

Kahn's Coaching on the Axis

Coaching on the Axis, developed by South African psychologist and business coach Marc Simon Kahn, is a systemic and integrative framework for business and executive coaching. It addresses a key challenge in organisational coaching: the duality of the client, where both the individual and the organisation are simultaneously the focus of the coaching engagement.

Unlike traditional coaching models that often draw from therapeutic paradigms, Kahn's approach is explicitly designed for the realities of business. It positions coaching as a relational and systemic intervention, aligning individual development with organisational culture, strategy, and performance imperatives.

The Core Framework: The Axis Metaphor

Kahn uses the metaphor of a tree to illustrate the coaching axis:

- Roots: The individual being coached (personal history, psychology, competencies)
- Branches and Leaves: The organisational environment (culture, systems, strategy)
- Trunk: The coaching relationship (the axis that connects and integrates the two)

This axis represents the relational space where coaching occurs. The coach's role is to facilitate dialogue and alignment between the individual and their environment, rather than "fixing" the individual in isolation.

The Three Dimensions of the Axis

1. The Individual Dimension

This refers to the intrapersonal system of the coachee, including:

- Personality traits, values, and beliefs
- Leadership style and emotional intelligence
- Past experiences, self-concept, and learning preferences

Relevant theories:

- Personality theory (e.g. MBTI, Big Five)
- Adult development theory (Kegan, Loevinger)
- Psychodynamic theory (transference, defence mechanisms)

The coach explores how these internal factors shape the coachee's behaviour and responses within the organisational context.

2. The Environmental Dimension

This encompasses the external systemic reality in which the coachee operates:

- Organisational culture and politics
- Business model, strategy, and market forces
- Team dynamics, performance expectations, and stakeholder perceptions

Relevant theories:

- Systems theory (Senge, 1990)
- Organisational culture (Schein, 2010)
- Leadership theory (Northouse, Covey, Maxwell)

The coach helps the coachee understand how the environment influences their role, expectations, and perceived success.

3. The Coaching Relationship

The axis itself is the dynamic relationship between the coach, the coachee, and the organisation. It is:

- Dialogical: built on mutual inquiry and reflection
- Contractual: governed by clear boundaries and expectations
- Ethical: balancing confidentiality with organisational accountability

Relevant theories:

- Relational coaching (Stelter, 2014)
- Dialogical process (Buber, Isaacs)
- Ethics in coaching (COMENSA, WABC standards)

The coach acts as a narrative bridge, helping the coachee make sense of their experience and align their personal growth with organisational outcomes.

Process and Methodology

Kahn outlines a non-linear, iterative process that includes:

1. Theme tracking: Identifying recurring patterns across the individual and environmental dimensions
2. Insight generation: Using reflection and dialogue to surface new perspectives
3. Action testing: Designing and implementing behavioural experiments
4. Reflection and integration: Embedding learning and adjusting course

This process is informed by Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön), reinforcing the idea that coaching is a learning partnership.

Integration with Broader Theories

Theory	Connection to Coaching on the Axis
Systems Psychodynamics	Explores unconscious dynamics in organisational systems
Integral Theory (Wilber)	Aligns with the “I–We–It” perspectives: self, relationships, systems
Evidence-Based Coaching (Grant)	Encourages reflective practice and outcome measurement
Theory U (Scharmer)	Emphasises presencing, co-creation, and systemic awareness

Kahn's model is eclectic and integrative, allowing coaches to draw from multiple disciplines while maintaining alignment with business realities.

Business Application: Case Example – Investec

Context: Investec, a South African-based international financial services group, has embedded Coaching on the Axis into its leadership development and organisational change initiatives.

Application:

- Individual dimension: Executives engage in deep self-reflection on their leadership identity and personal narratives.
- Environmental dimension: Coaching explores how leaders navigate Investec's entrepreneurial culture and strategic imperatives.

- Coaching relationship: Coaches act as systemic facilitators, helping leaders align personal growth with organisational transformation.

This approach has supported Investec's ability to retain top talent, navigate complexity, and embed a coaching culture that is both human-centred and commercially grounded.

Conclusion

Kahn's Coaching on the Axis offers a sophisticated, context-sensitive framework for business coaching. It provides a lens to:

- Understand the interplay between individual psychology and organisational systems
- Navigate complexity through relational intelligence
- Align coaching outcomes with strategic business goals

In a South African context, marked by cultural diversity, economic volatility, and institutional transformation, this model is particularly valuable for developing leaders who can think systemically and act relationally.