

Coaching with Polarities. Introducing the Stretching technique

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Abstract

Coaching with polarities is a way of working to make clients aware of their survival patterns (primary sub-personalities) and to give them access to their disowned sub-personalities. Clients who are identified with behavior that is not effective or even dysfunctional can gain more freedom of choice and access to a much wider range of sub-personalities. I describe in this article a delicate and deepening coaching technique called Stretching, which can be embedded in Voice Dialogue coaching sessions to deepen client awareness and understanding of sub-personalities. I supply a theoretical framework and demonstrate the working-method by means of two client cases.

Originality/value of your article for the readers (coaches, mentors, researchers, Human Resource professionals, training institutes).

How to work with the technique of Stretching by using polarities, having diagnosed that a client lacks access to a wide range of behavior and is stuck in one mode of behavior (primary sub-personalities).

Keywords:

Voice Dialogue, coaching, polarities, aware ego, sub-personalities

Introduction

In this article I focus on a specific technique that I developed within Voice Dialogue, and called Stretching. Before exploring and explaining this technique, I will give a short introduction on my background and on the method of Voice Dialogue to set the stage. With a background in social sciences, Gestalt psychology and Eastern philosophy, I met the psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone, the creators of Voice Dialogue, in 1982. I got very inspired and studied with them for several years in California. Since 1984 I develop the Voice Dialogue work in Europe where I designed and taught the first training programs, in different countries.

To introduce Voice Dialogue we have to go back to the era when Jung formulated his theories about complexes and archetypes (Jung, 1960; 1965). Since that period of time we are familiar with the idea that a human being consists not of one single 'I', but rather of many different 'I's' (parts, sub-personalities, archetypes, energy patterns). Voice Dialogue, a method that was developed by the aforementioned psychologists Stone & Stone (1989; 1991; 1993), is based on the idea that these different parts, these sub-personalities can in actual fact be approached one by one. Every sub-personality has its own willpower, its



thoughts and feelings, and its own voice.

Another important principle, used by the Stones (1989), is the arrangement of the parts in polarities. On the one pole we find the parts a person has learned to use in order to survive, for example the controlling part, or the tendency to perfectionism; his critical abilities; and generally speaking, the rational energies that man can work with, and make use of, in order to deal with life. Another example of a part we use to survive, is the part that is being nice to people, the so-called 'Pleaser'.

Every one of these parts, or poles, has an opposite that we are often not aware of, or that we have repressed. The parts situated on that side, are the opposites of the survival parts. For instance, opposite our rational energies we may find our more emotional energies, opposite our power and independence there may be our needs, our weaknesses and our vulnerability. Opposite the Pleaser there would be the repressed, selfish side of us.

It appears again and again that, as human beings, we cannot function well, neither in private, nor in professional life, if we do not understand these repressed parts of ourselves. At a certain point we will discover that we lack something, when we live by means of our survival strategies only. This applies to us as individuals, but also to those individuals who work together within the framework of an organization, and thus hold on to an organizational culture within which only a certain type of behavior is appreciated.

A key factor in Voice Dialogue is the development of the so-called Aware Ego (Stone & Stone, 1989), a middle position between the opposites from where there is access to a wide range of sub-personalities and real choices can be made.

Jill and Bob and their dominant sub-personalities

To demonstrate the technique of Stretching, let's have a look at two cases, both with former clients. With Jill I did 3 sessions in 6 weeks and with Bob 10 sessions over a 2-year period.

From a Voice Dialogue point of view a client becomes a client, because he or she gets stuck in one or two dominant sub-personalities. Take for instance Jill, a client who is identified with the archetype of "the hard worker". Jill wasn't able to relax anymore and started to get psychosomatic issues, such as asthmatic complaints and cardiac dysrhythmia. Or take a look at Bob, a client who got stuck in his role as a "political strategist". These qualities got Bob into the boardroom of a commercial bank. But one day he woke up and felt awkward. All of a sudden he realized how much integrity he was lacking and yet he was not able to change the system with his old qualities of being politically agile.

Jill and Bob's sub-personalities were once an essential and effective survival mechanism, probably "born" in their family of origin. Later in life Jill and Bob experience – while the original need for defense has become obsolete - that they are stuck with a limited amount of behavior that is becoming dysfunctional in more and more situations. When we live by



means of our survival strategies alone, sooner or later we will discover that we lack something (Halbertsma, 2000).

