

Grounded Leadership, Emergence Coaching, & Classic Grounded Theory: An Action Research Study

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Abstract

This study describes the iterative development of a Grounded Leadership (GL) and Emergence Coaching (EC) model based on classic grounded theory (CGT), designed to foster the emergence and realization of human potential. It traces five cycles of action research to transform the leadership, coaching practices, and culture of a learning organization. The model describes a co-creative process of facilitating human emergence that includes phases of engaging, discovering, core concepting, visioning, and "so-whatting," i.e. taking concrete steps toward realizing the vision. Emergence is the core concept that best explains the GL & EC process. This study extends the insight of an earlier study of GL to the domains of coaching and Being-Based Leadership (BBL). This includes development of a graduate level degree program and International Coaching Federation (ICF) accredited coach certification program designed within an EC framework. All five cycles demonstrate how CGT informs these leadership and coaching models, including the foundational processes of critical thinking, inferential reasoning, and the facilitation of human emergence.

Key Words: *Grounded Leadership, Action Research, Classic Grounded Theory, Emergence Coaching, International Coaching Federation (ICF), Transformational Coaching & Leadership, Human Emergence*

Introduction

This action research study represents an ongoing exploration of the principles and methods of classic grounded theory (CGT) applied to the practices of leadership and coaching. In the first three study cycles we describe Grounded Leadership (GL) and our initial attempts to apply principles of CGT to existing leadership programs.

This study highlights the synergies between CGT and the process of non-directive leadership (Wright, R. J., 2008) and later Emergence Coaching (EC), all of which focus on the emergence of explanatory core concepts that characterize what is happening in the data field of practice. Our study focuses on how key principles of CGT research design, including discovery of core variables (i.e. core concepting) and emergence, inform new theories of GL and EC.

Our interest in the process of emergence related to leadership and coaching began long before we learned about CGT. The principal researcher for this study was trained in a broad spectrum of individual and group process methodologies, including psychodrama in the French school of Sauvage (Blatner, 2000), contemporary Adlerian group process focusing on challenging limiting beliefs (Mosak & Maniaci, 1999; Wright et al., 2021), and encounter group approaches (Rogers, 1970; Schutz, 1973). He viewed leadership, coaching, and learning through an Adlerian-existential-developmental lens as a process of facilitating the emergence of individuals' unique potential for becoming their best, most authentic selves (Carkhuff, 2000; Jackins, 1975; Rogers, 1977, 1996; Wright & Medlock, 1995; Wright & Wright, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2013). The role of the leader, coach, and educator was to draw out this unique potential in those they lead and coach.

As we were introduced to CGT in our doctoral studies, we were struck by how the principle of emergence was central to the research design. It was the first time that we had seen a pragmatic and user-friendly way to bridge the domains of inquiry relating to content/data, theory building, and the process of facilitating human emergence at the level of being and becoming. Phenomenology includes a methodology of bracketing preconceptions to heighten awareness of what is unique in each present experience (Giorgi, 2009), but it proved to involve methods that were too complex and esoteric for our students to incorporate into the domains of coaching and leadership. CGT offered a disciplined design that could more effectively bridge these domains, while also avoiding the complexities of detailed descriptive qualitative data analysis (QDA) that accompanied phenomenological and other QDA approaches (Glaser, 2013).

In our initial introduction to CGT, we noted the importance that Glaser assigned to the principle of emergence. In the controversy with Strauss about the nature of GT (Glaser, 1992), Glaser took a definitive stance about the meaning and priority of the principle of emergence. For Glaser, emergence was defined by the practices of openness to a field of inquiry, suspending our pre-conceptions about what is happening, being willing to not-know, and allowing ourselves to discover what is novel and often unexpected (Glaser, 1992, 2013). Emergence is the opposite of forcing a point of view on the data. Rather, it allows the data to inform us about what is happening. We were impressed by his demand that researchers—and by extension leaders and coaches—suspend their preconceptions, attend

to what is actually happening in the data field of their experience, and allow their interpretations and hypotheses to earn their way in, rather than relying on inferential leaps that were not clearly grounded in the data.

This study also clarifies the relationship between Grounded Leadership, the process of personal transformation, and later Emergence Coaching and Being-Based Leadership. This action research study was conducted contemporaneously with J. Wright's classical grounded theory of Evolving (Wright, 2021). While the two studies were conducted separately, it was also clear that CGT was proving to be a powerful research methodology for clarifying the nature of learning, leadership, and coaching in our various educational programs. The grounded theory of Evolving describes a process of ongoing personal evolution, with an intent to transform. The leadership and coaching models described in this article all focus on facilitating this process of personal transformation.

