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Coaching: Buzzword or Breakthrough?

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Reprinted from *The Coaching Connection*



In the 10 years since the publication of “Coaching and the Art of Management”, there has been an explosion of interest and practices related to what some believe is emerging as a ‘new paradigm’. My colleagues have asked me to reflect on what I have observed about coaching in the past few years and speak to what I see is relevant about

coaching today and in the future. When Roger Evered and I wrote the original article about coaching, we were very aware that the traditional management paradigm of ‘command and control’ had serious limitations in a world that was changing rapidly. Organizational ‘culture’ was becoming a central concern for leaders and managers who were recognizing it as the phenomenon that could either impede or facilitate the kinds of changes that were necessary to maintain progress and effectiveness in what was becoming a global economy.

The last two decades of the twentieth century were a time of bold and aggressive leadership in both business and the Public Service, often characterized by extraordinary vision, driven by technology and the ‘globalization’ of commerce, and sustained by an increased accountability for tangible results. Throughout this period, thousands of individuals have been trained or declared themselves as ‘coaches’, programs for teaching and/or ‘certifying’ coaches have proliferated, many books have been published on the subject, and conferences on coaching are now mainstream. The term ‘coaching’ has become a catchall buzzword encompassing all kinds of

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consulting, counseling and management concepts and activities. Coaching is in fashion!

Unfortunately, as with any idea that becomes popular, the underlying potential of ‘coaching’ as a new paradigm of management and leadership can be diluted and become a distinction without a difference. Specifically, the word is often now used as a metaphor or sometimes synonymous with supervision, counseling, mentoring, and even the traditional role of manager. Several large corporations have even replaced the word ‘manager’ with the word ‘coach’ in all of their publications, organizational charts and on business cards. Obviously, changing a label doesn’t change behavior or the underlying issues of organizational life and culture. It is indicative, however, that there is something about coaching which speaks to the concerns of organizational leaders and employees alike. Most of us know from personal experience that a relationship with a coach is not the same as a relationship with a traditional manager. We know from experience that we listen and respond differently to a coach and we are often empowered to accomplish more with a coach than we accomplish when relating to a traditional manager. It is not surprising that historically in virtually every field of human endeavor where performance is the objective, ‘coaching’ has been an integral aspect of the design of the game, and the more professional the players, the greater the demand for coaching.

This was the case in every field *except* organization and management prior to the last 10 years. As coaching has become more mainstream, so has the distinction between attempting to consistently get results through traditional models for control and attempting

to get results through empowering the commitments and actions of others.

The Practical Case for Coaching

I have come to believe that the need to create ‘coaching cultures’ in our organizations is more pressing than ever. This is because a coaching culture is based on distinguishing, empowering and coordinating individual commitment and action. Since commitment is a universal human phenomenon, a coaching culture naturally transcends geographical and historical differences between people and enables more effective coordination in a global enterprise. As our historical practices for prediction and control break down, the need for new ways to observe and coordinate the collective actions of the enterprise becomes a practical necessity.

In the past, a company or organization could distinguish itself by focusing on quality, cost and/or service. However, demonstrated excellence in *all* of these areas is today a given if a company or public sector organization is a serious player and committed to making a difference in any game. Now, leaders are looking elsewhere for competitive advantage and excellence. I have suggested and believe that the most promising areas for distinguishing oneself and one's company or organization in the future have to do with the:

- Capacity to generate and sustain timely change,
- Competencies for building and sustaining powerful and committed relationships, and
- Integrity and consistency with which people ‘walk the talk’ or demonstrate their commitments and values.



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These elements are at the core of any ‘coaching culture’ and are the foundation for personal and organizational effectiveness in a world in which the future is unpredictable and coordination of action is becoming increasingly complex.

The need to clarify and integrate coaching competencies into our existing roles as leaders and managers is essential. The reason for this is that in most organizations today, leaders no longer have the luxury of time or the capability to maintain the illusion that they ‘control’ the decision-making and actions of the people who work in the enterprise. Leaders and coaches must create a powerful vision of their own reality, create the future in ‘real time’ and then fulfill their vision through the inspired and self-generated actions of those with whom they work. In a coaching paradigm, this is obvious. It is also clear from this perspective that a coaching culture can include good managerial practices, but that when ‘control’ becomes the context, which is the case in a traditional managerial culture, coaching simply becomes another way of controlling people. Coaching is not a replacement for solid management skills, but a new context, a new way of observing and relating to people and action—a different way of being.

