

SUPPORTING A LIFE OF CHOICE

Loosening the Grip of Master Assessments

By Karen Curnow and Stell Anderson

"Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions."
– Friedrich Nietzsche

Introduction

As coaches, we support our clients by listening, by asking powerful questions, and by inviting them to look at how they are viewing themselves and the world. These views are full of assessments. Uncovering these assessments reveals how our clients make choices and participate in the world. This is an integral part of our work.

Assessments are interpretations or judgments we (and our clients) have of self, others, or a situation based on prior experiences. They directly affect our perceptions of identity and what we believe is possible and not possible and in turn, influence our actions. Unlike assertions, assessments are not true or false. Since they arise from our own life experience, assessments reveal more about the assessor than they do about what or who is being assessed.

Coaches teach the distinction between assessments and assertions, inviting clients to use more precise language and to better understand how they may be getting in the way of their own growth. The result of this new understanding is often increased ease, greater clarity, and reduced conflict.

One kind of assessment that we often encounter in coaching is what we call a master assessment. Master assessments have a powerful impact on our view of ourselves, seeming to hold on with an unshakeable grip. While master assessments may serve us in some ways, they can also block and disable our efforts to create a different future.

In this article, we will look more closely at master assessments and how we can identify them for ourselves and for our clients. We propose that coaches need to do their own master assessment work in order to knowledgeably and effectively observe others' master assessments. If you are a coach who has not yet considered the master assessments in your own life, we invite you to use this paper to do that important work. You will then be better equipped to invite this deeper self-awareness in your coaching with others.

Once we and our clients are aware of our master assessments, we can observe and play with these assessments until they loosen their grip, ultimately allowing us to live with greater agency and to lead a life of choice.

Assessments: What They Do for Us

Assessments, including master assessments, play a critical role in living. Based on our assessments, we develop strategies, tactics, and plans for how we will live. Thus, while our assessments can produce the ambition and conviction needed to pursue our dreams, they

can also betray us, blocking the power of conviction and generating resignation. They may entirely paralyze our actions.

For example, a master assessment of "I'm not good enough" can cause a person to try harder in a continual attempt to make up for this perceived deficit, and may lead to years of accomplishment. On the other hand, an "I'm not good enough" master assessment can also lead someone not to try at all, to miss opportunities, convinced that he or she doesn't have what it takes to succeed. Thus, the same master assessment can inspire dramatically different actions and outcomes.

Master Certified Coach Carol Courcy comments:

Master assessments set the stage for action. If we like what we are getting, it's an assessment that is working for us. If we prefer a different future, we can make changes in our language, posturing and emotions that are coherent with the newer self, transcending the old. It's a simple concept, but surprisingly difficult to sustain.

One of the tricky points is that master assessments are so transparent that we often don't argue with them successfully. For example, we can dislike our "not good enough" tendencies and yet live with them for years, resigned that there's nothing we can do about it.

I had a real revelation years ago when thinking I had to get rid of "not good enough" as a master assessment. It turns out that particular assessment was a real driving force that had me please bosses and customers who hired and promoted me. I decided that I shouldn't "throw the baby out with the bath water" and kept some of the "not good enough" for learning things I wanted to be better at (instead of my former negative, universal characterization of "I am not good enough in all domains forever"). What a relief!

The problem is not the assessment itself, nor is it the fact that we assess. The challenge lies in the way we hold our assessments and whether we are aware of them or not.

What Are Master Assessments?

Consider an assessment you have of yourself that you have had for a long time and secretly still believe is the truth of who you are. You may believe that this quality defines you in some essential way. Most likely, you are looking at a master assessment.

Master assessments are positive or negative assessments we make of ourselves, not others. They permeate every aspect of our lives, such that we organize our time and make sense of who we are based on these master assessments. Even if the assessment emerged in only one situation, we tend to apply our master assessments to all situations in which we find ourselves. They are so pervasive that they are often invisible to us, "stalking" us quietly in all aspects of our life.

These assessments are usually very old. Most often, they first appeared in the form of comments we received about ourselves long ago from our parents, siblings, teachers or others to whom we granted authority. Sometimes they came from an experience in early life. Master assessments grow in strength over time to the point that we no longer see them as assessments. We see them as assertions, as features of ourselves that hold the same weight as age or eye color.

We can have multiple, even conflicting, master assessments. Some of the most popular appear as some variation of "I'm not enough," "I can," "I can't," "I'm special or gifted," "I'm not worthy," "I don't/can't belong," "I'm invisible," "I'm too much," "I'm lovable," or "I'm unlovable."