In fact, this means that we do not understand our inner 'disowned' parts, nor the aspects of these parts that we encounter in other people. We do not get on well with another person, because we do not recognize these aspects in ourselves, and so in our connections with others we are confronted with our barriers.

Using the Voice Dialogue method - and more specifically the technique of Stretching - we will have the possibility to really experience the energies of a polarity, to deal with them, and to finally integrate them in our consciousness (Stamboliev, 1989).

The Framework of Voice Dialogue

To be able to embed coaching with polarities, I present below the main principles of working with Voice Dialogue.

1. We map the survival patterns and disowned sub-personalities;
2. The 'primary self' is the sub-personality that accounts for the survival pattern;
3. The primary self puts a lock on the availability of other selves. There is always a deep sense of vulnerability at play that is being protected by the primary self;
4. The objective of Voice Dialogue is to let the client develop a new position within himself: the Aware Ego or Middle Position;
5. To establish this new position it is necessary for the client to dis-identify from the primary selves and to experience and integrate the energy of the opposites (disowned selves) and to be able to live with polarities.

Working with polarities and the technique of Stretching mainly impacts principles 3 and 5. If a client has developed a 'primary self' that is so strongly developed that it suppresses the other parts, it is possible to facilitate the awareness and energetic experience of the primary self for as long as necessary (stretching) until in a very organic way the counterpart comes into play. The survival patterns (principle 1 and principle 2) then relax, one gets access to the underlying vulnerability (principle 3) and a new position can be developed (principle 4 and 5).

A step by step coach approach using Stretching

With my experience in the martial art of Tai Chi Chuan (Lo et al., 1993), I noticed the similarity between the Tai Chi 'yin-yang principle' and the energetics that happen in Voice Dialogue sessions given by experienced facilitators (Stamboliev, 1989). I named this technique Stretching as it involves going fully to one side of a polarity (stretching it) and to follow the energetic flow when the energy moves spontaneously to the opposite side.

What does the approach for coaching look like in practice? Below is a description of the different phases. These phases are not completely prescriptive, but they give an outline, based on the principles that appear in Voice Dialogue. I have interwoven these phases into



the cases of Jill and Bob.

Step a: Recognition and mapping

The first step is to recognize the primary selves that are 'driving the psychological car' and to get an idea of the opposite selves. A first session is used for diagnosis: in this session I map the different sub-personalities that seem to be operating in my client. I try to map all these different voices that are into play and next to that I try to assess by mapping: a) where is the vulnerable child and b) by whom is it protected, in other words: who is the most dominant sub-personality? What, or better said, who, within the client works as a defense mechanism for him/her? If the therapist or coach doesn't recognize and address this dominant sub-personality, working at a transformational or developmental level will be severely hampered. The chances are high that if the right sub-personality is not pinpointed, this sub-personality gets away with it, and stays in its position. To assess this, the coach checks within himself if he experiences an imbalance in the contact with the client. The coach also tries to sense who are the main disowned selves within the client. If one of the opposites turns out to be excluded, this will lead to an imbalance. For healthy human development we need both poles in our lives. Think of the ability to connect and the ability to disconnect and set boundaries. The ability to give and the ability to receive. The ability to be active and the ability to be passive, etc. As a last step of the mapping process the coach tries to assess if the client has the ability to act from within an Aware Ego, the middle position that is able to regulate the different sub-personalities (polarities).

Step b: Acknowledgment

In coaching, the coach respects that which is being avoided. The task is to honor the primary self and the function he has and what he has achieved for the client in the past. As soon as you see that somebody is reacting directly via his primary self, then the coach knows that he's on important and sensitive ground. The coach must meet and treat this with care.

Let's take client Jill: she was raised by a dominant father with high standards. The 'hard worker' sub-personality helped to keep her vulnerability as far away as possible from her father's influence. By working hard she avoided her father's disapproval. In the case of Bob, he was raised in a big family. He was not a good learner, he was not the funniest guy and he was not as beautiful as his sister. That's when he learned to become politically sensitive. He became an expert in getting what he wanted in a situation with multiple interests at play. He became a good manipulator. That's how Jill and Bob learned to survive at home. Thanks to their primary selves, Jill and Bob became very successful in their working life.

