

THE MINDFUL COACH



*Seven Roles
for
Helping
People Grow*

Douglas K. Silsbee

Praise for The Mindful Coach: Seven Roles for Helping Others Grow

“Silsbee’s approach is both practical and profound. This is a must-read for everyone concerned with people and learning.”

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“A clear and integrated model to assist people in understanding and applying the important skills in mindfulness and coaching. Executives from diverse backgrounds will find *The Mindful Coach* an insightful and practical guide.”

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“I loved this book! *The Mindful Coach* is personal, spiritual, systematic and insightful. This is mandatory reading for anyone who has the responsibility of helping others learn and develop. My trainers will all be receiving a copy. This is Thich Nhat Hanh meets Stephen Covey!”

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“In serving others, we can get overly focused on specific strategies or tactics and lose perspective of the larger, broader dynamic. *The Mindful Coach* delivers on clarifying, organizing, and contextualizing what it really means to be involved in a coaching relationship.”

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“*The Mindful Coach* captures the very essence of what coaching can be. Silsbee marries the art and science of human dialogue, of compassionate listening and advice giving without creating dependency. He guides the reader gently through the seven distinct roles of a true helping relationship. This is a process to be internalized and lived every day.”

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“*The Mindful Coach* is not just another coaching model. It is a frame of reference for anyone involved in developing people. This highly readable book should serve as a reference for anyone genuinely concerned about helping others. It has had a significant impact on the way I coach.”

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“In his hands-on new book, *The Mindful Coach*, replete with artful and challenging exercises, Doug Silsbee models the mindfulness depth from which he springs in order to impart a valuable new coaching model based on professionalism, integrity, and dedication to service.”

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“*The Mindful Coach* is warm, sensitive and intuitive, while at the same time clearly written by a scientific mind. The book provides a simple and cohesive model for the development process, coupled with practical strategies on how to become a more conscious practitioner.”

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“*The Mindful Coach* is a book that anyone who is serious about coaching must read. It is comprehensive and compelling and will give you insights that will help you be the best coach you can be.”

James A. DeSena

AUTHOR, *The 10 Immutable Laws of Power Selling*

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Overview

The map is not the territory.
ALFRED KORZYBSKI

What we play is life.
LOUIS ARMSTRONG

A septet, in music, is a group of seven musicians playing together. The Septet in this book consists of seven integrated roles that we take on as we coach. These Voices, as we are calling them, are those of the Master, the Partner, the Investigator, the Reflector, the Teacher, the Guide, and the Contractor.

In this overview chapter, I'll share the origins and purpose of the Septet framework, present a brief overview of each Voice, and offer some suggestions about what this model might mean for you in whatever venue you serve as a coach. The following chapters in this part of the book will be dedicated to the exploration of each of these Voices in depth.

This model is an artificial construct for helping us look at what, precisely, we do as coaches. Please read these chapters carefully but not obsessively; what's presented in them is intended as a framework for examining yourself in the coaching process rather than as a flow-chart to be followed to the letter. In Part 3 we'll put all the pieces back together and offer strategies and exercises for maintaining or improving your coaching skills.

It should be noted that the Septet Coaching Model is derived from my own quarter-century of professional experience with change; although mindfulness and self-observation are central to my approach to coaching, the model itself is not part of any historical mindfulness tradition.

Introducing the Septet

The Septet Model is an architecture for seeing the coaching process more clearly, and for becoming aware of the roles that coaches play in helping situations, professional and otherwise. If you are mindful in using the Voices, and consciously choose between them as you help others develop their own skills, your coaching will be enhanced. Think of the Septet as a structure to guide your own inquiry into what it means to you to be a coach.

The Voices represent the seven essential roles that a coach plays. Think of them as instruments; each has its own tone and way of expressing itself, its own place in the music. When we're in tune with our clients, when our own conditioned patterns are set aside and we are fully present, we are able to choose the Voice that's most appropriate and most helpful at a particular time. In practice, we will often shift quickly and fluidly between Voices, both shaping and responding to a dynamic, ever-changing conversation.

The Voices of the Septet are like the musicians in a jazz band. There's a basic, agreed-upon structure to a jazz tune, yet as the musicians

improvise—listening and responding to what is emerging in the moment—one or another steps forward to take the lead. The same piece of music is never played identically twice. Improvisation, spontaneity, and an interplay between the members of the band assures that the music is fresh and alive, a reflection of a unique moment in time.

