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Editorial: Research and Theory: The Lifeblood of an Emerging Profession

Andrea D. Ellinger and Sherryl Stalinski
February 29, 2004

The inaugural volume of the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* “marked a defining moment in the history of coaching” (Cox & Ledgerwood, 2003, p. 4) because of the recognised need for evidence-based research on coaching and mentoring among practitioners and academics. While coaching has had a rich history in practice and interest in coaching has increased considerably in recent years, the necessity of grounding the practice of coaching in scholarship to enhance the credibility of coaching as it emerges into a profession has also been acknowledged.

The hallmarks of becoming a profession often involve the establishment of an empirical knowledge base, minimum industry-wide skill sets, and regulatory compliance regarding entry into the profession and maintenance and measurement of the skills that define the profession. According to Grant and Cavanaugh, many of these hallmarks rely largely upon “the development of a shared body of applied knowledge that forms the foundation of coaching” (p.8).

This second volume of *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* depicts the progress that is being made in the professional practice of coaching in the journey to becoming a profession of coaching. The maturation process within the coaching industry is illustrated by a focus on current research and theory, which Grant and Cavanaugh have conceived as the “life blood of an emerging profession” (p. 16).

Grant and Cavanaugh’s article provides an appropriate organizing framework for this volume. The purpose of their contribution is to offer a comprehensive review of the literature on coaching and they identify a number of challenges that must be met in the development of a coherent body of coaching knowledge, in particular defining and delineating what is meant by coaching, elaborating on the theoretically grounded approaches to coaching, and developing an empirical literature base on coaching.

Following Grant and Cavanaugh’s contribution, both Hannah and Peel extend the research literature on coaching within multiple contexts. Hannah’s phenomenological case study examines the impact that workplace coaching has on developing individual level competences and performance improvement among customer service employees within the U.K. Rail Industry. Further Hannah establishes the link between workplace coaching and customer service satisfaction among the travelling public. She concludes that workplace coaching may be an appropriately effective approach to improving individual and organizational performance when coaching is placed within a vocational qualifications framework. Her research extends the literature base on workplace coaching and suggests that there may be a payoff for organisations to invest in developing the skill levels of their employees through workplace coaching interventions.

Similarly, Peel acknowledges the virtual absence of research into the effects of coaching in mentoring in Small to Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) and develops an agenda for research in this setting. Peel’s case study research on SMEs within the securities sector in
the United Kingdom suggests that organisational behaviour, in particular, culture, must be at the core of coaching and mentoring strategies within the context of SMEs. The findings of this study extend research on coaching and mentoring within SMEs, stimulate further research on the selection of tools and techniques to augment coaching and mentoring within this context as well as evaluating the effects of such approaches.

The final two contributions in this issue examine coaching as a reflective process and one that positions coaching as a tool for facilitating genuine and effective dialogue. Each contribution draws upon distinct theoretical approaches that extend our understanding of coaching. Conceived as largely a reflective process, Jackson reviews the concept of reflection in the coaching practitioner literature and draws upon constructivist theories of learning and psychology to inform the development of a model of the mechanism of reflection in coaching. The aim of this article is to establish more firmly the importance of reflection in the coaching process and provide practitioners with support and guidance on enhancing the practice of coaching.

Finally, Stalinski’s contribution, “Leadership Coaching as Design Conversation”, firmly grounds the concept of leadership coaching within general systems theory, organisational learning, and dialogue practice. Her conceptualisation of leadership coaching as design conversation serves as a catalyst to integrate several domains of understanding that theoretically ground coaching, as well as enhancing the professional practice of coaching.

Several themes among the contributions to this second volume emerge for the reader. The most significant of this scholarship is the implication that the services that leadership and personal development coaches seek to provide their clients is not limited to a specific, narrow market. While case studies highlight coaching practice in the UK, the contributions from the U.S. (Stalinski) and Australia (Grant & Cavanaugh) demonstrate that theory and practice for professional coaching transcends geographic boundaries. Likewise, Peel notes that most scholarship and theory traditionally emphasizes the large organization, however, his contributions draw attention to SMEs, which have been, identified as significant components of economic growth within the UK and by most western governments. All contributors to this volume appear to address the issue that leadership is for everyone, regardless of formal role or organizational position. Stalinski presents the view that leadership is a practice, rather than a position, a perspective also reflected by Peel, Grant and Cavanaugh, and Hannah. Further, the skill sets and mental models of effective leadership can be learned and developed, from self-awareness and reflection, as discussed by Jackson, to the importance of cultural and organizational awareness, as emphasized by Peel.

In summary, the articles in this volume underscore the importance of establishing solid theoretical foundations in the behavioural sciences, the psychological sciences, as well as the integration of understanding from a broader organisational perspective, including the human sciences and the systems sciences for the practice of coaching. This issue contributes to this effort significantly, by highlighting both theoretical foundations as well as their application, through relevant, descriptive case studies. Further, many of the contributions call for additional research that continues to contribute to the development of a solid base of literature on the practice and impact of coaching that is grounded in scholarship.
Lastly, Stalinski suggests that a design conversation is called for that stimulates genuine dialogue among multiple stakeholders in the coaching industry to develop a “comprehensive vision of ideal practice in the coaching profession” (p. 76). Such contributions to research, theory, and the practice of coaching would enable coaching to progress into a respected trans-disciplinary profession, which practitioners and academicians believe is the natural evolution being advocated within the coaching community. This volume of *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring* provides a solid foundation for practitioners and academicians to build upon in the journey to become a profession.

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Toward a profession of coaching: Sixty-five years of progress and challenges for the future.

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Key Words: coaching literature, internal coaching, organisational change,

Abstract

The coaching industry has reached a key important point in its maturation. This maturation is being driven by at least three interrelated forces: (1) accumulated coaching experience; (2) the increasing entry of professionals into coaching from a wide variety of prior backgrounds; and (3) the increasing sophistication of management and Human Resource professionals. There is increasing awareness among coaches of the need to ground their practice in a solid theoretical understanding and empirically tested models, rather than the standardised implementation of “one size fits all” proprietary coaching systems. Further, there is a growing disenchantment with perceived pseudo-credentialing mills. In response to these forces we are beginning to witness increased interest in coaching-related research and the theoretically grounded approaches central to evidence-based coaching practice. This paper provides an overview of the existing academic literature on coaching, and explores five key trends in coaching-related research; (a) discussion articles on internal coaching by managers; (b) academic research on internal coaching; (c) research on external coaching by a professional coaches; (d) coaching as a means of investigating psychological mechanisms and processes involved in human and organisational change, and (e) the emergence of a theoretical literature aimed at the professional coach. It is argued that an explicit movement towards the scientist-practitioner model of coach training and practice is vital for the development of the coaching industry, and that such a move is vital in a movement from a service industry, towards a respected cross-disciplinary profession with a solid research base.

Introduction

The 19th Century Englishman, John Henry Newman, once said, “To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often”. By this criterion, coaching is alive and well - and has plenty of living left to do! There are signs that the coaching industry has reached a key point in its maturation. This maturation is being driven by at least three interrelated forces: (1) coaching experience; (2) the increasing entry of professionals into coaching; and (3) the increasing sophistication of management and Human Resource (HR) professionals.

In terms of coaching experience, there appears to be an increasing awareness among coaches of a need to ground their practice in a solid theoretical understanding and empirically tested models, rather than the standardised implementation of “one size fits all” coaching systems. The complexity of human behaviour and human systems requires coaches to respond and adapt their coaching in multiple ways, and anecdotal evidence
suggests that many coaches who have been trained in standardised proprietary coaching systems feel the need for the theoretical understanding and empirical knowledge required to make these contextualised responses.

At the same time, the profile of coaches in the industry appears to be changing. Individuals, whose primary training is in evidence-based organisational and human change, are stepping forward as professional coaches. These include psychologists, psychiatrists, adult education specialists and organisational change experts with postgraduate qualifications in business, human resources and other professions. Aside from a range of domain specific knowledge, these people often bring with them a set of practice standards and ethical understanding derived from their previous professional training.

Thirdly, and by no means least, the consumers of coaching services have grown progressively more sophisticated. Human Resource professionals who employ coaches for their organisations are increasingly well informed, and coach assessment and interview processes for corporate coaching assignments have grown more demanding. Indeed, HR professionals often have a more detailed understanding of the range of coaching services on offer, and their applicability to various organisational needs and challenges, than do many coach service providers. Human Resource professionals are increasingly wary of what they perceive to be pseudo-coach credentialing mills, and increasingly ask searching questions about the theoretical foundations of the coach training and the validating empirical evidence. Private clients are also requesting facts and data about the effectiveness of coaching.

In response to these forces we are beginning to witness a new interest in coaching-related research, and we are starting to see the emergence of a scientist-practitioner model of coaching. There has been a three-fold increase in the number of published theoretical and empirical peer-reviewed papers between 1993 and 2003 – with much of this work done by academics who are also practicing coaches. Partnerships and collaboration between coaching service providers and academic researchers are appearing, and doctoral level research is on the increase. These collaborations recognise that solid research and theory development are the life-blood of this new industry.

