



Creating Space for Human Flourishing: Partnering with the Metaverse in Coaching

Dr. Kelly M. G. Whelan

Belem Leaders

Roundtable: Professional Coaching

Abstract

Professional coaching involves developing various skills that, when consistently strengthened over time, enhance effectiveness and impact the coach-client partnership. In an era where artificial intelligence and the metaverse are developing at record speeds, integrating technologies into coaching practices is complex, bringing unique challenges for practitioners working to maintain integrity. As the coaching profession explores tech-driven environments, Christian and secular coaches seek to understand opportunities, limitations, and ethical considerations. With new ways of operating using digital platforms, metaverse practitioners must elevate their learning and development and coaching presence to design a psychologically safe client experience. Colossians 3:23 (*New International Version Bible, 1978/1990*), provides guidance in “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters.” This presentation paper will examine how practitioners can partner with man-made technologies to create human flourishing through coaching opportunities delivered with excellence.

Keywords: Christian coaching, metaverse, artificial intelligence, integrity, transformation, psychological safety, technology, presence, flourishing

Introduction

The coaching industry is marked by transformative conversations that, when done right and well, significantly impact individuals, teams, and organizations. Over the years, professional coaching has evolved into a billion-dollar industry. While the dollar signs demonstrate the money spent, the ways of delivering coaching have changed dramatically. Historically, coaching was conducted face to face, but in recent years, a shift towards digital modalities has evolved. Due to a pandemic, practitioners experienced a decline in traditional face-to-face engagements. According to Passmore et

2024 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 263-270

© 2024 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

al. (2024), fewer than 30% of coaches were meeting in person with clients. Telephonic coaching decreased by 21%, and as our world continued to experience change, it became advantageous to utilize digital platforms like Zoom and Microsoft Teams for coaching sessions. These platforms experienced a substantial increase with 43.85% of coaching conversations being completed in a quasi-face-to-face environment. This digital modality became the go-to for coaches and clients alike (43.85%).

With computer innovations, the way humans interact has been transformed (Yasuda, 2024). With the availability, affordability, and ease of using digital modalities realized, meeting with clients via technology-based platforms made way for fewer travel requirements, allowing engagements to take place across the globe with a click of a button. What was once regarded as the future of coaching has now become our present reality. This shift highlights the necessity for practitioners to refine their skills, embrace innovative coaching environments, and engage in discussions with clients about meeting preferences and requirements. Each modality of coaching has benefits and drawbacks. What remains the same is the need for professional coaches to not only develop competencies that demonstrate their abilities but also be committed to delivering them with integrity.

Adopting a Metaverse Mindset

Practitioners have a responsibility to be open to and cultivate a continuous mindset of openness to new learning and integrity as they discover ways to work in the metaverse. There is a different feel for the coach, a different feel for the client. Because of the newness of this technology for practitioners, they may be learning with their clients, together in a new world of being. As practitioners engage, they must accept the fact that our world is rapidly changing, and because of this, navigating unfamiliar territory can be uncomfortable.

Embracing a future-oriented and client-centered mindset, coaches must cultivate the skills necessary for their ongoing professional growth, particularly in an industry where unqualified individuals often present themselves as coaches. Obtaining certification, which requires specific and ongoing training, helps differentiate coaches on paper. However, having a certification is only as good as the coach can partner with their clients to bring about flourishing. Working in the digital space challenges practitioners in areas of learning and development, coaching presence, and designing environments that promote psychological safety, and integrity.

Coaching competencies and calls for ethical guidance have evolved, though slowly, in response to emerging needs. It is essential for coaches to continually learn and adapt so they can serve their clients well. With continued advancements in technology, the metaverse has become a social platform where artificial intelligence technologies have

created an immersive experience that, while not perfect, is intuitive. This new way of operating in the coaching world calls for practitioners to increase their adaptability, mindset, skill set, and ethical considerations. For the Christian practitioner, being mindful of the guidance in Colossians 3:23, “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters,” (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/1990) should be front of mind as we engage with His people.

