Core Coaching
Getting To The Heart Of The Matter

Teaching vs. Preaching

The Power of Using Key Distinctions in Integral Leadership Development

By Brian Whetten, Ph.D., M.A.

Summary

One of the defining hallmarks of "second stage" integral thinking is the ability to move beyond seeing our current developmental stage as the "one true stage" that "should" be used by everyone. Yet the process through which myself and many others have embraced integral theory is much like a religious conversion experience, and in my integral leadership development efforts, I've often found myself **preaching instead of teaching**.

This challenge stems directly from the greatest strength of Integral Theory – the overarching breadth and depth of its models, which provide a whole new paradigm for how to see the world. As demonstrated by Thomas Kuhn in <u>The Structure of Scientific Revolutions</u>, paradigm shifts tend to be traumatic, revolutionary events, which require heroic feats of unlearning our old paradigms before we can embrace a new one. Whether we're talking about a scientific, theological, or a philosophical paradigm, the psychological dynamics are the same. Namely, the more powerful the paradigm shift is, the harder it is to make, the fewer the adults there are who will tend to make it – and the greater the temptation there is once we've made it to push it on others.

In my practices as a coach and teacher, where most of my clients are not already "integral converts," I've found that **what** I teach is often less important than **how** I teach it. While I started out trying to **teach my models** to others, I've since found it much more valuable to **teach through key distinctions**. Even with the best of intentions, the first is often perceived as preaching while the second is more often seen as teaching. Learning to teach through key distinctions is a primary competency for integral leadership. It is also a crucial component to our practice of fostering and developing integral leadership in others.

This article:

➢ Highlights the differences between these two forms of communication

➢ Illustrates the core psychological dynamics beneath them

➢ Describes the five primary traits of a key distinction

➢ Lists six of the Integral Key Distinctions I have found most valuable

It concludes with an invitation and a challenge for this community to engage in a dialog aimed at distilling the most important Integral Key Distinctions. Doing so is an essential, pivotal step as we bridge the gap from theory to practice and create practical value for a wide range of people.

Core Coaching
Getting To The Heart Of The Matter

My Conversion Experience

For me, the second month of the third year of the third millennium is a hallowed date to remember, like a sacred anniversary, because it was the beginning of one of the most important, most intellectually transformative events of my life. In February of 2003, I found Ken Wilber.

It only took the first few pages of A Brief History of Everything, and I was hooked. I spent much of the next few months and years reading book after book of his, and integrating his "Integral Operating System" in to my brain. During the two and a half years prior to this holy date, I'd been pursuing a frantic, driven, often agonizing process of personal and spiritual transformation, not because I'd particularly wanted to, but because it had become too painful not to. In a "*dark night of the orange over-achiever*" I'd realized that I wouldn't be able to find peace until I was able to die to the scientist, agnostic, materialist foundations of my twenty-something world-view, and so had plunged into an angst-ridden period of deconstructing my most treasured assumptions about the world, while also desperately seeking answers to many new questions, such as "*are we evolving spiritually?*" I describe the years leading up to my conversion experience as being like the radical deconstruction of a skyscraper. I'd spent my entire lifetime constructing mental towers in my head, only to find that the foundations were unstable, and so had found myself needing to tear down or move aside the upper floors in order to unearth and dig out my subterranean beliefs – all without knowing what would fill the gaping hole when it was done. As you might imagine, it wasn't exactly a peaceful experience.

My clearest memories of "*finding Ken*" are of elation – and relief. It was like Ken had taken the crude new underpinnings I was piecing together brick by brick, validated them as correct and worthy, and then embraced them in a new foundation that was a mile wide and anchored all the way down to bedrock. The world made sense again! Hallelujah, and praise the pandit! With the passion and zeal of a religious convert, I set out trying to push Ken's work on everyone I knew.

Strangely, I found that most people pushed back – at times forcefully. And of the few who tried out my recommendations, many either struggled to find the practical value in it, or else reported that it "*just didn't click.*" As a very spiritual friend said, "*I so **want** to be a Ken Wilber fan, but no matter how hard I try, I just don't get him.*" So I found kindred groups of "Wilberites," joined their organizations, made them part of my new personal paradigm, and a year later began my new career of coaching and teaching.