This study also suggests that CGT (as conceived by Glaser) is more than a research design. It is a tool to be used in any practical endeavor where inferences and conclusions from data are needed to make sound decisions. During our doctoral studies, Simmons indicated that Glaser used CGT as a tool when exploring any data field, from making financial investments to developing services for others. This rang true for us as we explored how CGT informed the process of grounded critical thinking and decision making in the practice domains of coaching and leadership.

It is also worth noting that Simmons explored how the principles and practices of CGT could be applied to the practice of psychotherapy, providing an alternative framework to the predominant medical model (Simmons, 1994). Our work builds on Simmons' insights, further exploring the application of CGT principles and practices to the fields of leadership and coaching.

Definitions of Leadership

We define leadership in this study as the ongoing capacity of people to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others including intended or unintended communications or actions. In our view, we are all leading all the time.

This definition emerged from our work with process groups and our existential-developmental perspective on leadership (Wright & Medlock, 1995). It was also drawn from a literature review of skill-based leadership (Kouzes & Posner, 2002), servant-based leadership (Greenleaf, 1997), transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Beck & Cowan, 1996), and feminine leadership (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000).

Our definition evolved as we looked at diverse leadership theories to help students become more effective leaders. We sought to identify the common element that would allow these approaches to be conceptually integrated into the discipline and by our students. We found that leaders grew when noticing the gaps between what they wanted to have happen and what actually happened, and taking responsibility to close the gap. We also found this gap could best be resolved by better understanding themselves and those they lead and coach, and to establish a mutual alignment that would engage the yearnings of all. We

developed this understanding over the course of this study and the advancement of master and doctoral level leadership and coaching programs.

Viewed within the context of emergent processes and methodologies, we characterized Grounded Leadership (GL) and Emergence Coaching (EC) as a conscious, intentional process of facilitating self-directed action, learning, growth, and emergence of others toward mutually agreed upon goals and purposes, often with transformational intent (Wright, R. J., 2008). In this respect, GL, Being-Based Leadership (BBL), and Emergence Coaching (EC) all involve the same process: focusing on facilitating the emergence of human potential through interpersonal interaction. They differ in the context and complexity of the practices, purposes, and goals pursued and the nature of the contracts and agreements that are established among participants in each context. These differences are further discussed below.

The final two cycles of this study began after the models of GL and EC were applied for nine years to educational programs in transformational leadership and coaching at an accredited graduate university. The first three iterations of this study focused on GL, but the application to coaching was clear. The core concept of facilitating emergence applied to both contexts. We also described the coaching approach as Emergence Coaching (EC), as we identified the core concept of emergence in early stages of our research.

The university develops scholar practitioners through integrating theory and practice in all phases of programming. Emphasis is given to both academic content and the student's personal transformation and ability to facilitate the learning, growth, and transformation of those they lead and coach.

The curriculum covers fields of leadership and coaching, learning psychology, developmental and systems theory, neuroscience and related disciplines. It is grounded in practice-based research, including: an Adlerian, existential development model of human development (Wright & Wright, 2012); grounded theory research on personal transformation (Wright, J., 2008; Wright et al., 2021); and development of the grounded leadership model (Wright, R. J, 2008).

From 2008–2017 the curriculum focused on the GL Model described below, applying the principles of CGT to the fields of leadership and coaching. In 2017, we partnered with the International Coaching Federation (ICF) to offer an accredited coach training program (ACTP), integrated within our EC framework.

The fourth iteration of this study occurred as we focused more on the relationship dynamics of facilitating emergence in a coaching context. We introduced a Coach Observation and Reflection Process that directly applied CGT principles and methods to the coaching process. We also highlighted how the principle of emergence was implicit in the ICF competency framework, resulting in a clear synergy with the EC framework.

Finally, the fifth cycle involved the development of Being-Based Leadership (BBL), an integrated leadership and coaching program. BBL focuses on the micro-moments of facilitating human emergence, leveraging social-emotional intelligence and embodied knowing to discern the felt-sense of the what is emerging for participants in the present

moment (Gendlin, 1982; Rogers, 1996). This addresses the integration of the existential, affective, and cognitive dimensions of coaching and leadership as individuals and groups seek to find the words—and eventually the core concepts—to articulate their emergence.

Action Research Cycles 1-3

The Study of Grounded Leadership

Research Design

We used an action research design to conduct all five cycles of this study. We wanted to identify enhanced approaches to develop the quantity and quality of student leaders in our leadership development programs. We also wanted to introduce more non-directive approaches and skills to help leaders become better facilitators of student growth and learning.