Defining the Metaverse

The word “metaverse” conjures up different feelings, mindsets, and scenarios. For most practitioners, like artificial intelligence, metaverse is a new word that comes with many unknowns. Metaverse is a term for three-dimensional worlds; technology that enables multi-sensory interaction between the physical and digital worlds (Yasuda, 2024; Ritterbusch & Teichmann, 2023). Like the word “coaching” and the word “leadership,” there is not a uniform, scientific, one-sentence definition of metaverse. The definition continues to change and evolve as it is perceived, depending on the stakeholder and their lens.

The word “metaverse” was first introduced in 1992 in a science fiction book called *Snow Crash* by Neal Stephenson (Ng, 2022, Ritterbusch & Teichmann, 2023; Yasuda, 2024). In his book, Stephenson proposes that the metaverse is an evolution of the internet, built on virtual reality and inhabited by avatars controlled by users. Moreover, Ng (2022) cites Dionisio et al. (2013) who conceptualize the prefix, “meta” to mean beyond and “verse” is suggested to mean universe. More recent definitions and conceptualizations have evolved to include:

- “a network of 3-D virtual worlds where people can interact, do business, and forge social connections through their virtual avatars” (Jin, 2024, as cited in Purdy, 2022) and
- “an augmented digital world that is blending physical and virtual spaces through the use of extended reality (XR) and artificial intelligence-based systems for uses to interact, and/or trade virtual goods or services through cryptocurrencies” (Cho et al., 2023).

Stephenson’s book did not gain much notoriety when published, but in recent years has increased interest as the popularity of the metaverse has been established. In 2003, one of the first metaverse avatar platforms was created by Linden Lab founder, Philip Rosedale, and it was called *Second Life* (Ritterbusch & Teichmann, 2023). Ten years later, this 3-D platform boasted 36 million user accounts and one million monthly users from around the world (Linden Lab, 2013). *Second Life* failed to deliver on the anticipated breakthrough due to technical limitations and the size of the platform’s audience, which they call residents. There were also issues with the lack of advancement in virtual

reality glasses. However, 20 years later, Second Life continues to suggest they “provide a safe space for its residents to express their authentic selves” (Linden Lab, 2023).

In 2021, Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg shared the vision of the metaverse. He unveiled Facebook’s rebranded and reimagined way of who and what they are as a company to advance how people experience the world (Meta, 2021). Meta, as a company, was born. The Meta newsroom shares:

Meta builds technologies that help people connect, find communities, and grow businesses. When Facebook launched in 2004, it changed the way people connect. Apps like Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp further empowered billions around the world. Now, Meta is moving beyond 2D screens toward immersive experiences like augmented and virtual reality to help build the next evolution in social technology. (What is Meta? section)

Christian Perspectives

Coaching is about creating a sacred space where transformation can take root with flourishing and impact as the outcomes. In the metaverse, this is still true. There is much to deliberate at the intersection of biblical principles and the moral and ethical considerations of the metaverse. When in a coaching session, whether it is by telephone, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or another chosen platform, practitioners must consider the client first and foremost. As a Christian practitioner, biblical principles will always serve as the foundation of coaching inside or outside of the metaverse. Scripture teaches us the value of love, integrity, and accountability. These are all aspects that are carried into coaching engagements.

Increasingly, as we forge into the metaverse, coaches must create opportunities to explore, learn, and share their experiences. Proverbs 27:17 teaches that “as iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another” (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/1990). This is important in the coaching relationship but also equally important in the coach-to-coach relationship, as new awareness and skill sets are learned and practiced. Practitioners should ponder the following:

- What new experiences can I share and with whom?
- What new coaching competencies are being developed in the metaverse?
- What does a digital practitioner and the client relationship look or feel like?
- What challenges am I experiencing and how are challenges overcome?

Mark 10:45 teaches, “for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/1990). As coaches, we should adopt this mindset. We must look to prioritize the needs of the client and foster a supportive, safe environment that empowers them to grow and flourish regardless of the coaching

environment or platform we use. Adoption of working in the metaverse must include an action plan of assessing the readiness and comfort level of your client prior to entering an alternate world. This approach builds trust and encourages openness, which is essential in the metaverse where all senses are on high alert. Showing up for our clients in our humanness with the Holy Spirit as our guide is a powerful combination to bring into the coaching engagement to be in service of our clients.