Coaching as a Strategy for Culture Change

I have spoken about ‘coaching’ as being an alternative paradigm for management, as a body of competencies for assisting individuals and teams to achieve breakthroughs, and as a strategy for achieving changes in the organizational cultures within which people live and work. As previously stated, coaching is a different way of observing the world, a different way of being, a different context

within which to communicate and relate. From a perspective of action, coaching and leadership are virtually synonymous. Both the coach and the leader are always engaged with other people, they work exclusively in a medium of relationship and conversations, and they are both working to create through others a ‘future’ that is unpredictable and unprecedented. For coaches and leaders, the future isn’t a goal, it is a reality *now* and their job is to bring forth what is missing or what needs to be eliminated so that their vision can be manifested in the world. The future for leaders and coaches is ‘real’ by virtue of their declarations and commitments and is not diminished by conventional wisdom or the assessments of others. They stand for possibilities and their commitments become the context within which they and those they lead or coach organize information and coordinate action.

Learning to ‘be a coach’ or ‘be a leader’ requires more than appropriating new techniques or understanding a new model. It requires a fundamental shift in how one observes their world, themselves and other human beings.

This shift begins when we consider that all human beings normally behave and act based on how our world ‘occurs’ for us, not because of the ‘way it is’. For example, we can all find situations in our own experience where our actions were inconsistent with what we ‘knew’ to be the case, such as in continuing to smoke, running away from something because we were afraid even though no real threat existed, or making a decision which we knew to be wrong at the time, but rationalized or justified making it anyway.



As a premise, we could say that coaching enables people to change the way the world ‘occurs’ for them. When this happens, there are possibilities and actions available that are not available otherwise. We often hear organizational leaders speaking about the need to change people’s ‘mindsets’, to get ‘buy-in’ to some radical new approach or to overcome historical ways of working. We can also see myriad examples of frustration and costs associated with trying to explain, justify or rationally argue for change only to find that people are more often than not acting and behaving in the same ways they did previously. I suggest that these are all related to the same phenomenon, specifically the phenomenon of cognitive blindness—being blind to what we don’t know we don’t know or anything that is outside our historical frameworks of understanding.

Our historical frameworks for understanding, however, are cultural in nature. They are constituted by our interpretations and stories of what is and is not possible, what everything means, and are often self-referential, having no apparent function beyond assuring the persistence of whatever has worked in the past.

The challenge and the raison d’être for coaching is how to create a context or an opening for new action that is grounded in our historical reality but not limited by it.

If we only act based on what we can understand, what is reasonable and what makes sense, then our actions will always be consistent with the prevailing culture and produce variations of ‘more of the same’. The key to creating a ‘coaching culture’ or any new culture is in exploring the phenomenon

of commitment. If our reality is a function of our actions and our actions are a function of our commitments and we only commit to what is reasonable and feasible, then we will obviously be generating more of the same. The question is, does our view of the circumstances determine what we commit to *or* do our commitments and, therefore, our actions determine the circumstances?

Commitment is the Name of the Game

It is not possible to coach someone, or for that matter to be coached, in the absence of authentic commitment. I distinguish commitment here from wanting, wishing, trying, hoping (or any other notion such as ‘what is realistic’) that we sometimes substitute for commitment. Moreover, it isn’t practical or logical to coach someone who isn’t committed to accomplishing something ‘unprecedented’ in his or her experience. Coaching is inherently about achieving breakthroughs and a breakthrough is something that hasn’t occurred before—a new level of competency or new action or an unprecedented result. None of us would pay a coach to assist us to do what we can already do or to produce what we are already producing.

Commitment is a phenomenon that, while clear in almost everyone’s direct experience when it is present, is generally unexamined and somewhat mysterious in everyday living. Two basic premises in our work are that:

1. Everyone is always committed to something whether they are aware of it or not, and
2. Often our commitments are cultural in nature (that is we’ve become committed to interpretations and practices given us



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from the past and relate to them as ‘truths’ without rigorous examination or choice).