Marty Raphael, MCC and Newfield senior program coach, adds:

Master assessments have a profound impact on our experience of reality. They have taken root in our larger orientation to life. In other words, they make meaning for us in an infrastructural kind of way.

The Impact of Master Assessments

Master assessments can have tremendous influence on how we live, with whom we interact, and what we think, feel, and do. They may override or squeeze out other assessments. They can also act as commanders, forcing all other assessments and their associated actions, thoughts, and emotions to align themselves with the master assessment. They dictate, or at the very least, significantly influence what can and cannot happen.

Julio Olalla, founder of Newfield Network and a pioneer in the profession of coaching, describes the impact of master assessments using this example:

Now, imagine that I have a master assessment that I am a coward. This means that every other assessment I have of myself will be congruent with that one. My relationships will reflect my cowardice. I will develop strategies to hide the fact that I'm a coward. I will act in whatever way I believe will prevent others from seeing that truth about myself. It will define how I take action in moments of difficulty or fright. It will define an emotional space—maybe having pity for myself or despising myself or being angry with myself. When a master assessment is in place, it defines relationships, emotional worlds, and strategy. When we are able to look at it, it can be absolutely transforming. Over and over, I have seen people whose master assessment, once seen, stops having the weight that it had before. This produces enormous freedom and enormous joy.

David Rock, author, researcher, and master coach, describes the moment of insight as our opportunity to rewire our neural pathways. He calls this ability to rewire "self-directed neural plasticity." When we create new neural pathways, we are able to design our lives differently. We have awareness of the master assessment but can choose not to be driven by it. Engaging in ontological coaching can help our clients "rewire" by inviting them to deliberately

step out of their well-paved neural pathways, to practice new thoughts, actions, and emotions that lead to the learning and the future they want.

What follows is one example of how an ontological coach can work with master assessments and self-directed neural plasticity:

In the process of coaching, a client has declared her desire to pursue a new passion that requires a significant amount of public speaking. The challenge for this client is that one of her master assessments, "I am shy," has stopped her from doing public speaking in the past. One of many approaches she could take in rewiring neural pathways and dismantling this master assessment is to practice public speaking dozens of times until finally she can acknowledge, or is persuaded to admit: "I can do this...maybe I do not have to live in the story of being shy after all!"

As with any assessment, we can see the impact of master assessments extending from our thoughts to our emotions, moods, actions, physical shape, and movement patterns. Interestingly, the opposite can also be true: we may fall into a body posture or deep emotional state out of which some assessment may grow. The coherence that emerges from a master assessment provides more windows for observation—of ourselves and of our coaching clients.

Carol Courcy explains:

A well-defined and embodied master assessment blinds us to seeing a different way. For example, after years and years of living within an environment that supports and fosters what we think, we see ourselves AS these master assessments. That we don't see another way of being is where ontological coaching contributes so beautifully. Ontological coaches understand that the observer is constituted by our language, emotions, being, and doing.

Culture's Influence: Is This Master Assessment Really Mine?

Our assessments, "the way things are" for us, are shaped not only by our own life experience, but also by the life experiences of our parents, grandparents, and many others in the communities in which we live and work. Most master assessments are connected and congruent with the world in which we live. They are often linked to what is appreciated and allowed in our culture. By culture, we do not simply mean "country culture." Other cultures in which we live (such as our religious culture, family culture, or organizational culture) influence our self-assessments as well.

Julio Olalla points out:

If you look at a Catholic culture, the assessment of being a sinner is an assessment that would be very connected to, or coherent with, my world. People in that culture would be less likely to have "I am athletic" as a master assessment because it is irrelevant to the coherence of the world in which they live. They would also be less

likely to have “I am the author of my world” as a master assessment because it is contrary to the coherence of the Catholic culture (in which “God is the author of the world” is more accepted). A master assessment is very relevant to the world in which you live. It’s connected with the world; it defines relationships; it moves you in that sense.

Recognizing how master assessments are often culturally driven is important for coaching because it opens new doors for our clients. Clients who hold the negative results of their master assessments as their own fault, can benefit from acknowledging that these assessments logically emerge from the cultural “soup” they are in. Discovering and defining the larger cultural context of which a client is a part can generate compassion and alleviate suffering. It also allows them to let go of blame, thus removing an obstacle on the path to their desired future.