Two Ways of Learning

I've started off this paper with deliberately evocative (and perhaps provocative) language in order to make an important point. *There are two primary ways to learn, either through **models** or through **distinctions**, and while the former can carry tremendous power, it carries challenges and pitfalls equal to this power. Awareness and mastery of this distinction is critical to our effectiveness as "integral change agents," particularly if we want to be of service to the population outside our integral community.*

2

Let's take a look at this distinction. When we internalize a new **model**, we're adding a new page to our maps of the world, a new tower to the metropolis of our mind. Models are like "*cognitive technologies*" – intricate, tightly interconnected, hierarchically layered webs of ideas that come together to form tools of great power. These models can be smaller in size, like a 4-quadrant grid, or larger, like the field of calculus. In the extreme case, like with Integral Theory, they form an entire paradigm – a lens through which we see the world. In contrast, **distinctions** are one of the fundamental building blocks that models are made of. One common definition of cognitive intelligence is "*the ability to make increasingly fine distinctions as related to increasingly wide connections.*" If we picture a model as an "intellectual web," connections are the strands of the web and distinctions are the nodes these strands tie together. For example, one of my nephews, Easton, is currently learning his alphabet. This is a process of taking an undifferentiated soup of shapes and creating distinctions between each letter (i.e. this is an A which has the sound "ay", and it is different than a B, which has the sound "bee"). Switching analogies, if a model is like a building, distinctions are like raw materials and tools we can use to either build or remodel different pieces of these constructions.

The primary advantage of learning through models is the potential for rapid construction of new cognitive tools. Continuing with the building analogy, when we learn a new model, we're adding a new construction to an existing landscape. Since we're using blueprints that someone else has already created, we can quickly erect a new home, drop in a strip mall, or top off an existing skyscraper with a new penthouse.

The primary advantage of learning through distinctions is that the distinction can be easily applied and integrated wherever it's most needed. If we send trucks of paint and brushes to a dilapidated housing project, they can easily be applied to the walls that are most in need of repair. Instead of building a new skyscraper, learning through distinctions allows people to upgrade their existing mental structures. Whereby learning through models involves new construction, learning through distinctions involves upgrading existing constructions. Both are important, in the appropriate circumstances.

A Primary Challenge of Integral Leadership Development

The primary challenge of learning through models comes when we want to build on an area that's already occupied. A core psychological tenet is that **learning tends to be much easier than unlearning**. Imagine a nice, little, rustic neighborhood in your personal cognitive city. Old, brownstone, two story homes are nestled away on large, well manicured lots. The families are all friends with each other. Beautiful, mature oak trees line the streets. Now imagine that in the name of Evolution (aka Progress, or Spirit-in-action) a decree comes down that this neighborhood needs to be completely "developed" next year into high-density apartment buildings and shopping malls. What would be an easy task if undertaken on unused land now risks provoking a small civil war. Since a large hunk of what our ego is constructed of is the set of things we believe in, our ego naturally tends to feel that any attempts at large-scale deconstruction are attacks on its survival – and it tends to fight back accordingly.

www.corecoaching.org

A wise spiritual teacher said that the first half of our spiritual journey involves building an ego, and the second half involves letting go of our grip on it. As Ken points out in <u>A Brief History of Everything</u>, each developmental fulcrum involves first identifying with a stage (i.e. learning), then dis-identifying with the old stage (i.e. unlearning, or transcending) and finally integrating (i.e. including) the previous stage. When we're young, there is almost nothing but open green space in our minds, much of our early education involves learning through models, and more energy tends to be spent on identification than on dis-identification. As we age and our consciousness becomes more "full," the developmental bottleneck moves from learning (i.e ego building) to unlearning (i.e. letting go of our ego attachments).

Interestingly, most of our academic systems spend most of their time constructing, debating, and teaching different models. Our educational systems are really good at helping people learn, but we have very few programs to help people **unlearn**. As students of these institutions, we have a long history of being rewarded for successfully mastering new models, and so when we go to teach or coach others, we naturally tend to use this approach more or less by default. However, this has some particularly acute challenges when it comes to integral leadership development.

