

# What is Relationship Coaching?

Yossi Ives, Tag Institute, London, UK

Contact email: [yossi@tagdevelopment.org](mailto:yossi@tagdevelopment.org)

## Abstract

This paper presents an initial conceptualisation of relationship coaching for single people. The needs of singles are often ignored or misunderstood, and this paper argues that coaching offers an effective framework for helping them form and secure sustainable life-partnerships. Relationship coaching is here portrayed as a nuanced balance between goal-focused coaching, building a clear focus to create an effective action plan, and developmental coaching, to help the coachee identify areas of intrapersonal awareness and growth. Rather than emphasising a therapeutic role or aiming for profound inner change, relationship coaching seeks to foster more adaptive relationship attitudes and skills. Developmentally, relationship coaching draws most heavily on Kegan's subject-object relations, recognising that ability to reflect on experiences and be more in control of life dynamics are essential to making effective choices. The paper concludes with a model of relationship coaching, to serve as a flexible guide for assisting singles through a process of discovery and action towards their achieving their aim.

**Key Words:** Relationship, coaching, singles, developmental, goal-focused

## Introduction

This paper makes the argument that coaching singles to enhance their success at finding a life partner requires a nuanced coaching methodology. It has been argued elsewhere (Ives, 2008, 2012) that coaching approaches are usefully categorised into three paradigms: goal-focused, developmental, and therapeutic. Relationship coaching, and relationship coaching for singles in particular, does not fit suitably in either category. It is a fusion between elements of goal-focused and developmental forms of coaching. For this reason, relationship coaching is a distinct approach, focusing on the coachee's attitudes and skills.

For the purpose of definition, relationship coaching does not refer to the coaching relationship itself, but instead refers to an external relationship sought by the coachee. This paper addresses the goal of singles who seek romantic relationships that will be sustainable and typically result in a life partnership (not, say, a person's relationship a parent, sibling, colleague or boss). There are key differences between singles and couples coaching, mostly stemming from the fact that the latter has a permanent other in the mix. Many singles are not only keen to enter into a lasting relationship, and have invested significant effort, time and money to achieve this aim: their relationship struggles are a cause of great frustration and distress.

## What is relationship coaching for?

Based upon my own experience working with singles, I have tentatively concluded that in many (if not most) instances coachees are struggling with unhelpful attitudes or core relationship skills. I

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therefore suggest that relationship coaching should provide a semi-structured framework for reflection, learning and experimentation.

Although many singles claim that they cannot find suitable partners, in my analysis the main issue is to do with attitudes and perspectives. Many young professionals have formed views of life that get in the way of relationship success. Mezirow (1990) explains how people's meaning perspectives or habits of mind can be distorted, and how through critical reflection they can be transformed. Additionally, it would seem that many young people are bringing poor awareness of who they are, what they want out of a relationship and what it means to be in one – inadequacies that wreak havoc in their romantic lives.

My experience suggests to me that the issues singles face often fall into identifiable categories, making it comparatively easy to bring them into awareness and help single people to develop more adaptive approaches to relationships. If this analysis is correct, singles do not typically require extensive and deep therapy, but would benefit from a challenging interaction that helps them to become more self-aware and adjust their attitudes on dating and relationships. Clearly, some singles – as in any population group – are struggling with more serious psychological issues, in which case therapy is appropriate. However, it is my perception that singles would typically balk at the idea of therapy to address their issues and that in most cases this would be an unnecessarily draconian response.

Relationship coaching should work with the coachee to identify where there are gaps in their relationship attitudes or skills, and which therefore afford an opportunity for personal development:

*Attitudes* – While each coachee is unique and the issues that arise in coaching are always distinct, in my analysis there are several general attitudes or perceptions that singles are struggling with, some of which might affect the coachee before a relationship is formed (failure to establish) and some after forming a relationship (failure to sustain):

- 1) Conflicting or confused priorities in what is being sought from a partner, such as rare to find or implausible personality combinations, or seeking someone who is both similar to and different from themselves. Such singles struggle to prioritise their most valued qualities and let go of others.
- 2) Misunderstanding another's likely reactions to their personality or behaviour through poor self-awareness, resulting in negative reactions from potential partners.
- 3) Inflexibility and compromise are difficult issues for some singles who are fiercely protective of their independence, even though relationships require a transition to interdependence.
- 4) Failure to cope with disappointment when imperfections in another become apparent leading to the relationship unravelling, and some singles feel that any concession means 'settling for second best'.
- 5) Poor conflict management when miscommunication, conflicting or unexpressed expectations, or the odd moment of foolishness pose a threat to a potential relationship.

