

## From the Grow Model to Transpersonal Coaching – What is Sir John Whitmore on About?

By Sue Hanley, M. Org. Coaching; MA; Grad Dip Ed Studies; Dip Teach  
Branch President, International Coaching Federation, NSW

***“It is true that my focus is now on global issues, much more than coaching per se; although coaching is a hugely valuable tool towards that end. The GROW problem is that people have made too much of it and too much of my enthusiasm for it. It is a 4-part chronological sequence only, a useful one indeed, but nothing more ... coaching is about AWARENESS and RESPONSIBILITY, not a mere time sequence.”***

Sir John Whitmore, August 2011.

Sir John Whitmore has emerged as a passionate advocate for planet Earth, calling on people around the globe to take personal responsibility for its future, hold to account the world’s politicians and business leaders for collective economic and social fairness, and take a whole systems approach to preventing environmental Armageddon. When Sir John addressed a group of more than a hundred coaches in Sydney in August 2011, organised by the NSW Branch of the International Coaching Federation at the highly appropriate Royal Automotive Club, given his revered status as a racing car champion, some were shocked by the stridency of his message, and many perplexed by its relevance to them as coaching practitioners. Others were uplifted and inspired. This article is an attempt to briefly explain Sir John’s transpersonal coaching model in the context of the leading role he has played in the coaching industry over many decades.

The GROW model is largely derived from Inner Game theory developed by Timothy Gallwey in 1971 based on experience in sports training, specifically tennis ([www.theinnergame.com](http://www.theinnergame.com)). In short, Gallwey found that engaging an inner mental game based on simple questioning techniques delivered much better results than a ‘command and control’ instructional approach to sports coaching. He started to explore the concept of attentional awareness which some of us might understand today as mindfulness. Gallwey and Sir John recognized nearly four decades ago that being ‘present in the moment’ was a key to effective learning. They also recognised that individuals struggle to achieve goals when their learning does not come from personal experience, or when they are not encouraged to access knowledge which lies within themselves. Sir John and Tim Gallwey continue to run Inner Game workshops to this day.

The basic methodology of GROW grew out of this early work, and the acronym adhered when Tim and Sir John were doing some work with the consulting firm, McKinsey. The term was suggested by this firm to describe the structured process used in coaching to achieve a goal.

It is doubtful that Sir John Whitmore ever saw the GROW model as an end point. There were probably many influences which shaped his thinking and methodologies when he left racing, but his studies at the Esalen Institute in California, when the flower power movement flourished, are an important signpost to his future coaching philosophy. Sir John was part of a group of students who seriously questioned the behavioral psychology of Skinner, and they were deeply engaged in the psychodynamic school associated with Maslow, Freud, Jung, and most particularly, Robert Assagioli. Carl Rogers has also been an important influence.

Most coaches would be familiar with Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, and Maslow’s work deeply informs that of Sir John. In the later stages of his work, Maslow himself theorized a higher level of motivation than that of self actualization. He called it self-transcendence. Sir John refers to self-realisation as the purpose of all life.

*A Rectified Version of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Koltko-Rivera, 2006)*

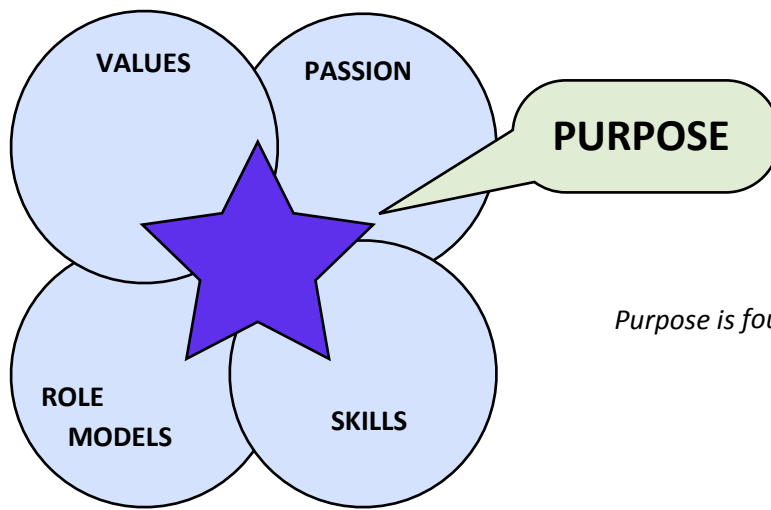
<b>6</b>	<b>Self-transcendence</b>	<b>Seeks to further a cause beyond the self and to experience communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Self-actualization</b>	<b>Seeks fulfillment of personal potential</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Esteem needs</b>	<b>Seeks esteem through recognition or achievement (or self-belief)</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Belongingness/love needs</b>	<b>Seeks affiliation with a group</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Safety needs</b>	<b>Seeks security through order and law</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Physiological needs</b>	<b>Seeks to obtain the basic necessities of life</b>

Koltko-Rivera argues that many psychological texts do Maslow’s theory a disservice by not acknowledging his later works and adjusting his model accordingly.

Like many developmental models, there is debate about the difference between stages (transitions in a hierarchy) and states. Arguably, while each specific level needs to be mastered before moving to the next, it is not clear whether or not Maslow believed that once you were self-actualised, you did not have remissions. Self transcendence by its very nature is likely to be episodic because the act of ‘holding on’ dissolves the moment, although spiritual traditions of the East may challenge this belief. Human development is rarely a sequential unfolding, but rather an ongoing internal dialogue which ebbs and flows.