For example, for years people were committed to the notion that you cannot accomplish more quality without increasing costs. This was an unquestioned point of view until shown to be untrue in the era of ‘total quality’. If one listens closely today in most planning and budgeting processes, a great deal of the conversation is still: "In order to do 'x', we require 'y' resources". While these types of statements are valid as assessments, they are not true or false per se, but simply the points of view of those involved. These points of view are also always seen as just points of view *after* a breakthrough, but are often defended and become powerful and self-limiting ‘truths’ until someone commits to a larger possibility and acts based on that commitment.

The problem is that these kinds of statements spoken as facts and justified based on past experience and expertise blinds us to the fact they are historical interpretations and commitments made by human beings as to the way it is. We are also blind to our blindness and don’t see it as *only* being ‘true’ in an historical cultural context. Every breakthrough begins when someone commits to another view or possibility and then organizes their actions and conversations around their commitment. Rather than allowing the historical commitments and interpretations embedded in the planning models to dominate what we will commit to in a coaching culture, the commitments to the future come first and then the planning is about how to accomplish or deliver on those commitments. One must be willing to authentically commit to a breakthrough *before* there is evidence that it can be accomplished or it can never be accomplished

except as a consequence of ‘good luck’ or some other circumstantial explanation.

Coaching Competencies

I have suggested in other writings and in various workshops and presentations that coaching isn’t mysterious when observed from the perspective of language and action. I have also claimed that coaching and leadership are virtually synonymous in that they occur in practical reality as expressions of commitment to people to invent alternative futures or possibilities and that they succeed (or fail) based on relationships and in conversations with other human beings.

Specifically, we might summarize the competencies of coaches (or leaders) as involving the following elements. A coach:

- Commits to and builds powerful, committed and trusting relationships
- Is grounded in an awareness of and responsibility for their own ‘blind spots’
- Grants total freedom, choice and power to those they coach—is vulnerable
- Is more committed to the other’s commitments and results than the person being coached is—takes an unreasonable stand *for* the other person
- Generates bigger possibilities for breakthroughs and accomplishment
- Is focused on listening for commitment and action
- Observes the other’s behavior and conversations for inconsistencies with the stated commitment or possibility, often revealing unexamined commitments and beliefs
- Formulates and offers interpretations and practices to align actions and commitment



in a context of the organization's vision and values

- Manages conversations and moods of people involved in the game—is able to 'generate' new conversations to displace old ones—doesn't fix people, but allows them to be responsible for their own moods and interpretations.
- Uses breakdowns, constraints, adversity, mistakes or undesirable results as 'positive' information and as 'assets' for improving performance or as raw material for creative inquiry and design of new processes and practices
- 'Comes from' the point of view that the results have already been accomplished and has a creative relationship with the future—does not play the game to cope with circumstances or to find out what will happen—is inventing the future
- Operates with clarity and consistency of his or her own commitments and 'walks the talk' at all times—speaks and listens commitment
- Maintains an active relationship and dialogue with his or her own coach—'pushes the envelope' of their own thinking, actions and accomplishment

These practices aren't unique or limited to only a context of coaching. They tend to occur naturally in highly responsible leaders and people broadly in times of crisis. I believe they are present in many instances of great accomplishment and leadership. I call these 'contextual competencies' in that they all relate to distinguishing what is missing or what is occurring in the background of a situation. One question that has particular relevance to organizations, however, is "Can they be systematically learned or are they

simply natural qualities that one must be 'born with', acquire through fortuitous circumstances of life, or appear only when there is an organizational crisis?"

In my experience, the answer is clearly "Yes". These competencies can be systematically learned and mastered. However, I believe this happens only when we understand that learning occurs in different domains.

Qualities and abilities such as committed listening, having compassion, living as one's word, being responsible, generating trust, creating possibilities and so forth are obviously desirable and often attributable to others—however, they can be elusive when we try to learn them ourselves or teach them to others.

