

**Research Paper: Using Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory
to Support Learning in Mentoring & Coaching Relationships**

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Sophocles is credited with saying: "There is no success without hardship."

Therefore, one might say that no successful person has made it to where they are without persevering through challenges, set backs, reroutes and outright failures.

Interestingly, the term "pivot" has been popularized in recent years which is seemingly a rebranding of a company's possible failure. Pivot is the action a company takes when their initial plans are unsuccessful and they reroute their business strategy to a new path. This has placed a positive spin on the act of aiming to avoid financial ruin.

So, on the road to success, bumps are seemingly inevitable. But what if we could avoid costly, time-consuming setbacks and proceed towards personal success without as many undue hardships? I think this is possible by applying Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory into one's learning activities. Specifically, I believe we can bring Bandura's theory into the coaching setting and apply it along with the coachee's relationship with a qualified mentor.

In Social Cognitive Theory, Bandura posits that learning is a rational, cognitive process in the learner, where there does not need to be any overt behaviour by the learner for learning to occur (Bandura, 1977). In addition, unlike Skinner's well-known behaviourist learning theory, Conditioning Theory, there does not need to be a formal teacher for learning to occur. The learner instead follows three phases in the learning process: attention, retention and behavioural reproduction (Bandura, 1977). In the retention phase, there are underlying cognitive processes known as symbolic coding, cognitive organization, and symbolic rehearsal, which all relate to encoding the observed behaviour into the learner's mental modeling which then allow for the final step of behavioural reproduction (Bandura, 1977). This process would be akin to a

learner watching someone perform a skill, mentally rehearsing the skill and incorporating it into their mental movement patterns, and then trying the skill physically. The key to learning and growth here is that the learner can use cognitive processes such as attention and observation to integrate learnings without the need for an active instructor.

Bandura (1977) incorporates some additional concepts that moderate the effectiveness of learning which are motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulation. These three concepts are areas I believe would be very important to bring into the coaching setting and will be important support systems for the learning that occurs between the learner and the mentor. Observing a mentor's behaviour may not allow a learner to develop motivation or self-efficacy, however this is exactly some areas in which a coaching conversation can help a coachee. Knowing that motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation are key components to supporting learning through SCT, learning can be enriched through coaching along with mentorship.

This paper will argue that a qualified mentor can be an expert who we can observe and model our behaviour after, which can serve to teach us how to step into a next level of development, and that the coaching setting will enliven and support the learning which is moderated by Social Cognitive Theory. Leveraging the frameworks of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a qualified mentor can help the learner progress in their learning journey to level up more swiftly and efficiently, develop a mental model for visualizing their next level, and avoid undue hardship.

It is important to consider what type of Mentor is selected, and to pick the right one for optimal learning and growth. Now we may consider Nick Petrie's theory of

horizontal and vertical development as it relates to my concept of leveling up. When looking to reach the next level of growth and development for a coachee, this means a significant leap into new territory with increasing complexity of demands on one's skills and competencies. Petrie defines horizontal development as adding knowledge and skills and being taught by experts, whereas vertical development is earned through life experience and is more about growing abilities to think, feel, and act in interdependent and systemic ways (Petrie, 2020). Petrie believes that for vertical development to occur, there needs to be three conditions: heat experiences, colliding perspectives, and reflection on your experiences (Petrie, 2020). Although Petrie believes vertical development can only happen through personal life experience, I align with Bandura's SCT, in that observation and attention to other's behaviour can facilitate learning and also vertical development. For example, I could observe a family member make a poor investment decision, and learn indirectly to be very careful about where I invest my own money. I do not need to emulate this mistake to learn it for myself as Petrie might argue. However, I do believe that vertical development requires a completely different methodology of learning than horizontal does. Namely, SCT can support us immensely with the use of a mentor and coaching to facilitate and enrich the leveling up learning process.

In addition, there is a popular term created by Lacy Phillips's To Be Magnetic, and her concept of Expanders™. To Be Magnetic defines an Expander™ as a person in whom we recognize as having aspects of ourselves that invite us to grow into them (Phillips, 2020). I see this as leveraging the concept of mentorship, in a way that allows greater accessibility and less of a direct reciprocal relationship. This is because TBM

allows for Expanders™ to be people you do not know, such as celebrities, and who can inspire you to grow without you even knowing this person (Phillips, 2020). I would argue that while a celebrity can be inspirational, the greater opportunity for growth comes when our model or Mentor is closer to home. In this way, we are able to personally witness behaviours to model or learn from, and can therefore also receive direct feedback and guidance from our mentor.

