

‘We have a choice. We can either say that “this” is what coaching is, and restrict it, or take a broader vision’



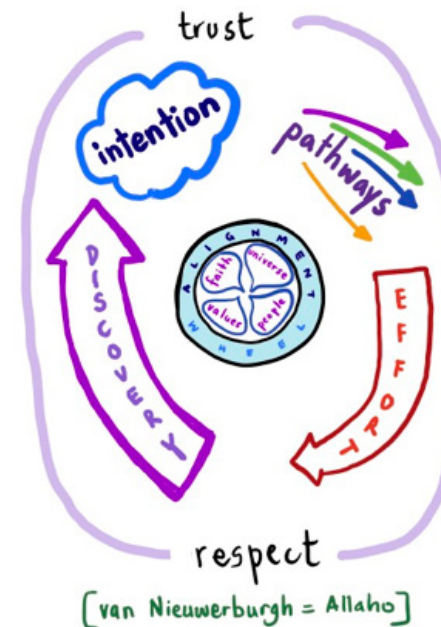
In part two of our interview, deputy editor James Bridgeman speaks to Christian van Nieuwerburgh about his work with Muslim coach Raja’a Allaho to align Western models of coaching with Islamic perspectives in the creation of their Ershad model. What does this mean for individuals, organisations and coaches across the globe in a post-pandemic landscape?

ABOUT PROFESSOR CHRISTIAN VAN NIEUWERBURGH

Prof Christian van Nieuwerburgh is a professor of coaching and positive psychology at the Centre for Positive Psychology and Health at the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, and global director for Growth Coaching International, a coach training provider for the educator sector. He is an academic, researcher, executive coach and consultant interested in the integration of coaching and positive psychology in educational and health settings. He has published widely in the sector, regularly speaks at global conferences, and has given presentations and delivered training in Europe, the US, South America, the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Australia.

In the first part of our interview, you mentioned a cultural disparity around the word ‘optimal’. What does your work coaching within Islamic culture teach us about coaching for optimal performance?

The short coaching framework, Ershad coaching, that I developed with my dear colleague Raja’a Allaho was a huge learning experience for me. My main contribution was to honour the principles of coaching, to bring the coaching lens. My colleague’s primary contribution was to bring a perspective about coaching people who wish to live their lives according to their faith. Our challenge was: how do we respect and honour both perspectives?



I was reluctant to compromise on what I thought coaching was. With hindsight, I think I was probably not flexible enough. Going into conversations with Raja’a, I thought: ‘I have to protect something about coaching in these conversations.’

It turned out that we were exploring the use of coaching in a particular context. We started by acknowledging that the client has a right to say: ‘This is my worldview and I would like to be coached within my worldview’.

I just love that the model we developed is highly attuned to relationships. It’s a systemic model that emerged from the Islamic perspective: the worldview is the system. The coaching framework we designed helps individuals to ensure that their values and principles are aligned with their context, so I do think that we have developed a model that encourages us to be respectful of our ecosystem.

The Ershad model has two major components. One is a conversational process, like many other coaching frameworks, but I think the real contribution is what we call the Alignment Wheel, which is part of the process. It’s not an optional piece: it’s making sure that a person’s behaviours are aligned with their intention. It’s so simple to say that, isn’t it? But I think that is a real and present challenge many of us are facing: often we’re doing things that aren’t really in alignment with some of our deeply held values and beliefs. There are other levels of alignment, too. As it’s a faith-based model,

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there is alignment with God, but there’s also alignment with the universe. There’s alignment with important relationships, and then there’s alignment with one’s deeply held values and principles.



This could easily be adopted by Western coaching models simply by asking these questions when considering the options that a client has proposed: how well are they aligned with their values? How well do they align with what important people in their life would like or think? My proposition is that if we feel more aligned, we’re more likely to experience higher levels of wellbeing, purpose and meaning. Ultimately, it will allow us to live better lives.

To what extent has coaching for alignment through Islamic coaching influenced your coaching more broadly?

When we were writing the book, Raja’a would say to me, ‘Christian, this book isn’t for Muslims,’ and I would say, ‘No, it actually is, that’s why we’re writing it. It’s called *Coaching in Islamic Culture*.’ What she was alluding to is that while it comes from the wisdom of a particular faith, it applies more broadly. That is always her message. Most of the models and the processes we use in coaching are based on Western theories and philosophies. Raja’a was saying she didn’t want the Ershad framework to be seen as limited to practising Muslims, which was my lens at first.