This takes both practice and mindfulness.

Stages of Learning

To switch metaphors for a moment, you could consider the Voices—roles you play as a coach—as being like the skills you learn in order to drive a car. In learning to drive, we begin with the mechanics. We learn the pieces, one skill at a time. We learn how to start the car, how to use the accelerator and the brakes, how much of a turn of the steering wheel produces what result. Then we begin to integrate the skills together, accelerating, braking, and steering as we navigate the landscape. We learn the rules of the road and what to expect from other drivers. With practice and attention, we become smoother and smoother. Soon we don't need to think about the turn signal, the windshield wipers, the transmission, we just know how to use them. It feels smooth and seamless because we've internalized the skills involved.

But driving is an activity that requires full attention, even at high levels of mastery. The best drivers are always alert; while they rarely think about the mechanics of driving, they're fully aware of what they're doing at all times. They're attentive to the performance of the car, to the road, to the changing positions of the cars around them, making countless minor decisions intuitively and easily as they seek the best and safest possible course through the traffic. (A short safety aside: While some people are able to drive and use a cell phone at the same time, statistics suggest that they're deluding themselves if they think this doesn't affect their ability to be mindful drivers!)

Like learning to drive a car, using the Septet Model may seem awkward and complicated at first, as you focus on one Voice at a time, seeking to understand what it means, how you do this role in your own context. You may feel self-conscious when you try a Voice that's not already in your repertoire, and it can certainly feel overwhelming to think of mastering all of them.

Over time, however, you'll become more comfortable and less self-conscious. When we've practiced and done our work around each of the roles, we come to know how and when to be the Investigator, the Reflector, or the Teacher, for instance, and how to notice when we're not doing it mindfully. We learn to shift smoothly and seamlessly between the Voices. We become more fluid and less concerned about the distinctions between the roles as we learn to integrate them, sometimes playing two or three in rapid succession.

At this point, it will be important to avoid becoming over-confident, thinking "I've mastered this." When we feel on top of our game, the temptation is to forget to be mindful. The moment we become attached to the idea that we know it all, we stop learning and paying attention. Our egos are invested in being good at one thing, and we seek to present ourselves to our clients as being good at it all. It is only by persisting, by noticing our lapses of attention, maintaining the alertness of a beginner, and bringing attention to our areas of incompetence, that we continue to stay present and to grow.

We must remember that there is always room to deepen our understanding of our own attachments, aversions, and habits of mind, and that learning how to bring our full attention skillfully to our clients is a life-long process. This is the place from which we can become truly mindful coaches, by continually seeing ourselves as learners.

A note to the perfectionists out there: learning to use this system will be much easier if you don't take it too seriously. By this I mean as you experiment with it, remember that it's only a construct. Be gentle with yourself as you try things out. See what happens; the work here is to discover what enables you to improve your skills and effectiveness.

Getting all tangled up in using a complex system perfectly will interfere with your learning process *and* make it much less fun. Let your curiosity and intelligence guide you, rather than holding yourself to an artificial and perhaps impossible standard for “getting it” quickly. Cultivate your own beginner’s mind.

The Septet Model will have served its purpose when we can look back at a coaching session, see how we moved easily into each Voice as it was needed, know that we offered the fullness of ourselves as expressed in all the Voices, and didn’t have to think about it.

An Overview of the Voices

The idea for the Voices originated with a client, Scott Ziemer, who was exploring the possibility of moving into coaching as a profession. In an effort to define for himself what coaching was all about, Scott came up with a list of seven roles that a coach plays, which we spent time discussing together. The roles (and the distinctions between them) have changed considerably as I’ve continued this line of work, and were known as the Seven Hats for years before they came together to form a Septet. But the basic ideas that emerged from my conversations with Scott provided a new and useful language for discussing the nature of coaching.

Here’s a rough sketch of the seven Voices and the tasks or responsibilities—parts of the whole process—they represent.

- Master (the coordinator): staying self-aware, modeling growth and learning, being fully present
- Partner: defining, negotiating, and sharing responsibility for the coaching relationship with the client
- Investigator (the question asker): finding out what the client’s true needs are, gathering information about the client’s situation and desired outcomes

- Reflector: providing feedback and encouraging self-awareness in the client
- Teacher: providing information, language, and tools for addressing issues and problems
- Guide: providing impetus and ideas for action
- Contractor: encouraging mutual accountability, monitoring client follow-through.