Mentors that are closer to us physically and socially can be aspirational in that we can seek to follow successful aspects of their journey which can allow us to create mental models for our own development paths. They say there is nothing new under the sun. Why not take advantage of the successful behaviours of others by learning from them, rather than trying to remake the wheel? Using Bandura's theory, we can observe the paths our mentor has carved on the way to their success. This is not about copying our mentor's exact journey, this is about observing and attending to their specific path, and then the cognitive processing and symbolic encoding of their behaviour patterns within the context of our own lives. In that way, when it's time to actively carry out the learned behaviour and to test the learnings, it can be relevant and hopefully successful. If there is no success in actioning the learned behaviour, it may be that the context was too different or the external factors have since changed and therefore this action no longer solves the problem at hand. In any case, this was an efficient use of time and resources as the behaviour could have been successful, leading to new growth, or been unsuccessful and an option has been ruled out. As a result, using a mentor and SCT mechanisms can lead to more efficient and swift problem solving and paths through vertical development.

Next, having a mentor can support the development of a mental model for vertical growth, or leveling up, that would not otherwise be possible. It is often advised to design with the end in mind. Without a clear image of the end goal, it can be challenging to chart a course towards it. In addition, it can be motivating and aspirational to see one's goals achieved by a mentor as it allows us to see the possibility in attaining the goal. If someone can do it, I can do it. When we have a mentor within our sphere who has achieved something we deem to be great, and they are in a place we would someday like to be at or near, we can use this to create a mental model to strive towards. Again, this is not about copying our mentor, this is about creating a vision of our own and momentum with a trajectory towards vertical growth and a new level for ourselves. Through Bandura's SCT, we observe our mentor, we integrate and consolidate their behaviours into our own internal and external context, and then we try our own behaviour rehearsal of our own unique solution. There is no way we could copy the exact path of our mentor because we are a unique person with completely different lived experiences and contexts. However, creating a mental model with their help allows us to create a trajectory to move towards which is helpful compared to the alternative of generating ideas and a desired end-result from scratch.

Finally, having a mentor can help prevent undue hardship along the learning journey. We can not only learn from the successes and solutions our mentor has experienced, but we can observe the challenges, missteps and failures of our mentors. If my family member has touched a hot stove, I do not need to repeat this error to learn the valuable lesson. With Bandura's SCT, in observing, retaining, and behaving as if I had learned a hard lesson myself, I am leveraging the beneficial cognitive processes I

have been endowed with through the processes of evolution of the social human being. We have evolved to collaborate, communicate and learn. We might as well incorporate the social learning mechanism into avoiding some undue hardships and painful life lessons that we observe in others. Perhaps our mentor took a job at a company with red flags and learned the hard way about the importance of trusting one's gut. Or perhaps our mentor never took time off and suffered burnout and this has now taught the learner to incorporate mental wellness practices into their life. The sky is the limit with what learnings can be applied. The key here is having a well-suited mentor that can deliver relevant and helpful learnings which can help the learner avoid such hardships. Overall, leveraging SCT theory and the use of a mentor, the learner can avoid some common pitfalls and setbacks as they pursue their leveling up journey.

On the other hand, one might argue that it is through challenges, setbacks and failures that one develops mental and cognitive resilience and these are necessary for robust character development. I would agree that persevering through hardships and overcoming challenges is crucial for character development, but that not all hardships are necessary to experience. Undue suffering may break a spirit rather than strengthen it. I believe that one does not need to learn every lesson under the sun to become a complex, successful human being, but that some could possibly be learned through the indirect experience of others or from a mentor as I have mentioned above. Would this be considered a "shortcut" in life? No I do not think so. I believe it allows us to leverage mechanisms of social learning and collectively share knowledge and wisdom. This sharing of lessons may even ease collective suffering, and can facilitate greater levels of learning and transcendence for all.

Using a mentor to learn is not to say you avoid your challenges and setbacks, but you avoid common ones, and can transcend and find your own unique failures to make. After making your own unique failures and learning lessons, you can then impart your own wisdom upon other willing learners. Like geese flying in formation who rotate around the front position to bear the burden of the headwinds, you can now take flight at the front and allow others to fly in the protected jetstream as you did. With the support of a qualified coach, the learner's progress can be enriched by developing motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation.

In conclusion, through the use of a qualified mentor and following Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory's frameworks, a coachee can ease their learning process to leveling up by avoiding undue hardship, having a mental model to aim their efforts towards, and to progress through their learning journey more swiftly and efficiently. As a result of leveraging the learnings and modeling the behaviour from their mentor, the coachee now has the opportunity to transcend what has come before them, and to find new heights to strive for. They will undoubtedly encounter bumps on the road, hardships, and lessons, however they will be greater and grander than if they had made their journey alone and experienced every hard lesson of those who came before them. In addition, the learner will ideally have a coach as well as a mentor to help navigate these challenges, with a particular focus on developing motivation, self-efficacy and self-regulation. As we've argued above, there is no need to "go it" alone and the collective wisdom of others, and our mentor, can be of great benefit to us and our learning.

References:

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