These kinds of qualities and abilities all have to do with our way of being, with who we are as committed human beings. Normally, when attempting to develop these qualities in others, we are often perceived as 'preaching' them as virtues. The often unspoken belief is that these are 'natural' abilities that one is born with or perhaps they can be acquired through 'apprenticeship' to someone we consider having these attributes. The coaching perspective rejects this notion and is grounded in the view that all people are capable of making authentic commitments, that most people are capable of actions consistent with those commitments most of the time, and that, while there may be differences in talent and 'natural abilities', there is an enormous gap between anyone's capacity and the levels at which we normally operate. In other words,



for practical purposes, there are no limits to what people can accomplish.

Most experienced managers recognize the limitations of enumerating how people ‘should’ behave or what qualities they ‘should’ possess to succeed. Most would also agree that reading books and articles about coaching or leadership rarely produce fundamental shifts in how a person sees their world or behaves on a sustainable basis. This is because we normally attempt to learn something by ‘understanding’ it. To understand something means that it makes some sense in terms of a person’s existing frameworks for understanding. More knowledge and information can satisfy, modify and/or expand what we already ‘know’ but cannot lead to breakthroughs or shifts in a person’s basic ground of being or way of observing the world. This is why we say that some things can be taught and others can only be acquired through coaching. Knowledge and pre-existing processes can be taught. ‘Ways of Being’, or ‘contextual competencies’, can be coached. Learning to be a coach is primarily to learn a different way of Being. When this occurs, the above competencies are obviously appropriate and, with practice, tend to develop quickly and naturally.

The Difficulty in Changing Culture

As originally discussed in “Coaching and the Art of Management”, we believe that coaching naturally creates (and can be a powerful strategy for changing) organizational culture by virtue of being so inextricably linked with the phenomenon of people’s authentic commitments and their inherent relationship to the contexts within which people are always operating. In the article, we distinguished the traditional

managerial culture as being grounded in deep background commitments to **Control, Order and Prediction (COP)** and a coaching culture as characterized by new commitments to **Acknowledge, Create and Empower (ACE)**. We also stressed that these are not mutually exclusive, but without the commitments implicit in a coaching culture, people lack the capacity to observe the limits of their traditional culture and ‘control’ becomes the context for coordination and leadership. An ACE culture can include the traditional, but not the other way around. If the COP culture is senior, then practices for empowering people for example, become a ‘means’ for controlling and generally fall short of the intentions of the practitioner.

One way to define organizational culture is the “unseen and unexamined historical context within which people are working”. When the historical context changes, then one might say there is a new culture. People’s observations and actions are being organized by a different interpretation of ‘reality’.

Organizational cultures are not facts.

They occur as contexts or interpretations and are not ‘objective’ in the sense that they exist only in human language and people’s commitment to them. Unfortunately, most approaches to this subject generally ‘objectify’ culture and then formulate approaches intended to ‘fix’ or ‘change’ it in some manner.

In our experience, when companies attempt to change or fix a culture they give power and focus to the past. This provides the fuel with which a culture assimilates or co-opts new ideas and possibilities and turns them into variations of the same thing. Initiatives intended to change organizational culture



have generally required vast investments of time and energy to gain marginal results. This phenomenon is captured in the aphorism “You get what you resist”. In other words, resistance to a cultural or context assures its persistence by virtue of continuously regenerating it. For example, if an organization’s culture is characterized by the historical belief that “**Success depends on hard work and long hours**”, it is not uncommon for there to be all sorts of programs, policies and attempts to restore balance between employees’ ‘work life’ and ‘home life’. Even with the best of intentions, experience suggests that the overall work habits in the organization rarely change or change very slowly. Moreover, even if superficial changes in behavior are forced, the changes often fail to achieve the desired objective and underlying discontent continues. People continue to be conflicted, frustrated and powerless to affect meaningful changes in the ‘way things are’.

From the perspective of a coach or within a coaching culture, the problem is *never* in the common and recurring diagnosis (conversation) of what the problem is. The culture is not a ‘thing’. It is the background or contextual interpretation within which we are observing and thinking about our day-to-day world and our concerns. If the focus shifts to “what are people’s commitments” and “how are they ‘seeing’ their situation”, it becomes obvious that many other interpretations are possible such as, “**Success depends on satisfying customers and other stakeholders, including our families**”. In this context, there isn’t a problem, just a commitment and other questions, such as, “How do I satisfy all my stakeholders in the time I am committed to working?” This, in turn, will often reveal new strategies, missing

competencies and networks of people who might help. A new context or cultural ‘opening’ doesn’t proscribe action or solve problems, but leads to new thinking and actions depending upon the commitments of those involved.

