

# Executive Coaching in a Cross-Cultural Context

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*Many executive coaches today find themselves working with leaders from a variety of cultural backgrounds, as well as coaching leaders who work with culturally diverse teams. It is therefore increasingly important that coaches understand the role of culture in their work. This article begins with an overview of several ways that culture plays a role in coaching, including an exploration of how assumptions about culture can positively or negatively impact a coach's approach and their ultimate success with a given individual. A second section provides three general principles for coaching across cultures, emphasizing the importance of using cross-cultural knowledge as a way to customize coaching to each person. The third section focuses on five essential conditions for learning—insight, motivating, capabilities, real-world practice, and accountability—and how cultural differences can influence various steps in the coaching process. A variety of examples for each condition highlight specific tools and techniques that coaches can use.*

**Keywords:** leadership development, executive coaching, cross-cultural, learning, individual differences

In August 2006, during the same period in which I was writing this article, I found myself teaching a week-long coaching workshop to a multicultural group of consultants in Shanghai. I decided to use that session to test a number of ideas my colleague Mary Dee Hicks and I had developed over the previous decade in our consulting and coaching with clients from 20 countries around the globe. Cultural differences were apparent from the very beginning of the class, when everyone introduced himself or herself. The first person to speak was the sole American in the group, a graduate student who had lived in Shanghai for years and spoke Mandarin fluently. The next to speak were the Australians. Then, the Chinese participants, two from Hong Kong and three from Shanghai, introduced themselves, followed by an individual from Sin-

gapore. The two participants from Tokyo waited until the very end.

It was in that context of culturally stereotypic behavior—outspoken Americans and Australians, reserved and respectful Japanese—that I was about to make the provocative statement that “culture is irrelevant in coaching.”<sup>1</sup> Although I do not intend that claim to be taken literally, I wish to convey the point that culture is a social- or group-level phenomenon, and coaching occurs at the level of the individual. The coach's challenge is to get to know the person they are working with, regardless of whether that person was shaped by culture, social status, family background, life experiences, education, profession, personality, or other factors. Certainly culture may be a potent force in shaping people's identity and behavior, but it is an

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<sup>1</sup> All of the participants in this workshop spoke English. Although language and culture are intertwined, this article does not delve into the issue of language differences in coaching. Suffice it to say that coaching works best when the coach and participant are fluent enough in a common language to discuss nuances of motivation, meaning, and behavior. Although even extreme differences in culture do not preclude effective coaching, lacking fluency in a common language is a formidable barrier.

unpredictable and unreliable factor in determining the character, values, or behavior of any particular individual. Regardless of cultural norms, a given individual from Germany, Mexico, or Japan might be punctual or chronically late, outspoken or reserved, methodical or disorganized. Because coaches work one-on-one, they can discover and work with each person as a unique human being rather than forming opinions based on generalizations and stereotypes about the person's cultural background. Therefore, one of the purposes of this article is to help make sure that one's assumptions about culture do not interfere with coaching an individual. Please note that this position should in no way be perceived as minimizing the importance of awareness, sensitivity, and respect for cultural differences.

A second purpose, which may appear almost contradictory at first blush, is to show how an understanding of culture and cultural differences can actually deepen the quality of coaching. The broader a coach's understanding of culture, the better they are able to identify important dimensions of human behavior and explore their meaning. The deeper a coach's insights into how culture has shaped their own beliefs and values, the more sensitive they can be to how their assumptions shape their reactions and advice to the people they coach.

This article is organized into three sections: a discussion of the role of culture in coaching, three guidelines for coaching across cultures, and a summary of insights into how cultural differences may influence the coaching process as well as the coach's choice of specific techniques to use.

## **The Role of Culture**

### ***Hypothesis 1: Culture doesn't tell you much about an individual***

It is clear that different leadership styles are preferred in different cultures (Hofstede, 1991, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Trompenaars &

Hampden-Turner, 2004). It is also clear that organizations have different cultures and their own preferred leadership styles (Schein, 1992). And yet it is evident to anyone who has worked or consulted inside an organization that some individuals do not fit the dominant cultural style of their country or their organization, yet are still successful. So whereas an understanding of a culture may tell you a lot about a given group, it does not necessarily tell you much about any given individual. An Indian executive from a large multinational organization articulated a similar philosophy: "The more I travel and work in other countries—and I've lived in India, Japan, Europe, and the U.S.—the more I conclude that culture is less of a factor than people believe. There are two big traps that people fall into when dealing with people from other cultures: First, expecting people to be like you. Second, expecting people to fit their cultural stereotype. People are people everywhere around the world. You have to treat them like individuals" (A. Gupta, personal communication, March 11, 2004).

