



## Navigating Social-Group Identity in the Coaching Relationship: Exploring the Fifth Coaching Domain

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### Abstract

A typical coaching engagement calls on the coach to support strategies leading to enhanced performance, promotion and leadership development. For those with historically marginalized or excluded social-group identities, sharing their bias-related stressors and traumas in coaching conversations is occurring with increased frequency. The need for coaches to build their competence in ways that enable them to support the 'whole' client cannot be overstated. Yet, when we surveyed coaches about whether or not they felt 'competent' coaching a client in the area of identity, nearly half said they did not. (Pinnock and Mayes, 2017). Based on our own client experiences, and the feedback we received from coaches responding to our 2016 and 2019 surveys, we theorize that coaching with social-group identity in mind represents a distinct and integrative form of coach development (Potter, 2020.). We call this area of coaching focus 'The Fifth Domain'.

### Authors' Note

In 2016, and again in 2019, the authors forwarded a survey link to a sampling of coaches using the web-based research tool, Survey Monkey. These samples consisted of coaches personally known to us, as well as a list of graduates of the Georgetown Leadership Coaching Program and members of the Association of Coach Training Organizations (ACTO). We received 172 responses to these two surveys. The authors acknowledge that the findings reported herein are not offered as statistically valid, but can, instead, be considered as *reliably informative*, and can help to frame our discussion. We believe our findings, while taken from a small sampling of coaches, invite additional research into coach effectiveness and coach training for anyone coaching those with historically marginalized or excluded social-group identities.

*Keywords: coach competencies, coach training and development, DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility), domains of coaching, integrative development, social-group identity, talent management*



## Navigating Social-Group Identity in the Coaching Relationship: Exploring the Fifth Coaching Domain:

### Part 1 of 3

#### Introduction

*“Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything.  
That’s how the light gets in.” - Leonard Cohen*

Coaching, as a profession, has developed significantly in recent years. A 2023 global study conducted by the International Coach Federation (ICF)<sup>1</sup> (Ashdown, A. and Hunt, P. (2023), recognized as the largest accrediting and credentialing body for coach-training programs, found that “notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic, between 2019 and 2022, the coaching profession continued to expand at a robust pace. In 2022, the estimated number of coach practitioners exceeded 100,000 for the first time, reaching 109,200, representing a 54% increase on the 2019 global estimate” (p.5). This is exciting news for the coaching profession, and yet we doubt that professional coaching will reach its potential using the homogenous lens through which the theory and practice of coaching was born, has developed, and continues to dominate.

Most coach-training programs – Eurocentric and Western influenced as they are – adopt the belief that if the coach is an active listener and focuses on the client’s agenda, good coaching will necessarily emerge. A key focus of these programs is typically on four coaching domains (cognitive, emotional, somatic, and spiritual), with little to no mention of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), social-power dynamics or cultural context. In fact, some coaches attending our developmental workshops or conference presentations have relayed that their coach-training program explicitly told them to avoid bringing social-identity into the coach-client relationship.

Concerned about the evolution of the coaching profession, in 2016, and again in 2019, the authors conducted two unpublished studies that found over 50% of respondents felt they did not receive or were unsure if their respective Approved Coach Training Programs (ACTP) provided any specific Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) training. Out of 172 respondents, three out of four (75%) who did receive some type of DEI awareness- development reported that what they were taught was “insufficient” when

it came to coaching to support effectively those with social-group identity (race, ability, gender identity, sexual orientation etc) differences (Pinnock and Mayes, 2017). In short, many coaches who had attended a formal coach-training program felt they did not receive the personal or professional development needed to navigate a coaching discussion in which issues of social-group identity arise. Our findings, while taken from a small sample size, prompted us to theorize about an additional coaching domain, and to develop a competency model and training framework to help bridge the DEI awareness-gap in the field.

If, in partnering with our clients, our aim, as coaches, is to support the work they wish to do by increasing their authenticity and leveraging their uniqueness in the workplace (Shore, et al, 2013; Jansen, et al, 2015), then it is important that we are able to apply aptly the proper lens through which to take in our clients’ identities, perspectives, and experiences. The authors have coined the term *Fifth Domain Coaching* (Pinnock and Mayes, 2017) to name this lens of social-identity competency, which we find is sorely missing in the field. Our goal is to add a vital dimension to the existing four domains of coach practice listed above. The ultimate mission of *Fifth Domain Coaching* is to equip coaches globally with the competencies necessary to coach each client in their “wholeness” (Rainey and Jones, 2019) and to make effective coaching accessible to every person, no matter their mix of social identities.