Creating a ‘Coaching Culture’

Creating a ‘coaching culture’ involves a multi-faceted strategy. The following steps are a generic approach that has been successfully used in a number of very large organizational environments in both the public and private sectors. The process involves seven components usually addressed over the course of 12 to 18 months.

Step 1 - Being Responsible for the ‘Box’

This involves various methods for displaying or ‘showing’ the existing culture. This is the ‘box’ often referred to when challenging people to ‘get out of their box’. This is more than simple description and is the result of questioning conventional wisdom and revealing *as culture* many of the hallway conversations and points of view that are widely shared within the organization but rarely addressed. For example, if we ask, “What does everybody know about the way things get done around here?”, people will begin to articulate this conventional wisdom such as “You must get the boss’s permission before you do something or you will be punished”. This kind of generalized belief can persist even when the boss has encouraged risk-taking and independent action. This step might be likened to looking in a mirror for the first time or when an alcoholic breaks through denial to confront what had been a prevailing structure of blindness to the condition in which he or she was viewing themselves and



their world. The result of this step is the recognition that our culture is not a problem but is the phenomenon that blinds us to possibilities and actions that would allow us to create an ‘unpredictable’ future.

Step 2 - Creating a Bigger Game

It is important for the leadership of the organization to undertake a serious learning process and open themselves to being coached with respect to “What is the future we are committed to creating?” This usually is in the form of an organizational vision, but not one created as a ‘picture of the future’ but as a ground of being from which to organize and align actions on a day-to-day basis. Leaders and executives begin to distinguish their true commitments from their rational and historical ‘stories’ about people, what is possible and many of the self-limiting notions that have organized their own behavior in the past. The result of this step is the alignment of the top team on the ‘game we are playing’ and an authentic commitment to learning and changing themselves as appropriate. They are committed to ‘walking the talk’ and demonstrating new ways of being as models for the rest of the organization.

Step 3 - Designing Structures for Fulfillment

Possibility and vision without structure is just a dream. It is also necessary to launch through a variety of ‘change projects’ the strategic, structural and cultural initiatives considered necessary to fulfill their vision of a ‘created future’. The know-how for these kinds of projects is usually available or easily attainable. In many cases, there are already initiatives underway which have bogged down because of the inherent cultural resistance to change. In the context of

coaching, commitment and creating the future, however, resistance becomes ‘raw material’ for design and action in the same sense that in sports, the opposition provides the opportunity to win the game.

The result of this step is a dynamic plan for fulfilling commitments that uses historical constraints as opportunities for creativity and action, rather than being constrained by the historical interpretations of ‘why not’. People learn that coaches do not go into a game to find out what will happen or who will win, but to continuously create the conditions and actions for having ‘already won’. They will allow history to determine what ‘really happened’ after the fact, but in the moment of action they are committed to the interpretation that the future has already happened.

Step 4 - Enrolling Others

The objective of this step is to expand the network of people committed to leadership and creating the future. Middle managers and staff people become a committed part of the process based on their own vision and capacity to generate commitment beyond that expected in the historical culture. This is usually accomplished through educational and working sessions similar to those undertaken by the top leadership and through participation in various change projects. The primary difference between this step in a coaching context and more traditional approaches which often take the same form is that the people are engaged from the point of view of their underlying commitments and responsibility. The process is not designed to get agreement, consensus or ‘buy-in’, but to challenge, engage and confront the historical interpretations and limits to responsibility and action. The result of this step is a broad recognition in the organization that it is



everyone's responsibility to bring his or her motivation to work, not get it from work. Moreover, people's practices with respect to straight talk, being accountable, relating to others, being authentic, and working in a context of commitment begin to become a natural expression responsibility rather than an elusive ideal. Of equal importance is that from this perspective, traditional behavior appears as an exception to our commitment, rather than as evidence that change can't happen.

