

Coaching on the Couch

Erik de Haan looks at Plato's dialogue, Meno

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Plato lived at a time when Greek society, having reached its full civic bloom in the previous century, was beginning to develop consultancy and coaching as a way to support and reflect on its great virtues and accomplishments. Obviously, words like 'consultancy' and 'coaching' were not yet in vogue, but sophists and philosophers started to apply themselves to exactly the same trade as consultants and coaches do today: the betterment of leaders and the education of future leaders and professionals.

Plato was not only one of the leading coaches of his day, but he also had the ability to reflect on his profession and pose questions that are still as open and profound and fresh now as they were then. He did this by creating a new literary form, and dialogue, which is, in both form and content, 'coaching'. One of Plato's earliest dialogues, the Meno, provides challenges that can help modern coaches to reflect on their profession. Indeed, the main question of the Meno is still relevant for executive coaches today. Can one learn from excellence?

Introducing the work

Meno introduces his question and Socrates, who acts as his coach, asks him first to share his own ideas about it, and also what he understands by the word 'excellence'. Meno then has three attempts to define the Greek word *arethe*, which spans our own concepts of (leadership) excellence, virtue and solidarity.

Meno's three definitions are then examined closely by Socrates. Socrates and Meno ask themselves, what conditions need to apply for one to be able to learn or teach excellence, whatever this 'excellence' may be? Socrates then sketches his ideal of the person who is able to both lead with excellence and teach it.

A personal reading

The content of Meno hinges on a pessimistic point that Meno raised and that Aristotle later calls 'Meno's dilemma': how can we learn what we do not know? For even if such knowledge crosses our path incidentally, we would not be able to recognise it. This almost sounds like a play on words, but in my coaching practice it is a very real problem: how can my coachee learn what he has failed to learn so far in his life as a leader? How is learning possible if the coachee does not know what to search for?

Socrates also finds the dilemma worrying, because it undermines learning itself. He invokes a radical definition of learning to counter it: 'learning is remembering'.

Why I think it's inspirational

The most painful, but I believe at the same time the most inspirational moment in the Meno is when Meno has exhausted his wits, produced three definitions and had to retract them, and then bursts out to Socrates, 'they warned me about you, even before I met you, that you always go around showing yourself baffled and baffling everyone

else...now I feel hypnotised, enchanted, even bewitched...with your big flat nose you don't only show the traits of a numbfish, but just like that fish, you paralyse everyone who comes close to you! I am completely lost.'

I believe it is the best thing for coachees and coaches to regularly meet a numbfish, so they can think afresh about issues without the dangerously tempting, self-gratifying voice within, that tries to convince them that either they have already resolved them, or, just as stifling, that they will never be able to learn anything without them.