Ethical Considerations

There are ethical considerations for practitioners to contemplate when delivering coaching in the metaverse. During a panel discussion on Artificial Intelligence (AI) at the 2023 Professional Coaching Roundtable, I brought forward the *Belem Leaders Guiding Principles for Practitioners: AI Commitments and Best Practices* (Belem Leaders, 2023). These principles were developed and released on October 17, 2023, in conjunction with Dr. Diane Wiater of Wiater Consulting Group, after realizing there was no guidance for the use of AI from a Christian perspective. Areas of concern during the development phase were addressing the challenges practitioners were experiencing to include ethical impact which 35% of the respondents from 19 countries relayed as the number one area to be impacted by AI in the Belem Leaders 2023 research on *The Future of Coaching and Consulting Survey*. The anonymity and virtual nature of the metaverse must foster a safe space for all users. Each area of the Belem commitments consists of what we believe, biblical inspiration as guiding scripture, and a practitioner commitment. This first attempt at creating guidance has proven to be a much-needed advancement in the conversations around ethical practice and the use of technology that include the following six pillars:

1. God as Creator
2. Honor & Care for Others
3. Co-Creating through Collaboration and Partnerships
4. Intentional, Continuous Learning
5. Permissions, Privacy, Transparency, and Informed Consent
6. Research and Thought Leadership

Christian practitioners must ensure that their practices align with Christian values, promoting in all things the character of Christ. The six pillars of *Guiding Principles for Practitioners: AI Commitments and Best Practices* give all people, regardless of role, the understanding of how to align Christian faith with using AI which also translates to the metaverse. There are tremendous issues with data privacy, consent, and the potential for harmful behaviors. Having guardrails in place to help practitioners uphold ethical standards, reflect the Christian faith, and enhance the credibility and effectiveness of professional practices becomes a win-win for both client and coach.

Unique Opportunities for Practitioners

There may be challenges for practitioners when deliberating the use of the metaverse as a coaching platform, however, there are also opportunities to consider. These new opportunities are exciting because they enhance development. Developing as a practitioner with a focus on both skill enhancement and business growth offers a unique environment for a coaching practice. Practitioners who have the desire to increase their skills can meet in the metaverse to experiment with coaching techniques, engage in role-play, and receive real-time feedback from peers and clients. This immersive experience can enhance coaching and communication skills, increase adaptability, and increase emotional intelligence as senses become heightened.

Coaches can take part in online workshops and certification courses that are designed specifically for the metaverse and virtual coaching. Having a continuous learning mindset will help early adopters and the curious keep current on industry trends, but also enrich their technology tool kit. Adding the metaverse to your toolkit and bringing best practices into engagements allows practitioners to serve their clients with excellence as they continue to practice. As the metaverse continues to pique the interest of academics and practitioners, resources and training programs will continue to develop and gain strength. With added learning comes opportunities to grow as a coach and as a leader in the technology space.

The metaverse also presents opportunities for coaches to expand their reach by establishing a virtual presence. We can connect with clients within the metaverse just like we do on Zoom or Teams regardless of geographic location. The opportunity to break down barriers that might exist in traditional coaching settings is no more if there is an internet connection to enter the space together. According to Jin (2024), an important principle when creating a humane metaverse is for it to be inclusive and equitable. However, because of the lack of internet connection and skills that are needed, inequities still exist. To counter this, there are metaverse devices that do not need an internet connection, and with time, any skills needed can be learned.

Providing space to coach, connect, and pique the curiosity of new or existing clients in the metaverse allows practitioners to create unique offerings, differentiating their services in a competitive market. The metaverse is an excellent way to capture a segment of the population who loves gaming – people who are already comfortable in the virtual reality space. Do you know younger people who do not want to step into coaching even if coaching is offered in the workplace? These potential clients may find coaching intriguing if their engagements are delivered in the metaverse. They already have experience with virtual reality; bringing them into coaching via the metaverse could increase the practitioner's client base and create impact for the client. Professional coaches who choose to coach in the virtual space create an environment for their clients

to flourish. With practice, coaches can intentionally create psychological safety, establish trusting relationships, and demonstrate heightened awareness and presence necessary in the metaverse.