Let's look at each of these in sequence.

The Master is the overarching role that encompasses and supports all the others. The Master is the ground from which the others spring.

Please recall from the “Language” section of the introduction to this book that I am using the term “master” with full awareness that it carries patriarchal connotations for some. I reiterate here that I intend it as an inclusive, gender-neutral term for a person with great skill, an adept, an artist, one who has attained a high level of discernment and competence, or a controller in a neutral sense—and it is to tap into all of these latter (newer) meanings, as no other word can do, that I am using it. If the word “master” carries patriarchal baggage in your mind, you are invited to shed that baggage for the time being and let the newer, more inclusive meanings of the word take precedence. After all, many words have multiple meanings; which is operative at a given time depends upon context, and the context here is inclusive and egalitarian.

A master, then, is one who has done the inner work of knowing herself and developing the capacity to use her skills wisely, artfully, and effectively. These meanings of the word are central to the Septet Model of coaching, in which the Master represents the quality of the coach being present and aware. The Master is the observant, conscious part of the mind that discerns what the client needs, when to shift roles in order to move with those needs, and how to stay present and as free as possible from the limitations of our own conditioning. Like the conductor of an orchestra, the Master pays attention to the whole, and shapes the

tempo and feeling of the music being played, even when other Voices are being heard.

The six “operational” Voices—Partner, Investigator, Reflector, Teacher, Guide, and Contractor—represent more specific elements of coaching, and are identifiable by actions and choices of words. I hasten to add that we’re not in the business of creating multiple personalities. There are times when two roles might be played simultaneously, and lots of areas where the lines between them blur; there’s some overlap, for instance, between the Partner and the Contractor, the Teacher and the Guide. For the sake of our inquiry, however, for now we’ll assume that these Voices are distinct. Let’s look briefly at each.

As the Partner, the coach focuses on building a win/win structure for his relationship with the client, and on honoring and maintaining that structure. The Partner Voice involves the client in decisions about the course of the coaching relationship and supports the client in taking increasing responsibility for his or her own learning. The Partner represents the coach’s commitment to the client’s outcomes, and his responsibility for the maintenance of mutual trust and respect.

The role of the Investigator is to ask questions. This is the Voice that many training programs for coaches emphasize, and for good reason. The Investigator role is at the core of coaching. The purpose of the Investigator’s questions is to support the client’s deeper understanding, not to procure answers for the coach or to allow the coach to formulate advice. Speaking as the Investigator, the coach challenges the client to look at the situation differently, to clarify what he or she wants, and to identify what can be done to bring these outcomes closer. In this role the coach is a learning partner with the client because both learn from the questions asked.

I think of the next three Voices as “the sharpeners” because each takes the coaching process forward by clarifying and sharpening the client’s answers to the questions of the Investigator. The sharpener Voices include, in increasing order of directiveness, the Reflector, the Teacher, and the Guide.

By taking the role of Reflector, the coach serves the client as a mirror: the Reflector provides feedback to the client and encourages the client to seek feedback from others as well. Speaking in this Voice, the coach promotes the client's self-awareness regarding the choices at hand and the consequences of those choices. The Reflector also encourages the client to become more self-observant and helps find ways to do this. The Reflector supports the client in discerning his or her real potential in a situation, and in paying close attention to the capabilities and resources he or she brings to the challenges of the moment.

The Teacher Voice represents the second most commonly emphasized role for a coach—that of the “expert.” As the Teacher, the coach provides information, tools, and language that help the client see the situation more clearly and expansively. The Teacher provides ways of looking at things, models, and tools for interpretation. The Teacher also challenges the client's thinking process, encouraging the questioning of assumptions and the exploration of the logic of his or her view of the situation at a deeper level.

The Guide's function is to present alternative pathways forward and encourage the client to take action. The Guide helps a client commit to doing something practical and concrete, to create change on the ground. At its most directive, the role of the Guide includes recommending specific courses of action.

The Voice of the Contractor is generally heard while wrapping up a topic or concluding a conversation. The Contractor negotiates clear and specific agreements for the client to act upon, stands for accountability to action, and follows up about results in subsequent conversations. In this role, the coach is developing the client's commitment to substantive change by exploring resistance and helping to resolve doubts. The Contractor supports the client in transforming new insights into concrete actions.