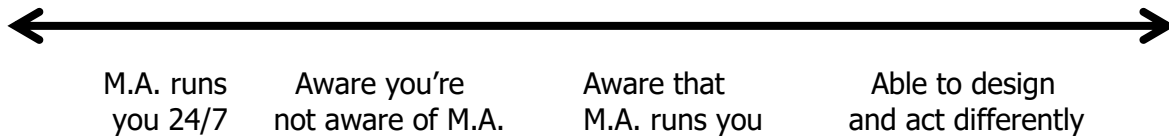
Terrie Lupberger, Master Certified Coach and former CEO of Newfield Network-USA, says: Ninety-nine percent of my U.S. clients come in with the master assessment, “I am not enough.” Through coaching, they get to see that their master assessment isn’t one that they made up on their own, but is one that the U.S. culture provided for them. If you think about it, every message we get from the U.S. culture says we either don’t have enough or we aren’t spending enough or we aren’t buying the right things or we aren’t enough without that product. The master assessment is already present in our culture, and we just take it on as our own without thinking. When the client begins to see that they are living in a cultural “soup” that comes highly spiced with the ingredient of “not enough,” they feel enormous freedom. They can now begin to develop their own power of choice.

Don’t Take My Master Assessment Away from Me!

After the master assessment is revealed, is it our job to help our clients get rid of it? Do we want to? As we stated earlier, our master assessments can sometimes fuel our ambition and help us achieve our dreams. Perhaps excising the master assessment completely is not a viable, or even a desirable, goal. Rather than trying to get rid of master assessments as though they are enemies, our focus is better placed on enhancing our awareness of how these master assessments influence us.

Imagine an “awareness continuum,” like the one pictured below. On one end, there is a master assessment that runs you 24/7. At this end of the continuum, you are unaware of being unaware. Moving to the right with increasing awareness, next you are aware that you are unaware. Here, you know that you are not clear about what your master assessment is and may not be aware of its impact. Continuing to the right, next you are aware that the master assessment runs you, may still feel that it’s “true,” and begin to observe it as a phenomenon and perhaps lightheartedly say, “Ha! There I go again!” Finally, at the far right, you reach a place where you design and act out of choice. You no longer act in your default mode. You have proven to yourself that it’s only an assessment, not the truth (not an assertion).

The Master Assessment Awareness Continuum:



At all points on the spectrum, the master assessment *still lives*. It operates in an increasingly weakened state as you supply more assertions to the contrary. The task at hand differs depending on where you fall on the continuum. At one end, you may focus on digging deeper to find the words for the master assessment and its impact on your life. At the other end, you may focus on creating practices that contribute to supporting the coherence and new future you want to step into.

What's a Coach to Do?

Now that we have explored the profound impact of our master assessments and the benefit of opening our awareness to them, we will turn to some of the coaching moves you might consider. To ignore master assessments in our coaching would be to miss an extraordinary possibility for our clients.

Consider one of your clients with respect to a particular master assessment and their place on the awareness continuum above. Wherever they are on the continuum, there is an array of possible moves you can make to unveil the master assessment and shake its grip. While we provide some of these moves in this article, we insist that this is not a comprehensive "how to" guide detailing the only "right answers." Instead, we offer an exploration of possible coaching moves that are linked to the three entry points we use in ontological coaching: language, emotions, and body.

Language

Naming It

In ontological coaching, a client's first big move is realizing and naming his or her master assessments. As coaches, we can facilitate this work by asking questions that invite our clients to look more closely or by sharing our guesses about what their master assessments may be. By considering and reacting to our hunches (that we propose, not tell), our clients may be able to find language that clarifies their master assessments. In the end, there is power in their own declaration of their master assessment.

Maria Carmen Güell, Master Certified Coach and former CEO of Newfield Network-Chile, states:

It is key for us, as ontological coaches, to unmask master assessments for our coaching clients, helping them to articulate them. In my experience, just naming master assessments as that, and not as truths (assertions) about themselves, the world or reality, is the most powerful move in the dance of coaching.

It is empowering and also frightening for coaching clients to see that a whole new world of possibilities lies in front of them. Now our coaching clients can choose. Now they have the power to design their lives as they work in a centered and adult way to build the future they desire.

In addition, articulating master assessments can reveal a dream or wish for the future that your clients may not have realized or voiced themselves. Julio Olalla adds "When, in your coaching, your client discloses his or her self-assessments, particularly master assessments, you will be in touch with the enormous dreams or wishes that person has for him or herself."