A vivid example of this was evident during a workshop in Tokyo several years ago, with an audience comprised of roughly equal numbers of American, British, and Japanese human resource executives. As a group, the Americans were the most vocal, whereas the Japanese were the least loquacious. However, the individual who most dominated the session was Japanese. Granted, single instances are not proof, but this illustrates the potential value of using culture to understand group behavior in contrast to the difficulty in using it to predict individual behavior.

### ***Hypothesis 2: Between company and country, the stronger culture dominates***

The stronger a company's own culture is, the more likely it will shape employees behavior. This becomes increasingly true as

people rise higher in their organization. Hewlett-Packard, for example, has been known for years as having a very strong culture, characterized by the “HP Way.” Engineers, whether in India, the United States, or elsewhere, wear their corporate identity with pride and begin to take on the corporate values and behaviors. Even people who have left the company years ago often say that they still feel a sense of connection, even loyalty, to the company.

A contrasting effect, of country culture dominating organizational culture, may be observed when ex-pats from companies with weak cultures “go native;” that is, they begin to assimilate into the local country culture.

### ***Hypothesis 3: Senior executives (from anywhere) tend to become more alike***

As globalization increases, business executives find themselves sharing a set of increasingly similar experiences: the majority of them speak English, face similar competitive dynamics in their businesses, read the same books and periodicals, travel on the same airlines, stay in the same hotels, and share similar privileged lifestyles overall as the result of their financial status. Carlos Ghosn, CEO of Nissan and Renault, observed a few years ago “as Nissan’s identity strengthens, the North Americans, Europeans and Japanese working here are becoming more alike than they are different” (Ghosn, 2002, p. 11). Mellahi (2001) examined the impact of national culture on cross-cultural management practices in organizations in France, the United Kingdom, India, and several Arab and African countries. Mellahi’s conclusion was that the various countries were converging toward a Western style of leadership, corresponding to an emerging global business culture.

Even outside of executive ranks, it has been noted that broad cultural distinctions are increasingly unreliable in the face of global communications, travel, and interactions. The expanding interconnectedness of

people and the growing confluence of cultures leads to greater complexity in social identities and an erosion of traditional cultural distinctions (Hermans & Kempen, 1998).

### ***Hypothesis 4: Culture and personality vary on similar dimensions***

As varied as cultural dimensions may be, many of them parallel differences in personality characteristics. A coach who is familiar with how personality and culture may vary will be more adept at tuning in to the unique character of the individual they are coaching. Consider the following types of communication patterns, drawn from Rosinski’s (2003) Cultural Orientations Framework.

- *High Context*: Implicit communication; the meaning of gestures, posture, voice, and context. *Low Context*: Explicit communication; clear and detailed instructions
- *Direct*: In a conflict or with a tough message to deliver, get your point across clearly at the risk of offending or hurting. *Indirect*: In a conflict or with a tough message to deliver, favor maintaining a cordial relationship at the risk of misunderstanding
- *Affective*: Display emotions and warmth; establishing and maintaining personal and social connection is key. *Neutral*: Stress conciseness, precision, and detachment when communicating
- *Formal*: Observe strict protocols and rituals. *Informal*: Favor familiarity and spontaneity

Rosinski sets forth these notions as important dimensions for understanding cultural differences. They are equally useful for understanding individual styles and preferences within a given culture. Conversely, a personality framework such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI; Myers, McCaulley, Quenk, & Hammer, 1998) can point coaches toward potential

differences that are useful in understanding both individuals and cultures. To recap the main point of this discussion so far, it is more important for a coach to have a good understanding of the ways in which people may vary and of what is meaningful to the individuals they are coaching than it is to determine whether a particular aspect of a person's character derives from innate personality, culture, or life experiences.

## Coaching Across Cultures

The following guidelines, summarized from Hicks and Peterson (1999a), outline an approach to coaching that focuses on the uniqueness of the individual being coached, while showing explicitly how insight into cultural differences provides a direct benefit to the coaching process.