Each of these seven Voices, then, represents a role of the coach. In addition, each Voice encompasses a grouping of two to five specific functions, or Aspects, of the coach. There are twenty identified Aspects in all; their relationship to the Voices is laid out in Table 4.

Table 4: The Voices and Their Aspects**Master**

- M1 Maintains self-awareness
- M2 Listens with focus and presence
- M3 Models learning and growth
- M4 Embraces the client with compassion and respect
- M5 Chooses which of the operational Voices to use at a given time

Partner

- P1 Establishes and honors an explicit structure for the coaching relationship
- P2 Makes explicit, clear choices with the client about the coaching process

Investigator

- I1 Asks questions that deepen a client's understanding of the situation
- I2 Helps the client articulate desired outcomes
- I3 Asks the client to generate courses of action

Reflector

- R1 Provides direct and honest feedback
- R2 Directs the client's attention toward his/her capabilities and potential
- R3 Encourages self-observation and reflection

Teacher

- T1 Provides "expert" information, tools, and language
- T2 Challenges and stimulates client's thinking process

Guide

- G1 Encourages the client to take action
- G2 Offers options and/or recommends courses of action

Contractor

- C1 Establishes clear agreements about actions
- C2 Explores and resolves client doubts and hesitations
- C3 Follows up with client about agreed-upon actions

Of course, each of these Aspects could be further elaborated and sub-divided, and the taxonomy could become quite intricate. In describing the coaching process in detail, we could list literally hundreds of coaching behaviors, and nearly as many ways of describing the coaching process. The Septet Model is one. The important thing is to have a framework and roadmap for yourself. In identifying these seven Voices and twenty Aspects, I've attempted to draw useful distinctions while at the same time remembering that we reach a point of diminishing returns if they are parsed too finely and we get tangled in classification and taxonomy.

