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This Thing Called Coaching

A Consultant’s Story

By Ginny Storjohann

In this article I hope to stir the curiosity of *OD Practitioner* readers about our reactions and responses to coaching, and to engage you in contributing to the body of knowledge being developed about coaching and OD. In so doing, we can start to define criteria and competencies that distinguish coaching from an OD consulting perspective as the unique, powerful and timely intervention it is becoming in this age of human development.

A snapshot

“I heard some fine consulting, but no coaching here. You won’t pass your exams with this.” The devastating feedback came from my coaching supervisor who had just listened to one of my client sessions with me. I was stunned. I thought that with all my experience in Human Resources (HR), Leadership Development, and Organization Development consulting, becoming a professionally certified coach would be no big deal.

The coaching we’d just co-reviewed involved a Director in a large health system describing a long standing interpersonal problem with an important co-worker. She was at her wit’s end as she described a variety of failed efforts to change the situation for the better. I’d been listening deeply and responding with understanding, compassion and mild curiosity. Soon I’d begun to ask powerful questions, like “What’s needed now?” and “How will you get there?” The more I delved the more certain she became that she’d already tried everything to no avail, and that the other

person was not only at fault, but evil to the core.

Having spent many years consulting in the conflict management arena, I dove right in and began asking, “What’s your preferred conflict style?” and, “Have you spoken directly to your co-worker about the problem?” This was the coaching belly flop that my supervisor was pointing out. It was evident that in the tension of the moment I’d defaulted into leading questions, contextual analysis and advice. I was no longer coaching. My method was not appropriate for what my client needed; nor was it congruent with a cornerstone belief of the coaching world – the client is creative, resourceful and whole. That is, she has her own answers. My role is to hang in with her as she looks for and sometimes finds them. But, what if she doesn’t seem able to do so? I was finding this thing called coaching to be more of a big deal than I’d anticipated.

Was my coaching supervisor, a former therapist who had transitioned into life coaching, making a valid point here? Had I assumed myself to be more capable of coaching than what was the case? Is there a significant difference between coaching and consulting at the individual level of system? Did I know what I didn’t know about the often subtle, yet important distinctions between coaching and consulting?

Like many fledgling coaches, I began examining these questions by entering a coaching certification program credentialed by the more than 10,000 member International Coaching Federation

(ICF). Several challenging months later I successfully met requirements to sit for an oral and written exam that earned me the designation of Certified Professional Co-active Coach (CPCC).

Soon I was coaching several mostly executive level people and finding myself genuinely tickled with the challenge and joy of it all. It had been a long time since I felt I was doing such meaningful work that incorporated so much of what I know is important. That is, working in authentic connection with clients committed to having a positive influence in their world – quality people, courageously addressing their own difficult and confusing realities, and initiating change in a variety of ways, such as:

- » Reordering their work and life according to more clearly defined values, priorities and goals;
- » Shifting the way they see and behave in the face of dramatic ongoing change and ambiguity;
- » Making clear requests, commitments, declarations and decisions.

Not one to keep good news to myself for long, I shared my passion about coaching with my OD colleagues. I was disappointed to hear the responses from many of them. It sounded like they were bristling from some mixture of apathy and disdain for coaching. An experiential coaching program I offered for OD peers did create engagement, while adding confusion with take-away comments such as:

- » “Yes, I’m providing paid coaching, but I’m not sure if that’s what I should call it;”
- » “I let the clients call it what they wish;” and
- » “I assume it’s something I’ve always done with no real distinction from individual consulting.”

Richard Beckhard says, “Coaching is an important and often central part of most OD consultant’s practices. In the past years it has become the activity that, for many produces the basic relationship they have with their clients and their bread and butter income.”

Is coaching different from the one

to one consulting that most of us have done, often as a regular part of a larger OD project? Does it warrant a deeper and more thoughtful look?