Taking Time to Reflect

Once the master assessment has been identified, your coaching client may need time to reflect on this realization. His or her life and personal identity have been shaped by this belief. Therefore, when the individual realizes that this new perspective is merely an assessment, he or she may experience the collapse of the old understanding as a loss. Often, the client will feel both tremendously sad and extremely joyful in the face of this fundamental revelation.

Inviting your client to reflect on such an immense shift by simply sitting with it, rather than attempting to take action, can support deeper learning and awareness. Another way to ease the transition is by writing. Provide your client with the option of journaling answers to questions such as the following:

- In what domains of my life has this story dictated my plans and decisions?
- How has my master assessment served me?
- What has the cost been?
- How do I behave and what do I do when I believe that my master assessment is true?
- How would I be different in my thoughts, emotions, or actions if I did not believe my master assessment is true?

Deconstructing

Another way we can invite our coaching clients to look more closely at their master assessments is to help them deconstruct the master assessment. This involves three steps:

1. Ground the assessment by identifying assertions that support your belief or master assessment. (How does it make sense?)
2. Identify assertions that do not support your master assessment. (How does it not make sense?)

3. Gather or remind yourself of assessments that both support and do not support your master assessment.

The following example is a deconstruction of the master assessment, "I am not smart enough."

Assertions that support "I am not smart enough:"

- I flunked 8th grade math.
- I didn't get into my first or second choice college.
- My SAT scores were lower than my best friend's.
- My siblings said, "No, you can't. You are dumb, and besides, you don't know how."

Assertions that do not support "I am not smart enough:"

- I started my own business at age 23.
- I expanded my business to two cities.
- I manage my own schedule and am my own boss.
- I graduated from college and have done post-graduate work.

Assessments from others that support and that do not support "I am not smart enough":

Take note of assessments from people whose opinion you respect in order to validate or invalidate your belief. Examples could include:

- "You are a smart woman."
- "I'd hire you in a heartbeat if you were available."
- "How do you know how to do that?"
- "You numbskull!"

Since master assessments are global in nature and not necessarily logical, it may help to invite your coaching client to collect assessments from others that are relevant to their master assessment. Inevitably, your client will hear assessments that both support and contradict their master assessment. As they hear the assessments from others, encourage your coaching client to suspend judgment and just take them in.

Keep the following in mind: Master assessments don't necessarily follow perfect logic. One important aspect of this process is to meet the coaching client where she or he is. The insight that comes from identifying, naming, and reflecting on the master assessment ultimately allows a new world of possibility to open up.

From each individual deconstruction, your coaching client can now see the past impact of their master assessment. They can also discern where the master assessment has had the most influence. The question now is: In what specific areas of life has this been most or least helpful? In career, family, relationships, body, spirituality, or other areas? What new choices are now open, given this new perspective on an old master assessment?

Deconstructing in this way gives your coaching clients a fuller picture, a bigger mirror to look into, so they can see the impact that their master assessments have had on their lives. Once your clients can see their master assessments more fully, they can *choose* how they want to design their lives going forward, rather than allowing their master assessments to choose and design for them.

Emotions

Language provides one door to help our coaching clients better articulate and understand their master assessments. Emotions and moods provide another.

Identifying Emotional States

Identifying the emotions and moods that emerge with the master assessment can be eye-opening for our coaching clients, sometimes providing a fuller picture of their master assessments and their impact. Asking our coaching clients questions such as the following may help them identify these moods and emotions:

- What emotional states show up when you reflect on and believe your master assessment?
- What emotions have you been deprived of when you hold this master assessment?
- How might you develop the capacity to experience those emotions more frequently?
- What emotional states show up when you reflect on the master assessment's opposite?
- What emotional states show up when you imagine the future you have declared you want?
- What emotions are not available?
- What emotions and emotional competencies would you like to add to your life that would serve you in moving along the continuum to more choice around your master assessment?
- What practices could you design in order to learn these new emotions and competencies?
- What have you not allowed yourself to explore given the emotional power your master assessment has had over you?
- If you had 10 times more courage, what emotions would you allow yourself to experience given what you've learned?

Engaging with a Mood of Lightness and Curiosity

The mood we bring to coaching is also very important. The coach's mood of lightness and curiosity is critical to the work of unearthing master assessments. Maria Carmen Güell offers, "When my coaching clients give me an assessment as if it is etched in stone, I reply with the words, '...or not!' They usually ask, 'What do you mean?' and a new entry point to the conversation is opened." This is an example of an approach that brings lightness to the conversation, rather than approaching the master assessment from a place of seriousness.

