

# Coaching to the Human Soul

*Ontological Coaching and Deep Change*

Volume I



ALAN SIELER

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**Alan Sieler**

First published by Newfield Australia 2003  
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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Sieler, Alan.

Coaching to the human soul : ontological coaching and deep change.

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 1 876677 41 4.

1. Speech. 2. Ontology. 3. Language and languages. I.  
Title.

111

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Blackburn, Victoria  
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Edited by Kaye Ely  
Cover design by David Constable  
Produced by Publishing Solutions Pty Ltd

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**Volume I**

**The Linguistic Basis of  
Ontological Coaching**



# Praise for *Coaching to the Human Soul*

*“In times when we have erroneously equated knowing with having information, our epistemology has become soulless. Alan Sieler’s book is a wonderful articulation of a different path, where the question of what is being human is at the core of the adventure of learning and knowing. Ontological Coaching, that practice that I have dedicated my life to, comes alive in this book. Great reading.”*

Julio Olalla, President of The Newfield Network and co-developer of Ontological Coaching.

*“Coaching to the Human Soul by Alan Sieler provides a much needed theoretical and practical basis to the evolving profession of coaching. There is a profound need for books of this nature, and coaches who coach at the level of excellence that is explored in Coaching to the Human Soul. The book sets the benchmark for all coaching books, and it is a high bar. For anyone who endeavours to be a better communicator, be it in the domain of coaching, leadership or relationships, Coaching to the Human Soul is a must have.”*

Christine McDougall, Master Certified Coach  
Inaugural President International Coach Federation Australia  
Immediate Past Vice President International Coach Federation.

*“This book is a must for anyone wishing to empower others or lead in bringing about fundamental change in their organisations. The reader is offered a powerful and well-grounded interpretation of the human being, which can open new pathways for action and unprecedented results. This is a book for those not satisfied with quick-fixes and easy answers, but are looking for theoretical foundation and associated practices for effecting and sustaining meaningful change – in themselves and in their workplace.”*

Jim Selman, Chief Executive Officer  
Paracom Partners International.

*“Alan Sieler has done a great job of taking a set of very powerful learning concepts and making them accessible and useful for the reader. Ontological Coaching is a powerful force in creating lasting change. This book is an important read not only for those in the coaching profession but also for anyone interested in increasing their own capacity to produce change – personally and professionally.”*

Terrie Lupberger, Master Certified Coach  
Chief Executive Officer, Newfield Network Inc.

*“Your book has a great deal of intrinsic merit, and you have certainly outlined a comprehensive and novel framework for organisational and life coaching. In evaluating the first volume on ontological coaching, your work stands out.”*

McGraw-Hill Publishers.

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# Introduction

## Becoming a profession

As a new field of human service, coaching (in the form of Organisational Coaching and Life Coaching) faces the challenge of establishing itself as a fully-fledged profession. Like other professional practitioners, as well as providing service that is valuable and beneficial, it is important for coaches to be able to demonstrate that *their practice is informed by a methodology with a robust theoretical basis*.

According to an ancient Chinese expression, “Theory without practice is foolish; practice without theory is dangerous”. In the absence of sound theory and practice, there is a risk that coaching could be marginalised and trivialised, and it will be seen as a fad, which anyone can do by attaching the label “coach” to themselves. If this happens, it will be a huge blow to the potential of coaching to make the world a better place by enriching people’s personal and professional lives. This book is designed to advance the cause of coaching by introducing a particular approach to coaching, called Ontological Coaching, which has a substantive and readily applicable theoretical framework.

The basis of this framework is *a new practical understanding of human beings and human interaction*. This understanding is built around two key questions: “What is it to be a human being?” and “What does it mean to live and work well?” These are no longer questions for philosophers in ivory towers. They are questions that now touch every part of our lives, in times in which the speed of change and the pace of life seem to be accelerating and show no signs of abating. All too often, our experience of daily life can be one of uncertainty and confusion and, at times, bewildering complexity. The net result can be that in our attempts to cope we find ourselves living and working in a manner that is less than we desire. Somehow, the quality of our existence seems to be significantly compromised.