This paper provides an overview of the academic literature on coaching, and explores some key trends in coaching-related research. It is argued that an explicit movement towards the scientist-practitioner model of coach training and practice is vital for the ongoing maturation of the coaching industry. Despite the fact that no existing profession holds a corner on the market of coaching knowledge, coaching cannot move from a service industry to a genuine profession without the development of a common body of empirically tested knowledge.

**Distinguishing Between a Coaching Profession and Professional Coaching**

At present, the coaching industry is far from meeting the basic requirements of a true profession. This is not to say that coaches are not operating in a professional manner. Rather, it is a consequence of coaching being a relatively new discipline. Nevertheless, professional status is defined by several key criteria. These include: (1) significant barriers to entry, (2) a shared common body of knowledge rather than proprietary systems, (3) formal qualifications at university level, (4) regulatory bodies with the power to admit,
discipline and meaningfully sanction members, (5) an enforceable code of ethics, and (6) some form of state-sanctioned licensing or regulation (Bullock, Stallybrass, & Trombley, 1988; Williams, 1995). While individual coaching organisations have developed accreditation systems and codes of ethics for their own members, coaching as an industry does not adequately meet any of these criteria.

The distinction between professional coaching and a coaching profession is important for at least two key reasons. Firstly, naming coaching as a profession, when in truth it is not, obscures the issues that the industry needs to address as it matures and grows—issues such as establishing an empirically tested knowledge base, minimum industry-wide skill sets, and generally enforced barriers to entry. Secondly, representing coaching as a profession, when it is not, diminishes the credibility of such individuals and the industry in general in the eyes of those who are informed about the true status of coaching and professional institutions.

The road to professional status is not an easy one. Along that journey, potential members will be required to make many difficult, unpleasant and often unpopular decisions. For example, there will be a need to submit to some form of regulation, normally at a government level, and decisions will need to be made about “who should be in” and “who should be out” based on skills and knowledge. All of the key criteria for professionalisation of the industry rely, at some level on the development of a shared body of applied knowledge that forms the foundation of coaching.

We believe that this shared body of knowledge needs to encompass a number of core areas. Clearly, as means of achieving behavioural change, all forms of coaching must be linked into the broader knowledge base of the behavioural sciences. For business coaching, additional expertise in business and economics is also important, as is an understanding of adult education principles for those involved in coach training and education programs. To have confidence of the efficacy of coaching across the diverse contexts in which it is practised we must have well-conducted, peer-reviewed coaching-specific research. This requires a shift towards a new model of coaching practice and the emergence of the scientist-practitioner model of coaching.

Towards a Scientist-Practitioner Model of Professional Coaching

The scientist-practitioner model of professional coaching practice draws on practice and educational frameworks established in the behavioural sciences. Within this framework practitioners are trained to have a working understanding of the principles and methodology of research. This understanding then enables them to apply informed critical thought to the evaluation of their practice, drawing on and being informed by relevant academic literature to design and implement evidence-based interventions (Haring-Hidore & Vacc, 1988), evaluating client progress and adhering to ethical practice (Barnett, 1988).

Scientist-practitioners are not expected to be significant producers of research (Parker & Detterman, 1988). Rather they are positioned as informed consumers of research, with their practice professionalised by their ability to utilise related research. Whilst the scientist-practitioner model in the behavioural sciences has its critics (O’Gorman, 2001), it has nevertheless formed a vital part of the professionalisation of the behavioural sciences (Shapiro, 2002).
Movement towards a scientist-practitioner model requires that coach training programs explicitly address the theoretical and empirical foundations of coaching, and provide training in sound research methodologies, basic statistical and data analysis skills, and foster informed critical thinking skills in student coaches. Such an approach would form the basis of an evidence-based coaching paradigm. Experience and anecdotal evidence suggests that current coach training is generally woefully inadequate in preparing students to understand and utilise empirically sound research.

Although many professional coaches and potential student coaches may applaud a move toward such professional training, current industry practice well may act as a significant barrier to a widespread transition to an evidence-based training. Firstly, many commercial coach training schools teach their own proprietary coaching systems which incorporate little or no reference to the broader knowledge base (Grant, 2000). Secondly, while there are undoubtedly many coach practitioners trained in research methodology, it is uncertain whether at present the coaching industry incorporates enough practitioners able to develop and teach a sophisticated evidence-based approach to coaching. Finally, this means that for many coach training schools, there needs to be a significant investment in personnel and course development so as to produce a truly professional curriculum. Coach training schools already have a large financial investment in their existing intellectual property, and the addition of practitioner-research training may be seen as a costly exercise rather than an investment in an emerging profession.

Despite these difficulties, evidence-based coaching is not complex or ethereal. At its simplest it involves the intelligent and conscientious use of best current knowledge in making decisions about how to design, implement and deliver coaching interventions to clients, and in designing and teaching coach training programs (Sackett, Haynes, Guyatt, & Tugwell, 1996). Best current knowledge can be understood as being current information from valid research theory and practice. Thus, evidence-based coaching is not cookbook coaching. It requires the coach to have the ability, knowledge frameworks and skills to be able to find such information, understand it, determine its applicability, apply it and finally evaluate its effectiveness. At present few coach training programs prepare their students for such tasks.

Such an approach to coaching of course requires that such research exists. Although the coach-specific academic press dates back to 1937 (Gorby, 1937), and many thousands of articles about coaching have been published in newspapers, magazines and professional and trade journals, there is little academic literature specifically on coaching. However, there is a vast body of established research in fields intimately related to coaching. These include the behavioural sciences, business and organisational studies and the field of adult education. The task for coaching is to mine these rich depths, all the time adapting and refining this knowledge for coaching contexts. In this way coaching can develop its own domain specific body of knowledge.

Fortunately, coaching has already gone some way down the track of developing this body of knowledge. Before offering our thoughts on the key challenges facing coaching it is useful to briefly overview the academic literature on coaching and past and current trends within this literature.
An Overview Of The Academic Research On Coaching

In November 2003, an electronic search was conducted of the behavioural science databases PsychInfo and Dissertation Abstracts International (DAI). The search sought to identify all peer-reviewed papers that focused specifically on executive, business and life coaching. Mentoring (the transfer of domain-specific personalised knowledge from a more experienced mentor to a less experienced protégée) and peer coaching papers were excluded. The search was restricted to peer-reviewed psychological journals, purposefully excluding professional and trade journals and newsletters, sports coaching and educational one-to-one tutoring (often termed coaching).

The search identified a total of 128 such papers (Figure 1), with the first published peer-reviewed paper on coaching being published in 1937 (Gorby, 1937). Published papers on coaching have steadily increased over time.

Between 1937 and 1994, only 50 papers or PhD dissertations were cited in the PsychInfo and DAI databases. Between 1995 and 1999 there were 29 papers or PhD dissertations. Between 2000 and Nov 2003 there were 49 citations. Between 1935 and Nov 2003 there were a total of 33 PhDs.

![Figure 1: Total Number of Coach-specific Peer-reviewed Papers Since 1935](image)

Of these 128 citations, 73 were articles which discussed coaching, theories of coaching or application of techniques, and 55 were empirical studies of various types (see Figure 2). The majority of empirical investigations were uncontrolled group or case studies. The following discussion does not aim to be totally inclusive; rather it highlights papers which are representative of the key themes or research trends.
Five Broad Research Trends

There are five overlapping phases or thrusts to coach-specific research: (a) discussion articles on internal coaching conducted by managers with direct reports; (b) the beginnings of more rigorous academic research on internal coaching and its impact on work performance; (c) the extension of research to include external coaching by a professional coach as a means of creating individual and organisational change, (d) the beginning of coaching research as a means of investigating psychological mechanisms and processes involved in human and organisational change; and (e) the emergence of a theoretical literature aimed at the professional coach. Three primary means of reporting and investigating coaching have been used throughout these five phases: descriptive articles; empirical evaluations based on case studies; and empirical evaluations based on group studies.

The first research thrust involves descriptive reports of internal coaching in organisations, with managers or supervisors acting as coaches to their subordinates and staff. This is most clearly evident in the literature between 1937 and the late-1960s and it continues through to the present day. The first paper in the literature (Gorby, 1937) describes how older employees coached newer employees in reducing waste in order to increase profit and maximise employee bonuses as part of a profit sharing program. Bigelow (1938) discussed coaching by sales managers as a means of improving sales training. Hayden (1955) argued that follow-up coaching was an effective way to improve performance appraisals, and Mahler (1964) noted that most organisations have difficulties in getting their managers to be effective coaches.

