the recognition that even within the medical field, the bastion of evidence-based practices, there has been notable difficulty in affecting clinical practice through the dissemination of research findings (Margison, 2001) and there is research to suggest that physicians will follow practice guidelines only about 50% of the time (Timmermans & Mauck, 2005). A critical need in this new era is to deepen our understanding of what happens the other half of the time. There is a clear sense that coaching has a lot to offer in that search.

The third issue has to do with how much is found under the umbrella of 'coaching' and how this growing trend contributes to the challenges of developing a coherent and robust profession using the old standards. This is important for those who provide coaching in terms of their identity, power and ongoing development as well as for those who use coaching in terms of their abilities to select, evaluate and benefit from coaches. For example, what does it mean for either group that there are more people who use coaching as part of their professional practice – and thus have other primary professional identities – than there are those who do coaching full time? Across the spectrum of people who identify with coaching, they may see it as a new calling, a way of life, another set of tools to enhance their current work, or a structured and unique professional practice. As a result, we need a new understanding of a 'profession' that will accommodate this spectrum in a responsible and productive manner.

Since coaching began as a broad field encompassing people who came from a wide variety of backgrounds and paths, it may never be possible to have an all-inclusive profession of coaching. Because of this, it may never be possible to have a unified field of coaching. One option for coaching is to borrow from the distinctions that have emerged in psychology between psychiatrists, psychologists, licensed

therapists, unlicensed but trained therapists, therapeutic professionals, therapeutic volunteers, peer support and self-help resources. I foresee that as the field of coaching matures, it will eventually yield similar categories that formally distinguish among various levels and types of coaching providers. As a result, new forms of professional communities will arise across the spectrum of people who identify with coaching.

In the end, coaching may be more usefully seen as a network than a profession or field in the traditional sense. In time, we may even discover that *coaching* is not even the right word for much of what happens. Perhaps it will come to be seen as a movement that profoundly shaped the arenas in which it is currently practiced – leadership and management development; team and individual performance; training support and organizational learning; career and life transitions; relationships and conversations – yielding a spectrum of providers, in which only some people are seen as professional coaches. There will undoubtedly be some wrinkles as this story unfolds, but it will ultimately strengthen coaching and coaches as they seek their place in an era of the *artisan*. It is an historic opportunity for coaches to redefine what it means to be a professional and how they want to position themselves relative to the foundations of the past, the realities of the present and the needs of the future. Along with this differentiation of roles will come a more refined understanding of the various relationships with evidence.

Why evidence matters in the new era

Coaching is at a fork in the road as it critically examines its individual and collective stances on how to: (1) navigate the medical model *and* a contextual approach in working with evidence; (2) make room at the table for rigorous scholarship and vigorous practice as sources of evidence; and (3) respond to internal *and* external forces that are at play in shaping the evidence conversation and its outcome. In seeking a broader definition of and value for evidence in coaching, coaches would do well to heed the distinction between internal and external validity offered by Knotthaus and Dinant, who advocated for ‘medicine-based evidence’ as well as ‘evidence-based medicine’ (cited in Steinberg & Luce, 2005, p. 86). This shift can be seen in psychotherapy research where, according to David Orlinsky (2007), they are beginning to use the phrase ‘practice-based evidence’ to make an essential point about ‘evidence-based practice.’

Coaches have the opportunity to create a new stance on evidence that takes more seriously the historic scientific requirements of a profession as well as the dynamic contextual needs of a new type of practice. By respecting multiple types of knowledge and evidence, coaches can incorporate research guidance, practice experience, client experience, local context knowledge, (and professional knowledge) in making better decisions in working with their clients (Rycroft-Malone et al., 2004). Great coaches do this instinctively; the goal now is to be able to articulate and disseminate how this is done. In order to increase the conscious competence within coaching.

As coaching evolves, there is a growing recognition of the need to establish a clearer canon and taxonomy of evidence that addresses core questions for the field such as: (1) what works; (2) how it works; (3) why it works; (4) how well it works; (5) how we know it works; (6) when and with whom it works; and (7) what might work

better (Linley, 2006; Stober, Wildflower, & Drake, 2006; Tanenbaum, 2005). In doing so, it will be important to maintain an understanding of evidence that serves all of the stakeholders in coaching. For example, coaches need evidence that informs their awareness, shapes their assessment, and guides their actions – not only a ‘science of discourse, but [also] a science of intervention’ (Lane & Corrie, 2006, p. 83). It is a matter of understanding what you notice, what you think it means, and what you should do about it. Many coaches struggle most with the latter – taking and reflecting on action – and would be served well by having greater distinctions about evidence.

One way to help this cause is to consider the provocative proposition that evidence is a verb as much as a noun (Drake, 2008). By that I mean to look beyond the traditional notions of evidence as universal, static, objective, neutral and codified data to include the idea that it is also contextual, dynamic, subjective, political and socially constructed. This view draws on a seasoned appreciation for the evidential value of relational and experiential wisdom in professional practice. For coaches to become masterful, they need to move beyond thinking of evidence as only a tool or label to be brought from the outside into their practice. Instead, they can also see it as a way of thinking, a way of being, which is integral to how they work inside their practices. In doing so, coaches retain the important distinctions among science and practice as they relate to evidence but they are no longer bound by false dichotomies that do not serve them or their clients.