Step c: Giving a voice and Stretching

After 'mapping' the sub-personalities at play, I invite the primary self to come forward. In Jill's case, I did so when she started to answer me for the fifth time in a very elaborate way: 'It seems that every time I ask you something, you start to work very hard. It seems as if a short answer will never be good enough for you. Can I speak to the "hard worker"? And in Bob's case I said: 'At these positions everybody sees things that do not stand the light of day. But with your political intellect I am sure that you are able to handle this situation in a very delicate manner. Can I speak to your 'political side'? I suggest to Jill and Bob that I speak with



their primary self. I invite them to sit in another chair, so they can separate from the ego-position and dive totally into the experience of the primary self.

Example of a Voice Dialogue Stretching session with Jill

During the stretching process, the coach starts the interview with the primary self of Jill (the hard worker) and asks if it can move to a different physical position. At the same time the coach connects energetically with this self as if it is a real person, the only person in the world. In this way the part will gain energy and become fully alive and present. Only when this has been achieved the coach makes a connection to the past. The coach asks: 'When did you come into Jill's life?' In doing so, the primary self comes into contact with its underlying vulnerability. You can pay attention at this point if you see already changes in the gestures and body language of the client. Jill's hard worker answers: 'Jill was often bullied by her father at home. So many norms and high standards, you never were good enough. If you got an A for school, he asked: why didn't you get an A+? That's when I showed up. I started to work increasingly hard. I would put everything in my power into Jill's life.' In reaction to my question about what the hard worker has done for Jill, she answered: 'I made sure that Jill was not rejected by her father.'

In "stretching" the coach also examines the actual experience of the primary self, such as whether he always carries out his task with full energy or if the primary self ever gets tired. An example:

Coach: *'Can you tell me something more about yourself, hard worker. For instance: are you important for Jill?'*

Hard worker (proud): *'Yeah, I'm the one that provides for the whole family. Every task Jill gives to me, I will plough through it as thoroughly and fast as possible.'*

Coach: *'How is it to be here now?'*

Hard worker: *'In every single exercise and technique that coaches try out with Jill, I am here. I always am there for her to get the job done. And I'm pretty quick to figure out what needs to be done. Let me handle the job and everything will be all right.'*

Coach: *'Can you say something about your week's schedule? What's the first moment in the day that you come out to play?'*

Hard worker: *'The first thing I do when Jill wakes up, is to get her legs out of bed as soon as possible. Once those legs are out of bed, the rest will follow.'*

Coach: *'What help do you offer Jill then?'*

Hard worker: *'I am cheering her on like a sports coach. I make sure she gets out of bed as soon as the clock rings and the day starts.'*

Coach: *'Does Jill need to be cheered?'*

Hard worker: *'Actually, she always gets out of bed very quickly. She's drilled quite well. But I keep encouraging her, just in case. A person never can be fast enough.'*

Step d: Waiting for the counter-sub-personality to come across

By continuing the interaction with the primary self to its extremes, there will be a moment of fatigue when the energy simply vanishes and the counterpart begins to present itself.



This is the start of the separation from the sub-personality that, until now, functioned as a 'primary self'. It is also the 'birth' of an Aware Ego in relationship to this self. This jump or slide into the opposite sub-personality itself will take only a second or so.