*Skills* – Much has been researched and written about relationships skills in marriage, but far less consideration has been given to the relationship skills required by singles to form and secure successful sustainable relationships. Extrapolating from couples work, however, it would seem that singles would benefit from a range of communication skills that would reduce or manage conflict and enhance satisfaction in the relationship. For example, the extensive work by John Gottman (1994) on conflict management could be used to inform singles on how to spot unhealthy patterns of arguments and how to manage disagreement in a manner that leads to the improvement of the relationship and prevents its deterioration. Similarly, the popular work of Gary Chapman (1995) on love languages enables singles to understand how they experience love and what gives them most relationship

satisfaction, as well as focusing on understanding the same in a potential partner. Non-violent communication by Marshall Rosenberg (2003) may also offer help to singles in expressing their needs in a non-confrontational manner and to better understand a potential partner's real needs.

Based on the foregoing aims and remit, relationship coaching's primary methodologies are encouraging the experiential learning of new attitudes and skills. As an informal adult learning situation, this is not an abstract, academic type of learning, but one directly related to an exploration of the coachee's own experience and prior knowledge (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005).

### **Combining goal-focus and development**

Given that the coachee comes to the relationship coach for help with a clear aim – a lasting relationship – the coaching approach needs to harness the strengths of goal-focused coaching. However, the assumption of relationship coaching is that there is usually a requirement for reflection and learning, which are the strengths of developmental coaching. First a brief summary of these two coaching paradigms:

*Goal-focused coaching* – Goal-focused coaching has been defined as “A systematic and collaborative helping intervention that is non-directive, goal-focused and performance-driven, intended to facilitate the more effective creation and pursuit of another's goals” (Ives & Cox, 2012 p. 26). Its primary function is fostering the coachee's self-regulation, “helping individuals regulate and direct their interpersonal and intrapersonal resources to better attain their goals” (Grant 2006 p. 153). The primary method is assisting the coachee to identify and form well-crafted goals and develop an effective action plan (Ives, 2008). The role of the coach here is to stimulate ideas and action and to ensure that the goals are consistent with the coachee's main life values and interests, rather than working on helping the coachee to adjust his/her values and beliefs. In this conception, coaching primarily aims to raise performance and support effective action, rather than to address feelings and thoughts, which it is assumed will be indirectly addressed through actual positive results (Grant, 2003). It aims to achieve results in a comparatively short space of time and normally focuses on a relatively defined issue or goal. While psychological change may occur, in goal-focused coaching it is a by-product (Ives 2010).

Unlike many approaches to coaching (e.g. Stober, 2006; Gray, 2006), goal-focused coaching does not advocate a holistic approach to achieve its purpose, but focuses on stimulating effective action integrating change processes into daily modes of behaviour. Goal-focused coaching adopts a forward focus, directing attention towards practical steps. Doing this leads to a reduction of anxiety, makes the task seem more manageable, and enhances buy-in by rendering goals more real (Ives & Cox, 2012). Research (Ives, 2010, Ives & Cox, 2012) has found that applying a forward focus through goal setting and action planning engenders acceptance of self-responsibility, encouraging the coachee to focus on trying to improve what he or she can, rather than complaining or blaming. By setting a clear goal, coachees focus on attaining the goal and are less likely to engage in marginal activities that distract from its attainment.