It is believed that we are at a major transition point in the history of Western civilisation, characterised by continually rapid changes in technology, values and key social institutions, which can have a deeply unsettling, even turbulent, impact on how we live and relate. This profound historical shift *demands fundamentally different ways of thinking and perceiving*. New ideas based on old ways of thinking are not new ideas. Recycling old ideas and dressing them up in new ways will not work. The very question of what constitutes thinking is now “up for grabs”. A substantial shift in thinking is required to effectively navigate the recurrently turbulent waters of everyday living.

Ontological Coaching offers a different way of thinking and perceiving. This approach to coaching provides a basis for generating substantial positive shifts in how we live and relate in our personal and professional lives. In short, the theory and methodology of Ontological Coaching is not only a basis for effective action, but also for building a more meaningful life.

## **A new discipline for coaching**

In the latter part of the twentieth century, the integration of significant developments in the fields of philosophy and biology produced a new discipline. As a substantive and coherent body of knowledge, this discipline provides a new understanding of human beings and human interaction, which is relevant and applicable to everyday living, working, learning ... and coaching. The general name for this discipline is *Ontology*. More specifically, it has been named *Ontology of the Human Observer*. The resultant coaching methodology and coaching practice is *Ontological Coaching*, which is equally applicable to Organisational Coaching and Life Coaching.

Ontology is the study of being, and is an inquiry into the nature of human existence. This especially includes a concern for the quality of our existence, much of which is the quality of co-existence in our everyday personal and professional dealings with each other. According to Vaclav Havel, former President of Czechoslovakia, “man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being”.<sup>1</sup> If this is the case, it is

increasingly urgent that *our being become a major focus of learning*, so that we may feel more connected with our individual selves, each other and the environment.

Learning about our being is *ontological learning*. Ontological Coaching provides an avenue for connecting the relevance of our being to everyday living, working and learning. In a world of accelerating change, and increasing uncertainty, turbulence and confusion, questions about the quality of our individual existence and our co-existence can no longer be taken for granted. These questions encompass major existential issues of meaning, fulfilment, happiness and worthiness in our personal and professional lives. They touch on our deep concerns about relationships, and how to think, act and live together more productively and harmoniously. *These are issues of the human soul and this is the territory of Ontological Coaching.*

## **The human soul and organisational success**

Issues of the human soul are not just “touchy-feely” issues dealing with the “soft side” of life. They are also issues that go to the heart of how well our organisations are functioning, and core concerns of performance, productivity and competitive success. There is a sharp edge to the so-called soft side of business, for when morale is low, there are poor relationships, communication breakdowns, minimal enjoyment of work, organisational performance suffers, and long-term viability in the marketplace is threatened.

*The human soul is the hidden side of business.* Coaching to the human soul is about supporting people to be at their best in living, learning and working. Coaching to the human soul makes good business sense, for when people are at their best, organisations benefit from their enhanced performance, productivity and creativity.

Ontological Coaching provides a robust theoretical and practical framework for dealing with the inevitable intersection of organisational and personal concerns. As a new way of thinking, it provides fresh ways of viewing problematic circumstances, generating innovative thinking and the production of effective strategies and practices.

Thoughtful organisational leaders are hungry for a new paradigm that will enable their organisations to flourish in the complexity of a rapidly evolving global culture. They are searching for something beyond conventional understanding. They want learning that will produce deep and sustainable change, which includes the necessity for *recurrent adaptiveness* in an increasingly unpredictable and competitive environment.