This series of articles is intended to offer a three-part dive into the ‘Fifth Domain of Coaching’. This first article examines the existing literature and research in the coaching field and invites an evidence-based call for the field to see, name and work what it has been neglecting: *the power dynamic inherently present in coach/client relationships*. The second article focuses on defining and introducing the authors’ theory of a Fifth Domain of Coaching and sharing our Fifth Domain Competency Model to help the reader envision what it would ‘look like’ for coach-training programs and coaches to include our theory and model into their training and practice. The third and final article will provide a high-level ‘how to’ primer to facilitate the application of the Fifth Domain framework into coaching practice.



## Part 1: The Case for Change

The question of how to manage effectively the complexity of multi-cultural/multi-racial/multi-national/multi-generational, and gender-fluid environments is on the minds of many coaches and other helping professionals worldwide (Bacon and Spear, 2003; Downey, et al, 2015; Tanneau and McLoughlin, 2021). During times of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA)<sup>2</sup>, the question of how to recruit and retain diverse talent challenges forward-thinking leaders in almost every field or industry (K. Brown, 2018; Day and Lance, 2004; Siminovitich, 2017). Both Professional- and Business-Coaching have a lot to offer individuals and organizations looking to boost their brand and expand their offer in an increasingly diverse marketplace (Bacon and Spear, 2003). However, the coaching profession will not be able to meet its potential by holding tightly to the coaching models and methods created largely in an environment of homogeneity.

Even before the global social justice awakening of 2020, leaders were encouraged to develop competencies in areas such as authenticity, bravery, empathy and vulnerability (B. Brown, 2018; Frei and Morriss, 2020; Siminovitich, 2017; Stober and Grant, 2006). Additionally, cultural, emotional, and social-intelligence competencies have long been recognized as much-needed anchors for work being done in conjunction with Diversity and Inclusion (Allen-Hardisty, 2018; Gardenswartz, 2010 et al; Goleman, 2000; Oyewunmi, 2018). As Tanneau and McLoughlin, (2021) assert "...rising social consciousness on issues of ethnicity, social justice, and belonging has carried over to the workplace. Cross-cultural awareness and sensitivity are key to navigating this rising workplace diversity..." (Para. 6). The job of coaching leaders and high-potential talent in such a complex environment calls for a blending of the aforementioned leadership competencies with solid DEI awareness. For many coaches this will require ongoing personal and professional development which seeks to narrow the gap between how they have been trained and what the current VUCA environment is demanding from them.

Sadly, there have not been many studies seeking to examine the impact of race- or color-bias in the global coaching environment. While race and color are not the only wedges of identity to which coaches should be attending, the paucity of research in this area should be a cause for concern among coaches all over the world. We did find one study, conducted by Roche and Passmore (2022), that queried coaches from the New Zealand (Māori), South Africa (Kenya), the US and the UK, and supports our own beliefs that the coaching eco-system is bounded by a general color-blindness that fails to consider the impact of homogeneity in the field. Referring to *underrepresentation* in the field of professional coaching, Roche and Passmore assert:

"Our review of professional artefacts conducted by searching professional association websites, such

as professional body reports, coach competency frameworks, training syllabuses and statements on diversity and inclusion, ignore race as a factor. Competency frameworks of the main bodies have no explicit discussion about race, yet these competency frameworks form the cornerstone for coach training.... While data is collected on gender, language, and country of residence, at the time of writing, no data is collected on racial identity or ethnicity by any of the professional bodies. Without such data it becomes impossible to say whether, or by how much, Black, Indigenous and Other People of Colour (BIPOC) are under-represented in executive coaching, or to develop evidence-based mechanisms to address inequalities." (Roche and Passmore, 2022, p.3)

As if to reinforce Roche and Passmore's point, the most recent ICF Global Coaching Study (2023) cites coach-demographic information solely related to age, gender and geographic location. Given the study's global reach of over 14,500 coaches responding from 157 different countries, we see this as a missed opportunity to probe for possible underrepresentation of coaches of color in the coaching ecosystem.

### Discussion

Interrogating the ways in which coaches can bridge learning gaps, Potter (2020) asserts that coaches need *integrative*, as opposed to *additive*, development to manage complexity in today's workplace. "Integrative development implies a transformation into something new – combining concepts, abstractions and behaviors in new and more complex ways" (Potter, p. 130). Following this reasoning, novice and seasoned coaches will benefit greatly from the type of development that helps them understand and integrate the varied perspectives and worldviews expressed in globally-diverse markets and organizations.

The dilemma many coaches face today is that they have had little or no DEI development as part of their formal ACTPs (Pinnock and Mayes, 2017). This, despite findings from the ICF Global Coach Study (2020) indicating that many coaches receive hundreds of hours of coach training over their careers. The 2020 study reported that nearly all coach practitioners (99%) said they have completed some coach-specific training. Increasingly, training is through programs accredited or approved by a professional coaching organization, and a plurality of coach practitioners (43%) said they have received *200 hours or more* of coach training (International Coach Federation, 2020). Yet, with hundreds of hours of coach-specific training being completed by would-be and professional coaches, the field has been slow to insist on the critical personal-development skills coaches need to close the gap in this area.