Concluding Thoughts

As we work on behalf of the Lord, we leave an open door for our clients to experience our Christian faith, even if the client does not practice the same faith. A Christian coach may not always serve fellow Christians as clients. Still, I challenge my fellow practitioners to show up fully as a Christian coach. By grounding our work in biblical principles, embracing the character of Christ, and being vigilant about moral and ethical considerations, practitioners can gain ground as they navigate the complexities of the metaverse. Even in this complex environment, we can still create a positive experience, an opportunity for flourishing, and create impact in and for our clients. There is still work to do in creating a metaverse that is everything practitioners may want this space to be. There are still glitches and areas within the technology that might not work smoothly. There are still questions that will emerge as coaches step into new ways of operating. Although the metaverse is still a little bit clunky at times, it is fun to play in and allow clients the opportunity to engage. Are you ready to deliver coaching in an alternate world?

About the Author

Dr. Kelly M. G. Whelan is a globally recognized executive and team development strategist and founder of Belem LLC (Belem Leaders). Dr. Whelan is a 2017 DSL graduate of Regent University and an adjunct in the doctoral coaching concentration. She is certified as a Gallup® Strengths Coach and, with a passion for working with teams, holds a European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) ITCA- Sr. Practitioner Level team coaching accreditation. In keeping with bringing a Christian voice to the world, Dr. Whelan became editor-in-chief of *Christian Coaching Magazine* following a July 2022 acquisition by Belem LLC.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Kelly M. G. Whelan.
Email: info@belemleaders.org

References

- Belem Leaders. (2023). *Guiding principles for practitioners: AI commitments and best practices*. <https://belemleaders.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Belem-Guiding-Principles-for-Practitioners-RDPDFA-10.17.23.pdf>
- Belem Leaders. (2024, February 29). *Artificial intelligence: Are you ready* [Presentation]. CCMi Sr. Practitioner Research Project.

- Cho, J., tom Dieck, M. C., & Jung, T. (2023). What is the metaverse? Challenges, opportunities, definition, and future research directions. In T. Jung, M. C. tom Dieck, & S. Loureiro (Eds.), *Extended reality - XR in times of crisis* (pp. 3–26). Springer.
- Dionisio, J. D. N., Burns, W. G., III, & Gilbert, R. (2013). 3D virtual worlds and the metaverse. *ACM Computing Surveys*, 45(3), 1–38.
- Jin, S. V. (2024). “In the metaverse we (mis)trust?” Third-level digital (in)equality, social phobia, neo-luddism, and blockchain/cryptocurrency transparency in the artificial intelligence-powered metaverse. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking*, 27(1), 64–75. <https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2022.0376>
- Linden Lab. (2013, June 20). *Second Life celebrates 10-year Anniversary* [Press release]. <https://lindenlab.com/press-release/second-life-celebrates-10-year-anniversary>
- Linden Lab. (2023, June 22). *Original Metaverse Celebrates 20th Birthday* [Press release]. <https://lindenlab.com/press-release/original-metaverse-second-life-celebrates-20th-birthday>
- Meta. (2021, October 28). *Introducing Meta: A social technology company*. [Press release]. <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta>
- New International Version Bible*. (1990). Zondervan (Original work published 1978)
- Ng, D. T. K. (2022). What is the metaverse? Definitions, technologies and the community of inquiry. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 38(4), 190–205. <https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.7945>
- Passmore, J., Diller, S. J., Isaacson, S., & Brantl, M. (2024). *The digital and AI coaches' handbook: The complete guide to the use of online, AI and technology in coaching*. Routledge.
- Purdy, M. (2022). How the metaverse could change work. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2022/04/how-the-metaverse-could-change-work>
- Ritterbusch, G., & Teichmann, M. (2023). Defining the metaverse: A systematic literature review. *IEEE Access*. <https://doi.org/10.1109/ACCESS.2023.3241809>
- Yasuda, A. (2024). Metaverse ethics: Exploring the social implications of the metaverse. *AI Ethics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-024-00507-5>