The forward-focus in goal-focused coaching is not to the total exclusion of considering the past, and looking for solutions is not at the expense of gaining a proper understanding of the problem (Bachkirova, 2007). However, the main focus “is on the coachee's present and preferred future” (O'Connell & Palmer 2007, p. 280). Small, concrete actions (what Rogers (2008) calls 'quick wins') create positive experiences that ultimately will lead to more positive choices of action (Parsloe & Wray 2000; Berg & Szabo, 2005). Initial action by a coachee, even if small, is necessary to create the

platform for progress, and the coachee's "self-efficacy is built upon previous successful experience" (Cox, 2006 p. 204).

*Developmental coaching* – By contrast, developmental coaching focuses on self-development rather than self-regulation. It is based on adult development theory which adopts a more holistic approach towards the growth and maturity of the coachee (Chandler & Kram, 2005; Fitzgerald & Berger, 2002; Berger, 2006; Laske, 2006a, 2000b). Personal development can refer to the growth of the whole person into all that he or she could be. However, in practice, developmental coaching typically focuses on a specific aspect of the person, depending on the requirements of the coachee and the situation.

Personal development coaching is based on the belief in human capability and potential, and it provides opportunities for their development. As Cox and Jackson (2010 p. 217) argue, "to be developmental, the coaching also has not merely to focus on problem solving but also to ensure that client capacity is built through that problem solving." Development generally refers to 'growth and change over time', what Cox and Jackson call the 'progressive' element. According to Cox and Jackson (2010 p. 218), the "developmental coaching approach, as well as addressing immediate needs, takes a longer term, more evolutionary perspective." Similarly, Berman and Bradt (2006, p. 245) suggest that a personal development intervention tends to be "relatively long-term." We see this expressed through a study of coach training (Grant, 2007), whereby training spread over a longer period was more effective than highly concentrated intensive training. Grant concludes that in order to deepen the emotional intelligence it is best to adopt "a spaced learning approach over a number of weeks" (p. 257).

Developmental coaching requires a greater amount of time because internal psychological progress is at the heart of the process. This approach is more open to learning from the past and using previous experiences as a platform for personal development. Developmental coaching is less interested in quick wins and short concrete progress, and instead aims for significant new awareness and growth opportunities. Cox and Jackson (2010 p. 217) suggest that development "must involve progress and expansion of some kind." Depending on the approach or target of development, the progress and expansion will vary from either very broad to quite narrow.

The developmental coaching approach has two streams. One is based on lifecourse development theories and is addressed in Palmer & Panchal (2011). Their approach focuses on the way motivation alters over the lifespan and alerts the coach to how this impact on their life choices. The other stream is based on constructive-developmental theories, which assert that with maturity comes an increasingly nuanced attitude towards authority and responsibility and a greater tolerance of ambiguity. According to this approach, coaching should target issues relating to the person's stage of development (Bachkirova 2011; Bachkirova & Cox, 2007, Berger, 2006). It is this latter type of development that mostly informs relationship coaching.

### **So what is relationship coaching?**

Relationship coaching, I suggest, incorporates establishing a clear goal and effective action plan as well facilitating personal growth. It embraces features of goal-focused coaching, such as brainstorming for creative solutions and ensuring the requisite skills and strategies, but it also aims to foster personal development and attitude change. In orientation, relationship coaching is broadly forward focused, although it gives greater weight to understanding the lessons from past experiences. In keeping with a developmental approach, relationship coaching is gradual and organic; focused on

sustainable results, rather than achieving a 'quick fix'; yet remembering that singles are looking for a prompt result, not a lifelong process.

Relationship coaching is cognitive-behavioural insofar as it aims to facilitate self-awareness through an exploration of internal dialogue and automatic thoughts, the development of functional thinking skills and the ability to change perspective. Relationship coaches may explore the client's beliefs and the consequences of holding onto unhelpful beliefs – activities not normally associated with goal-focused coaching. I would argue that relationship coaching could be suitably termed 'transformational coaching', as it aims to help the coachee to think and act differently in response to a dilemma. In the same vein, Brockbank (2008, p. 133) distinguishes between coaching that is functionalist and operational (equilibrium) versus transformative and engagement (disequilibrium). The former seeks "to enhance performance in a given function," whereas 'transformative' coaching looks to question fundamental assumptions. More than goal-related informational learning to serve the better pursuit of a goal, relationship coaching encourages transformational learning.