The realisation that for Maslow self transcendence, not self actualization, is at the pinnacle of human need shifts the personal coaching paradigm. Just as models such as Robert Kegan’s stages of mind opens the question as to how far along a developmental trajectory you can coach if you have not made that journey yourself, this new look at Maslow forces the coach to look at their own stages of development. This inevitably forces the coach to examine her/his own spiritual or supra-religious status. Sir John is a pioneer at this threshold, and he is there without apology. He sees the coachee has having a purpose in life with challenges and obstacles to meet in order to fulfill a greater purpose, which is in essence a spiritual purpose. Identifying that purpose does not mean (necessarily) a religious experience on the road to Damascus. It does involve the interrogation of our values and beliefs about the meaning of life and its interconnectedness.

The importance of identifying values is becoming very widely accepted among coaches, partly emanating from the positive psychology movement. Helping a coachee to nominate



*Purpose is found at the intersection of values, passion, role models and skills.*

their core values is a challenging enterprise, but it is even tougher to go on a journey to where, as coaches, our own deepest yearnings lie. That is the territory of life purpose. Sir John suggests various exercises which can be used by a coach in focusing a coachee on what his/her life purpose is. Sir John's simple model does not really capture the enormity of this task, nor the level of humility and respect that is required of the coach who accompanies another on this journey.

Purpose, in Sir John's work, is found at the point at which the circles overlap. His 'powerful' coaching question is: what do I need to change in each of these spheres to achieve my purpose?

Among Sir John's principles of transpersonal coaching is a hierarchical model of psychological theory in which psychoanalytical and behavioural cognitive approaches occupy the remedial space. They are about getting behaviour 'right'. The next three psychological principles, however, are about increasing levels of self awareness.

### **Principles of Transpersonal Coaching**

- Fifth:           **Integral Psychology**  
*All there is; whole system*
- Fourth:       **Transpersonal Psychology**  
*Self-realization; responsibility*
- Third:         **Humanistic Psychology** (positive psychology)  
*Self-actualization – Awareness*
- Second:       **Behavioural & Cognitive**  
*Change in behaviour, instruction*
- First:         **Psychoanalysis**  
*We are our history*

In terms of 'evidence based' coaching (ie the paradigm of scientific measurement), this developmental hierarchy of psychological theory is likely to be contentious. In terms of legitimising itself as a science, psychology as a profession relies on the measurement of observable phenomena. Sir John's model relegates cognitive behavioural theory to the remedial sphere of fixing some aspect of individual thinking or behavior which is somehow 'broke'. Cognitive based coaching theory is probably the most widely used theoretical underpinning of contemporary coach training practice and yet in this model it is barely evolved. This is not to say that cognitive based coaching is deficient in respect to performance coaching - on the contrary. However, it is not an end point.

If a coach wants to move his/her practice into higher orders of purpose and universality or spirituality, he/she needs to have taken that arduous personal journey to self awareness. If as a coach you were to use Sir John's methodology you would begin by identifying what he calls sub-personalities in order to observe yourself dispassionately. You would work to harmonize your own different personalities, and you would detach yourself emotionally and intellectually from the outcomes of your own actions in order to observe them. This is where Sir John uses the orchestra metaphor – sub personalities are the musicians 'me as my parts', the "I" is the conductor who combines and synchronises the parts, and the "Self" is the composer. "We" needs to find integration. "I" is characterized by consciousness, will and choice, or as Sir John asserts, by individual awareness and responsibility. The "self" writes the script, and at its simplest that script is about the ecological whole.

Transpersonal coaching is the amplifying work of coaching the whole person. Adoption of transpersonal principles requires an acknowledgement that the whole system is inexorably ecological. The whole system is a natural system and, over the millennia, nature has proved herself a more effective evolutionary designer than any of her component parts, including each of us. 'Growing the economy' is the flawed industrial era paradigm where quantitative external knowledge has prevailed, but at the expense of qualitative social and environmental guardianship. Sustainability is the future, where economies shrink and hierarchy will decay, to be replaced by self-responsibility and the shared consciousness of an organic whole that is beyond the individual. A simplistic GROW coaching paradigm funnels; it does not amplify.

At his address to the ICF (NSW), Sir John remarked that in respect to the GROW model, in his practice, he rarely gets past the "G" part. It is easy for me to see why for two reasons; firstly, those who live in affluent parts of world are experiencing a crisis in meaning as they grapple with loss of certainty and loss of confidence in a range of social institutions. Secondly, Sir John Whitmore is very much committed to his own goal. He is a warrior sage, still in racing colours, and on the road at the age of 74. He has a message which he is passionate about. He believes that coaches are uniquely placed to partner with their clients in raising levels of consciousness about personal potential and beyond.

As the author of this paper, I need to state that I am not a transpersonal coach, but perhaps I would like to become one. Nor am I a psychologist. As a graduate of the University of Sydney's Coaching Masters program, I have been thoroughly schooled in evidence-based coaching, and would like to state that except for some digging I did on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this is largely an opinion piece based on my participation in Sir John Whitmore's recent two-day work shop in Sydney, and some of his writing which can be accessed on <http://www.performanceconsultants.com/sir-john-whitmore>.

I would also like to engage with anyone who is interested on the evidence base for transpersonal coaching, particularly given its roots in the work of Maslow, Assagiolo, Jung, Rogers and others. A linked in group, Transpersonal Coaching – Australia has just been

established. My hope is that this will be a forum for a rigorous professional exchange of concepts and practices that can bring transpersonal coaching into the mainstream of academic discussion.

Sue Hanley, President, NSW Branch Leadership Team, International Coaching Federation

Reference:

Kegan, Robert. (1982). *The Evolving Self*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.

Koltko-Revera, Mark E. (2006). Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification. *Review of General Psychology*. 10(4):302-317.

Whitmore, John. 2011. Personal correspondence.