Many positive psychology theories align very well with faith-based teachings. In the Ershad framework, the first conversational stage is called discovery – and of course appreciative inquiry starts with discovery – but there’s something else in our discovery stage which is about building a relationship. Unusually I think for Western

models, we would expect the coach to share a bit about their own background after hearing from the client, so there would be a two-way dialogue, the purpose of which is to build relationship.

In our shared framework we also talk about pathways, which aligns very nicely with Hope Theory and the idea of agency. You could say the Ershad framework is an example of a coaching framework that includes positive psychology concepts within it.

Ershad has really made me question some of our assumptions around coaching. I would say coaching is often too individualistic. I think, if we're not careful, coaching could add to some of the societal, organisational and individual challenges we're facing because of its very narrow focus. We ask clients: 'What is it you want and what are you going to do?' That's empowering, but that may not lead to optimal outcomes. It's almost saying: 'Forget about everybody else, what is it you want? What can you uniquely do?' Then, the coachee is just going to worry about themselves, right? I've become more aware of the individualistic nature of some forms of coaching and I think this can be unhelpful in the long term.

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Another assumption is our obsession with goals, and that may be partly to do with the Western focus on winning. Executive coaching had got to the stage where it might have been encouraging the achievement of goals at almost any cost – that's something we need to be alert to. What we learned by working on Ershad, rolling it out and doing some research, is that by raising the client's awareness to this concept of alignment, it's much more likely they're going to be able to sustain the changes that they've made.

If a client is in respectful dialogue with the people around them, or the organisation, then it's better for their wellbeing: they are achieving objectives or outcomes that are important to them, in a way that aligns with important values that they have but is also respectful of the context they're in.

The third assumption is a red flag for me, which is how judgemental we can be as coaches, especially with a positive psychology lens. To what extent is somebody who is a devout believer of any faith better served by being coached by somebody of the same faith? In some way at least, they're not going to be judged on their faith; is that better? Is it actually possible? I'm thinking both ways here. For a non-believer, are they better served by being coached by somebody else who has that worldview? And is it possible?

This is a big question. Is it possible for somebody in this scenario, who doesn't have that worldview, to be truly non-judgemental about that and without any tendency to try to navigate the person

in one way or another? The most important thing is to create psychological safety so that the person does not feel judged, and therefore it's so important that the coach can be truly non-judgemental about things that are important for the coachee.

It's often stated that coaching is Western-dominated. Is that starting to change and, if so, what is the future for coaching across cultures?

Are things getting better? Yes, I do think so. Hopefully with some humility I can suggest that the University of East London, UK, has played a very important role in bringing the non-WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic) perspective. There have been calls for more than a decade now to move away from just looking at so-called WEIRD research. In the last five years there have been probably been 40 or 50 articles from UEL that are about the application of coaching in various contexts. I've also been grateful for the response the Ershad framework has received: the most frequent positive feedback has been that it applies outside the Islamic context too, which is what Raja'a was trying to tell me right from the beginning – so that openness is encouraging.

There's now the *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, so that's a welcome development. A former UEL student, Sylvia King, has been quite active in asking the question: 'Do we need an indigenous coaching psychology for the Middle East?' Of course, that's looking at one specific context, but my question would be: 'Do we need indigenous coaching psychologies?' When asking questions, we have to be ready for any answer, so I'm open to 'No' – but I think we should stay curious about this.

This brings me back to what I said earlier: I think if we're too defensive about what coaching is then it's not going to work in some contexts. We've come to some kind of consensus to say yes, it should be one-to-one, or it shouldn't; it should be directive or non-directive. These are decisions that we've come to: they weren't handed down to us, nothing has been irreversibly decided.

In some cultural contexts, the way we've defined coaching is not likely to be successful: if we've insisted on the nature of the relationship; on hierarchical or non-hierarchical arrangements; or whether you can or cannot share advice.

We have a choice. We can either say that 'this' is what coaching is, and restrict it – in which case we just have to accept this as a Western-developed, Western-designed conversational intervention, and in that case it should probably be limited to those areas where we hold true to the values that created this model. Or, we need to take a broader vision of what coaching is.

The broader vision that's growing in my mind is that coaching is conversational – it's relational. It's about intentionally supporting another person, and it's about helping them to achieve things and enhance their wellbeing. If we're broad about it, I think it's more likely that in different places we can say: 'Yeah, that's what is needed in our cultural context.'

In the West we have to be very alert to imposing our views, imposing our ways of thinking. We have a track record of doing that. If we can bring the principle of humility to the way we work, we're much more likely to be able to design something that is accepted and useful globally.

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