Relationship coaching aims to both modify people's actions (external) and to change people's attitudes (internal). It is both Summerfield's (2006) 'acquisitional' coaching (acquiring a new ability) and 'transformational' coaching (undergoing personal change). It is both about raising performance and supporting effective action, and about addressing feelings and generating deep reflection. Relationship coaching combines Hudson's (1999 p. 20) 'coaching for being' and 'coaching for performance' – inner versus outer work. Relationship coaching shares with goal-focused coaching an interest in analysing and solving a problem, but it also recognises that the route to a positive outcome travels through personal development territory. It embraces an exploratory style that is both developmental and pragmatic (Snyder, 1995).

### **Personal development in relationship coaching**

Whilst a great deal of development coaching is based on the literature on life span development, chiefly the work by Erikson (1974) and Levinson (1978), for relationship coaching the work by Kegan (1994) into cognitive development is more relevant, as it focuses explicitly on how personal development affects our ability to foster effective relationships. Bachkirova and Cox (2007 p. 331) argue that Kegan (1982) offers "the most comprehensive description of underlying structures that give rise to the natural emergence of the self in relation to others."

Kegan's (1982, 1994) work is key to understanding the kind of healthy approach to relationships that relationship coaching aims to nurture. As people mature they find it possible to interrelate in a more complex manner. They display enhanced autonomy and 'separation' so that the pursuit of a relationship is not burdened by a high level of dependence, yet displays a tendency to relatedness and 'inclusion' to foster intimacy. While appearing contradictory, Kegan shows that in reality the two positions are interdependent; the greater a person's sense of inner security, the better they will be able to foster true intimacy.

Kegan further shows how people's perceptions of relationships are determined by what they perceive as 'self' and what they perceive as 'other' and the relationship between the two – what he terms 'subject-object relations'. As Bachkirova and Cox (2007 p. 331) explain:

Things that are 'subject' in this theory are by definition experienced as unquestioned, simply a part of the self. Things that are 'object' cannot be observed because they are a part of the individual, they cannot be reflected upon – that would require the ability to stand

back and take a look at them. While things that are 'subject' *have* us, we *have* things that are 'object'.

Things that are 'object' in our lives are "those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalise, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon" (Kegan, 1994 p. 32). The more individuals can take as 'object', the more they can examine and act upon more things. To be subject is to 'see with' rather than to 'see through'. As Drath (1990 p. 486) explains: "We see with our culture-bound norms and expectations, accept them as given, and cannot examine them for what they are – that is, we cannot see through them." Whitmore (2003) similarly argues that, "I am able to control only that of which I am aware. That of which I am not aware controls me." Therefore, the ability to reflect on experiences and raise awareness of the dynamics of one's life are essential to making effective decisions and choices. In developmental coaching, raising awareness not only helps people see things that were previously overlooked, but moreover to look at these things through different eyes.

In a similar vein, relationship coaching aims to help coachees to be able to approach their relations as 'object', in order to be able act upon influences on relationships instead of being under their spell. As Fitzgerald and Berger (2002 p. 31) say: "one of the most powerful interventions coaches can provide is simply help to keep critical insights alive for their clients". A key role of the relationship coach is to note the coachee's current level of development, but also to acknowledge the coachee as he or she could be and is in the process of becoming (see Kegan, 1982).

### **What does relationship coaching seek to change?**

There are two ways of approaching relationships. The first is the 'simple way', which is generally how people enter relationships when they are young and flexible. The second is by entering into them more consciously, which is typical of older singles, at which point issues cannot generally be ignored, but rather they need to be addressed. Relationship coaching is about enhancing the coachee's ability to stand back and take a more objective look at this aspect of their lives, as unquestioned assumptions may block progress.