The design was well-suited to address this challenge and allowed us to include our program participants as co-researchers in the process. This increased their sense of ownership and creativity as they actively engaged in the research.

The design was also well-suited to our learning organization since it encouraged an iterative process of plan-act-observe-reflect. We drew on the model of Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and expanded upon it:

1. Develops a plan of action to improve what is already happening;
2. *Acts* to implement the plan;
3. *Observes* the effects of the action in the context in which it occurs;
4. *Reflects* on these effects as a basis for further planning and subsequent cycles of action (Wright, R. J., 2008, p. 18).

This research design ensured the research would be a learning process for all. We view leadership development as essential to our programs, and this methodology provided the structure for optimizing learning while improving the program.

The iterative emergent process also fit well with our interest in GT methodology and our research questions. Stringer (2007) described the basic routine of action research as look, think, and act. The “look” phase involves observing *how* things are happening (not *what*), an important focus for GT research (Glaser, 1978). During the “think” stage, the researcher analyzes emerging data for insights and develops a working theory and possible interventions to guide action. In the “act” phase, the researcher plans and implements actions to resolve identified issues. Finally, the researcher evaluates action effectiveness and revisits what may be needed (Stinger, 2007; Wright, R. J., 2008).

Another key similarity between these approaches is that practitioners are cautioned against forcing a theory onto data and implementing changes to fit the theory rather than honoring what is emerging. Researcher Hans van Beinum wrote (1999):

One of the classical mistakes one can make is to come too quickly with the right interpretation. One has to fight one's tendency to reduce the Other to the Same, to reduce the situation to one's theory. . . . One moves from practice to practice, and perhaps from practice to "theory". In action research one starts in the middle and ends in the middle. (p. 19)

Glaser made a similar point. The researcher needs to be open to discovery, not-knowing, and allowing the theory to emerge (Glaser, 1992, 2013). Our sensitivity to the principle of emergence and the principles of CGT informed our work throughout.

Our study was reviewed and approved by an independent Institutional Review Board (IRB), which determined no anticipated risk of harm to participants in this study.

Using Action Research to Explore CGT as a Leadership Process

Simmons and Gregory (2003) formally conceptualized the synergistic relationship between GT and action research in Grounded Action (GA). In GA, an explanatory theory is created following CGT methods, then an action plan (operational theory) based on the explanatory theory is created, data are collected and analyzed to cyclically inform revisions to the action plan and theory as needed. The theory often identifies the participants' core problem and activities to successfully resolve it. Once the GT is defined, the action component is initiated to explore ways to facilitate optimal outcomes.

We discussed the idea of conducting a formal GA study with Gregory, our faculty mentor. However, as we began with an action research approach to enhancing our leadership approaches and methods using CGT, it became clear that we needed to pursue a straight action research design. In effect, the theory of Grounded Leadership emerged from the action research process, as we progressively sought to implement CGT as a leadership design. We had identified emergence as a defining principle of CGT, based on Glaser's critique of Strauss (1992), and proceeded to explore how the CGT methodology could inform a new process of leadership in our organization.

This translation of CGT to the domain of leadership practice posed a challenge in how to best apply a research design intended to generate social science theory to a dynamic interpersonal process. The purpose of Grounded Leadership was for leaders to identify the core variable in their interactions that would best explain what was emerging for the participants. This required a basic training in CGT principles and practices, with a focus on applying them in the leadership context. During the first two iterations of the process, student leaders learned about CGT, including open coding and how to identify potential core concepts. Data in this context focused on what was happening with participants as they engaged with leaders. The leaders learned to underline and reflect back concepts that had grab and explanatory power. They practiced remaining in a state of "not-knowing" to discover what was emerging for participants without imposing their own interpretations. This proved to be one of the most challenging aspects for students learning this leadership process.

Core concepting took on a different property in this context. Specifically, students learned to focus on what core concepts had grab for the participants as a focal point for

their emergence. Arriving at the core concept was an interactive experience as leaders and participants co-created the core concept through a process of mutual discovery.

Leaders were also being trained to see beyond the descriptive qualitative data in their interactions to discern the core variable that would best explain what was emerging for participants. In this respect the fundamental principles of CGT were being maintained (Glaser, 1992, 2013).