In an early case study presentation which foreshadowed later coaching applications, Mold (1951) reported on a manager-as-coach training program in which priority was placed on enhancing the manager’s interpersonal skills. The program focused on establishing a coaching culture in which each manager was coached by their superior and encouraged to explore and accept their own personal fears and aggressions – an early example of the use of emotional competencies (Goleman, 1998) in the workplace.
The late 60s saw the beginnings of more rigorous academic research in the form of doctoral
dissertations with a continuing focus on internal organisational coaching. In the first coach-
specific doctoral research, Gershman (1967) evaluated how supervisors who acted as
effective coaches could improve subordinate’s attitude and job performance. Kondrasuk
(1974) discussed the role of coaching in job enrichment, and Carroll (1975) marked the
emergence of research that positioned coaching as being part of the role of human resource
practitioners. Some of the published research continued to focus on job performance
enhancement (e.g., Cohen & Jaffee, 1982; Holoviak, 1982; Tyson & Birnbrauer, 1983), but
nearly all of the literature still consisted of discussion articles (e.g., Frohman & Kotter,
1977; Ponzo, 1980) rather than empirical studies. This balance began to shift slightly in
the 1980s with early doctoral work from Duffy (1984), Wissbrun (1984) and Gant (1985)
who conducted empirical evaluations of the effectiveness of coaching. Nevertheless,
discussion articles continued to dominate the academic literature (e.g., Kelly, 1984; 1985;

The beginning of the 1990s saw levels of doctoral research accelerate (see Figure 3) and
empirical coaching research in general, at last, began to gather momentum – typically in the
form of case studies. Strayer and Rossett (1994) reported on the design, implementation
and evaluation of an in-house coaching program for Century 21® real estate salespersons.
Tobias (1996) discussed a case study in which a technically excellent, 44 year old male
manager whose strengths lay in attention to detail, was coached in relation to being over-
controlling, lacking in empathy and self-awareness and poor appreciation for creativity.

Figure 3: Coach-specific PhD Citations

The empirical research literature in the nineties began to reflect the emergence of
professional external coaches. Diedrich (1996) presented a case study of a technically
outstanding male manager in his mid-40s who had poor interpersonal and team-building
skills and was perceived as being inflexible, unreasonably perfectionist and overly task-
focused. Drawing on a systems perspective Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, and Doyle (1996)
reported on a 40 year old male star performer who was described as being intimidating,
needlessly competitive and with “immense interpersonal problems” (p. 73). From a
psychodynamic perspective, Kilburg (1996) presented a case study of “several months

While most of the empirical research was based on case studies (e.g., Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999; Sauer, 1999; Laske, 1999b), some group-based empirical evaluations were reported. Graham, Wedman, and Garvin-Kester (1993) reported an evaluation of a coaching skills program for 13 sales managers with a total of 87 account representatives. McGibben (1995) evaluated the effectiveness of management training on coaching skills. The Olivero, Bane, and Kopelman (1997) study is noteworthy, in that it focused on evaluating the additional effectiveness of coaching in comparison and in addition to skills trainings. However, although the study was group based, allowing for qualitative analysis, there was no control group.

Large-scale studies have been conducted. Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas, and Kucine (2003) reported a quasi-experiential field experiment of the impact of coaching on 404 senior managers who received 360 degree feedback and coaching, and found that feedback and coaching enhanced performance and re-evaluation scores on the 360 tool. However, although a welcome move towards larger scale studies, this study had methodological shortcomings as the pre-coaching and post-coaching 360 raters were different people. This study highlights some of the problems in conducting large-scale research within organisational settings – jobs change, people move, business units are restructured. Coaching research will need to develop research methodologies that deal with such issues.

Current trends in research: Using Coaching To Understand Human Change Processes

The fourth identifiable phase or thrust of the literature can be seen from the late 1990s onwards. About this time case study and group-based empirical research began to develop a new and potentially very interesting direction - namely investigating the relationship between coaching and interpersonal and intrapersonal factors, and using coaching as a real-life experimental methodology for discovering psychological mechanisms involved in individual and human change. For example, Taylor (1997) investigated the relation between resilience, coaching, coping skills training and stress, and Wageman (1997) found that coaching was a critical factor in the development of superb self-managed teams.

Wachholz (2000) examined the role of expressed positive emotion in corporate coaching, finding that expression of positive emotions can be transferred to coachees when modelled by coaches, and that this process improved communication between the coachee and other individuals. An interesting and unusual study was conducted by Norlander, Bergman, and Archer (2002) who investigated the relative stability of personality characteristics and the effectiveness of a 12-month coaching program with 15 employees of an insurance company. They found that, as expected, many personality traits remained stable, but individuals’ emotional stability was enhanced, their norms and values were reinforced and their openness to new experiences improved. This study is important because there is a long running debate as to whether interventions (coaching or otherwise) can impact on
personality traits. This study indicates that some personality traits are indeed flexible and responsive to coaching interventions.

In terms of life coaching, the empirical literature is almost silent. Grant's (2003) paper is the first, and at present only, peer-reviewed published empirical evaluation of the impact of life coaching. Grant found that life coaching was effective in facilitating goal attainment and well being and suggested that coaching was a useful platform for an applied positive psychology and the investigation of the psychological mechanisms involved in purposeful change in normal, non-clinical populations. Personal communication with researchers suggest that in the near future we are likely to see several new empirical studies of life coaching in the peer reviewed press.

The Emergence Of Literature Aimed At The Professional Coach


Although aimed at the professional coach, the majority of these theoretical papers were once again discussion articles about the nature, practice and evaluation of external professional coaching. One key paper is the first compressive review of the executive coaching literature (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). Other areas of discussion were the distinction between coaching and therapy (e.g., Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001; Sperry, 1993), the credentials, competencies and roles of coaches (e.g., Brotman et al., 1998; Witherspoon & White, 1996), definitions of coaching (e.g., Kilburg, 1996; Levinson, 1996), and techniques and methodologies (e.g., Kilburg, 1997; Peterson, 1996). Despite the rapid increase in peer-reviewed literature, empirical evidence for the efficacy of these theoretical models, techniques and methodologies remains elusive.

Where To From Here?

In the development of a coherent body of coaching knowledge there are a number of key tasks to be completed. The most basic of which is defining and delineating the field. Theoretical elaboration of coaching practice and empirical validation of these theories and methodologies remain key challenges.
Challenge 1: Defining and delineating coaching

Strangely, to date there is no clearly agreed definition of what the term coaching actually denotes. The term “coaching” has been applied to a huge range of activities used with a wide range of populations and issues. These include: coaching individuals to fake malingering on psychological tests (Suhr & Gunstad, 2000); peer coaching in educational settings (Scarnati, Kent, & MacKenzie, 1993); cognitive training for learning difficulties and disabilities (Dalton, Morocco, Tivnan, & Mead, 1997); resolving relationship difficulties (Jacobson, 1977); coping with infertility (Scharf & Weinshel, 2000) and premature ejaculation (Maurer, Solamon, & Troxtel, 1998); career coaching (Scandura, 1992) and job coaching to help disadvantaged individuals gain and retain employment (Davis, Bates, & Cuvo, 1983); improving performance in interviews (Maurer et al., 1998); improving executive performance (Tobias, 1996) and sales performance (Rich, 1998). The list could go on, and we have not even begun to list different types of life coaching, developmental coaching or remedial coaching.

A profession of “coaching” which is grounded in research will need to find a way to establish a clear identity, and it must do this by establishing clear boundaries around what is professional coaching and what is not. These are difficult issues and difficult conversations are yet to be engaged. For example, should ‘aura’ coaching, or coaching using ‘personality assessment’ based on facial structure be considered professional coaching alongside cognitive behavioural coaching? By what criteria should such decisions be made?

We would argue that professional coaching is distinguished by the nature and quality of: its process and intention, its focus, the quality of the coach/coachee relationship, and the issues with which it deals. Firstly, in terms of process, the professional coaching process is a theoretically grounded, systematic, goal-directed process designed to facilitate sustained change. It is intended to foster the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee (Grant, 1999). Hence, the primary focus in professional coaching is on constructing solutions rather than analysing problems. Professional coaching is also distinguished by the collaborative and egalitarian, rather than authoritarian, relationship between coach and coachee; an emphasis on collaborative goal setting between the coach and coachee; and the recognition that although the coach has expertise in facilitating learning through coaching, they do not necessarily need high levels of domain-specific expertise in the coachee’s chosen area of activity. In terms of the issues with which coaching deals, professional coaching is aimed at skills development, performance enhancement and personal development with non-clinical populations; that is, individuals who do not have abnormal levels of psychopathology or acute mental health issues. While often therapeutic, coaching is not a substitute for appropriate medical or psychological therapy. Hence there is an assumption that professional coaches are able to distinguish between clinical and non-clinical issues.

Challenge 2: Elaboration of the theoretically grounded approaches to coaching

Although worldwide there has been considerable media interest in coaching (Garman, Whiston, & Zlatoper, 2000), to date the development of rigorous and coherent theoretical frameworks for coaching remains in its infancy (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998).
Coaching is a broad area dealing with a huge range of issues. Hence the development of multiple theoretical approaches is important. The key issue here is not that coaches should all accept the same theoretical foundations. Rather, it is the scientific and conceptual rigour associated with the approach used that is the key issue. Without such rigour, our interventions as coaches run the risk of being either the slavish following of coaching ‘recipes’, or the unreflective enactment of ‘gut instinct’. Our clients, rightfully, demand more of us.