A coaching description (including derivatives and misnomers)

Coaching is a buzzword, loosely used to describe so many varied functions and objectives, that it’s little wonder some professionals are reluctant to connect themselves with it. The dictionary meaning of coaching comes from reference to a specific type of carriage, “used to convey a valued person from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be.” Here are some common and often unfortunate derivatives:

- » Someone with subject matter expertise and authority hired to direct and develop another person or group to achieve success in a sport or learning endeavor (*i.e., instruction*)
- » A boss’s responsibility to influence or require improved behavior from a subordinate (*i.e., performance management*)
- » An individual with seasoned experience sharing advice and insight about the “way things work here” as they guide someone less experienced towards desired outcomes (*i.e., mentoring*)
- » A coaching partnership between a client and a coach accomplished through regular, brief phone visits that are typically designed to help the client acquire more self-understanding, life fulfillment, direction and success (*i.e., one version of life or personal coaching*)
- » Individual work with a client-leader as part of a dynamic values-based approach to systems change in organizations (*i.e., Organization Development [OD] consulting at the individual level of system*)

The following definition is one that many consultants use to describe coaching. For purposes here I will use this definition to focus on individual work called coaching that can be specifically developed and contracted as stand alone work or as part of

a larger organizational change chart:

An action-learning process to enhance effective action and learning agility. It involves a professional relationship and a deliberate, personalized process to provide an executive client with valid information, free and informed choices based on that information, and internal commitment to those choices. (*Executive coaching by Robert Whitherspoon*)

What makes coaching different from individual consulting?

There are clear similarities and less clear distinctions between coaching and consulting to an individual leader. The two interventions can look a lot alike from the outside. For example, excellent consulting and coaching both include:

- 1) Following a sequence designed to create a successful helping relationship – i.e., entry, contracting, data gathering, analysis and presentation of data, mutual planning, action, evaluation and termination.
- 2) An intention to shape leader effectiveness by engaging in a dialogue that offers feedback and expects change.
- 3) Addressing various aspects of the client’s whole life, including attention to values, feelings and emotions.
- 4) Using many of the same skills – e.g., listening, clarifying, inquiring, reframing, brainstorming, considering options and consequences.
- 5) Emphasis on desired future and current reality with present impact.

Yet, those of us who have tried on and practiced coaching for a while have discerned some qualitative differences that, although challenging to describe, deserve naming. They’re hard to define because they cluster around a variety of familiar yet nebulous topics, such as, degree of consciousness, intentionality, use of self, work scope and focus, real time dialogue, challenge and accountability. In a deliberate coaching partnership with skillful use of qualities like these, it is reasonable to expect that choice for change will occur.

Improved skills will affect performance and bottom-line results.

We all know that change is hard. Here's what I see as some distinct change levers that coaching uniquely serves up to help create internal commitment to lasting change:

1. Hooking into the person's personal values. From the outset coaching lays a clear values and desires based foundation for potential change. The increasing clarity that comes from defining what is most central to a person's life and positive self-regard – from memorable stories, proud and not-so proud moments and more – is valuable in and of itself. As the client's learning goals and specific development work become more apparent, this and similar information becomes pivotal. Coaching deliberately sets up the likelihood for transformational change by offering the impetus and support for making a free and informed choice. The impetus sometimes emerges from a cognitive dissonance that results from arranging current behavioral realities next to a person's most important purpose and values.
There is a significant amount of time dedicated to just working on the person as a leader and as a human being – not focused on the event orientation of consulting. In this precious time allowance there is room for a trusting partnership to develop – one that listens for meaning, inquires from curiosity and paradoxically allows the tension for change to develop, without demanding it.
2. Having credible data on issues that matter to the client sets up a springboard for a carefully crafted personalized 360 assessment process. As clients see their affect on self-selected critical others – i.e. individuals whose opinions matter to them – the process becomes more than just another corporate exercise. Current realities take on new shape when looked at together with data drawn from important values turned into customized questions (e.g., For a client who holds helping others grow

as a key value, those interviewed would be asked, what could I do to help you be more successful?). Coaching for change picks up steam as it considers both virtues upon which to build and relevant liabilities. As this information is unveiled, through summarized themes supported with specific examples and punctuated with personal messages, commitment to specific change emerges. The work then shifts from do I need to change to how can I be successful in making it happen?