Julio Olalla adds:

When you bring the conversation to a state of lightness, you are providing every coaching client with an emotional context that was not available previously. It's not just the distinction that you produce that is so extraordinary; it's the mood in which you have the conversation that is critical. If the conversation can be had in a mood of lightness, in a mood where we can have some tears and also some laughter about the master assessment, you are providing an extraordinary possibility for the coaching client. You create an emotional realm for them to deal with it that for that person was completely unthinkable before talking with you. So it's not just the intelligence of the conversation; it's the greatness of the distinctions you provide and also the mood, the emotional place in which the conversation can be had.

Body – Shape and Movement

Now we turn to the third door in our coaching work in master assessments: the body. Similar to the explorations in language and emotion, body-based coaching moves are as numerous as our creativity and our coaching relationships allow. For some clients, using the body can be an effective way to deepen their understanding of their master assessment.

We'll use the "I am shy" master assessment to identify some possible ways a coach could work with his or her client.

Starting with the client's familiar physical postures and shape, the coach could ask:

- What is the disposition/shape of "I'm shy?" Show me.
- Have the client speak the declaration that matches their master assessment, such as: "I can't be outgoing and bold...I'm shy." Note: Because this is a familiar place for the coaching client, the shape and the declaration is usually very coherent both for the client and for the coach who is observing. If not, make adjustments until the declaration and shape are coherent.
- As you hold this position, exaggerate it. What do you notice? What do you notice about your eyes? Describe your breath. Do you feel contracted in your face, chest, eyes, etc.? Do you feel expanded...relaxed? Note: The coaching client usually feels "normal." The "I'm shy" Master Assessment has created a coherent shape in how she or he has lived.
- Now that you've observed this shape more closely, exaggerate it even more. Hold a few seconds.
- Now, let go. Shake it all off. Let all your muscles change, shift, and breathe. Allow a moment of reflection and shake loose the grip of the Master Assessment.
- Note: Now that your coaching client has a more embodied experience of their Master Assessment, here are some more reflections and questions: Given the impact your Master Assessment has had so far, what future can you predict if you continue along the same path. Is that OK with you? (Warning: all answers are OK and acceptable!) If your client is ready and eager to create a shift for the sake of something they care

about, it is a perfect time to invite them to this next step in designing the future s/he wants instead.

Inviting the coaching client's declared future, the coach could continue:

- Show me the opposite shape of "I'm shy."
- Have the client speak the declaration that matches that shape and the new view of themselves that they want, such as: "I am bold. When I walk in a room, my presence is noticed."
- You can also ask, "Now that you've taken into account your master assessment and the impact it's had so far, what is the future view of yourself that you want instead? What is a more balanced and full view of you?" (And have them embody that.)
- Note: If the shape feels uncomfortable, you're on the right track. If the words are difficult to speak, no adjusting is necessary—you're in rich territory.
- As you hold the position, exaggerate it and tell me what you notice (as in the above example with I'm shy). Note: The tolerance for holding this new shape and speaking these new words is usually low. Be gentle yet rigorous.
- Shifts will come for your clients when they commit to a practice...the practice of becoming who they declare themselves to be.
- Note: Your job as the coach is in allowing the coaching client to observe who they have been so they can now become observers of who they are becoming. The nervous system loves homeostasis. Our bodies will want to revert back to what has been. Give permission for being human. Take notice of the emotional states as the shapes change. There is no judgment – just observe.

With any of these somatic approaches, coaches and their clients can then co-create practices for rewiring the client's default postures and ways of moving so that they can design the life they declare they want. While this approach may look like a prescription, we insist that this is a collaborative process that unfolds uniquely in the moment of the coaching conversation. Each observer will have a different experience and the coach's work is to dance with that observer and that experience.

Conclusion

Master assessment work is an important part of the work of an ontological coach. By challenging your coaching clients to examine the effects their master assessments have produced, you are inviting your clients to become more self-aware and present. By reminding them that their master assessments are part of a larger cultural "soup," you produce relief from blame. By challenging them to use this greater self-awareness as a catalyst for change, you light a path toward their desired future.

They can initiate this change by engaging their centered presence, breath, muscular tension, ways of moving, emotional states, prevailing moods, and the stories they tell themselves. Through effective ontological coaching, you can help your coaching client loosen the grip of old stories that bind them to engrained habits, and engage with freedom in a fresh, new world of possibilities.

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