It is encouraging to see the ongoing development of a vibrant theoretical debate and an academic discussion on core facets of professional coaching. These debates will form the basis of a theoretically grounded, evidence-based approach to professional coaching as it develops over time. If these debates are to continue and become more and more rich, it will require an increasing level of openness among professional practitioners. The secrecy and reluctance to divulge methodology often encountered at gatherings of coaches needs to be seen as a significant limitation to the development of a coaching profession. What other profession is made up of members who seek to hide best practice from each other?

**Challenge 3: the development of an empirical research base**

If the development of theory is to continue in a healthy and rigorous way, reflective practice and empirical research must be the fuel and touchstone of theoretical debate. At present there is precious little solid empirical research validating the efficacy of executive and life coaching (Kilburg, 1996). Overall the literature indicates some measure of empirical support for the efficacy of both internal and external coaching, but it is clear from this overview of the academic literature that empirical research into coaching is in its infancy and far more systematic and rigorous research is needed. Discussion articles still dominate the literature and much of the outcome research is based on case studies. Group studies are becoming more common, but many of these group-based studies are methodologically flawed. While all these types of research do make an important contribution, we need more large scale, methodologically rigorous, controlled outcome studies.

Future research may do well to focus on the evaluation of coaching by following established research methodologies, including random assignment to intervention and control groups, and group-based research as opposed to single case studies. Further, it would be useful to see an increasing emphasis on objective quantitative outcomes measures and on investigating the relative efficacy of different approaches to coaching.

To support this necessary theoretical and empirical development, the establishment of journals, symposiums and conferences, which incorporate good quality peer-reviewed publishing processes, is important. We need to foster and support such initiatives and be vocal in demanding that the bar be raised progressively higher in these professional forums.

**Conclusion**

In this paper it is argued that professional coaches should be calling for explicit movement towards the scientist-practitioner model of training and practice, and that such a move is vital for the maturation of the coaching industry and its movement from a service industry, towards becoming a truly respected cross-disciplinary profession. Coaching-specific
research is far from being an ethereal academic pursuit restricted to the ivory towers. It is the core and the lifeblood of an emerging profession. If coaching is to be more than the last management or life style fad, then we need to train coaches in the scientist-practitioner model, so that we share a common language and can communicate our practice professionally. If we do this well, in time we will see a real profession grow.

References


Improving intermediate skills through workplace coaching: A case study within the UK rail industry

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Key words: case study, customer service, workplace coaching, National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), intermediate skills

Abstract

This phenomenological case study, set within the UK Rail Industry used Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland and Scholes, 1991) to answer the central research question “Can workplace coaching improve individual performance among staff and raise levels of customer satisfaction?” The case study examined the individual and business impact resulting from the introduction of a workplace-coaching model on a population of on-train customer service employees. The case study results proved the research theory that through workplace coaching, the level of employee competence would improve, as measured through the assessment against National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at Level 2, and that this increase in competence would be demonstrated consistently whilst at work. Furthermore, that the resulting service consistency would improve the level of customer service satisfaction amongst the travelling public. Given the possibility of drawing generalisations from this case study, the results make a strong argument for using workplace coaching as a method of raising intermediate skills levels and show that coaching can significantly improve individual and organisational performance when placed within an NVQ framework.

Introduction

Ashton and Felstead (1995) highlighted that however crucial training is, we are far from demonstrating the fact that training represents a key determinant of an organisation’s financial performance. The purpose of this research was to describe how the workplace coaching undertaken among a population of customer service staff improved both their individual competence and increased the level of customer satisfaction. The research helps make the case for coaching for non-management grade employees within a business and as a means to develop intermediate skills capabilities that benefit the individual, the organisation and the UK general public. It could also help inform other research on the adoption of coaching as a leadership style.

The central question for the research was, “Can workplace coaching improve individual performance among staff and raise levels of customer satisfaction?” The hypothesis was that through workplace coaching, against defined standards, the level of employee competence would improve, as measured through the assessment against NVQ, Level 2, and that this increase in competence would be demonstrated consistently whilst at work, as measured by Mystery Shopper surveys (see Fig. 1). Furthermore, it is argued that the resulting service consistency would improve the level of customer service satisfaction amongst the travelling public.

To explore the theory I looked at a case study within a UK intercity Train Operating Company (the TOC), where a team of 13 regionally-based workplace Coaches were responsible for increasing the customer service skills of a population of approximately 350
customer hosts (the population). The whole coaching programme was scheduled to run over a 52-week period. The case study was concerned with the effect of the coaching between 1st September 2002 and 31st May 2003 (9 months). I chose to conduct the research as a case study, using Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) (Checkland and Scholes, 1991) as a means to interpret and analyse the real world phenomenon and its impact on the population and my theory. SSM was also used to identify flexible research systems and ensure that all parts of theory were tested using both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis.

![Research Theory Diagram]

Figure 1: Research Theory

The National Context

Since the privatisation of the UK rail network in 1996, the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA), on behalf of central government, has awarded short-term franchises to a variety of private companies.

Since this date, many events have influenced these franchises and their ability to deliver the promises privatisation sought to deliver. Railtrack was called into receivership in 2002, following the catastrophic aftermath of the Hatfield rail disaster in October 2000. At this time a new simplified rail franchise map was drawn up. The competition for these new franchises will be very strong, despite the incumbent TOC advantage.

The emphasis of the SRA is one of integrated and reliable customer focused services. This wish is against a backdrop of failing infrastructure and the knowledge that track performance, and therefore train-running performance, is unlikely to improve significantly, and will probably get worse, over the next few years, as Network Rail (Railtrack’s successor) upgrades the national rail infrastructure.

Although the context in which the research was set was dynamic and complex I believe that the ability to generalise findings between one population and another within this and other
customer service organisations is considerably high and as such adds to the body of knowledge and inform further research. The results of the research are particularly interesting, as they help establish the business benefit of workplace coaching. To date there has been very little academic research in the area of coaching at work, although 70% of organisations purport to use coaching as a method of organisational learning (Industrial Society, 1999).

Company Context

The TOC previously invested heavily in customer care training but delivered little tangible benefit. By common consensus, it was felt that the reason was the failure to define, reinforce and monitor the delivery of front line standards.

In 2002 a new commercial strategy was designed by the TOC. The people element of this strategy formed a major component with a key business driver to gain and maintain customer service consistency. The learning and development model was based on Deming’s (1981) theory of continuous improvement, the principles of which can also been seen within Kolb’s Learning Cycle (1984). The TOC’s interpretation of Deming’s theory (1981) is explained in Figures 2 and 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element of Deming’s Continuous Improvement Cycle</th>
<th>Manifestation in TOC’s learning and development model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLAN</td>
<td>• Defined customer service specifications issued to each member of the population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DO</td>
<td>• Off job learning on wider customer service skills/safety knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHECK</td>
<td>• Assessment of customer service tasks and behaviours with an NVQ framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>• Performance management through key performance indicators, such as commissioned Customer Monitor and Mystery Shopper research and individual performance appraisals with line managers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Manifestation of Deming’s theory in learning and development model for maintaining service consistency (1) (Adapted from Deming, (1981)}
Coaching within the TOC

There was a team of 13 regionally based Coach/Assessors within the TOC. They were originally employed as Service Quality Managers as part of another service improvement initiative, whereby they were required to ensure standards were delivered on-board trains. Their role was to achieve standards through ‘command and control compliance’, reporting poor performers to management. Although this achieved the desired result whilst managers were on-board the train, left unsupervised, staff returned to their ‘old ways’.

As part of the People Strategy these service quality roles were placed into a learning framework where coaching was the vehicle for delivering consistent standards. The existing team role was redefined and renamed ‘Coach/Assessors’. They were transferred to the human resources and training teams where they attended a series of development interventions provided by an external consultancy that gave them coaching and assessing skills to NVQ standards.

Although the participation in gaining an NVQ was voluntary for the population, the delivery of consistent service standards was not. Therefore, within this context the coaching relationship was enforced, albeit using NVQs as a guided learning framework to encourage changed behaviour.
The model of workplace coaching

The model of coaching used within the TOC was the A.C.E.R (Assess, Challenge, Encourage, Review) model (Figure 4):

![Diagram](image-url)

**Figure 4: A.C.E.R diagram**

Within the TOC coaching was defined as: “The release of individual and team potential by using on-the-job opportunities for facilitating learning and development”, whereby:

**Potential**

People are a source of tremendous untapped potential. Self-development needs to be encouraged to meet ever-stringent market demands.
On-the-job

Work is a learning activity. Coaching embraces continuous learning in the day-to-day work situation.

Facilitating

Not telling or prescribing but developing people to develop themselves. The Coach is a resource to the individual and the team.

Learning and Development

Learning is at the heart of coaching. Learning is about extending our capacity to create our futures.