The remarkable power of Integral Theory comes from the fact that it is so astoundingly deep and broad. Ken talks about it as the "Integral Operating System" upon which all our other programming can run. Integrated fully, it becomes the foundation our mental buildings rest upon, the binder our cognitive maps fit in to, the framework between which our cerebral webs are woven. To many, it is the "mother of all mental models." However, as a once and former computer scientist who "cut my programming teeth" on the upgrade from DOS to Windows, I'll attest that undertaking such a major upgrade is not an easy task.

As we work with other people as their coaches, teachers, and guides, we'll tend to find two groups of people – the small group who are primed for an "integral conversion experience" and are capable of the mental surgery this requires, and a much larger group that is not. With the first group, much of our task is made easier by the existing body of Integral teachings – as a starting point, we can simply point them to Ken's work, light the fuse, and watch the fireworks. The size of this first group is some subset of the "less than 2%" of people Ken talks about as being ready for "integral consciousness." As I'll be the first to declare, working with this group is extremely important, and the conversion experiences can be completely life altering. There is tremendous work being done in this area, much of it by Ken and I-I. The potential scope of opportunity with "just" this group is astounding. I fully support this work, and eagerly look forward to participating in its future evolution.

At the same time, if we're to extend our calling and our reach beyond this particular group, we need to recognize that **for those not ready for a conversion experience, teaching Integral models often feels like a direct attack on their existing world-views**. As a "post-Mormon," I tend to be very sensitive to religious proselytizing. It was quite a wake-up call when I realized how often I was innocently mounting my own little "integral crusades," trying to convert others to my particular religion – to my "superior" maps and models of the paths of spiritual evolution. The key point is this: **while my integral models are what work best for me, and I believe**

that they encompass more truth than most other models, I find that they are usually not the most effective way for me to coach and teach others. Again, I am not saying that we should stop all teaching through integral models – simply that we should be aware of the limitations that come with this approach, as a direct consequence of the power and depth of those models.

However, while teaching by integral models is often not effective, simply teaching a bunch of random distinctions is rarely effective either, particularly if we're hoping to facilitate not just translational but also transformative change. Instead, the most effective teaching and coaching technique often lies in using our maps to determine which distinctions matter most given the current consciousness and challenges of our audience, and then teaching those distinctions instead of the models themselves. I call this the process of coaching and teaching through **key distinctions**.

Coaching and Teaching Through Key Distinctions

If we look at the great wisdom literature, we find that most of it teaches through **key distinctions**. In addition to much of traditional scripture, think of Stephen Covey's The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, or Eckhart Tolle's The Power of Now.

A key distinction has five key properties.

1) **A key distinction is relatively easy to hear, learn, and integrate.** Because it teaches through distinction, it doesn't require whole scale mental deconstruction to be able to gain value from it. It allows us to remodel and improve an existing building, rather than having to tear down an old one before constructing a new one. Also, because it meets the student where they're at, it can be used with people at a wide range of stages of development, not just with people who "are integral".

2) **A key distinction is flexible and widely applicable.** Similarly, it provides a tool or resource which can be used in many different places, according to where the client needs it most. The great wisdom literature can be read over and over again, because each time we hear a key distinction, we can find new places to apply it. It allows unlearning and dis-identification to happen in the areas where we're ready for it, without forcing it on us. It allows us to evolve through the stages at our own pace.

3) **A key distinction is highly leveraged.** Because the selection of the distinction is informed by the teacher's broader, more complete maps, as well as by their understanding of the student's current state, it speaks to an issue that is highly relevant and important to the student's growth and evolution. Much of the genius of Covey's book came not in the explanation of the habits, but in the choice of **which** habits to include – a choice he made only after reviewing the vast literature on personal development and creating his own complex models of this field.

4) **A key distinction offers applied, experientially based value.** While mental models are often highly theoretical, a key distinction involves working with clients where "their

rubber meets the road." This often involves experiential learning. It "connects the dots" from theory (the teacher's models) to practice (the student's current needs). It directly provides the student with value, rather than making this value conditional on their first having to do the challenging work of learning a brand new theory, integrating it into their existing landscape, and then deriving their own applications and key distinctions from it.