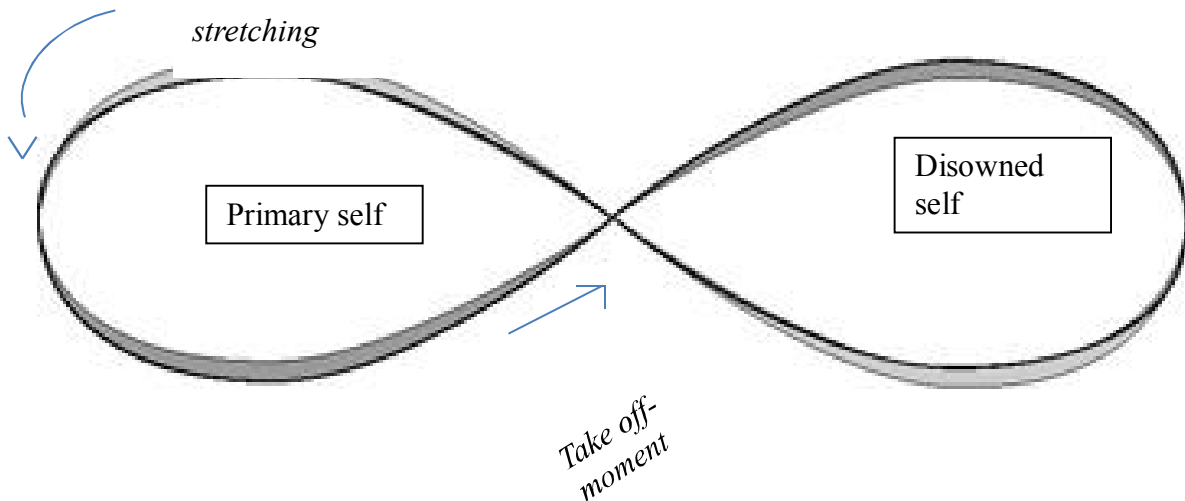


Figure 1: General stretching scheme

Because the primary self has been valued, interviewed and stretched, the client has had a conscious experience of this energy whilst at the same time learning that it's not the totality. The coach then asks the client to move physically to a different chair. As soon as the client begins to coincide with the counter-sub-personality, one will see a totally different energy that starts to flow within the client; as well as between the client and the coach. This is the turnaround movement that has been built up during the session, with a sudden popup of a new sub-personality as a result.

In the case of Bob, I asked him to go back to the time that he heard he got his new job. From that position, from that sub-personality, I asked what he liked about it. He liked the financial security that came with his promotion. When I stretched this side, he started talking about bigger, better: about status. When I asked why *he* got this position instead of somebody else, he knew it was all about his political awareness, his cleverness and his diplomacy. When I continued on this path of energy, he wallowed in power. This was the moment I assessed his Machiavelli-side. Almost at the same time this was the take-off moment for Bob to address the opposite side of his personality. He got overwhelmed by his opposite sub-personality. From this opposite point of view he addressed that things happened in this company that he was not prepared to accept. He got straight in his attitude. From this counter-sub-personality he became a principle man. From this moment on he was able to articulate his values in a very powerful way. From the perspective of this sub-personality, he loathed politics and was extremely negative about a lacking backbone. King Arthur saw the light. From that moment on, I started to facilitate the integration of this King Arthur and Macchiavelli position in his Aware Ego, with an eye on his Vulnerable Child.



As a result of Bob's political agility, he had lost a great deal of contact with his 'principle side', his "King Arthur". As long as he identified himself with his political agility, he had a hard time to stand for his principles. After stretching to the Macchiavelli-side his King Arthur side popped up and he was able again to tap into the part within him where his principles and his conscience was seated.

