Navigating Social-Group Identity in the Coaching Relationship

Part 2:
The Theory and the Competencies of the Fifth Domain

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This series of articles is intended to offer a three-part dive into the 'Fifth Domain of Coaching'. The first article examined the existing literature and research in the coaching field and invited an evidence-based call for the field to see, name and work what it had been neglecting: the power dynamic inherently present in coach/client relationships. This 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.

> *"There is nothing so practical as a good theory."*
> *Kurt Lewin*

The Theory of the Fifth Domain

As our taxi made its way to Minneapolis airport, following a Fifth Domain presentation at the St. Thomas coaching conference, our years of theorizing about a different, more expansive way to think about, and practice, coaching seemed to fall into place. We had been overwhelmingly surprised by the numbers drawn to our concurrent session – a session in which we had run out of handouts for the coaches who had lined the walls of the conference room eager to hear what we had to share. Making our way to our departure gate, we set a clear intention to codify the theory and model we were creating to address the coach-competency dilemma we had been discussing for several years. Thus began our journey as a two-person community of practice which, through conversations about our shared experiences, enabled us to build a coaching theory that is grounded in what we have learned as coach practitioners.

Beginning in early 2016, through a series of unstructured (and sometimes rambling) discussions, we began exchanging our experiences of working with clients who were sharing thoughts and feelings about issues that were typically outside the usual coaching conversation. We had each had very similar interactions with coaching clients who told us they had been unwilling to bring issues of gender, race, sexual orientation etc into their previous coaching engagements, for fear their coach would not, or could not, effectively hold space for their experiences.

Ultimately, we connected nearly all these stories to social-justice events occurring between 2014 and 2016, in the United States and elsewhere in the world: specifically, the deaths in the US, as a result of exchanges with law enforcement officers, of Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014) and Sandra Bland (2015) among many others; and the mass shootings at the Pulse nightclub (2016) and Charleston Emanuel AME Church (2015), that were figural in US media broadcasts (Mayes and Pinnock, 2020). Additionally, a spotlight on gender, sexual orientation, and/or religious-based assaults (Botti and Strasser, 2015; Perasso, 2015; Casey, 2016) were dominating global airways and a plethora of social-media sites.

Using our lived experiences as US born, cisgender/heterosexual, Black women to center our thinking about the role of social context in relationship to the coaching conversation, we began to recognize the *heart* (the vital core) of our theory. Our experiences as coaches propelled us into a years-long exploration of what we have named *Fifth Domain Coaching* (Pinnock, S. and Mayes, A., 2017). We see what we have created together as an integrative approach to a practitioner *competency* dilemma in the coaching ecosystem and, as such, strongly believe our theory to be globally applicable.

The Fifth Domain focuses on helping coaches explore how a client makes sense of the world based on their lived experiences as members of various social-identity groups. These groups, which are assigned to us by our societies, also often result in *self-categorization* based on shared characteristics, phenotypes and cultural similarities. This phenomenon of sorting based on similarity, is how 'in-groups and out-groups' or 'dominant and marginalized group identities' are formed (Mayes and Pinnock, 2020). The most commonly (and globally) recognized social-identity groupings today are those tied to:

- Race and/or Caste
- Skin-Tone and/or Color
- Ethnicity/Culture and/or Language
- Gender Identity and/or Gender Expression
- Nationality, Immigrant Status, and/or Tribal Affiliation
- Religion
- Age
- Ability Continuum (cognitive, emotional, neurodiverse, or physical)
- Socio-Economic Status/Education Privilege
- Sexual Orientation

The *ribs* (scaffolding) of our theory are comprised a variety of Applied Behavioral Science (ABS) concepts and models. These include but are not limited to: Gestalt Organization Development (Rainey and Jones, 2019; Nevis, 1987); Group Theory (Bion, 1961; Wells, 1995); Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979; Tajfel and Turner, 1979); Field Theory (Lewin, 1997); Use of Self (Brown, K., 2020; Seashore et al., 2004; Jamieson et al., 2010; Cheung-Judge, 2018); and Organization Development Theory (Cummings and Worley, 2005).