5) **A key distinction is intuitively recognized as valid.** While the validity of mental models is most often determined through academic debate, scientific research, and reference to other models, key distinctions are heard by the heart. When we hear a key distinction, no one has to "prove it" to us. It resonates with someplace deep inside, and we intuitively open up to receive it. It is heard not just as knowledge, but also as wisdom.

Learning of this sort is often associated with "character building" or "developing wisdom." It's the essence of good parenting, and it's the essence of great coaching and leadership development.

For example, my coaching practice focuses on the integration of business with spirituality, and some of my favorite clients are highly successful executives and entrepreneurs who've proven they can achieve whatever they want in the world, and are now wondering "*is this all there is?*" Put simply, I love a good alpha-dog mid-life crisis. To honor confidentiality, instead of talking about a specific client, let's look at a hypothetical/composite example, named Jonathon, and imagine that we're working with him together.

Jonathon is 48, happily married, no children (that is if you don't count their beautiful yellow lab named Honey) and runs 1-2 marathons a year. He's a highly successful entrepreneur, whose liquid net worth recently passed the critical $3 million mark – the point at which he could retire in a comfortable but not extravagant way. While part of him wants to keep striving for the next level of success, he's dropped into a real funk, and reports that he's been really struggling to get up the motivation to go to work each day. He loves his beautiful, brainy blonde wife and already has the bright red convertible (a Porsche 911 Carerra S Cabriolet) so he comes to us looking for a deeper solution.

Using our integral maps, we quickly discern that Jonathon's mid-life crisis is really a stage transition, where he's moving out of the orange vMeme/mental worldview/orange level of consciousness, to a green vMeme/pluralistic worldview/green level of consciousness, or perhaps even to 2nd tier. Put more simply, he's starting the leap from rational to trans-rational, and his critical need is to find a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in life. While he doesn't realize it yet, his crisis is really a deep-seated yearning to develop a sense of authentic spirituality. However, Jonathon was raised in a fundamentalist church, which he left in a dramatic fashion when he moved to college, and he still reacts strongly against anything he perceives as religious.

With this background, and our Integral Operating System humming quietly in the background, what key distinctions would you suggest we use with Jonathon? Please feel free to think about this for a few minutes before continuing, and write down a few of your own answers. Got them? Great!

Integral Key Distinctions

There are six core Integral Key Distinctions that I have found particularly valuable so far, each of which could potentially provide exceptional value to Jonathon as he navigates his current developmental fulcrum.

➢ **Pre-rational religiosity vs. trans-rational spirituality** (the pre/trans fallacy)

➢ **Darwinian evolution vs. spiritual evolution** (evolution as Spirit-in-action)

➢ **Our shadow as the enemy vs. as the gateway to spiritual evolution** (regression in service of transcendence)

➢ **Different thoughts vs. different ways of thinking** (developmental stages)

➢ **Either/or vs. both/and** (the four quadrants and reductionism)

➢ **IQ vs. multiple intelligences** (developmental lines)

Working with Jonathon, one possibility would be for us to start with the distinction between **pre-rational religiosity** and **trans-rational spirituality**. Tailoring our messages to his current developmental context, we might find him receptive to the notion of Spirit as the source of Loving that rests at the heart of each person's core. We might also try talking about the difference between our physical needs for survival and success, and our spiritual needs for meaning and fulfillment. Notice that this last distinction in particular speaks to his core yearning need for meaning, and so taps directly in to a sense of motivation, urgency, and leverage for change. If these ideas resonate, we might also then introduce a very simple 3 or 5 stage model (such as pre-rational, rational, and trans-rational) to illustrate this distinction. Moving forward, and over multiple sessions, we might then talk about the rest of the above list of key distinctions, pairing each with direct, experiential exercises and tools he could immediately start applying to his most important and acute needs.