A key element of developmental coaching is that it seeks to affect some permanent change. Cox and Jackson (2010 p. 221) perceive this to mean that "that the solution should extend beyond the presenting trigger and create some greater, sustainable capacity in the client." In relationship coaching this means that while the coachee is looking simply to form a lasting relationship, the coach recognises that this may require issues to be addressed that are not the declared reason for the coaching. It is likely to be necessary to address one or more 'secondary' issues in order to attain the principal goal. In developmental coaching, and relationship coaching likewise, something needs to shift – and rarely will it be a small technical alteration. Even if the resolution manifests itself in minimal outward change, usually more significant internal awareness would have occurred for the change to be sustainable and result in the desired outcome.

However, whilst in many forms of developmental coaching the coaching addresses wider personal development, in relationship coaching the focus remains on the presenting issue as much as possible. Where the benefits extend beyond the issue of relationships, this is a bonus and an unintended consequence. In this respect, relationship coaching is relatively goal-focused. Relationship coaching does not deliberately target a wider impact on the maturity and development of the coachee, but the literature suggests that the systemic and integrated nature of the human psyche means that this is invariably the case.

For the same reason, relationship coaching does not explicitly seek cognitive-structural change, which is a protracted and evolutionary process. Developmentalists acknowledge that people develop in varying ways (Bachkirova, 2010), thus, it is not inevitable that maturity will require cognitive structural change. Progress can still be made without it necessitating rising to an entirely new level of development (although clearly reaching a higher level of development renders the person more functional).

Relationship coaching is intrinsically tied with reflection on and improved human interaction, by helping the coachee to be better attuned to nuances in social interaction that may previously have gone unnoticed. Early understanding of the social realities that affect us is something that increases as cognitive development occurs. In relationship coaching, success is measured by “sustained application of coaching development, specifically the knowledge, skills, attitudes and other qualities acquired during coaching” (Stewart, Palmer, Wilkin & Kerrin, 2008 p. 32).

Hall and Duval (2004), drawing on the work of Argyris and Schön (1974), argue that there are different levels of change: modifying existing skills and behaviour, learning new behaviours and beliefs, changing identity or sense of self, and experiencing a whole new way of living. These ‘levels of change’ correctly represent the different approaches to change within coaching. Goal-focused coaching operates at the first level of change, whereas developmental coaching helps the person learn new behaviours and beliefs. Put somewhat differently, goal-focused coaching fosters regulation *by* the self, whereas developmental coaching fosters regulation *of* the self. Whereas goal-focused approaches are satisfied to focus on ‘overlying’ issues, developmental coaching addresses ‘underlying’ issues – and relationship coaching in this respect is very much developmental.

However, while relationship coaching looks for lasting change, it does not seek to achieve a new fixed level of personal development. On the contrary, it works with the person as he or she is at present. Several traditions in psychology and philosophy (e.g. Gestalt) claim that transformation of the self is possible only when a person is fully oneself as he or she is now. The aspiration to become something different should not cause individuals to disengage efforts to understand the person they currently are. A person’s infatuation with an ideal self can result in what Krishnamurti (1991, p. 160) termed ‘an accepted and respected postponement’.

Furthermore, coaching in all forms must be led by the agenda of the coachee. In relationship coaching, the coachee does not come for personal development but for help in pursuing a relationship. It is not for the coach to decide to impose personal development upon the coach even if motivated by the best of helpful intentions. As Kegan (1982 p. 295) wisely notes: “among the many things from which a practitioner’s clients need protection is the practitioner’s hopes for the client’s future, however benign and sympathetic these hopes may be.” Thus, relationship coaching is not about trying to elevate coachees into a new state of self, but to work with them as they are in their existing level of maturity and development. Explicitly pursuing personal development is not a part of relationship coaching, although by stretching the coachee within a relationship coaching framework such progress is a likely and welcome development.

As in all forms of coaching, questioning and listening skills are the key instruments of the coach. Questions focus on thinking processes and not merely on ascertaining facts. However, in relationship coaching questions are meant to be more reflective, probing and challenging than in goal-focused coaching. They seek to uncover not just what the coachee is doing, but how and why (see Sheldon, 2002). How the coachee came to a conclusion is as important as the conclusion itself. Similarly, listening is more proactive than in goal-focused approaches insofar as the coaching is sniffing out possible issues. Listening is also more diagnostic in that the coach is actively seeking to

interpret what the coachee is saying to formulate a hypothesis of where the problem lies in order to test those insights with the coachee.