Yet, there was an important difference in purpose and perspective. CGT researchers are focused on theory generation. Grounded leaders are focused on helping others envision who they are becoming and generating actions to realize that vision. Once the core concept was determined, leaders and participants began articulating their visions and related actions. At this juncture, vision-in-action served as the analogue in Grounded Leadership of theory generation in GT research. As participants elaborated their vision and related actions, they discovered new facets of the core concept they had identified. Often the visioning process led to further clarification and refinement of the core concept, similar to the selective coding process in the research context. Theoretical coding did not become an explicit focus of the trainings, as it seemed to be a complexity that was unnecessary for these purposes. It did however become clear that different phases of GL were emerging with each iteration, indicating that a process framework was emerging as the best way to organize the emerging theory of Grounded Leadership (Glaser, 2013).

Research Process and Findings

This study involved five cycles. Each contributed insights that informed Grounded Leadership (GL), Emergence Coaching (EC), and Being-Based Leadership (BBL). Cycle one involved introducing this new leadership approach and testing it through a student-led event. Students found the CGT content difficult to learn and apply, as it was counter to the more directive forms of leadership with which they were familiar. They also identified that additional skills (i.e. project management and group facilitation) were needed to attain high quality results. We realized that further education in CGT would be necessary, and that it was also important have leaders clarify the new leadership contract more explicitly with their groups in the initial phase (Wright, R. J., 2008).

Cycle two evolved from lessons learned during the first. It involved a deeper exploration of GT methodology and its application to leadership. This cycle included an in-depth, experiential, one-day GT training for 40 student leaders who were introduced to CGT principles and used the GT approach to generate a theory to better explain GL. Data showed how challenging it was for leaders to bracket their assumptions and interpretations and just observe what was emerging from groups. They were also learning how to use CGT to generate a theory of grounded leadership. Student leaders proposed core variables that included Emergence and Ownership, both of which had grab for participants.

The first two cycles of this study were largely educational. In cycle three, we trained student leaders to facilitate participant learning. This cycle yielded a refined theory of GL, building on insights from earlier cycles and our initial hypotheses. In cycle three we identified a replicable process for leaders to facilitate the emergence of positive potential

among those they led and coached. This theory was effective in realizing the goals of our study and continues to inform our work.

Cycle 3: Leadership Training for Facilitating Personal Emergence

During cycle three we encountered a new dilemma. We had developed an introductory seminar that focused on the central themes of our personal growth programs (Wright, 2005). The seminar condensed a five-year transformation curriculum into a single weekend. While an exciting step, producing sizable, public training events posed a significant challenge.

We found that participant success largely depended on small group discussion and analysis activities. These activities helped them integrate the content for themselves. A pair of trained leaders facilitated exercises for each group, of which there were 20 or more at each 3-day event. This necessitated more trained staff than we had available.

Creating a transformative experience for participants required leaders identify a key unifying theme for the participant, generate a powerful vision, and choose a course of future action to apply their insights. Under earlier models, the skills necessary to facilitate this could demand four to six years of postgraduate training before leaders could operate at the level required.

We needed to train leaders quickly. We did so by leveraging the knowledge and generativity of participants from the first two cycles of this study: Those who had already learned how to apply the principles of CGT.

Grounded Leadership

Subsequently, we matched our emerging GL training program with our demand for trained seminar leaders. We grew momentum to generate a framework, definitions, and training approach that is captured in a five-step process we still use.

Working with students who participated in the initial program, we cooperatively developed a GL training curriculum for seminar leadership. This continues to evolve. The course is now "owned" and taught by student leaders who are engaged in seminars and other activities.

The GL training series includes six, 2-hour sessions and a 20-hour weekend seminar. During the seminar, trained GL leaders guide small groups in integrating and applying their learning. Participants receive coaching, supervision, and leadership development. Following the second day of the training, group leaders identify core concepts and an "empowering vision" for each participant that is shared on the final morning. This provides a focus for each participant and helps them discern the programs to best support their transformation.

Results

The success of the GL approach was immediately apparent to our student leaders and participants. Student leaders reported its positive impact on their leadership and their

lives. Empirical evidence is also illustrated by our conversion rate. Among attendees of the free public event, 15-30% have progressed into our tuition-based programs.

A Theory of Grounded Leadership: Facilitating Emergence

Consequently, our GL design has evolved into a five-step leadership process for facilitating personal growth and learning. The core concept that best explains the process is Emergence—a multi-phased, social process whereby participants discover and actualize a fuller sense of themselves and their potential (Glaser, 1978). It includes five phases: Engaging, discovering, core concepting, visioning, and so-whatting (designing and acting to realize their vision) (Wright, R. J., 2008).

Phases of Grounded Leadership

Engaging

Engaging begins with initial contact and contracting between the leader and the participant(s). The leader shares the process, establishes rapport, solicits agreement to help define the program or goal, and invites participants to utilize support. Participants agree to engage in full, truthful dialogue with intent to discover and fulfill whatever open or specific outcome is defined. Engaging continues throughout the GL relationship.