Evidence only becomes significant when put into action in response to a question, in support of an outcome or in the creation of relevant knowledge. Therefore, what constitutes ‘evidence’ is determined in large part by the community in which it is used and that community’s preferred paradigm, discourse, and norms (Lincoln, 2002). As such, what are the implications of coaching’s strong allegiance to clients and the marketplace for much of its language and actions relative to evidence? Professionally, it is imperative for coaches to be able to articulate to clients, sponsors and peers what they believe about evidence, its nature and its use. Personally, it is important for them to candidly ask themselves: (1) How do I *really* use the various types of evidence right now in my practice? (2) What would I *actually* do differently with more and better evidence? (3) What evidence would I need to be more effective and wise in my practice? In doing so, the drive for an engagement with evidence is internally driven as opposed to externally imposed.

This honest self-assessment by coaches also brings a greater awareness of and astuteness about the politics of the evidence they generate from and incorporate into their practices. Evidence is political because clients, sponsors, coaches, scholars and the larger coaching community each have their own criteria, norms and purpose for evidence – and vie to privilege their evidence and their norms. As one psychology researcher noted (Orlinsky, 2007), ‘If I get to define “evidence” then my practice wins; if you get to define “evidence” then your practice wins and mine may lose.’ Therefore, it is incumbent for all involved in coaching to stay in dialogue about the path forward regarding evidence and for coaches to equip themselves to be able to fully participate. In the end, coaches must decide how they will assign their allegiance in the midst of the growing demands to serve multiple masters. It is my hope that the next generation of frameworks and guidelines for evidence will arise from within the profession and a place of intentionality rather than from external entities and a quest for accelerated legitimacy.

Rather than trying to ‘prove’ themselves as if engaged in an adolescent dare, coaches need to take up the mantle of evidence in addressing the questions above as part of their professional and collective maturation. In doing so, it would be naive for coaches to turn their back on science or to be against a scientific methodology. At the same time, to present coaching as a hard science – anymore than can be said of psychotherapy – is merely an attempt to make it a credible competitor in a crowded marketplace. Rather than being handed off to either the coaching research community or the marketing people, evidence is everyone’s responsibility in this era. Coaches can no longer afford to wait for larger collectives to decide on evidentiary standards for everyone or skate ahead on their own thin ice in an unregulated environment (cf. Spence, Cavanagh, & Grant, 2006).

Conclusion

‘[W]e are in the presence of a serious trend, a very significant one, in fact, that sees the emergence of a ‘meta profession’ at the heart of all the help-related professions and which therefore represents a profound and unstoppable trend which can contribute to the lasting development of people and institutions.’ (Vincent Lenhardt)

Coaching is at a developmental crossroad, flourishing yet somehow restless about its next step. This paper was designed to support this process through positioning coaching both historically and at the forefront of a new era. As I’ve advocated in previous work on rites of passage in coaching (Drake, 2003, 2004, 2005), there is great value in stepping back to look at where we have come from and where others have traveled who have been this way before. There is also great value in being willing to release old attachments to make room for whole new ways of being in the world. In some ways, it is time for coaches to coach themselves.

For now, coaches can certainly embrace a new approach to science and practice as seen in the alchemists in science, the wise ones in coaching, and the masters in the arts. There clearly are connections between artistry and mastery (Drake, in press) and a case to be made for professional practice as artistry. For example, Phillips (2006) urged psychotherapists to inhabit the middle ground of the arts between religious truth and scientific truth, in which ‘truth and usefulness have traditionally been allowed a certain latitude . . . In the so-called arts it has always been acknowledged that many of the things we value most – the gods and God, love and sexuality, mourning and amusement, character and inspiration, the past and the future – are neither measurable or predictable. Indeed, this may be one of the reasons they are so abidingly important to us.’ Is not coaching a quintessential art in this regard – helping clients get to the heart of their dilemmas, the core of their values, the essence of their life, the meaning of their legacies?

If coaches thought of themselves as daring yet disciplined artists, it would free them to move more confidently in the direction of their dreams for their practice, their part of the profession, and what they can do in the world. The path of the artist seems compelling because, as Harvey Brooks wrote:

‘The dilemma of the professional today lies in the fact that both ends of the gap he is expected to bridge with his profession are changing so rapidly: the body of knowledge that he must use and the expectations of the society that he must serve . . . This places on

the professional a requirement for adaptability that is unprecedented.’ (cited in Schön, 1983, p. 15)

As such, coaches must continue to catch themselves whenever they are trying too hard to fit in rather than create the taste by which they are judged (Phillips, 2006). To do so will require them to step more fully into this era and what it requires of them in remaining agile as masterful artisans of a sacred craft. If coaches are courageous and committed in forging a new path, they may find their way home to their highest selves – doing for themselves what they do so well for others. If they are successful, they may have the same experience as Tom Hanks in the movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*, when he says about the first time he touched his late wife’s hand, ‘It felt like coming home . . . only it was unlike any home I’d ever known.’

Notes on contributor



David B. Drake, PhD is the Executive Director of the Center for Narrative Coaching. He works internationally with organizations to improve their coaching capabilities and develop integrated coaching strategies, and he teaches advanced narrative/coaching skills to professionals. David has written over twenty publications on narratives, evidence, and the future of coaching; he is the executive editor for *The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching*.

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