## Coaching at the 'Group' Level

The inspiration for the theorizing presented in this series of articles grew from a number of conversations between the authors – both of whom are professional coaches and identify as US born, cisgender, heterosexual women of color. Sharing our experiences of coaching clients with historically marginalized or excluded social-group identities, we found a common theme in our coaching practices. Specifically, expressions of societal in/out-group biases were coming up in our respective coaching relationships with growing frequency. Several of our clients who identified as having at least one marginalized social-group identity expressed feeling like an “outsider or misfit” in their respective workplaces. Their stories are supported by a broad body of literature on the impact of microaggressions<sup>3</sup> and marginalization in the workplace (K. Brown, 2020, Friedlaender, 2018; King, et al 2022; Offerman, et al, 2014; Sue, et al 2009; Washington, 2022). According to Washington, microaggressions “can negatively impact careers as they are related to increased burnout...and require significant cognitive and emotional resources to recover from them” (Washington, 2022, para. 3).

It must be noted that this pattern was observed by the authors across the spectrum of social-group identities and *was not limited to clients with historically marginalized identities related to their race, skin-tone or ethnicity*. Gender identity, sexual orientation, generational cohort differences, ablism, religion and national origin (including immigration status) also surfaced in our respective client populations.

Further, several of our clients told us that the feeling of being an outsider in the workplace often rendered them unwilling or unable to discuss the impact of societal bias, microaggressions or discrimination at work. Many individuals shared stories of having worked with coaches who “did not get” why issues related to their social-group memberships were affecting them. Still others reported feeling gently steered to more traditional or safe coaching topics, such as interpersonal communication, executive presence, or time management when the coaching conversation turned to exploring the impact of their marginalized identities. In a few cases, our clients shared that in previous coaching relationships, they felt completely misunderstood when they expressed concerns related to their social-group identities and chose not to raise similar issues with the coach in subsequent coaching sessions.

In 2018, K. Brown, a diversity and inclusion consultant working in the US, underscored this point and tied it to the challenge of retaining diverse talent in organizations:

“Employees who differ from most of their colleagues in religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic background, and generation often hide important parts of themselves at work for fear of negative consequences. We in the diversity and inclusion community call this “identity cover,” and it makes it difficult to know how they feel and

what they want, which makes them vulnerable to leaving their organizations.” (Para. 2)

A 2012 study of coaching effectiveness, conducted by Blackman and Moscardo, found over 40% of coaching clients reported that preoccupation with *other personal matters* presented a barrier to the success of the coaching process. We believe the current fractious discourse related to social-group identity differences, as highlighted by Brown above, falls into the bucket of “other personal matters” showing up in coaching conversations.

Added to the category of “other personal matters” is the present environment of uncertainty exacerbated by the recent COVID-19 pandemic. If we consider the current context in which coaching support is being offered, coaching interventions are more likely to have a stronger than average impact - either positively or negatively - on individuals holding historically marginalized social-group identities. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) doctors, David Acosta and Philip Alberti, marginalized and under-resourced communities always suffer more during a public-health crisis (Weiner, 2020) and warned of the pressures faced by those with marginalized social-group memberships due to factors such as racism and xenophobia. The stress and anxiety highlighted by these medical professionals are undoubtedly present in coaching conversations across a variety of fields, sectors and industries. In too many cases, coaches may not be equipped to address effectively issues related to social-group identity with their clients. Additionally, many coaches may be avoiding broaching the topic of social-group identity for fear of showing their own ignorance. Research conducted by Bernstein (2019), as part of her doctoral research, found that White coaches, likely out of fear of being seen as racist, fail to challenge Black coachees in the same way they do White coachees, and thereby do not serve them as well.

## Coaching With Blinders

Again, referring to our research (2016 and 2019), we were hoping to learn what coaches were experiencing in their coaching relationships. We were curious to know if coaches felt their interventions were aligned with the life experiences and cultural values of their clients who held historically marginalized identities. We wanted to know whether practicing coaches felt competent to coach around issues of social- group identity. This is what our survey respondents told us:

- Over 90% of respondents rated themselves as being at least ‘moderately effective’ in addressing issues of social-group identity between their clients and the individuals with whom they work.
- 82% rated themselves as being between ‘moderately effective to highly effective’ in addressing issues of social-group identity with their clients.
- Similarly, 83% of respondents said they intentionally broach topics of diversity and inclusion in their coaching conversations.

We were surprised by these findings, as we had



collected a lot of anecdotal data to the contrary. The self-assessments by our survey respondents were very much at odds with what we believed was happening in a field that is comprised predominantly of White woman geographically located in the US or Western Europe (International Coach Federation, 2020, pp. 8 – 11). Our survey sampling, while small, is also aligned with the ICF study, as it relates to the demographics of the coaching profession.