During the coaching programme the Coach/Assessors were introduced to Egan’s (2002) ‘Skilled Helper’ model for effective coaching relationships. This theoretical model was used because is it an “opportunity-development” model, and also “provides an excellent foundation for any ‘brand’ of helping” (2002 p.25).

Despite this development there remained one fundamental factor that needed to be acknowledged, that of individual ‘coach characteristics’. Some of the original ‘command and control’ team were now Coach/Assessors. The characteristics of the former are not necessarily appropriate for the latter. Within their training programmes the characteristics of a ‘good coach’ were identified and discussed (Figure 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Integrated</th>
<th>Reliable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genuine</td>
<td>Discreet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warm</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courteous</td>
<td>Enthusiastic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firm when necessary</td>
<td>Sense of humour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values me for myself</td>
<td>A good listener</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows the relevant literature</td>
<td>Good practical experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helps me to focus</td>
<td>Really tries to understand me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honest and straightforward</td>
<td>Asks probing questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthy</td>
<td>Not sexist, racist, or ageist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open to different views/experience</td>
<td>Positive about my potential knowledge of people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges me to do my best</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Characteristics of a good coach

Nonetheless, it should be noted that for the population who were to receive coaching and the remaining Quality Managers they might recall that maintaining consistent standards was about compliance rather than development. This may have affected the early coaching relationships.

Methodology

The case study employed SSM through four key activities (Figure 6) and used them within the context of other theories and models associated with methodological development.
Rich Picture Analyses

Checkland and Scholes (1991) argue that the real world situation can be analysed through the development of a Rich Picture. This enables the pictorial articulation of the complexity of human affairs and the multiple, interacting relationships. They say pictures can be taken in as a whole and help encourage holistic thinking. This method is also referred to as a ‘conceptual framework’ which can identify enabling and disabling mechanisms operating within a particular situation and the context relevant to that situation (Robson, 2002).

A Rich Picture of the interrelatedness of the research population, the Coach/Assessors and the wider intra and inter organisational relationships was therefore developed, together with an identification of the cultural and political context in which the systems of research are designed.

The overall research design can be illustrated in two different ways (Figures 7 and 8).
Figure 7: Research design

Figure 8: Identifying input and output data sources

Data was collected at three points during the case study. The results were analysed in relation to the environmental conditions prevailing in the preceding three-month periods to ensure confounding and extraneous variables were taken into account during the analysis.

The periods from which data were collected and analysed are shown in Figure 9.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Series</th>
<th>Data collected</th>
<th>Analysed in relation to events during the preceding three months</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Baseline</td>
<td>December 2002</td>
<td>Sept – Nov 2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st series</td>
<td>March 2003</td>
<td>Dec - Feb 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd series</td>
<td>June 2003</td>
<td>Mar – May 2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: Data collection timetable
Research systems

Four research systems were designed as relevant purposeful systems of activity, each mapping onto the original research design:

1. Coach/Coachee relationship

This data was collected through a series of individual semi-structured interviews, (King, 1994; Kram, 1988; Powney and Watts, 1987), held with 15 randomly selected individuals from the population of Customer Hosts at each data collection point.

I acknowledged that because I was both the researcher and a senior manager within the company my personal bias and very presence would influence the individual responses. I therefore used a junior field researcher from my team to limit these effects. I also ensured that no interviews were undertaken when a Coach or line manager was present, nor did I give any advance warning to the Coaches that the interviews were going to happen.

The system for testing the coaching relationship is shown in Figure 10.

![Diagram of the Coach/Coachee Relationship System]

Figure 10: Relevant system to test coaching input

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each. The resulting qualitative and quantitative data has been weighted heavily in the overall analysis as I placed greater reliance on the conclusions as they were observed first-hand by a trusted informant and were collected when the respondents were alone and not in groups (Robson, 2002, p.484).

2. Assessing employee competence

The population was assessed against published company specifications, issued to all of them as part of their normal job role. These standards were directly linked to the NVQ in
Railway Operations – (Passenger Services), Level 2. The NVQ assessment criteria dictated that the candidate must demonstrate the required behaviour against a range of performance criteria. Progress towards increased population competence was achieved by the reporting of the numbers within the population being assessed as competent against each of the elements. Figure 11 shows the research system used to best enable validity and reliability of this data.

![Diagram of data collection process](image)

**Figure 11:** Relevant system to test employee competence

### 3. Mystery Shopper

Consistent customer service constitutes the repetition of tasks to standard and the demonstration of appropriate customer care behaviours as laid down in company documentation. The TOC employed an independent research company to undertake valid and reliable mystery shopper research to evaluate whether individuals were performing to company standards. Figure 12 shows the research system of enquiry using this data source that tested the application of consistent standards (Checkland and Scholes, 1991).
Part of the research theory argued that the delivery of consistent customer service standards within the population group would have a positive impact on the level of customer satisfaction. A professional market research company undertakes customer research as part of the TOC’s regulatory requirements. As such its content is determined by the outputs required by the statutory body. I have access to this data in the normal course of my job role. The results of this survey are provided to the SRA and are used as part of the franchise commitment regulations. However, I am concerned with the reliability and validity due to the nature of the many confounding variables that will have an impact on the perceived levels of satisfaction among customers.

Figure 13 shows the research system of enquiry using this data source to test the effect of coaching on improved customer satisfaction levels (Checkland and Scholes, 1991).
Results

Following the data series collection and analysis the results showed that there had been an increase in employee competence levels and an improvement in the Mystery Shopper and Customer Monitor results over the length of the case study. Nonetheless, it was not sufficient to take these at face value. Throughout the research the dynamic nature of the phenomenon meant that all variables could have had an impact and these were considered in the context of the results. I argue that seven significant events had a direct negative impact on the ability of the population to perform to standard (Figure 14). These principally were around poor train service performance and staff shortages.
Figure 14: Time–ordered matrix of real world situation resulting in significant negative impact on the population during the case study

There were four events that could have had a direct positive effect on increased employee competence and their ability to perform consistently. These centred on additional resources for coaching and periods of stable train performance. In addition, there was a possibility that the introduction of NVQs in September 2002, additional staff in October 2002 and Catering Managers in January 2003 may have had an indirect positive effect on morale, and confidence that the TOC was investing in the population’s future (Figure 15).
Figure 15: Time–ordered matrix of real world situation resulting in direct or indirect positive impact on the population during the case study

I suggest that the negative factors had an overall greater impact and this therefore increased the validity of the results, in so much as the evidence showed improvement despite the many negative variables. I believe the effect of coaching would have been greater if the Coach/Assessors had more regular access to the population during a time of sustained organisational calm. However, this is real world research and the world of the case study company is rarely that stable.

The Coaching Relationship

Throughout the case study incremental improvements in the overall coaching relationship were found and these correlated in timeframe with the increased vocational skills of the population, thus I argue reinforcing the research of Billett (1993, 1994a) who believed coaching strongly supported the acquisition of knowledge and attributes required for vocational expertise. I analysed and drew conclusions on the nature of these coaching relationships in relation to three specific areas:-

- Motivation to learn
- Relationship with Coach
- Coaching methods used

Motivation to Learn

Forty of the forty-five people sampled throughout the case study had enrolled on their NVQ (89%), (Figure 16). The NVQ structure was chosen by the TOC as a means to incorporate
guided learning in the workplace and to ensure that learning was against a defined range of standards and performance criteria. This structured approach supported the learning undertaken during induction and informal learning from peers and ensured that incorrect practices were identified and remedied. I argue this strategy further supports the work of Ragoff (1995) on guided learning and that a developmental framework encourages the individuals to think positively about learning new ways of doing things and therefore accepting change in the workplace. I believe that this is particularly true in this case study due to the historical role of the Coach/Assessors as ‘Enforcers of Standards’ and the traditionally adversarial nature of management/employee (trade union) relations in the rail industry.

I suggest that this strategy also strengthened the likelihood of workplace learning, as the NVQ structure ensured that the population was briefed on their coaching and assessment schedule. This appears to support Billett (2000) who argues that preparation is necessary for workplace learning to be effective.

The standards required by the TOC were communicated through a specification manual. The presence of this manual appeared not to be detrimental to the individual’s propensity to learn. One interviewee stated that "They tell me what I am going to be assessed on and so the night before I refreshed myself by going through the manual". This appears to contradict Karakowsky and McBey (1999) who proposed that organisational scripts are negatively related to the level of potential for adult learning. However, these specifications manuals, although highly prescriptive, were task-focused and did not include rigid guidance on how an individual should ‘behave’, thus enabling individual personalities to ‘shine through’. This appears to support one of Karakowsky and McBey’s (1999) other propositions that submission of personality is detrimental to learning.

I believe that the presence of NVQs at work significantly increased individual motivation to learn (Knowles et al 1998) as each valued the qualification that changing behaviour would bring. However, I argue that although improving the overall outcome, the presence of NVQs as a guided learning strategy merely strengthened the potency of the coaching and was not the significant reason for the population’s improvement in competence.
The data also showed that although competence increased, the reported numbers of coaching sessions was not high. The results showed that there were many more assessments than coaching sessions over the period of the case study (Figure 17).