3. The individual is the only focus of the coaching work. When the client is the system – as compared to consulting work in the system with the client as one part of it – different expectations occur for both coach and client. How often is a leader identified as a primary source of organization dysfunction without an overt plan or process for recovery? Excellent coaching begins with a strong, specific and customized contract for individual work that includes upfront understandings in areas, such as:
 - » Who initiated the coaching? For what purpose?
 - » What change is wanted by whom?
 - » What's likely to happen when change does (or does not) occur?
 - » Is the client's whole life in the coaching spectrum?
 - » Who pays for the work?
 - » Is complete client confidentiality assured?
 - » What communication forum exists between the client and their leader?
 - » What style of coaching works best for the client? For what topics?
 - » What will happen when the work becomes difficult? When the client gets slippery?
 - » What accountabilities need to be in place for homework and actions?
 - » How will success be measured?

Another category of critical distinction involves use of self. Using self as an instrument has always been an important aspect of consulting. However, when there is no external matter to look at together, the client and coach must look directly at

each other in their search for answers to the questions that brought them together. As therapists already know, conscious use of self in relation to what's needed here takes on great significance. Healthy interpersonal contact is the main order of business. A quality coaching interaction can't be pulled off with any amount of method expertise or dazzling command of theory. It's what culminates from deep personal work that the coach has done and continues to do to prepare for this kind of an engagement. A heightened alertness to one's natural biases, tendencies and their impact is necessary along with a nimble ability to choose. A dear and respected colleague of mine said it like this. "As I was supporting my client to look at both what was right for her and what was right by her organization, I probably erred a little on the side of influencing her to take care of herself." This is the kind of self-awareness and self-management that excellent coaching demands.

In the opening coaching scenario the client was likely maneuvering to have someone she saw as an authority reinforce her righteous martyrdom in the face of repeated shabby treatment from others. Yet, her primary desired outcome was "to learn to work effectively with her colleagues." Had I, as her coach continued to analyze or offer solutions for her to defend against, it's unlikely she would have untangled the story she helped create. She saw little choice but to a) continue to endure gamey condescending behaviors that impeded business effectiveness; b) pick up the slack for others by working unreasonably long hours; c) complain and eat herself into ill health on her drive home; and d) routinely arrive too exhausted for quality relationship with her spouse and child.

The likelihood of this client achieving lasting change was a challenge that didn't need my talk about conflict or inclination to tell how she seemed to be shooting herself in the foot. What she did need was information that drew its validity from her own words, values and intentions. Seldom do we need to dispute our own data. After wading around in her own life pond, she felt the dissonance and

consequences of her unconscious choices. In those reflections her insights emerged and a number of self-limiting beliefs became open to question. How long had she been collecting data that supported her unverified assumptions of their bad intent? What other meaning might also be possible? What learning experiments might produce more valid information? Her change was taking root in the fertile ground of coaching.

The remaining work was mine. That is, to be present enough to support her and conscious enough to stay out of her way. Directive coaching is seductive. We don't usually have to look very far to find powerful figures getting big results by telling it like they see it. Although consciousness about style and choice of directiveness was a vital learning for me, wide variance remains in actual coaching behaviors as outlined in *Figure 1*.

In a comprehensive study by the Lore International Institute thousands of coaching clients surveyed said, "I prefer the coach to ask questions and help me explore the issues myself." The irony is that most coaches prefer to coach directly, but most clients prefer to receive help non-directively. The Lore Group goes on to notice that for some of us stretching beyond our natural preferences to tell our clients what to do, especially when we're pretty sure we know, is easier to conceptualize than it is to put into practice. Nondirective coaches must exercise considerable self-restraint, born of confidence in the other person, that he or she will find the right path with proper support and subtle guidance.