While important, major changes in systems, structures and strategies are insufficient in themselves. Attention to the inevitable role of people in the successful implementation of change is necessary. It is now widely recognised and accepted that the traditional concerns of business – performance, productivity, profit and competitive success – cannot be divorced from human behaviour. However, *it is no longer sufficient to just focus on behaviour*. A deeper understanding of humans, and how their thinking and behaviour affect organisational concerns, is required. A more profound understanding of the drivers of human behaviour is sought after.

Thoughtful leaders are beginning to recognise the wisdom of what W. Edwards Demming said half a century ago: “Nothing changes without personal transformation”. Change is no longer just “out there” in the form of different strategies and work practices. Most importantly, it is “in here”. Deep change that generates ongoing adaptiveness is a phenomenon with *exterior and interior dimensions*.

A deeper practical understanding of human behaviour can be reached through paying attention to our being, or more specifically, our “Way of Being”. This can be thought of as our “inner behaviour”, which shapes our “outer behaviour”, and our effectiveness in the art of living and working well. *Way of Being is the underlying determinant of communicative competence and behavioural effectiveness, and a source of deep change*. Ontological Coaching provides a precise approach for understanding and shifting “inner behaviour”, and is a powerful source of organisational transformation.

## Outline of Volume I

This is the first of three volumes on an ontological approach to coaching. It is important to emphasise that these are not “how to” books, full of tips and techniques that can be read and applied like a recipe. You will not find “The ten best ways to ...” or “The five most important things ...” in these books. Coaching is not a mechanical process that can be done from a “cookbook”. Nevertheless, if you have not already had practical engagement with Ontological Coaching these books will enable you to begin to relate key principles and concepts to your everyday living, working and learning, as well as gain an initial sensitivity to their coaching applications. If you are an accredited Ontological Coach, the books will consolidate and, in all likelihood, provide a basis for further learning.

Volume I covers the unique and powerful approach to language that is central to Ontological Coaching. Volume II, titled *Emotional Learning, Body Learning and Ontological Coaching* focuses on the crucial role of emotions and the body for the development of professional competence in coaching. Volume III, *Ontological Coaching as Artistry*, explores a range of key considerations for effective in-depth engagement with coaching clients.

In this volume, the linguistic underpinning of Ontological Coaching is explored in detail. The first three chapters set the scene for the approach to language that is one of the hallmarks of Ontological Coaching. In Chapter 1, the basic coaching model, and the essence of the coaching methodology, are outlined. Chapter 2 takes this further to develop a model of learning, and the concept of Second-Order Learning, that contains *the potential to bring about profound shifts in how people can live richer, fuller and more deeply meaningful lives* – individually and collectively. Chapter 3 is an invitation to step back, and look from a major historical perspective at the increasing relevance of an ontological approach to learning and coaching for coping with rapid change that is not likely to abate. Chapters 4–12 then provide specifics of a new understanding of language that is a distinguishing feature of Ontological Coaching. These chapters show how language can



be used as a powerful technology for enhancing the quality of our individual and collective existence. The utilisation of specific linguistic tools opens new doors of possibility for more meaningful living.

Apart from Chapters 6 and 12, each chapter and Appendix A has examples of *Ontological Coaching in action*.<sup>2</sup> While it is difficult to capture the entirety of a coaching conversation in the written word, each example serves to demonstrate the application of specific aspects of the coaching methodology. In addition to the coaching examples, Chapters 3–11 also contain sets of questions that invite you to apply the relevance of what is being covered to your personal and professional life. These questions are formatted as “Reflective Activities” and “Self-Coaching Exercises”. Exploring your responses to these questions will enable you to build a first-hand appreciation of the relevance of Ontological Coaching for living, learning, working and coaching.

Welcome to Volume I, *The Linguistic Basis of Ontological Coaching*.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Vaclav Havel, “The Search for Meaning in a Global Civilisation” in Walter Truett Anderson (ed), *The Truth about The Truth*. p. 234.
- <sup>2</sup> These are reports of actual coaching conversations. Names, and occasionally circumstances, have been changed to ensure anonymity.