![Figure 17: Number of coaching and assessment sessions reported during the case study](image)

It should be noted, however, that there is a significant possibility that individuals were reporting multiple assessments that occurred during only one assessment ‘session’. I believe this discrepancy between the numbers of coaching and assessment sessions should be treated cautiously as there were a few reports that coaching behaviour was concurrently occurring during an ‘assessment’. This would fit the model of coaching for the TOC, as the Coach/Assessor would want to identify knowledge and skills gaps before beginning coaching. Nonetheless, I believe that further research is required on the effectiveness and efficiency of coaching as a method of increasing intermediate vocational skills in the workplace, as some of the more experienced individuals appeared to require little coaching to achieve competence once they had read the specification manual.

**Relationships with the Coaches**

The Baseline data showed that the population viewed the Coach/Assessors as ‘Managers’ and ‘Enforcers of Standards’, rather than ‘Trainers’ and ‘Coaches’. I was concerned that this perceived positional power may affect the quality and nature of the relationship (Ragins 1997). However, with the passage of time this perception changed (Figure 18). Although early indicators showed a shift in perception on both scales, Data series two showed no movement in the perception of the Coach/Assessors as ‘Enforcer of Standards’.
I argue that although the perception of the population is important, it is the actual construction of the developmental relationship that is more valid as an indicator of a developmental coaching relationship and not the propensity of the population to choose one role descriptor over another. The evidence showed how the overall quality of the developmental relationship improved during the case study and I argue this has stronger validity because it is based on the presence or absence of particular factors, rather than individual perception and interpretation of a single statement.

Within the A.C.E.R coaching model the characteristics of a ‘good coach’ were introduced (Figure 5). Many of these indicators can also be seen within Murphy’s (1995) stated coaching roles and responsibilities. Figure 19 shows the average perception ratings of stated important aspects in the coaching relationship(s).

Figure 18: How the perception of role of the Quality Coach/Assessors has changed during the case study

Figure 19: Average perception ratings of stated important aspects in the coaching relationship(s) – Data series one and two
When analysing the data it can be noted that there was a slight decrease in the reported presence of these ‘important aspects’ (Figure 20). I argue that this decrease may be due to the increased presence of multiple developmental relationships and strengthened my belief that ‘enforced’ coaching together with multiple developmental relationships weakens developmental relationship tie – strength (Higgins and Kram, 2001). I suggest that further research is required in this area.

Despite this slight decrease, Data series two showed that the aspects were still present in significant degrees (Figure 19). The levels of ‘important aspects’ reported within the coaching relationship meant that the population felt ‘psychologically safe’ with the Coach/Assessors. This was born out in their increasing propensity to proactively seek feedback or coaching, thus supporting the research by Fisher et al. (1982) and Wills (1991) on psychological safety. I also believe that this feeling of psychological safety was increased due to the consistency of coaching approach as reported in the increasing presence of defined A.C.E.R coaching behaviours, which also contain many of Murphy’s (1995) roles and responsibilities. Figures 21, 22 and 23 show the presence or absence of these behaviours during the three data collection points. Figure 24 shows the percentage point shift in the total presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours between Baseline and Data series two.
Figure 21: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors - Baseline data (Sept 02- Nov 02)

Figure 22: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors - Data series one (Dec 02 – Feb 03)
Figure 23: Number of respondents indicating the presence or absence of specific coaching behaviours by the Coach/Assessors – Data series two (Feb 03 - May 03)

Figure 24: The increased levels of A.C.E.R coaching behaviours during the case study

The high level of these aspects being present within the relationship proved that it was coaching that was taking place as defined within the A.C.E.R model, and this was supportive of Brookfield’s (1986) definition of an adult learning facilitator in so much as the coaching enabled the population to:

..consider rationally and carefully the perspectives and interpretations of the world that diverge from those they already hold, without making [them].. feel they are being cajoled or threatened. (Brookfield, 1986, p.286)
I also argue that it was coaching rather than on-job training, as defined by Gold (1981) that was occurring. This is important to recognise, as Bowerman and Collins (1999, p.219) state that the traditional view of coaching was little more than an “enlightened step beyond telling”. Given the traditional command and control leadership style within the TOC this was a significant step forward in the company’s organisational development. However, there was no evidence of generative coaching, (Flaherty, 1999, Guest, 2000) whereby the individual and coach continually reassessed their mental models. I suggest that this may be due, in part, to a culture where collaborative learning is uncommon and to the fact that intermediate vocational skills development does not lend itself to this type of coaching occurring.

The combination of all these aspects appeared to support the work of Murphy (1995) and Billett (1994a, 1994b), and resulted in the vast majority of the population accepting multiple coaching relationships and that having more than one Coach/Assessor was “not a problem as they are all coming from the baseline standard”.

Overall the nature of the developmental relationship is best described as ‘opportunistic’, (Higgins and Kram, 2001), as was expected, and I assert that although the population felt ‘psychologically safe’ the ‘enforced’ nature of the coaching relationship delimited the probability of strong and proactive relationships developing. This ‘enforcement’ was particularly evident in Data series two, where there was found to be an increased level of passivity towards gaining a qualification at work. For example, “We were getting assessed as part of our job so we may as well get a qualification for it.” was a typical response from many of the individuals interviewed. In addition, the lack of change in the perception of ‘Enforcer of Standards’, I argue, is evidence of the potentially detrimental nature of enforced coaching.

Assessing Population Competence

Throughout the period of the case study the Coach/Assessors had varying ability to undertake formal NVQ assessments. Nonetheless, they were able to assess a total of 2,882 tasks against company standards and the coaching that had been undertaken had a significant impact on the population’s propensity to behave consistently to standard.

Mystery Shopper

Throughout the case study significant improvement was seen in the Mystery Shopper data specific to the population (Figures 25 and 26). Figure 27 shows the variance in Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study. The results show the actual behaviour seen among the population and correlates closely with the company standards. I argue that this is valid and reliable evidence that overall there was significant and increasing improvement in the performance and consistent application of company standards among the population and that this was directly attributable in substantial part, to the coaching they received during the case study. The two significant decreases are in the area of uniform standards and this is explained by the difficulty experienced within the TOC to receive and distribute adequate uniform supplies to the population. The minor decrease of –2% in ‘Thank you/Farewell’ I suggest is due to the increased levels of customer service on-board and the inability of the individuals to be in two places at once
Figure 25: Average TOC Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study (1/2)

Figure 26: Average TOC Mystery Shopper results for the population during the case study (2/2)
Customer Satisfaction Monitor

The relevant extracts of the Customer Satisfaction Monitor data analysis are shown below in Figure 32. These results represent all data collected during the case study. The results show a mixed picture, with an overall increase between Baseline and Data series one, but a significant decrease between Data series one and two.
Figure 28: Customer satisfaction scores from the Customer Monitor survey for the population – September 2002 – May 2003

Figure 29 shows the variances between Baseline and Data series two. When comparing increased customer satisfaction over this longer timeframe we see that there have been increases in levels of customer satisfaction on six of the ten variables.
Although one could conclude that the increased compliance to company standards had an impact on levels of customer satisfaction and that the level of increased compliance appeared to correlate, in part, with the levels of increased customer satisfaction, the dynamic nature of customer perception and the degree of influence the confounding variables had on it meant that the validity of these particular results were not as strong as all other data results and should be treated with some caution.

Summary

This case study set out to prove the research theory that the introduction of workplace coaching can improve employee competence when measured against company standards for an intermediate vocational skills role within a UK train operating company. Using NVQs as a guided learning and assessment framework, the resulting increases in competence would be evidenced by the individual’s successful assessment against company standards and that this would lead to the consistent application of standards in the workplace, as evidenced by increasing Mystery Shopper scores. Because customer standards were increasing this would then have a positive effect on the level of customer satisfaction with the population.

This study demonstrated that coaching did occur in the workplace as defined by the TOC’s workplace coaching model; ‘opportunistic’ developmental relationships did develop (Higgins and Kram, 2001) and the important characteristics of a coaching relationship were evident throughout the case study. This research also proved that the coaching had a significant effect on developing employee competence, although I believe that there was a significant contributing factor. The introduction of the specifications manual contributed to defining ‘what good looked like’ in the TOC and supported the consistent ‘coaching – in’ of the standards in the workplace. This manual also acted as a comprehensive guide for the more experienced members of the population who proactively read the manual to ensure
they passed assessments. I believe that the presence of the specifications manual for more experienced employees meant that the level of coaching they required was probably lower than less experienced members of the population. This is important as it leads me to question how effective and efficient workplace coaching is for this level of vocational skills, especially when there are clearly defined organisational scripts.

I am confident that the NVQ assessment process was a valid measure of competence and that the introduction of the NVQs did give the population an increased level of motivation to learn new things and change their behaviour. However, I argue that the presence of NVQs merely added strength to the coaching outcome and the introduction of NVQs themselves did not have a direct impact on improved employee performance, however they did have a significant impact on the population’s ability to accept change in the workplace in return for the reward of a national qualification.

