

Theories “X” and “Y”

by Erna Kriigel of [Stepping Stones Coach](http://www.SteppingStonesCoach.com)

At first glance the title of this article seems to suggest that you might be reading about the difference between coaching women and men. This will not be the case! Instead I will present a connection between coaching and leadership development theory. At times, clients or organizations request some type of academic “proof” that we know what we are doing. The following article very briefly describes some theoretical concepts upon which coaching stands.

In the mid 1900’s, Douglas McGregor was a Professor at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, visiting lecturer at Harvard University, and author of the book entitled *The Human Side of Enterprise*. McGregor’s academic work has had a lasting impact upon the fields of organizational management, human resource development, and modern leadership development theory. At the time of McGregor’s writings, society was in the midst of applying scientific management principles (efficient means of production, exacting processes, standards, and controls etc.) to all of its endeavors. McGregor proposed two contrasting theories, called Theory X and Theory Y, which describes how organizations and management relate to their employees. Coaching is aligned with Theory Y.

Theory X describes the human worker as inherently lazy, disliking work, and unwilling to work without strong organizational controls and penalties. Management and organizations must, therefore, instill strict methods and procedures to guarantee output. Coercion tactics, threats of discipline, firm supervision, and detailed task descriptions are part of the carrot and stick approaches which are used to obtain organizational goals.

Theory Y describes the human worker as willing and able to put forth effort or work as a natural part of human life, desiring to be self-directed and committed to meaningful goals, motivated by intrinsic rewards, able to learn responsibility, acknowledges that creative problem solving ability exists throughout the organization, and finally that intellectually capacity of the employees is an untapped resource.

Coaching uses the assumptions of McGregor’s Theory Y in order to help clients reach their significant goals, develop leadership capacity and be positive change agents in their circles of influence. Pass it on!

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