Finally, the *skeletal frame* (strength and structure) of Fifth Domain Coaching is found in the acceptance of seeing and owning the social-group power dynamics at play in the way coaching is taught, and how coaches approach their practice. Seeing our own vulnerability as a strength in the coaching conversation, and not being anchored to a specific coaching methodology (eg coach as 'asker of powerful questions'), creates an emergent space for making authentic contact with our clients. By maintaining a structure of openness, social-group awareness and intentionality, coaches who develop skills in the Fifth Domain are better prepared to meet their clients where they are, and to be with them in that space in a way that affirms and acknowledges the *wholeness* of the client and their lived experiences.

Simply put, Fifth Domain Coaching is a theory of coaching that *seeks to recognize social-group power dynamics, and integrate diversity, equity and inclusion skills, and contextual awareness, into the coaching ecosystem*. In this regard, Fifth Domain Coaching hopes to inform coaches, as well as coach-training organizations, that a broader lens is required if we are to make contact with, and build trust between, ourselves and our clients who may not share our cultural values and/or worldviews.

The Gap in Coach Training

The four coaching domains taught by many Accredited Coach Training Programs (ACTPs) are the cognitive, spiritual, emotional and somatic (Wahl, et al., 2013). Each of these domains focuses on the client as an *individual*. We assert that there is a *fifth* coaching domain – one which challenges the coach to use the lens of social-group identity to acknowledge and address the ways their clients view and experience the world. If coaches are blind to important aspects of their clients' identities, they are at great risk of negatively impacting those clients by unintentionally invalidating the coachee's group-level experiences. Since one of the essential goals of coaching is to open a space where clients feel fully seen and heard in the partnership with their coach, the need for additional coach-training and development in this area cannot be overstated.

The Fifth Domain differs from the other four domains of coaching in that it focuses on the *social-group memberships* of the coachee, and recognizes the 'ingroup/outgroup' impact the client may be sharing. Fifth Domain Coaching asks coaches to consider that what an individual is experiencing is not necessarily happening because of the individual themselves (eg "not demonstrating Executive Presence"), but could be the result of the social-groups to which the individual may belong (eg racialized voices being delegitimatized or undervalued). As a characteristic of Western culture, individualism pervades the coaching profession. In so doing, it leaves little space to explore the need a client may have to seek *commonality* in their relationships, or to feel a part of a *collective* or the *ingroup*, within the spaces they occupy.

In order to navigate the Fifth Domain with clients, coaches must be willing to address the set of worldviews and group-level experiences presented by their clients' social-group identities. Likewise, coaches need to reflect on their own social-group identities in relationship to the social-group identities of their clients in order to assess their potential blind spots. A reluctance on the part of a coach to enter the Fifth Domain, can often be traced to what they have been taught in their coach-training program. As Roche and Passmore (2022) assert, "...coaching research, reflective practice, including supervision and coaching methodology (outside of team coaching) tends to focus on individual interactions missing systemic and contextual factors and power dynamics" (p. 5). This gap in development leaves coaches open to overlooking or actively ignoring significant aspects of their clients' experiences, thus resulting in the client feeling "unseen."

Competencies of the Fifth Domain

The first step to becoming proficient at working in the Fifth Domain requires coaches to begin to see themselves – and others – as more than individuals. In other words, a coach must be able to 'see' what is occurring at the social-group level. In US culture we are socialized to view conversations about race and group power-dynamics as taboo. Mothers will often "shush" their young children when they point out someone's group-identity differences (eg "*Why is that girl's skin so dark, Mommy?*") Sue (2015) calls this the 'Politeness Protocol' and asserts that "we are socialized to avoid engaging in potentially controversial discussions such as race" (p.24). We believe the same is true when issues of age, gender identity, sexual orientation, range of ability, and other aspects of socially-marginalized group identities, are raised in the coaching conversation.
Operating at the social-group level of system radically challenges the politeness protocol. The power dynamics that play out in the coaching relationship – based on social-identity group differences – are often muted. When this happens, the coach runs the risk of missing what their client is sharing as a 'group-level experience', based on their specific social-group identities.