### **1. As you build the coaching partnership, search for hidden layers**

Effective coaching, even within a single culture, requires a high degree of interpersonal perceptiveness and sensitivity—emotional intelligence, if you will. Coaching across cultures magnifies the coach's challenge. A good coach recognizes that people look at the world through different lenses. A good cross-cultural coach recognizes that sometimes they may not even know what that lens looks like, and so will scan for important dimensions that they may not fully understand or appreciate. Such a coach assumes there is always more going on than meets the eye. One of the best ways a coach can improve their ability to spot hidden meanings is to become familiar with the various ways that people differ, by studying cultural dimensions and distinctions (e.g., Berry, 2004; Cushner & Brislin, 1996; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, & Nishida, 1996; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Hofstede, 1991, 2001; House et al., 2004; Lewis, 1996; Rosinski, 2003; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner,

2004), as well as individual values, motivations, and personality variables (e.g., Aluja & García, 2004; Dweck, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1998; McCrae & Costa, 1997; Paunonen & Jackson, 2000).

As noted by Hicks and Peterson,

Because cultural differences can be quite distinct and vigorous, [familiarity with diverse] cultural norms [can] help a coach generate hypotheses about the person being coached. Is this person likely to be better motivated by a collective goal than an individual one? Might this person prefer authoritative expertise and clear direction from a coach to a collegial, free-flowing discussion? Should the coach vault quickly into the task or spend a significant amount of time getting to know the person? Will the coach's preference for quick, linear decisions be suitable when working with this person? Testing relevant hypotheses like these can often help [coaches] avoid obvious pitfalls. (1999a, p. 297)

### **2. Personalize the approach**

As the coach gains insight into the individual's makeup, they can ask questions to identify the most effective methods and approaches for this particular person, independent of their culture: What's the best way to foster the coaching relationship with this person? What's the best way for this person to learn? What skills, approaches, and style will be most useful for this person in their context?

One of the best ways to personalize the approach is to consult with the individual directly, by asking questions such as: What would you like from me as your coach? How can I be most helpful to you?

In some cultures, such direct and personal lines of inquiry will not work well. Singapore, for example, has such a strong focus on the teacher as expert authority, that such questions may undermine the credibility of the coach, who is more likely to be viewed as a teacher than a facilitator. Two alternate approaches are recommended. First, a coach can explore the

same issues by presenting them as assignments rather than as open-ended questions. For example, in teaching a coaching workshop in Singapore, I found it more effective to instruct participants to prepare a written assignment describing the three techniques they would find most beneficial than it was to ask the comparable open question. Second, a coach can ask questions about what is typical, rather than what the participant would want, such as: What are the most common techniques that a coach would use in this culture? What would other people find most helpful if they were using a coach? A coach in these cultures needs to be able to project a sense of expertise and authority about the coaching process, even though they may be learning about the individual and the culture at the same time.

A cross-cultural coach needs to walk into every coaching engagement prepared to learn about new ways to be helpful to the person, and even prepared to learn new ways of going about their own learning, so they can readily adapt to new cultures and styles.

### **3. *Orchestrate change—in a way best suited to the individual***

Some authors present coaching as a collection of activities, such as gathering and delivering feedback, writing development plans, offering advice, and teaching skills (Kampa-Kokesch & White, 2002). Thinking about coaching in this way may lead coaches working in cross-cultural settings to ask the wrong questions, such as “How do I give feedback in this culture?” In contrast, some authors, including Peterson and Hicks (1996) define coaching in broader terms: “coaching is the process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective” (p. 14). Such a definition leads to a different type of question, such as “what does this person need in order to become more effective?” Feedback, advice, or a development plan

may not be the answer (Hicks & Peterson, 1999a).

## **The Development Pipeline**

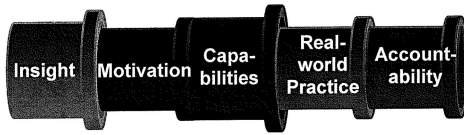
Thinking about coaching as orchestrating a process of learning led my colleague Mary Dee Hicks and me to examine the necessary and sufficient conditions for change. We were searching for the active ingredients of change within the individual, rather than for a set of activities that the coach would engage in. Our efforts resulted in a framework labeled the Development Pipeline (Hicks & Peterson, 1999b; Peterson, 2002, 2006). This framework provides a picture of five necessary and sufficient conditions for systematic learning, regardless of culture (Hicks & Peterson, 1999a). Once the underlying needs are determined, then a personalized and culturally appropriate set of tactics may be sought to address those needs.