The level of increased employee competence was successfully evidenced through the significant increase in the Mystery Shopper scores on nearly all aspects during the case study. I believe this shows that the coaching has helped to change the mental models of the population who are now performing to standard without management supervision.

The impact of coaching on levels of customer satisfaction is less clear due to the confounding variables that affect the public’s perception of satisfaction. Overall I believe that the customers received ‘better’ service as a result of coaching but this did not strongly correlate with their perceptions of satisfaction. I also argue that rail customers have suffered journey disruption and poor quality service over such a long period of time that they now expect the worst and therefore subconsciously filter out the improvements that do occur, remembering only what went wrong. These confounding variables are part of a real world situation. Throughout this research I have sought to identify and analyse the effect of these variables on the population and research phenomenon and this further strengthens my belief that the methodology I adopted was appropriate and has led to the collection of valid and reliable data that, in turn, has proved the vast majority of my research theory as true.

The limitations of the case study methodology and timescale of research meant that I was not able to make significant adjustments to the Coaches’ performance that would have been possible through Action Research. Given the case study results I suggest that the effect of workplace coaching could have been more significant if Action Research was used. I believe that future similar research would benefit from a longer time frame and this alternative methodology.

Nonetheless, I believe the level of generalisability is significant within many customer service contexts. Ashton and Felstead (1995) suggested that we are far from demonstrating that training represents a key determinant of an organisation’s financial performance. This research showed the significant business impact workplace coaching had and is a timely example, so keenly sought by the current Government (White Paper, 2003) that could encourage more employers to invest in the intermediate skills levels of their employees. I also argue the lack of research on workplace coaching has meant it is seen as a ‘nice to have’, disjointed from the ‘real business’ of the organisation, and has not been considered seriously when discussing ways to improve organisational performance. I believe this case study showed beyond doubt that coaching can improve individual and organisational performance. I hope that this research helps to overcome the UK’s long-standing indifference to training at the intermediate skills level, which is seen by many (Hallier and
Butts, 1999) as responsible for holding back the UK’s ability to compete in the value-added/high quality international markets.

References

Coaching and Mentoring in Small to Medium Sized Enterprises in the UK – factors that affect success and a possible solution.

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Abstract

This paper, adopts a case study approach in order to examine the issues relating to the deployment of a coaching and mentoring intervention within the context of a specific UK based small and medium-sized enterprise (SME). The SME coaching and mentoring research agenda is highlighted as an area urgently needing attention given its economic impact. This paper seeks to initiate this debate. The pre-eminence of culture within an organisational context is analysed in order to establish its uniqueness and impact on coaching and mentoring deployment. A number of barriers to effective coaching and mentoring within this context are also identified as issues that need to be incorporated within an intervention if it is to be successful. A coaching and mentoring programme was developed to incorporate these findings and provide a starting point to address the SME research chasm.

Key Words: SME, coaching, mentoring, barriers, culture.

Introduction: the objectives of the research

The intention of this paper is to outline a suggested approach to developing a government funded, coaching and mentoring programme within a small to medium sized enterprise (SME) operating within the UK securities industry. The selection of this particular organisation is significant for several reasons. Firstly, the importance of SMEs to the UK economy is overwhelming, with organisations employing less than 250 people making up 99.8% of UK companies, and accounting for 52% of turnover and 55.6% employment in the private sector (DTI, 2003). Further Zimmer and Scarborough (1994) stated that this century would dawn with the greatest number of small businesses ever and over the last two decades new SMEs have been identified by most western governments as significant components of economic growth in terms of job and wealth creation according to Holmund and Kock (1998), Kuratko and Hodgetts (1995), Hodgetts and Kuratko (1995) and Birley and Westhead (1989).

Secondly, given this economic significance, there is a virtual absence of existing research into the effects of coaching and mentoring on SMEs and their employees. Leading researchers tend to focus on larger organisations and interventions, for example the work of Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995), Klasen and Clutterbuck (2002), Hay (1999) and Whitmore (2002) typify this trend. One explanation for this is that the UK generally has been slow to capitalise on the SME market unlike the USA and Japan, which stimulated and exploited independent entrepreneurs (Nancarrow et al 1999). Consequently, according to Hill (2001) it is little wonder that academic researchers are slowly turning their attention towards addressing the SME research agenda.
Further it will be contended that the size of this type of organisation can provide an excellent opportunity to examine the effects of a coaching and mentoring intervention, sometimes avoiding the complexities that larger organisations innately posses. Supporting this argument Storey (1994), citing the work of Wynarczyk et al (1993), contends that too often the large firm model is taken as given and the small firm is assumed to be a “scaled-down” version of a larger organisation. Further, Hill (2001) argues that it is widely acknowledged that SMEs are not just ‘little big businesses’ but in fact have their own particular characteristics which affect the way they operate and which largely determine their preoccupations and concerns as evidenced in the work of Carson and Cromie (1989).

I will also postulate that organisational behaviour is a central tenet in identifying the issues within SMEs and designing a coaching and mentoring solution. If, organisational behaviour is “concerned with the behaviour of people within an organisational setting” and the factors that influence their performance, (Mullins, 1989, p.2), then my contention is that issues that emerge from a diagnosis of the organisation would serve to mirror the organisational imperatives of that business. Such factors as culture and its impact, the prevalence of owner-managers in setting behavioural standards and the company perception of external consultants are all permeated by complex organisational behaviour. Further I would suggest that any coaching or mentoring strategy that does not incorporate such factors into its inception will be fundamentally flawed and miss an opportunity to anchor the intervention in the reality of the company context.

First I outline the research methodology adopted within this paper. Then I move on to contextualise the case study organisation within its specific operating environment, because it provides an opportunity to examine the factors that influence its organisational behaviour. Then I move on to suggest that the pre-eminence of an SME’s culture is a central issue that must be incorporated within any coaching or mentoring intervention if it is to be successful. Certainly the determinant and visible effects of culture on mentoring have been clearly identified in the work of Barham and Conway (1998) and justify its inclusion here. The significance of this argument revolves around the contention that all the other identified issues that need to be addressed within a coaching and mentoring strategy emanate from the prevalence of the culture of the company. I then postulate a coaching and mentoring strategy that addresses these issues by interweaving what I regard as good practice with existing coaching and mentoring theory. The interaction of theory and practice within this strategy will also serve to highlight the uniqueness of such a tailored coaching and mentoring intervention.

The research methodology

A case study methodology has been adopted as a research strategy because, as Eisenhardt (1989) and Sarantakos (1994) have postulated, it is particularly well suited to new or inadequately researched areas of study. This is certainly the case in terms of existing research that specifically addresses the issues of organisational capability for the deployment of coaching and mentoring schemes within an SME context. Yin (1984) further contends that a case study methodology is the most appropriate approach for investigations where boundaries between what is being investigated and their context are not clearly evident. This is certainly the case concerning the organisational dimensions of SMEs and their use of coaching and mentoring since there is a lack of rigorous research in this area.
This methodology also involved an extensive literature review of research concerning various training and learning interventions within the SME context. The decision to use the above material was necessitated by the lack of existing research, which specifically examined the effects of coaching and mentoring in the SME community. The notable exception to this trend was the innovative work of Devins and Gold (2000). Unfortunately, this groundbreaking study did not provide an extensive analysis of the broad range of factors affecting the successful deployment of coaching and mentoring. Consequently, an analysis of the SME research that was available provides the basis for this paper’s examination of organisational culture, existing barriers to deployment and the development of an SME specific coaching and mentoring strategy. The case study organisation itself was identified through this author’s continuing coaching and mentoring work with the Welsh Development Agency, which funds a broad range of SME specific interventions.

**Putting the specific working environment into context**

The organisation operates as a Small to Medium Sized Enterprise (SME) in the securities industry, based in Wales but with national provision contracts. This SME sector of the security industry is very ‘fragmented’, to use Porter’s (1980) terminology, in that no one company has a significant market share. This fragmented sector is also typically populated with a large number of privately-owned companies, and there is currently no market leader who is in a position to substantially influence industry outcomes. This is further supported by Carson et al (1995), who suggests that the small scale of SME operations means that they have little impact on their economic surroundings and lack the ability to modify environmental forces to their advantage. Consequently, this vacuum of influence was a key motivator in this organisation’s drive to successfully deploy coaching and mentoring in support of a skills development programme. Their rationale was that if they could develop their human resources sufficiently, they would in turn provide a sound foundation to secure their independence and assure their continued trading in a very competitive market. Supporting this rationale is the work of Westhead and Storey (1996), Curran (1999) and Gray (1998), which highlights the uniqueness of SMEs compared to larger corporations in that their motivations tend to be more focused on survival and independence rather than organisational expansion.