In some instances, the coach, often due to holding membership in a historically dominant or centered group (White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-normative etc), is likely to shift the coaching conversation, consciously or unconsciously, to a domain of inquiry focused on the client as an *individual*. This transition feels natural, since many coaches are trained to focus on what the coachee (as an individual) thinks, feels, embodies and intuits about their situation. Attachment to these four coaching domains can keep the coach anchored in a coaching methodology that makes conversations about a coachee's experience *at the social-identity group level* almost impossible to see or approach. Roche and Passmore (2022) affirm the importance of understanding the complexity of identity, and how it impacts coaching, as an impetus for the evolution of coaching.

Beyond *tracking*[1] the dynamics of social-group identity, there are specific skills required to navigate the Fifth Domain terrain with coaching clients. Based on our research, coaching practice and coach-training workshops, we have identified the following five *Core Competencies of the Fifth Domain:*
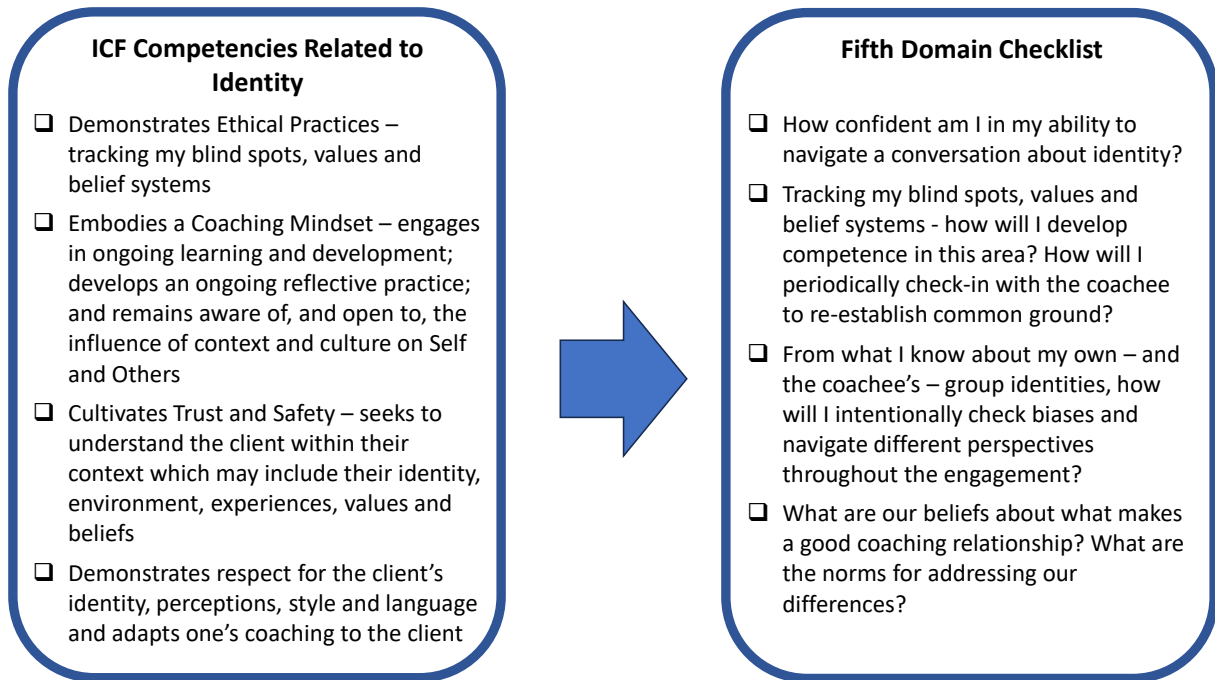
- Seeing Self and Others in their fullness, using a DEI lens.
- Recognizing and tracking cues that indicate the presence of social identity, and the influence of societal context, in the coaching conversation.
- Maintaining the client's focus in the coaching conversation by consciously using oneself to create a collaborative, *power-with*[2] coaching dynamic.
- Holding lightly to ego-gratification and image-management in the coaching relationship.
- Using vulnerability and appropriate risk-taking to probe for possible social-group power dynamics at play in the client's story.

In 2019, choosing to be informed by a growing body of literature on coach effectiveness, as well as its own 24-month study and analysis of global coaching practices, the International Coach Federation (ICF) announced plans to revise its Competency Model to include a new focus on client *identity* and *societal context* within the coach-client relationship. Specifically, the ICF core competencies of *Foundation, Co-creating the Relationship* and *Communicating Effectively* (ICF Core Competencies, 2021) have been updated to include Fifth Domain capabilities such as 'cultural, systemic and contextual awareness' in the coaching relationship. The new ICF Core Competency model went into effect in January 2021.