To yield transformation, the quality of contact must be strong. However, roles may be defined or left open. The range of engagement varies by purpose and the personalities involved. The leader must remain sensitive to diverse subjects of inquiry and establish rapport with flexibility and individualization.

For participants, engaging requires committing to an inquiry, taking risks, and disclosing. For leaders, it requires a focused inquiry and suspension of knowing to facilitate the discovery process. This state is central to CGT (Glaser, 1992, 2013). It can be demanding for a leader to suspend knowing while staying attuned to emerging truths.

Discovering

This phase is often the longest and the most demanding. In discovering, the leader is required to sustain their suspension of knowing, listen and formulate broad, open-ended questions based on the participant's problem or desired outcome.

Throughout discovering the leader engages in constant, comparative observation to understand the emerging essence. They listen and identify core concepts that are emerging into the field of inquiry. The leader asks open-ended questions that promote deeper inquiry, underlines concepts and situations and observes participant responses. This process is similar to open coding in GT (Glaser, 1978).

In underlining, the leader identifies potential elements that may be core concepts. They may note strong affective elements or repeating themes and remind participants of content flow. The leader can share observations—remembering inquiry is a key to the process. Silence by participants during this phase must be respected and honored.

This phase is like a dance between the leader and participants. As the leader underlines, the group responds and the leader tends closely to new data, underlining new themes and variations, while closely observing reactions.

There is often a period of extreme uncertainty in the discovery process that seems essential to emergence. Confusion and doubt can herald new discoveries.

Glaser (1992, 2013) emphasized the importance of allowing this period to unfold without the researcher (or leader) rushing to resolve it. This is arguably the core concept of CGT.

Throughout the discovering phase, the leader must be vigilant to avoid forcing directions and results. They must monitor biases and emerging hypotheses, occasionally verbalizing them to see if they have grab or stimulate a more focused inquiry.

Insights offered by the participants are a key property of emerging and should be underlined. Insights are eureka moments that mark the uniting of elements and may illuminate problems or new ways of thinking (Wright & Wright, 2013; Wright, R. J., 2008).

Core Concepting

Core concepting provides an organizing principle, strategy, or focus for the emerging vision and course of action. Core concepts emerge from the data and provide a conceptual focus for explaining what is emerging for participants. Concepts must meet all the criteria defined by Glaser, including grab, fit, relevance, and workability (Glaser, 1978).

In this phase, the leader switches to a process of winnowing: Seeking the core idea with the most grab and greatest explanatory power. This is a powerful focal point that can determine the success of the exercise. It provides a stimulus for participants to define their vision of their emerging potential.

Visioning

In visioning, the leader and participants add properties and elements that have grab to the core concept in a coherent way. This effort compels the action or leads to the “so-whatting” phase.

This is a critical step. Elements that emerged in the discovering phase are included in the vision or abandoned. These elements are fragile until related to a core concept, where they take on a powerful form. The goal of visioning for participants is to generate an empowering, sensory-grounded conceptualization that compels them toward a desirable outcome. Insufficiently envisioned, emergent discoveries will sink back into the unconscious and participants are untransformed.

For participants, engaging with the vision is often a peak experience. However, it will be unsustainable unless they continue to work. The leader enables them to experience what it would be like to live the vision. If not taken to the next phase, the vision will fade away.

So-Whating

The “so-whatting” phase can appear simple. This is where many visions recede into the unconscious. Insight and vision are easily mistaken for realization—the making real of a concept.

During this phase, the leader works with participants to identify necessary action steps. The leader may also facilitate the group's realization of their vision. Implications of this model for coaching are discussed in later sections.

Required actions can seem obvious and this is a significant hazard. The unconscious resistance of participants to their emerging potential can lead to overly ambitious plans. The leader must consciously, artfully facilitate and nurture the vision into being.

In so-whatting, the leader helps the participants articulate what it will take to implement the vision, without overlooking the core variable. The emergent vision can only be actualized by setting specific goals, along with timetables, support, and other resources.

The leader may need to recapitulate the process many times as the participant's emergent potential is freed from old definitions. Re-visioning and adjusting the so-what can be done using the model's five-step process.

Cycles 4 & 5 – Emergence Coaching & Being-Based Leadership

During the nine years following generation of the GL theory, we applied the theory to our practices of Grounded Leadership (GL) and Emergence Coaching (EC) at our graduate university. These programs were foundational to our degree and certificate programs in Transformational Coaching and Leadership.