The five conditions are as follows (Peterson, 2006):

- **Insight:** The extent to which the person understands what areas need to be developed in order to be more effective
- **Motivation:** The degree to which the person is willing to invest the time and energy it takes to develop
- **Capabilities:** The extent to which the person has the skills and knowledge that are needed
- **Real-world practice:** the extent to which the person is able to apply their skills at work
- **Accountability:** The extent to which there are internal and external mechanisms for paying attention to change and providing appropriate and meaningful consequences

Using the pipeline as a metaphor (see Figure 1) highlights that this is a constraint model (Goldratt & Cox, 1992). That is, the amount of change a person can make is constrained by where the pipeline is most narrow. For example, a person with great





*Figure 1.* The development pipeline.

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Insight, Motivation and Capabilities will not be able to make key changes if they don't have opportunities to apply their skills in Real-World Practice. Another person might attend a workshop to increase their Capabilities, but unless Motivation is sufficient (along with the three other conditions), no real change is likely to take place.

### **Cultural Differences in the Coaching Process**

The final section of this article examines various ways in which culture may impact the choice of coaching tactics and techniques that can best address constraints in each of the five Development Pipeline conditions.

#### ***Insight***

In the United States, feedback is commonly viewed as such an essential part of coaching and development that many definitions of coaching specify feedback as an integral aspect. In reality, feedback is not absolutely necessary to effective coaching and development—it is just one means to the desired end, which is Insight (Hicks & Peterson, 1997; Peterson & Hicks, in press). Hoppe (1998), for example, points out that 360-degree/multirater feedback is well-suited to American culture because of a preference for quantification, measurement, and empirical data, a focus on the individual, and the presence of a low-context environment that requires more explicit communication. He posits that it is less well-suited for cultures with a preference for theory over data (e.g., France, Ger-

many), a preference for relational and metaphorical thinking over quantification (e.g., Japan, China), or more collectivist or high-context cultures that provide information about where people stand through family relationships (e.g., India), education (e.g., France; see also Roussillon, 2002), or tribal membership (e.g., certain Arab countries). In some areas, such as Saudi Arabia, feedback is likely to be viewed as a personal criticism or even an attack. In France, intellectual challenge is valued, but feedback—which is perceived as a personal challenge—is less welcome. French culture is typically more impersonal than American culture, where many people share personal information readily. Thus the French may also be less inclined to openly discuss their own strengths and weaknesses in general (Roussillon, 2002).

Self-reflection and self-observation are other means to gaining insight that might be more acceptable in some cultures. Confucian approaches to learning (Tweed & Lehman, 2002) emphasize learning from role models. Insight can be gained from observing someone with the desired qualities and comparing oneself to that ideal. In some cultures, feedback from an outsider is not common nor is it welcomed. Coaches can thus expand their repertoire of coaching techniques by considering ways to cultivate insight through asking questions to promote self-reflection and by encouraging people to self-monitor and compare their behavior and results to others.

One of the more interesting anecdotes about insight concerns Japan, where feedback is traditionally seen as overly direct and inappropriate, given people's desire to save face. However, I have heard from several Japanese managers that there is at least one vehicle for providing upward feedback to people's managers. It is not uncommon for managers to go out for an evening of dining and drinking with employees. Late in the evening, after a number of drinks have been consumed, an employee may

occasionally offer very direct negative feedback to their boss. The next morning, however, that individual will take it upon themselves to apologize to their boss for any inappropriate behaviors: "I may have had too much to drink last night and perhaps made comments that I did not intend and that I certainly did not mean. However, I cannot remember the details too clearly. If I gave offense in any way, please accept my apologies."

Even in cultures where direct feedback is not common, it is inevitable that people in organizations will find a way to express their feelings to others. Coaches should search for the culturally acceptable ways that people create to meet their needs, not just for sharing feedback, but for gaining insight (Stone-Romero & Stone, 2002).