Does the orchestration of valid information with a solid, but non-directive presence represent the only or best way to coach? Certainly not. Different situations, topics and understandings will influence one's coaching style. For example, when the coaching topic relates to a specific knowledge arena, such as financial management, marketing or human resource law, it would be silly to try to draw such data from the client. Also, some matters have such urgency that providing an answer or telling the client what appear as available alternatives is necessary.

Beware, however, of the client who asks to be told things that can best be learned through personal introspection.

Building an alliance between Organization Development (OD) and Coaching

Coaching began in the U.S. primarily as personal or life work designed to offer individual support to people who were thirsting for revival and renewal of their sense of value, purpose and meaning. What could have been more timely in our fast-paced beeping, chirping, techno-centric, sterile, parched, strategic existence? In Europe, on the other hand, the origins of coaching were more related to teaching managers to use the principles of coaching to influence culture and create results-based change.

The ICF emerged as an early organizing and guidance producing institution for coaching in the U.S. with an understandable bias of interest around the coaching phenomena created by dynamic entrepreneurs, such as Tom Leonard of Coach U and Laura Whitworth of Co-Active Coaching and the Bigger Game. While executive and leadership coaching, performance improvement coaching, and middle management training in coaching skills have all been on the ICF menu, they seem to have fallen short in addressing some of the theory and practice of coaching as an OD intervention.

Renowned OD leader Edgar Schein says, "Coaching is a subset of consultation. Clearly, it can then be thought of as one kind of intervention that may be helpful to clients under certain circumstances. In this context I think of coaching as establishing a set of behaviors that helps the client to develop a new way of seeing, feeling about, and behaving in problematic situations."

When looking at the effect of coaching in organizations, new ways of seeing and behaving in *problematic* situations may represent an early and important edge in a continuum of applications. Surely it's worked in problem situations and there is far more potential. According to Flaherty, "Coaching offers an alternative to the usual way we think of people – often as a means to an end."

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He suggests that coaches can think about and relate to humans in a different way thereby creating different consequences. For example, "The more fundamental the distinctions we address, the more radical, complex and transforming can be the actions we take or design." And he continues, "if we understand how the eye, pigment and light come together in our seeing of a painting, then we can take quite different action than if we only understand how to select a frame to fit a particular room." Reflecting Flaherty's perspective, organizations are leaning towards supporting and challenging their best and brightest with the right executive coach. Desired outcomes often sound like something that others will be able to know and trust when – like the picture – they see it all put together. These are often qualities that are difficult to evaluate separately, such as confidence in their depth of self-knowledge, breadth of understanding about people and how they behave, and an ability to hold it all together in a manner that forwards the long-term strategic perspective.