The basic tenets of GL and EC remain unchanged. These following two iterations represent refinements of the theories, most significantly providing a deeper focus on the relationship dynamics of the emergence process and the development of a Coaching Observation and Reflection process to more directly apply the principles of CGT to the domains of coaching and leadership. These iterations also identify the ways CGT provides a model for critical thinking and reflective practice in coaching and leadership contexts.

Cycle 4 – International Coaching Federation (ICF) & Emergence Coaching (EC)

Cycle four of this study began as we introduced an ICF accredited coach training program (ACTP) to our graduate program. The research cycle covered a four-year period between 2017 and 2021, with the first year focused on developing the ICF-ACTP program and the following years focused on program implementation. Twenty students participated in this program during three years of this study. While this cycle includes a discussion of the ICF competency framework and training, the primary focus of the discussion is how this program helped us clarify and refine how we educated and trained students in the Emergence Coaching Process.

We engaged a consultant with experience in transformational coaching and the ICF competencies and training approach to help us design our ACTP program. She described transformational coaching as "a form of action research in that clients do research and thinking, apply what they learn through practice, and then refine their thinking and action based on that experience" (Rao, 2013, p. 6).

We then engaged a second consultant, Francine Campone, with extensive background and expertise in coaching and leadership and experience with the ICF competency and training framework (Hildebrandt et al., 2020).

The educational approach and training integrated the ICF competencies within the context of the EC framework. The elements included:

- Content related to GCT and how it informed the EC process
- A coaching observation and reflection process that enabled students to apply CGT principles to the coaching process
- Group mentoring sessions to demonstrate and practice ICF competencies
- Individual mentoring sessions that included review and feedback on session recordings and transcripts
- Review and analysis of MCC level coaching sessions
- Practice sessions with classmates in triads (coach, client, observer)
- Weekly coaching supervision sessions focused on use of self as a vehicle for facilitating client emergence and identifying subjective factors / projections that affected the coaching process
- Personal Emergence Process (PEP) trainings in contextual listening and intentional speaking to facilitate emergence.

Students reported an inherent tension between the behavioral/skill focus of the ICF approach and the contextual being-based approach of EC. This created some early confusion, partially due to the use of an older ICF competency framework that focused more on demonstrating techniques than on coach presence. This tension was largely resolved as greater emphasis was given to how EC creates a context within which the coaching competencies are demonstrated. Updates to the ICF competency model in 2019 also improved the situation, as competencies were modified to be more congruent with the EC context, including Embodies a Coaching Mindset, Evokes Awareness and Facilitates Client Growth. These last two competencies replaced competencies 9-11 of the previous competency model that focused more narrowly on goal-focused coaching techniques and practices (see <https://coachingfederation.org/core-competencies>).

A key enhancement of the EC approach during this research cycle was the development of a coaching observation and reflection process. Developed through the partnership of Wright and Campone, the process helped clarify how principles and practices of CGT could be applied directly to coach training. It also helped clarify how the EC focus on emotions and quality of being were essential elements of the reflective process of coaching and coach education.

A coaching observation and reflection form was used in all coach training sessions. It included three columns: (a) recording observable behavior, including "codes" of what was

happening in the session; (b) formulating hypotheses and inferences about what was emerging for the client; and (c) identifying the coach's subjective reactions, including emotional charges and projections that could affect their ability to be fully present and accurately see and assess what was emerging. This form mirrored the CGT practices of observing data, creating codes, generating memos about emerging concepts, and journaling to address unconscious bias. Glaser's (2014) discussion of free style memoing was particularly helpful in setting a context for coding and memoing on the fly that is required in a coaching or leadership context. This form enabled students to easily apply CGT principles to coaching and to develop the critical thinking and reflective practices essential to effective coaching.

EC also emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence to critical thinking and reflective-action. Identifying emotions and the capacity to be fully present is an exercise in critical thinking and reflective action. Coaches learn to distinguish what is happening at an emotional and cognitive level, as they learn to see more accurately what is happening with the client. They also learn to draw on their emotional and cognitive experience as they generate hypotheses about what is emerging for the client. The core concept in this context is not a cognitive abstraction, but rather a guiding concept or metaphor. It is then expressed as a vision of who the client is becoming and the reflective actions they can take to realize that vision.

The issue of the relative importance of emotion and emotional intelligence in coaching practice continues to be a focus of debate in the coaching research literature. In a recent study presented at ICF's Converge21 conference, researchers found that one of the most significant predictors of coaching effectiveness was how clients viewed the moments of deep emotional connection and expression in the session (Gavin et al., 2021). Clients typically identified this as the single most important factor in achieving their desired outcomes and overall success. This study suggests integrating an emotional dimension into the coaching process is powerful and worthy of further investigation.