Considering the ways in which the Fifth Domain coaching model could be constructively fused with the new ICF Competency model, we developed a crosswalk (Figure 1) between the ICF competencies and our Fifth Domain checklist to help coaches understand how the Fifth Domain model supports the new competency areas.

Figure 1

Integrating ICF Competencies with Fifth Domain Competencies

ICF Competencies Related to Identity

❑ Demonstrates Ethical Practices – tracking my blind spots, values and belief systems

❑ Embodies a Coaching Mindset – engages in ongoing learning and development; develops an ongoing reflective practice; and remains aware of, and open to, the influence of context and culture on Self and Others

❑ Cultivates Trust and Safety – seeks to understand the client within their context which may include their identity, environment, experiences, values and beliefs

❑ Demonstrates respect for the client's identity, perceptions, style and language and adapts one's coaching to the client

Fifth Domain Checklist

❑ How confident am I in my ability to navigate a conversation about identity?

❑ Tracking my blind spots, values and belief systems - how will I develop competence in this area? How will I periodically check-in with the coachee to re-establish common ground?

❑ From what I know about my own – and the coachee's – group identities, how will I intentionally check biases and navigate different perspectives throughout the engagement?

❑ What are our beliefs about what makes a good coaching relationship? What are the norms for addressing our differences?

Figure 1 gives providers of coach-training programs an easy-to-understand way to update their curriculum and help would-be and developing coaches gain clarity about how to strengthen their understanding of these new ICF competencies. Further, by adding the aforementioned Fifth Domain competencies to existing learning modules covering the traditional four coaching domains (cognitive, emotional, somatic and spiritual), coach-training schools will better prepare their students to support a globally diverse coaching clientele.

Summary

Power dynamics in the coaching partnership do exist (Pinnock and Mayes, 2017; Bernstein, 2019; Roche and Passmore, 2022). The fact that many coaches believe they share power equally with their clients is at odds with what we know from our review of the literature, as well as our own coaching experience. In actuality, the coachee often sees the coach as the helping expert in the coach/client relationship. As a result, many coachees unconsciously cede power to the coach, expecting the coach to know how best to unpack the situation before them. This supports a *power over* dynamic in which the coach unwittingly becomes the senior partner in the coaching partnership. Starhawk (1990) describes such power in this way:

Power is never static, for power is not a thing that we can hold or store, it is a movement, a relationship, a balance, fluid and changing. The

power one person can wield over another is dependent on a myriad of external factors and subtle agreements (p. 268).

Often veiled, the power dynamics (coach over coachee) of social-group identity in the coaching relationship must be seen before they can be mitigated. Integrative development for coaches in this area will go a long way to normalizing conversations about social-group identity differences and the dynamics of power they inherently bring to the coaching relationship.

Coaching in the Fifth Domain requires expanded competency development, with a focus on navigating conversations about social-group identity, context and power. When taking on the lens of social-group identity, those coaches who consciously value meritocracy and individualism may feel afraid and deeply challenged when asked to name the power dynamic associated with their own social-group identities. This discomfort is important and it is necessary. No significant personal development comes from a place of complete comfort. Coaches working towards integrative development must lean into vulnerability to coach effectively in the Fifth Domain. If, in the coaching relationship, coaches are asking their clients to be vulnerable, they must be willing and able to do the same.

In the final part of this series of articles, we will provide a Fifth Domain "*how to*" primer that coaches and coach-training programs can experiment with, should they wish to begin using a social-group identity lens in their coaching practice and professional development.

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 term "Tracking" was coined by Delyte Frost, as part of the body of Diversity Management work being championed at the time by Elsie Y. Cross Associates, Inc. in the late 1980's and early 1990's.

2. In 2019, Graeme Stuart described four types of power in systems: *power over, power with, power to* and *power within. Power with* is shared power that grows out of collaboration and relationships. It is built on respect, mutual support, shared power, solidarity, influence, empowerment, and collaborative decision-making. *Power with* is linked to *social power* and the influence we wield among equals. (Blog post, Sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com)

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