### **Motivation**

Individuals are motivated to seek coaching and development for different reasons. Clients may seek to improve their performance because they want more money, autonomy, respect and recognition, power, control over their lives, variety and change, life balance, or because they want to provide for their family. Culture may play a role in defining which values are more common and/or socially acceptable. Triandis (2004) summarizes different sets of values that are common to two broad cultural categories.

Values that are representative of the Eastern orientation to collectivism and harmony include:

- Group achievement
- Harmony
- Keeping relationships over time
- Being responsive to the needs of others; contributing to the well-being of the family and group
- Being agreeable, friendly, sympathetic

Values that are representative of the Western orientation to individualism and control include:

- Personal achievement and advancement
- Dominance
- Autonomy and self-reliance
- Openness to new experiences
- Having fun

I routinely ask my coaching clients what their primary values and motivations are. When coaching people from traditional strong collectivist cultures, such as Japan, it is not unusual for them to say, "I don't know" or "I have no personal motivations." Through gentle persistence and asking other types of questions, such as "What values do you want to uphold in the work that you do?" I usually find that people start talking about maintaining respect and harmony, caring for their family, fitting in, and other values represented in Triandis's first list. With even more time, and by making sure I demonstrate a nonjudgmental, accepting attitude, many clients start to disclose other motivations, which they are less comfortable sharing publicly. These motivations frequently include items from Triandis's second group, such as gaining independence and autonomy.

In an earlier article, Triandis (1996) pointed out that individuals in collective cultures give more weight to norms than to personal attitudes as determinants of behavior, whereas people in individualistic cultures prefer behavior to be guided by personal attitudes and values. This in itself may be difficult for coaches of different orientations: Western coaches may feel that self-actualization is a condition that everyone should seek; some coaches even define their practice as actualizing the person's potential to bring out the best in them, which is a very individualistic perspective. A similar contrast is evident in what some have described as the Western focus on "doing" and the Eastern focus on "being." Some traditional Chinese, following the Confucian example, revere a leader with high moral character, independent of what the leader may accomplish through the

group (Hui & Tan, 1999). Coaches working cross-culturally need to be especially sensitive to not letting their own preferences result in negative evaluations of what others value.

Another important motivational factor has to do with varying cultural beliefs about how much change and development is even possible. North American culture, perhaps more than any other, believes that personal change and growth are almost unlimited. The business culture of the United States is frequently touted as highly tolerant of active experimentation, trial and error, uncertainty, risk, and failure. An American's belief that they are in charge of their own destiny is a foreign idea to much of the world. For example, many members of Eastern and Middle-Eastern cultures believe in harmony and acceptance one's circumstances. People in China, as another example, are more likely to attribute success to hard work than to abilities. Therefore, working to improve abilities through coaching may be a rather indirect way to achieve success compared to simply working harder and longer.

### **Capabilities**

Research shows that certain leadership attributes, such as charisma, reliability and trustworthiness, and basic management competence in communications, problem-solving, and so forth, are important in all cultures (House et al., 2004). Some dimensions of leadership effectiveness, such as uncertainty avoidance, gender egalitarianism, assertiveness, collectivism, show significant variation around the world (House et al., 2004). So at least some of the capabilities that leaders value and seek to develop will vary across cultures as well. Some of these (e.g., gender egalitarianism) may relate to the values that the coach and client hold as well, creating potential conflicts for some.

In addition to the content of the coaching and learning, preferences for the pro-

cess of learning also vary (Peterson, 2004). Learning about business and management in India is typically very hands on; in France, the education system focuses on identifying the best and brightest and sending them to schools based on intellect. For more detailed information, Derr, Roussillon, and Bournois's (2002) book provides fascinating overviews of leadership development in various countries.

Tweed and Lehman (2002) contrast Socratic and Confucian approaches to learning. From their perspective, the Socratic or Western individualistic tradition holds that knowledge resides within the learner, so learners can progress without a guide through self-teaching, active trial and error, and learning from experience. This blends easily with the common coaching philosophy that the learner has the answer within them. The Confucian or Eastern collectivist tradition suggests that learners need a competent teacher to guide them.