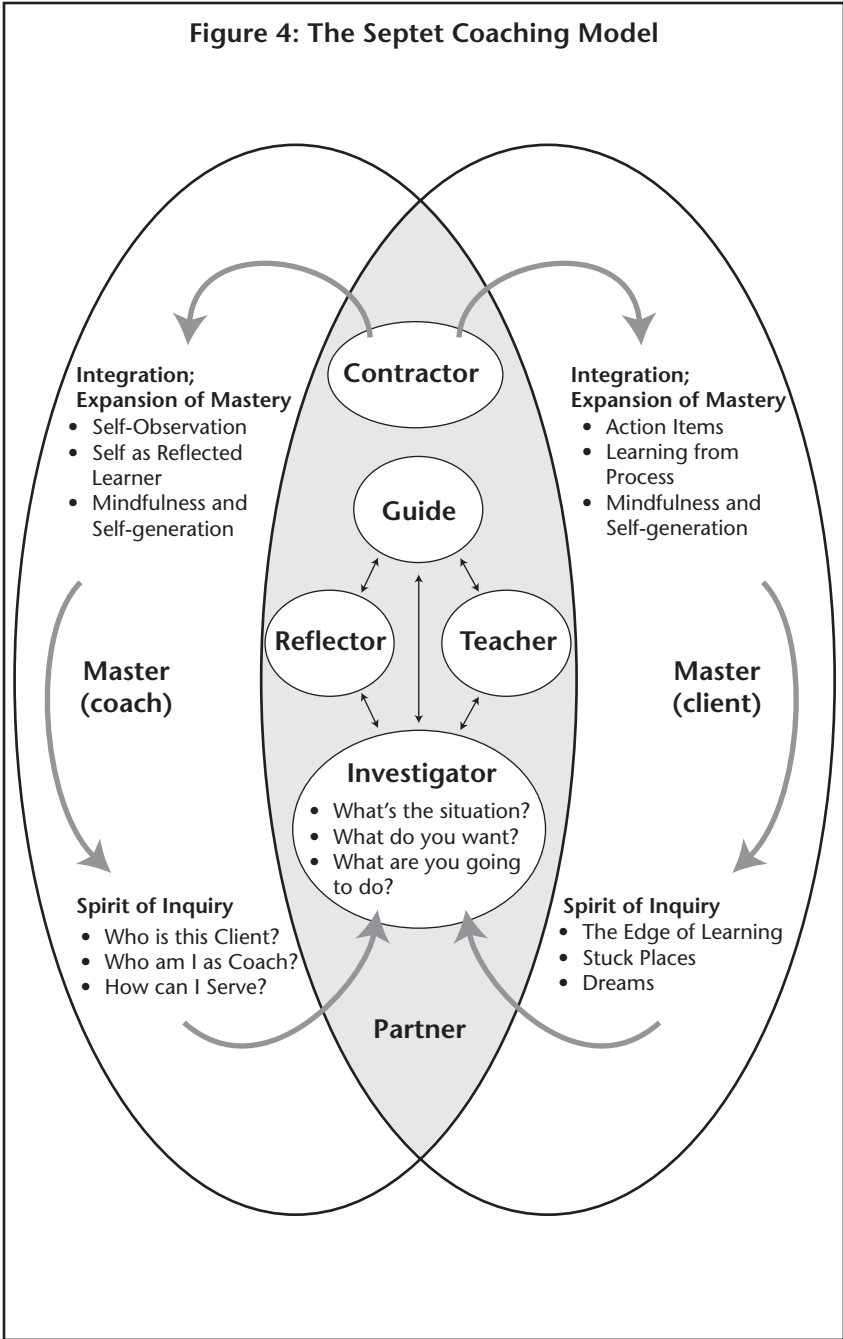
A Sneak Preview of the Model

Before exploring the specifics of each Voice and Aspect, let's remind ourselves that each of the roles interacts with and supports the others. Figure 4, "The Septet Coaching Model" depicts this integration—the flow of coaching—including key elements that take place outside the coaching relationship for both the coach and the client.

Take a minute to look at the figure, read the bullet lists in it, and think about how its parts relate to one another. Notice, for example, that the Masters (both coach and client) sit outside the coaching arena and are present within it. The process of seeking mastery takes place in all areas of our lives; the coaching process is simply one activity that brings it into sharper focus. Coaching takes place within the intersection of the separate worlds of coach and client, and that is the subject of this book.

The qualities of the Master as coach, as expressed in the five Aspects listed above, are cultivated by the coach outside of coaching as she does her own learning and growth in life. The Master offers this larger perspective and experience to the coaching relationship. From this larger

Figure 4: The Septet Coaching Model



perspective, the Master also observes the coaching as it unfolds, shaping what happens within it, and choosing which of the six “operational” Voices to use at a particular time.

Similarly, the client takes what he or she learns within the relationship into other settings and situations. Both are on their individual quests towards mastery; both learn and grow from the interaction between them and integrate this learning into the larger spheres of their lives. Coaching, in short, is seen in this model as part and parcel of living life, not as a discrete activity.

The Partner both structures and serves as guardian for the arena within which the coach and client can do their work. The Partner is a caretaker and a guarantor of the coaching space, shown in the center of the diagram.

Within this realm, the five other Voices play their parts, “taking solos” as they interact with the client and with each other to provide the best possible support for the client’s development. This interplay animates the coaching process as each of the Voices serves the client in a unique and mutually reinforcing way.

The model will be discussed at length in Chapter 12. For now, suffice it to say that each of the roles comprises a distinct set of functions within the coaching process; they fit together as an overall architecture for the coaching process.

Using the Model

Each of the remaining chapters in Part 2 will begin with a description of one of the Voices. Each Aspect of that Voice is then explained, with anecdotes and sample dialogues to illustrate how it emerges in an actual coaching situation. These narratives are simplified, constructed from actual ones in such a way as to show the essence of an Aspect in action. Most coaching is, of course, more intricate than it appears here.

While the goal of including these stories and dialogues is to help you think about the roles you're playing and the purpose of each part of your coaching conversation with a client, it won't be particularly helpful to spend lots of mental energy parsing each sentence to determine which Voice or Aspect it represents. The focus of the book, after all, is on becoming mindful, not on improving our expertise at splitting hairs. Much of the professional development work that will follow in Part 3 derives from this understanding.

Work with this model to develop your awareness of what Voice and Aspect you're using at a particular time; pay attention to the distinctions between them but don't obsess about classification. Try to become intentional and conscious about shifting Voices and identifying which Aspect of the process you're focusing upon at a given time.

Each of the chapters in Part 2 closes with a description of some of the pitfalls involved in the use of a particular Voice—and guidelines for avoiding those pitfalls by staying mindful. Note, too, that the content of the coaching varies widely. This is intentional, and meant to emphasize the point that these roles are universal, and that this model is relevant to all the many venues in which coaching occurs.