The majority of coaches we surveyed (92%) described their coaching philosophy as a “partnership” with their coachees. Nearly as many of these respondents (82%) assessed themselves as competent when coaching individuals holding social-group identities that were different from their own. Curious about these findings, we consulted the literature on coach competence to learn more about what we saw as dissonance between our survey and our anecdotal and experiential data.

Bernstein (2019) found that many studies that have sought to measure coaching tend to rely on self-report assessments from both coaches (Perkins, 2009) and coachees (Bowles, Cunningham, De La Rosa, and Picano, 2007; Thach, 2002). Additionally, Bernstein identified a trend of an increasingly growing dependence on coaching support for those with historically marginalized identities remaining “largely unexplored” (p.4).

Boyce et al examined the impact of the coach-client relationship and named *commonality* as a factor in successful coaching relationships (2010, p.8). Commonality, as a feature of the coach-client relationship, can also be realized via shared personal and professional interests and experiences. Emphasizing the importance of commonality in the coach-client relationship, Wycherley and Cox (2008) argue that without *demographic* commonality coaches “cannot understand the social and psychological conflicts of the client, and therefore deep levels of trust, sharing, and cooperation will not be achieved” (p.43). While we agree that demographic commonality can help a coach bridge potential gaps with coachees who hold social-group identities that are similar to their own, we also know that by attending to the *social-identity cues* that are present in certain coaching discussions, most skilled coaches - regardless of demographic commonality - can learn to navigate issues of social-group identity successfully.

Kruger and Dunning (1999) attribute a lack of competence in one’s chosen field to *low metacognitive abilities* and believe that an individual’s ability to know how well they are performing often leads to an imperfect self-assessment. Reduced or limited metacognitive abilities among coaches has not been a subject of research on coach effectiveness.

Lawley and Linder-Pelz (2016) looked at a number of studies that assessed coach competency from different perspectives. Two of the studies they reviewed showed “dissonance between coach and coachee ratings and both concluded that the coach’s estimate of the strength of the relationship did not correlate with the coaching outcomes

nor with the relationship measured by the coachee” (p.113). Additionally, Lawley and Linder Pelz concluded that whether or not a coach’s approach complied with their coach-specific training, coachee satisfaction with the coaching partnership could not be guaranteed.

## Summary

It is very likely that coaches are not able to self-assess accurately their ability to coach clients who hold social-group identities that are different from their own. If coaches are receiving upwards of 200 hours of coach-training to achieve certification, and if they report that the coach-training they have received is not sufficient to help broaden their understanding of issues related to DEI, then can a coach – particularly a seasoned coach – accurately self-assess their competence in the coaching domain of social-group identity? We, the authors, conclude that many coaches do not know what they do not know, and that this ‘not knowing’ has led to a pattern of well-intentioned coaches ‘missing’ certain clients when coaching support is needed the most. The good news is that increased awareness of this phenomenon has started to permeate conversations about the gaps in coach training throughout the world. We believe the competencies of Fifth Domain coaching can help narrow the gap between intent and impact in coaching relationships. In Part 2 of this series of articles we will say more about our theory and share the core competencies of the Fifth Domain.

## BIOGRAPHIES

### SUKARI PINNOCK-FITTS

Sukari is a cisgender woman and a member of the Black Diaspora. She is a heterosexual Baby Boomer, living with a hidden disability and some degree of socio-economic privilege as a U.S. National. She has no religious affiliation, believing strongly that the “Universe Provides.” Sukari is the daughter of a Jamaican immigrant father and South Carolinian mother, and was raised with one sibling in a working-class, multi-racial neighborhood in Los Angeles, California. Now residing in Northern Virginia – on the historic and stolen lands of the Nakachanct – Sukari has been supporting leaders in both the U.S. and abroad for over 20 years.

### AMBER L. MAYES

Amber is an African American and Greek, Gen X, heterosexual, Cis woman. She grew up middle class in the Boston area in a racially diverse working-class neighborhood. Raised in a multicultural household by an African American father from Georgia and a Greek immigrant mother, she developed an early passion for helping people communicate across differences. In the past 23 years Amber has developed a global leadership coaching and organization consulting practice that integrates issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. She is based in Northern California and is a proud auntie of the best 10-year-old on the planet!

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## Notes

1. The International Coach Federation (ICF) is a non-profit, global organization dedicated to the field of professional coaching. ICF is recognized as the largest accrediting and credentialing body for coach-training programs and coaches.
2. VUCA is a concept, originating at the US Army War College, which characterizes an environment in which change accelerates quickly, predictability is lacking, cause-and-effect forces are interconnected and the potential for misreading the situation is high. The acronym stands for *volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous*.
3. Microaggressions are the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or not, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership (Sue et al, 2007).

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