Notice that while each of these distinctions can be taught as part of a larger integral model, they don't have to be. And while it may require a certain level of development to hear some of them, I was fascinated to attend a Tony Robbins seminar where he walked a diverse audience through the basics of Spiral Dynamics, and had people self-identify their "color." He then taught all 2-3000 of us the "different ways of thinking" distinction by giving colored hats to representatives of each stage and facilitating a dialog between them about how they viewed the "other colored hats." While most of the audience probably couldn't recite a list of the different vMemes when we were done, many people did have a fundamental "ahah" experience from it, and left with a much deeper sense of tolerance and acceptance for other vMemes.

After benefiting from Ken's decades of developing, evolving, and communicating Integral Theory, the primary challenge and opportunity for our community now lies in translating this theory into practice. Integral Institute, Integral University, and many independent practitioners

are now involved with the task of **turning the genius of integral models into widely applicable wisdom**. The Integral Training seminars provide shining examples of this trend towards creating practical tools based on integral theory, although they are still explicitly based on teaching the integral models. There are tremendous, wide open spaces of opportunity for contribution, and yet if we're to grow our focus beyond the small minority who are ready and able to work with such a comprehensive set of models, we need to get to a place where we can fully embrace our integral models and create integrally informed value in our clients – **ideally without ever needing to mention the word integral**. Our opportunity involves creating tools that derive their power from the Integral Theory they are based on, but which do not require these models to ever be pulled from underneath the covers. Shifting from preaching about our models to teaching through key distinctions is a foundational tool for us to use in our endeavors to nurture the healthy evolution of humanity up the integral spiral.

Conclusion

I love Integral Theory. I love learning big, hairy, interesting, complicated models, and I am a much better coach and teacher for my models. I am in awe of the work that's been done by Ken Wilber and the integral community, and I pray that this genius continues to grow and spread it's brilliance throughout the world. Lord knows, our world could use it! At the same time, I recognize that cognitively, I'm a bit of a freak. As my father says, "*With every great gift comes an equally great challenge,*" and one of my challenges is accepting that most other people just really don't particularly care about my bright and shiny intellectual models. Similarly, the great gifts that come from the astonishing breadth and depth of Integral Theory create equally large challenges in communicating these gifts to the world. The more power the paradigm has, the more challenging it is for people to learn it. The deeper the theory goes, the more steps that are required to connect this theory to practice. And while some of us love to play in the land of theory, what most people care about is finding directly applicable solutions to their most pressing needs.

Interestingly, the most efficient solutions to their needs usually involve deep change, transformative growth, and evolution up the Integral Spiral. They involve stepping further into authentic integral leadership. However, we don't have to tell people this! There is a hidden agenda behind all my coaching, whether in helping a client double their income or resolve a fight with their spouse. This agenda is that by focusing on an "inside-out" approach as the most efficient way to meet their goals, we're furthering their spiritual evolution – one key distinction at a time.

In our collaboration to further the field of integral leadership, one of the critical first phases has been our work to adapt existing leadership models so they can run on our Integral Operating System. Constructing models of integral leadership has been an important exercise within our integral academic community, and it will continue to be so. At the same time, for us to step into the dazzling opportunities our field faces, we need to complete this process by using our models to create the key distinctions that will meet more of our leadership clients where they're at.

Going forward, some of the questions that fascinate me include:

➢ *"What are the most important key distinctions that emerge from Integral Theory, and how are they different from those in the existing wisdom literature?*

➢ *"How does our selection of key distinctions change based on the level of development we're teaching to?"*

➢ *"What is our body of integrally informed wisdom literature going to look like?"*

To me, these are some of the most important questions that face our integral community, particularly for those of us dedicated to coaching, teaching and leadership development. And so I throw out a challenge to our group. I invite us to step up, create a dialog around these questions, and take the next steps in the process of generating our integrally informed wisdom literature. I look forward to participating in this dialog with you, and to seeing the magnificent results that emerge from it. Please email me at brian@corecoaching.org if you would like to join a conversation on this topic with other like-minded souls.

Namaste,
Brian
brian@corecoaching.org
www.integralcoaching.org

References

Covey, Stephen. The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. Free Press; 1st edition, 1990.
Kuhn, Thomas. The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. University of Chicago Press; 3rd edition, 1996.
Tolle, Eckhart. The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment. New World Library; 1st edition, 1999.
Wilber, Ken. A Brief History of Everything. Shambhala; 2nd edition, 2001.