### **A relationship coaching model**

Based the foregoing discussion, I tentatively propose a model of relationship coaching based on the acronym GREAT. As is true for most coaching models, the stages are not strictly linear and, depending on the situation and the style of the coach, some stages may overlap and interact. In almost all scenarios, coaching is an iterative, cyclical process, in which the various stages repeat themselves as the coachee progresses towards achieving his or her goal.

<b>G</b> - Goal	Setting a general and specific goal; remembering that this may require exploration
<b>R</b> – Reality	Understanding the current state of play and what has gone on in the past
<b>E</b> – Exploration	Gaining a deeper understanding of the coachee’s experiences, perspectives and attitudes and teasing out the learning from these
<b>A</b> – Action plan	What the coachee can now do differently and upon which a strategy can be created
<b>T</b> – Take action	Implement new strategy
Once the action has been taken...	
<b>E</b> – Evaluate	Review and analyse whether progress has been made
<b>R</b> - Repeat	Adjust the action plan or goal as required

A brief description of each stage now follows:

*Goal* – The process of goal setting may often involve two distinct stages (Ives & Cox, 2012): the first to clarify a general goal (e.g. whether the coachee desires to be in a relationship) and a more specific goal (what kind of relationship). Setting the goal at the optimal level of specificity, difficulty and proximity ensure the goal is most achievable. It is also vital that the goal is consistent with the core values of the coachee, which can be a complex challenge as the coachee may have conflicting value sets that have never been explored or resolved.

*Reality* – Relationship coaching is a non-therapeutic intervention, therefore it focuses on the past only to a sufficient degree to work out what is best done in the future. It does not delve into the past beyond what is required to form a coherent picture of the coachee’s challenge. However, because relationship coaching is a learning approach, it is based heavily on understanding the lessons to be gained from passed experiences, so the coaching begins with a thorough fact finding activity to clarify what has gone on until the present. The ‘reality’ stage serves several vital purposes: It brings key information to the fore for the coachee, it directs attention towards facts and away from negative emotions, it enables the coach to get a reasonable understanding of the coachee’s situation and, crucially, listening carefully and without judgement to the coachee’s story build trust and rapport which sets the platform for the important coaching work to follow (Whitmore, 2003).

*Exploration* – Once the current reality has been established to a reasonable level of clarity, the coach will be looking to ask probing and challenging questions to access the possible underlying reasons behind the coachee’s choices and key events in his or her relationship life. Instead of

brainstorming for options, at this stage they should brainstorm for lessons from past experiences. This is what Goodman (2002 p. 138) calls 'asking for meaning'. Some coaches will find that some way through the reality stage, they already are finding useful and meaningful 'exploration' questions to ask. I would recommend, in keeping with many other coaching texts, to allow for the reality stage to be given due time before pushing forward with the more invasive and robust exploratory questions. As already noted, by showing interest in the coachee's story trust is build, as the coachee experiences the attention and commitment of the coach. Additionally, some initial thoughts may arise in the mind of the coach, but without the complete picture these could turn out to be entirely wrong. In coaching the order is always: listen, and then ask.

Whilst the exploration stage may throw up numerous interesting and valuable areas for growth and change, it is the purpose of coaching to zoom in on where the 'issue' lies. The coach is looking to work with the coachee to understand where the 'blockage' is. According to Peterson's (2006) constraint model, development bottlenecks along the pipeline impede progress towards the coachee's goal. Coaching aims to unblock these constraints, to ensure continuous progress. So the learning at this stage needs to be deep and thorough, and it needs to have practical implications. Very abstract learning – highly theoretical insights into life – may struggle to find their way into practical change. Thus, this stage may in reality involve several iterations if the conversation begins at a very philosophical level. The learning is not limited to exploring past experience, but also future learning that is fostered by the coaching. For example, the coach may ask the coachee to maintain reflective and observational logs, experimenting with problem-solving or communication patterns. The coaching must ultimately inform the practical reality of the coachee in real and tangible ways.