Students in the EC education program learn the power of presence and "being with themselves" as they coach. These are core EC practices and capabilities that augment the ICF competencies. As ICF training focuses on active listening and asking empowering questions, EC trainings enable coaching students to hold their clients as whole and complete and to listen contextually for the underlying intention in sharing. The Coaching Observation and Reflection process helps the coach sense the focus of the client's emergence and the developing vision and actions that will enable the client to fulfill their deeper intention.

Students described these benefits from engaging in the integrated EC / ACTP program:

- More faith in myself, the process and skills of presence and being
- Becoming aware of my anxiety and taking care to be more fully present with clients
- Structuring coaching sessions to identify and meet a client's desired outcomes
- Letting go of agendas and letting the client drive the session

- Liberating myself from the expectation that I need to solve, fix, and take responsibility for the client.
- Developing more patience to trust emergence to happen in sessions
- The concept of mutuality and how we co-create the coaching experience
- Increasing my listening skills, my presence, attunement, ability to ask open ended questions and to determine what is emerging in my client as they step into new ways of being.
- Learning about research behind the approaches we use.

Suggested areas for improvement of the training included:

- Greater clarity about how ICF fits within the EC framework
- Learning more about other coaching programs and approaches
- Options for sharing information that can evoke awareness.

Cycle 5 - Being-Based Leadership

As our need for student leaders has grown, we've found many to be over eager and forcing interaction and outcomes rather than facilitating emergence. This problem led to cycle five: Development and introduction of a refined leadership model or Being-Based Leadership (BBL). BBL helps develop small group leaders and production teams of student leaders in our signature training and enrollment activity. This represented another iteration of the leadership training that was the focus of cycle three of this action research study (see Cycle 3).

In this iteration, we refined the GL model. We define leadership as the omnipresent capacity of an individual in any interaction to influence the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. As such, we are leading all of the time. The discipline of leadership is to understand and enhance our capacity to consciously exercise this influence in the service of facilitating human emergence. Coaching in this context represents a central aspect of leadership.

Being-Based Leadership focuses on the micro-moments of interaction and interruption that allow or facilitate emergent, and otherwise inhibited, thoughts, feelings and actions. It is particularly relevant in learning contexts.

In feedback sessions with students, it became clear that the heart of the BBL training involved modeling the facilitation of emergence. It involves a way of being and a way of seeing what is happening in interactions that we have with ourselves and others.

A number of factors emerged from discussion with students. First, it was clear that the coach delighted in noticing when a person was becoming more themselves or closing the door on their becoming (when the coach typically intervened). This was marked by a comment, expression, or emphatic observation of what they saw happening, followed by a challenge for the student to stop and take notice themselves. This was a co-creative

yearning to exist--A yearning to see a person becoming their authentic self. It can involve the coach existing in the presence of the person, particularly when the pattern is "freight-training" (i.e., the person is charging forth unaware of themselves in the interaction).

This is clearly more than a technical skill. The primary author conveyed his delight and described seeing the person's whole life journey unfold in these micro-moments. He described a moment many years earlier when he seemed to sense what was going on with another person and coached them toward a more successful realization of their intent. It wasn't clear how this ability was developed or how he learned it. But he had a deep hunger to facilitate his own emergence and to become more fully his genuine self. That yearning expressed itself in a heightened sensitivity to choice points when one chooses to step into the unknown or close the door. The willingness to sense those moments and choose to keep the door open is at the heart of BBL.

This ability cannot be taught in a traditional sense. We believe the next step in the iteration of the training will be to design a rubric to enable students to track their own progression.

Regarding the current structure and content of the training and how it can be improved, students commented:

- The training is about learning to be with yourself as you are being with others, and to notice what's going on with you that either enables you to accurately see the other person or not.
- It's about focusing on how you are being rather than what you are doing.
- It is grounded in your embodied experience of what is going on as you engage with others--and what you notice about their experience.
- It's about focusing on the micro-moments of interaction to see the myriad of possibilities for choices that emerge for you and for those you are engaging with.
- It's about learning to contain your reactions and being conscious of what's going on in the moment, rather than doing what you historically might have done.
- Two main assignments involve (a) not doing what you typically would and noticing how else you might be, and (b) playing ping-pong in your interactions with others, noticing how you "hit the ball" and how they "return the shot" and then how your return that shot, etc. Catching the patterns and seeing what's happening.
- Noticing the moments of interactions as the "atoms" of human interaction--the building blocks of what is happening all the time;
- Settling into your body and cultivating the capacity for presence and compassion for myself and others;

- Calming the chatter in our minds to really be with another human being – and with ourselves;
- Learning to listen better with greater empathy; and,
- Building capacity to be with myself and choosing how I want to be.