To highlight the original point of this article about connecting to the individual regardless of culture, here is a quote from a Japanese consultant who had begun practicing coaching several years earlier: "Before I learned about coaching, I didn't like education. It's about knowing the right answer. I like the freedom of coaching. And the learning never ends. When you know the facts, you're done. With coaching, every time you visit it, you can go deeper" (K. Yoshitake, personal communication, February 10, 2004). This consultant had been raised in a traditional Japanese educational environment. However, knowing only his culture and upbringing would provide a misleading clue as to his deeper values and motivations.

### **Real-World Practice**

As noted earlier, certain cultures (e.g., North American) may place a high value on action and implementation and be more comfortable with entrepreneurial risk-taking and failure. What we might call an



inductive learning style—do something, observe what happens, assess what you've learned—could be very comfortable for individuals adapted to that type of culture.

Given that bias, a fairly common response to management theory among action-oriented managers in the United States is, "Skip the theory, just tell me what works." I experienced a stark contrast to this the first time I presented the Development Pipeline to an audience of executives in Paris. The very first question, from the back of the room, was, "Obviously this model works, but what's your theory?" I was not at all prepared for such a question, due to my own cultural blinders at the time, and almost laughed. I assumed the question came from a quirky character who was trying to make a humorous point. Only slowly did it dawn on me that my intellectual rigor was being called into question, and that theory and academic debate were going to dominate the rest of the session.

If we label the French approach deductive learning, then we may compare and contrast the two styles. Deductive learning begins with reflection on relevant theory and concepts to determine what type of action (if any) is appropriate. Coaching clients with this style ask many questions in an attempt to understand what is being recommended and why. They want to analyze alternatives and debate the merits of various approaches. At its worst, a deductive learning style allows theory and discussion to become ends in themselves, and little action is taken. Inductive learning typically starts with doing something and then trying to figure out the relevant lesson or principle afterward. It has the advantage of yielding concrete and pragmatic ideas about what to do. At its worst, however, reflection may be lost in a cycle of constant doing, yielding simplistic insights with limited applicability that fail to generate a sufficiently sophisticated model of reality.

## **Accountability**

In contrast to the four other Development Pipeline conditions, I have found few indications of cross-cultural variability in accountability, although I have considered hypotheses, such as that in collectivist cultures, accountability is provided by a sense of social obligation whereas in individualistic cultures accountability will more often come from an individual's personal commitment to a goal.

A similar hypothesis, from the field of accounting, is proposed by Velayutham and Perera (2004), who connect collectivist, high power-distance, and high uncertainty-avoidance cultures to an emotion of shame, and connect cultures with the opposing characteristics to the emotion of guilt. Their view is that shame-based cultures are less likely to share information and thus suffer from lower levels of personal accountability, and thus may need to place greater emphasis on external sources of accountability. Guilt-based cultures are more likely to instill a sense of accountability in the individual.

Communication styles in high-context and low-context cultures (Hall, 1983) may have a significant impact on Accountability, as well as other conditions, especially Insight. Low-context cultures, such as the United States and Germany, tend to emphasize communications based on the content of the message, placing value on clear, explicit messages and contracts. Thus expectations for accountability are more likely to be explicit. High-context cultures, such as Japan, Mexico, and France, base communications on roles and relationships, emphasizing trust and respect. Messages are often implicit, with weight placed on non-verbals and subtle cues. Here, it is likely that accountability will be assumed, given the nature of the coaching relationship. To some extent, explicit contracts may even be perceived as insulting to the person.

Finally, as with the other conditions, an effective coach will partner with their client to survey relevant paths, both in the person and in their environment, for enhancing accountability, and find one or more methods that are suited to the individual.

### The Coaching Relationship

In conclusion, I would like to point out that I have not addressed one of the most critical aspects of coaching across cultures (Hicks & Peterson, 1999a). A relationship of trust and understanding is an essential prerequisite of effective coaching (Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Hicks, 1996). Each client the coach works with has their own set of expectations and requirements for what goes into building that relationship, and cultural differences are only likely to accentuate the challenge. The greater the coach's knowledge of cultural differences, the more likely the coach will anticipate and handle the process smoothly. However, regardless of the amount of cultural knowledge a coach has, the best coaches will always be those who coach with an open attitude of curiosity and interest, who meet people where they are, who accept them for what they are, and who project a genuine desire to be helpful to each person on their own terms.

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