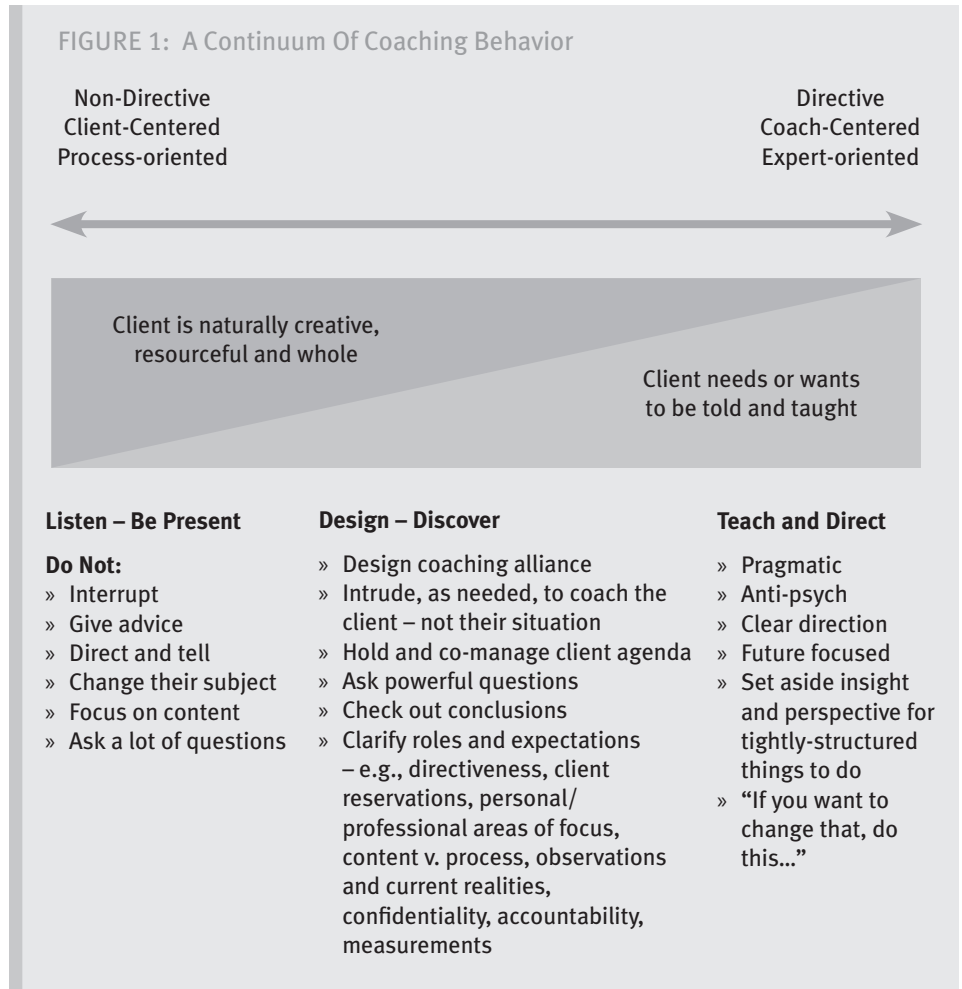
The essential and separate treatment of various interventions pertinent to

the business coaching arena has been studied, practiced and published within Organization Development for many decades. The foundational principles, values and theoretical framework are in place to distinguish coaching as a subset of OD consulting while continuing its customized development. It's time to step up and invite a professional alliance between OD consulting and coaching, not by showing up as though we already know what this dynamic thing called coaching is all about, but rather with a readiness to learn about coaching from genuine and respectful curiosity. Then, after taking in and appreciating coaching as one would a piece of impressionist art, what OD needs to contribute relative to coaching is likely to become evident. Many of these questions are already being asked and answered by people who do not have an OD background. We in the OD profession need to be responding to questions like these, or others will answer them for us and we'll be left with the consequence:

- » When and by what criteria is coaching an Organization Development intervention?
- » With at least a decade of coaching history what important data is emerging?
- » Under what circumstances does it become an integral part of a larger OD system process?
- » What knowledge, skill and credentials are necessary to be considered a competent executive coach?
- » Can and should the executive coach and system consultant be the same person?
- » What are the pros and cons of using internal vs. external coaches?
- » What issues are surfacing that call for a response from people with a background in behavioral sciences, systems theory and the like?

Conclusion

Coaching is a young, evolving and exciting field. Like many of us, it's still not entirely certain what it might be when it grows up. As OD consultants we're grounded in something both different and closely related. Coaching may have come along



to remind us that no matter how fast companies are spinning our role is often to go slower, recall our values and make enough safe space for a helping relationship to form. It might be offering a refresher on staying present in order to avoid historical pitfalls. Or, perhaps it's one of the gifts being delivered by more recent generations unwilling to compromise the meaning and quality of their lives.

Some of what I've most embraced and tried to describe about coaching is reminding me of Meg Wheatley's powerful chaos theory language. She comments, "Process structures are like streams that maintain form over time yet have no rigidity or structure." Until finally, she asks the stream directly, "What is it that you can teach me through your impressive ability to adapt, to shift configurations, to let the power balance move, to create new structures... while yet, driving this adaptability, making it all happen?"

I'd like you to get in this stream with

me as a knowledgeable and qualified coach. It's a ride you won't want to miss!

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