Step 5 - Expanding Organizational Competencies

The implementation of a new culture requires a commitment to continue to mobilize the organization to include all employees and other stakeholders in the 'new game'. The underlying principle of this approach is that when a critical mass of authentic commitment is reached, the 'whole' is changed. The new view becomes the 'new reality'. Implicit here is the notion that creating a coaching culture is more than changing 'A' to 'B'. It is to create an organizational culture and environment capable of continuously creating the future and changing itself as appropriate to accomplish its commitments. Coordination is seen as coordinating commitments. Commitment is viewed as action and is not considered a matter of morality. In the traditional culture, people are taught not to make bold commitments because 'good' people always keep commitments and 'bad' people don't keep their commitments. In this view, people need certainty before commitment that in turn keeps them locked into the past. In a coaching culture, people are responsible for their commitments and don't take them lightly, but recognize that commitments are how we create the future. If we only commit to what is feasible, we will

by definition get more of the same. If we make commitments to accomplish unprecedented results, we won't keep all our commitments and we need to be authentic and responsible for the consequences. The result of this step is an organization where everyone can be responsible and learning becomes a by-product of action and what doesn't work, rather than a prerequisite for commitment.

Step 6 - Walking the Talk

To anchor the foundation and sustain 'new ways of being' requires a company solidify its new culture through design of processes and practices consistent with this new worldview. Coaching isn't a one-time relationship or intervention. In most fields, the more competent and more professional a player, the more their demand for and reliance on coaching. In a coaching culture, coaching isn't a role, but the practicing of coaching competencies in every situation. Everyone is open to both giving and receiving coaching as appropriate to their abilities and concerns. My assistant is my coach in some domains, and I am her coach in others. Coaching is a partnership between human beings in which one person can empower another to accomplish more than is possible on their own. When commitment and actions are aligned, the coach is able to assist in creating larger and larger possibilities and learning becomes an 'upward creative spiral' rather than an attempt to exploit some finite and fixed potential defined by the past.

Step 7 - Continuous Learning

Creating culture is to continuously transfer coaching capabilities and responsibilities through continuous learning and through the organization's practices for recruiting and for moving people between jobs, including



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transferring accountabilities when people retire.

In a coaching culture, everything that everyone is doing comes down to:

- What am I committed to accomplishing?
- With whom am I coordinating commitments?
- What do I see is missing or in the way to fulfilling our commitments? and
- What possibilities and actions am I committed to now?

In a coaching culture, the organization is seen as a network of people coordinating commitments for the sake of accomplishing a common future.

Conclusion

The ‘coaching approach’ allows an organization to get at what is beneath all the things that are traditionally in the way of becoming the organization that they want to be. It goes beyond addressing symptoms or problems or putting a band-aid on what is wrong. I believe it is a breakthrough in the fields of organizational design, organizational development and management. Like all breakthroughs, the final judge will be history and whether this way of observing people and work and developing competencies resulted in new possibilities and new accomplishments that were not available previously. So far, the experience of most people who have engaged the topic seriously is that this is the case.

Coaching creates sustainable positive changes in ‘the way things are’. The ontological underpinnings of this approach, which deals with the nature of being, allow people to experience themselves and their world more directly and have a more responsible relationship with whatever they see is limiting

them. In a coaching culture, an environment is created in which context is just as important as content and becomes the main lever for creating a future that is not already constrained by the past.

Coaches accomplish this by distinguishing all the background ‘conversations’ that usually stop people and keep them trapped in their reasons for not having what they say they want.

As people unearth and share their real commitments, they are naturally empowered to move through historically difficult situations and create new interpretations and actions.

‘Coaching competencies’ are the practices that allow a person to be effective in the domain of context or culture. Coaching an organization’s members to learn them in practice and move toward mastery in these areas leads to having an organizational culture where commitment to clarity and results is more important than the historical and unexamined attachment to reasons, justifications, control and predictable outcomes.

Finally, the seven-step approach to creating a coaching culture is a holistic way to implementing this new paradigm broadly in an organization. It is believed that creating a coaching culture is the fastest and most sustainable strategy for an organization committed to continuously reinventing itself and for being successful in a complex and globally interconnected world characterized by constant and unpredictable change.