*Action plan* – The aim of relationship coaching is not enlightenment; it is enhanced capability to form and secure a lasting relationship. Thus, the most important stage is creating an action plan which specifies what changes in attitude and behaviour the coachee can make. The plan may include additional reading and learning or skills development, as well as practical steps. As explained earlier, this is an experimentation process whereby ideas are tested 'in the field' and the learning is fed back into the coaching process. Many coachees, if not guided towards a forward-focus, will direct all their attention towards moaning about how usefulness men or women are, which leads to nothing positive. Working towards and on an action plan reflects the strong commitment to prioritise envisioning and acting to create a better future, and not being dragged down by past frustrations.

Determining what goes into the action plan is the task of the coachee, but the coach can assist in several important ways. Firstly, change is rarely easy and when it comes down to practice the coachee may be reluctant to commit to the hard work. The coach can provide encouragement by reminding the coachee of why this action point was considered important and by providing general support (Ives, 2010). More importantly, the coach can provide insight into creating an effective action plan. Effective goal pursuit involves a combination of distal and proximal goals (Latham, 2007). Short-term planning is essential to ensure proximal goals are appropriate to prevailing circumstances (Baumeister & Vohs, 2007), whereas distal goals provide consistency and direction. Goal setting theory suggests that short-term goals cannot be planned too far in advance as the chances of change are too great, but rather they need to be considered much closer to their actual execution: "thus, it makes sense to plan in general terms, chart a few steps, get there, reassess, and plan the next bits" (Carver & Scheier, 1998 p. 256).

*Take action* – By this point, the coach should have established a high level of credibility and trust. The coach must hold the coachee accountable for the actions he or she is committed to in the action plan. Clearly, often the coachee will fail to implement the plan as agreed or will do so only in part. The role of the coach is not to become despondent, but rather to view this as a further learning

opportunity and to support the coachee in finding more effective ways of succeeding in implementing the plan (Rogers, 2008).

*Evaluate* – Coaching needs to measure progress against some benchmark of success. The coaching should address whether the coachee is making the desired progress, whether that is in terms of awareness, new skills or greater relationship success. Furthermore, it has been my experience that the coachee will often want to come back to the coach to review the situation. If they are still single, they will discuss further strategies, and if in a relationship they usually wish to discuss matters that are worrying them. This would be the opportunity to revisit previous attitudes to explore how they may have changed and whether any adjustments or skills have been sustained.

*Repeat* – Unless the coachee has achieved his or her goal, there remains the need to remain motivated to work to achieve it. The foregoing process is therefore often a recursive process in which the first attempt may not result in a successful outcome. Coaching is not a miracle drug, and there could be a wide range of reasons why things did not go as plan – not least because circumstances changed.

## Conclusion

This article takes some first steps towards developing a theoretical basis and practical guide to relationship coaching focused primarily on singles. It suggests that relationship coaching needs to fuse key aspects of goal-focused coaching and developmental coaching to formulate an approach to coaching that focuses on a defined issue – seeking a lasting relationship – through fostering greater awareness and personal growth. While relationship coaching does not seek to change the person *per se*, it recognises typically that the coachee needs to address some underlying issues. The main purpose of relationship coaching is to ensure that the coachee has the requisite attitudes and skills for relationship success. This was distilled into a new model for relationship coaching.

Relationship coaching is therefore somewhere in middle of the idealised forms of goal-focused and developmental coaching. It is forward focused but still emphasises learning from past experience; it is non-directive insofar as the coach is not an advice giver but it does contain an element of diagnosis; the coaching alliance is not in itself the solution (as say in therapeutic forms of coaching) but a strong coaching relationship is vital to support the challenging developmental work.

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Yossi Ives recently completed his doctorate at Oxford Brookes University Business School. He is chairman of Tag International Development and the Tag Institute of Jewish Social Values, and until recently was minister of Richmond Synagogue in London. He is a qualified life coach, the co-author of *Goal Focused Coaching*, the author of *There Must be a Better Way*, and also a Hebrew work on Kabbalah (mystical cosmology).