A central goal of the training from an action-research perspective is to develop the capacity of BBL among leaders to more effectively lead and coach others in all our programs, including our signature training program. Each participant in the training agrees to serve as a team lead in various program components as their training “tuition.” Students also described the increased skills they were developing to facilitate participant growth and learning. Similar benefits were described in the context of leadership opportunities.

Key suggestion for improvement of the BBL training included:

- creating more structure between sessions (every three weeks) to build momentum and retain learning;
- learning the sequence of BBL skills (This observation led to the discussion of the process, described previously.);
- more structure in what to orient to between sessions; and,
- a rubric for students to assess where they are on the continuum toward competence and mastery of BLL.

Conclusion

Grounded Leadership, Emergence Coaching, and Being-Based Leadership represent practices based on an integrated classic GT framework with important applications in the fields of transformational learning, coaching, and leadership. Specifically, each practice sheds light on the process of facilitating the emergence of positive potentials in these various contexts and within any system.

Synergies between GL, EC, BBL, and Evolving Theory

While this study and the grounded theory study of personal transformation (i.e. evolving) were conducted independently, there are important synergies between the two. Evolving theory identifies six phases focused on consciously engaging in one’s own evolution with the intent to transform: Yearning, engaging, revealing, liberating, rematrixing, and dedicating (Wright et al., 2021). Engaging is understood in this context as yearning-based engagement, where learners access their yearning as the driver of the evolving process. Yearning is recognized as a vague dissatisfaction or desire expressed by engaging in activities and interactions in order to drive an ongoing process of self-discovery (revealing), which in turn finds expression in liberating action. Rematrixing and dedicating represent the phases of personal transformation during which learners strategically plan and implement the vision of their own becoming in a process of lifelong learning.

The phases of GL and EC include engaging, discovering, core concepting, visioning, and “so-whatting.” Through the lens of evolving, EC facilitates yearning, engaging, revealing (core concepting) and liberating (so-whatting). While these phases are defined differently in this study, there are obvious synergies between them. As leaders and coaches collaboratively engage with those they support, they follow their yearnings to contribute to a worthy goal and support the learning, development and transformation of others. The first three phases of this study—the student event, the GT training, and facilitated learning in the seminar—involved facilitating personal transformation. Likewise, the processes of EC and BBL are designed to facilitate transformation. This yearning to engage in transformative learning and become our best, most authentic selves is the core of all of our graduate programs (Wright & Wright, 2013).

The Core Curriculum of Transformational Coaching & Leadership

This study stops short of developing implications for an integrated graduate-level curriculum in transformational coaching and leadership. To do so would require clarification of the core academic disciplines that inform the curriculum including developmental, Adlerian, and existential-humanistic, psychology; educational theory and practice; systems theory; and relevant neuroscience and related research. It also would require a consideration of the cultural context of leadership and a holistic approach to problem solving and transformational change.

By applying the practices of GL, EC, and BBL to the development of an integrative graduate program, we have found that classic GT methodology and related principles inform all of our approaches to critical thinking, research, and practice. The principles of suspending preconceptions, openness to discovery, grounding abstractions in experiential data, and allowing insights to emerge are foundational to our educational, coaching and leadership research, and practice.

The application of critical thinking and reflective learning in the practices of GL, EC, and BBL also suggest a rethinking of predominant models of experiential and transformative learning that tend to emphasize the abstraction of thought from the emotional immediacy of experience and reflective action (Cox, 2013; Kolb, 1984). As we saw in the dynamics of EC and BBL, the micro-moments of presence between persons creates a liminal space for grounded critical thinking and liberating action. As we continue to apply these insights to our graduate programs, we are discovering new models that can inform these fields.

Toward a Grounded Formal Theory of Human Emergence

As Glaser (1978) indicated, a substantive GT related to a specific practice area and context can often be the foundation for a theory with broader applications. This is the power of CGT methodology, which focuses on generalizable processes rather than specific properties of the participants or contexts. A formal theory of human emergence would address human ways of being, knowing, doing, including practices of coaching, leading, learning, and personal transformation (among others). This article and the related article on evolving represent initial steps toward such a theory. It represents an important area for continuing research and experimentation to further clarify the broader implications of CGT to the fields of learning psychology and transformational coaching and leadership.

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