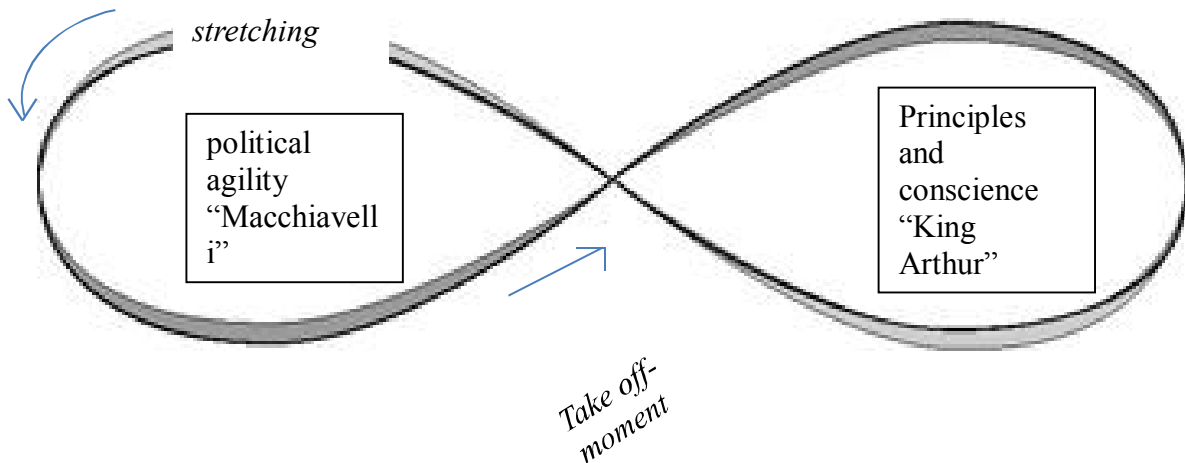


Figure 2: Stretching pattern in Bob's case

Step e: Interviewing the counter-sub-personality

Now that the counter-sub-personality has arrived, it is important that the client becomes aware of and fully experiences the energy of this part. To achieve this, the coach interviews the client like a journalist for a life-style magazine, asking what it likes to do, sees, feels, experiences. In this way the part really becomes alive and the client can thus fully experience the energy of the sub-personality. Think about verbal and non-verbal aspects. What is felt in the body? What can be heard in the voice? What can be seen in somebody's posture and movements.

Once this part is fully established and alive the coach may ask if there is someone that reminds the client of this energy. Bob's 'authentic side', for instance, had a vision of his grandfather as being a man with very straight principles. This associated person can be used in future sessions to let the client identify once more with the formerly disowned sub-personality. The 'authentic side' despises the 'political part' and the ambitious position that it had obtained. Later in the Aware Ego or Middle Position it became clear for Bob that he preferred the authentic self and that he didn't want to work much longer in the organization where he was working. In the sessions that followed Bob gained enough strength to leave the company, whereas before the sessions he was stuck in his ambivalence regarding what to do. Before the stretching technique, he had mixed feelings all the time. On the one hand he didn't want to cooperate in such a company, yet he also didn't want to see his head roll.

Step f: Inviting the underlying vulnerability

After the contact has been established with the two sides of the polarity, other selves will very likely come to speak with a renewed and own free will. Special attention should be paid to the vulnerable self that was protected by the primary self. Let the client then welcome and feel the sadness that starts to surface. It is already incredibly healing to experience the energy of vulnerability.

Step g: Practicing the Middle Position/ Aware Ego

The last phase of the coaching approach after stretching is to expand on the Aware Ego or Middle Position to increase the client's behavioral repertoire. If the client is not taking care of its own vulnerability from the Aware Ego, the power of his 'primary selves' will not dissolve. In that case old patterns will return and a fundamental transformation will not take place. The client's Inner Child must be acknowledged, taken care of and protected when necessary, otherwise there is no real resolution to the conflict and no vital transformation possible (Stamboliev, 1989).

The same principles apply to other pairs of opposites that are part of the client. From the coaching perspective, the next steps are allowing the Aware Ego to emerge, a 'free middle position', from which contact is made with the different sub-personalities. From this free position, Bob and Jill have learned to choose more consciously which sub-personality needs more attention in each passing moment.

From the Middle Position a client like Bob will be able to learn to shut himself off from external stimuli from time to time, so he can invite the sub-personality that stands for principles and integrity. In that way he will be less affected by the outside world. Other clients may learn to be more open and to let go. In Jill's case, her default behavior to work hard was the only option left, but being in the Middle Position, she is now able to choose freely to work either hard or to stay relaxed, open. She is free to let go. From this position she will learn to put a moment of choice before she takes action.

Requirements for coaches

Coaching in this way requires a number of special skills from the coach. First of all, there's a thin or even non-existent line when it comes to therapeutic interventions. We talk about *coaching with a therapeutic touch*. Supervision and intervision (peer reflection) is therefore essential. Otherwise, there's a chance that the coach could cause more damage to the client than they are able to repair.

During the coaching, the coach often seeks advice from his own sub-personalities and taps into these in order to feel what is happening in the moment and what is now needed. This means that the coach has worked on himself and his own selves: these selves have, under professional guidance, all had sufficient chance to speak out, so the coach has become deeply acquainted with all their many layers and manifestations.



Conclusion

Coaching with polarities is a technique within Voice Dialogue that makes it easier to transform and dis-identify from the dominant sub-personalities within the client. Working with polarities is done by Stretching. By this technique the dominant sub-personality and the opposite sub-personality come forward. During the whole process the coach keeps checking on the position of the Vulnerable Child.

The effect of the stretching is that the client sees and feels from inside-out the core qualities of his primary selves and then discovers new opportunities that stem from other sub-personalities. Once this take-off process has taken place, it is important to support the connection with the new sub-personality. This is done by exploring this new position. Later on the coach will try to integrate the two polarities into a new neutral Middle Position or Aware Ego, from where the client can choose freely between all the sub-personalities he has explored.

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