Equally important in contextualising the ways SMEs operate is the work of Stanworth and Gray (1991) and Westhead and Storey (1997), because they suggest that managers of small firms are reluctant to take part in external training or support activity, which supports my 12 years of experience of delivering training within this market sector. Rather they favoured using individuals with whom they had an existing relationship as opposed to securing the services of external paid professionals (Curran and Blackburn, 1994; Gibb, 1997). There is also complimentary evidence from Curran and Blackburn (1999), to indicate that owner-managers are reluctant to accept any form of external advice, driven primarily by the characteristics that prompted them to become owner-managers in the first place. Smith et al (2002) contend that these characteristics, namely extreme autonomy and independence, serve to delimit the perceived options open to owner-managers in even seeking out such advice. As a result of these factors, and my own experiences of working with this particular company, it would not be unreasonable to suggest that within SMEs generally there is little history of linking individual or organisational development with formal training/learning interventions. This suggestion is supported by the work of Bramley (1999), Centre for Enterprise (2001) and Robinson and Henry (2001), who all found that the
norm within SMEs is for informal learning with a practical and experiential slant rather than a formal or accredited learning intervention. This is not to claim that learning and development do not happen, rather it supports the contention put forward by Ross (1993) that this activity does go on but is not labeled as such. These characteristics coalesce to produce a range of issues that must be addressed if the coaching and mentoring intervention is to be successful. It is to these issues that I now turn.

**The emerging and potential issues identified – a case study**

The first and perhaps singularly most impactful aspect of the range of issues identified for this particular organisation was the role their culture played in how the business operated. The seminal work of Chouke and Armstrong (2000) serves to highlight the significance that the organisational culture or ‘climate’ plays in the development, maintenance and success of an SME. This pre-eminence resonates from the fact that the culture ‘emanated from the founders’ (Chouke and Armstrong, 2000, p.233), and because of their proximity to the workers would serve to continually reinforce and mirror their values and norms of behaviour. Further support for this contention is provided by Schein (1985), who suggests that organisational culture has a number of different levels, some of which exhibit underlying beliefs. The prevalence of these underlying beliefs and values is significant because they are important factors in a SME’s success and consequently this encourages owner-managers, in my experience, to develop them further. Goldsmith and Clutterbuck’s (1984), research provides an underpinning rationale for this argument in that they concluded that a strong culture was a crucial element in maintaining the characteristic of a successful management style, which in turn permeates through to the success of the company.

The owner-managers ability to determine directly the acceptability and continuance of these ‘standards’ of behaviour and belief are a crucial element that needed to be incorporated in any coaching/mentoring intervention. Support for this argument comes from the work of Leppard and McDonald (1991) who stated that the omnipresence of the owner-manager has a significant impact on every aspect of an SME. Further supporting this premise, Thompson and McHugh (1995), argue that culture can be utilised by managers as a purposeful instrument of control and management. Therefore, it would be prudent to dovetail this instrument into the specific ways in which the intervention would support the introduction of the skills development programme. Significantly, because of its specificity to the small family business environment, Gersick et al (1997) justify the above strategy by contending that owner-managers are at the heart of the company through their role in laying the foundations of their business.

Another specific issue for this SME that needed to be incorporated into a coaching/mentoring intervention revolved around the perception of external consultants themselves. Hankinson (1994) argues that SMEs’ perception of external consultants is a real barrier to the effective deployment of any type of development activity. External consultants were viewed as both expensive and disruptive, with little understanding of the company’s real problems. This also manifested itself in a perception that consultants created problems and over-complicated issues that did not exist. In my experience of working with a number of SMEs this perception of external consultants is legitimised by a genuine lack of understanding of people development and general HR issues by this company’s owner-manager. This however, is not an isolated case but serves to typify a general trend amongst SME owner-managers according to Smith and Whittaker (1998)
Nash (1994), Down (1999) and Ram (2000), thus serving to reinforce its inclusion as an issue in this analysis.

Additionally a combination of potential issues affecting this company, relating to the deployment of coaching and mentoring, have been identified and consequently need to be included in this analysis. For a coaching and mentoring intervention to work effectively here, it not only needed to demonstrate real business benefits as outlined by Cannon (1997) and Blackburn and Kitching (1997), but also that it would not be overly procedure driven or bureaucratic (Gaunt, 1998). If these criteria could not be achieved then the company would typically reject the coaching and mentoring intervention as a viable solution. This is more significant than just rejecting this solution because it also highlights an antipathy to traditional forms of business planning. This is a well-known area of weakness within the SME arena (Martin and Staines, 1994; Joyce et al., 1995; Storey and Westhead, 1996) because plans tend to be short term with little emphasis on the development of time-consuming or complex support mechanisms. Consequently, this would necessitate a significant change of perception of the need for planning by the owner-manager if a coaching and mentoring programme were to be successfully launched (Clutterbuck, 2001).

Supporting this change in perception could also help SMEs to recognise the amount of informal training and development they already provide as demonstrated by Curran et al (1997). This recognition could be used to stem their possible objections to taking on additional tasks, as they were already being undertaken. This could identify the obvious business benefits, as discussed earlier, that SMEs need to have demonstrated to them in order to get their support. Now I move on to examine how an integrated coaching and mentoring strategy can address the above issues.

The coaching and mentoring strategy

The first issue that needs to be addressed is the necessity to establish a common understanding of what coaching and mentoring means in the context of an SME. This is important because, without this understanding and common agreement, the owner-manager and the management team could easily sabotage the solution and reinforce the old command and control culture. Whitmore (2002) suggests that a coaching culture is the antithesis of command and control behaviours and thus reinforces its significance here, starting with providing an appropriate definition of coaching that establishes this commonality. This approach is based upon Merriam’s (1983) suggestion that the definition used within a scheme, describing the activity taking place will determine the extent of the mentoring and also, I would contend, the coaching found. I consequently decided to use the definition provided by Cleary (1995), because of the emphasis on an informal yet planned ongoing process for interacting with employees. The goal of coaching is to improve job performance by increasing employees’ capability to managing their own performance.

Additionally Phillips’ (1995) contention that such coaching would add value to the organisation by helping its employees grow and develop and thereby enhance overall production and profitability was also emphasised. This is because these are core areas of concern to an SME and if they can be woven into a deployment strategy they can only serve to ease the tensions concerning the effects on bottom line profit. In terms of mentoring, a more traditional definition in terms of hierarchy was used because it placed emphasis on trust, experience and supervision (Atkinson et al 1994). Further, Parsloe’s
(1992) distinction about the mentor being one step removed from direct skills or performance enhancement was also incorporated because it laid the foundations of the role the mentors would fulfil within this programme.

Once the definitions had been communicated to managers, small focus groups would need to be set up to identify what they wanted to achieve by using coaching and mentoring and also how they might be able to measure its success. Providing an opportunity to establish this ‘buy in’ was, for me, about getting the managers actively involved and opening a dialogue with them. Support for the involvement and dialogue aspects of this strategy are provided by Devins and Gold’s (2000) research on coaching and mentoring in SMEs. This concluded that talking to managers at an early stage of development had the greatest impact on their commitment to supporting such a programme. The significance of achieving this ‘buy in’ is even more crucial in an SME where any form of government assistance is viewed as conflicting with their existing intuitive and informal approach (Curran, 1999).

The structure of the coaching and mentoring programme is based on a two-tier approach. The first tier, the mentors, would comprise the three directors of the company, who would support and supervise the second tier comprising the managers who in turn would act as performance coaches for the employees. Underpinning the selection of this cascade approach is Schein’s (1996) contention that communications between different levels of an organisation are riddled with difficulties and misunderstanding. To address this concern and make the strategy more robust, the mentors would be responsible for demonstrating the ‘new behaviours’ and enabling the coaches to do the same. This level of communication and ‘permission giving’ from mentor to coach is very significant in an SME where the owner-manager visibly sets the tone of acceptable behaviour and cultural imperative. The expectation is that mentors would be manifesting these new behaviours in performing one-to-one supervision for the coaches around their coaching and business role. The integral function supervision performs within this strategy is based on the approach outlined by Mead et al (1999), in that it role models effective skills development. It also increases the involvement of the mentors while simultaneously making them accountable for maintaining this in-built credibility check on good practice. This provides an excellent opportunity for culture, values and skills alignment from the directors right through to the employees.

At the core of this programme are the principles of modelling as outlined by Geroy et al (1998), Crouch (1997), Horsfall (1996), Alder (1992) and Zenger (1991), as a combination of ‘skills based training’ and a variety of other facilitative techniques including discussion, demonstration and feedback. Geroy et al (1998), further suggest that these techniques provide the opportunity to identify, and if appropriate, help individuals to change their values. This can have a greater impact on behaviour than changing skill levels alone. Supporting the centrality of modelling to this strategy is the work of Pescuric and Byham (1996), who suggest that modelling provides the most effective means of skills development and behavioural change that is currently available. Consequently, if modelling can achieve this change in behaviour and its underpinning values then it can also provide a concrete opportunity to directly effect the culture of the company, thereby addressing one of the earlier identified issues. Supporting this contention Burnes (1996) argues that company culture is not static, instead individuals and groups within the organisation, serve to reinforce and continually change the culture in an organic manner. This reinforces the choice of modelling as an approach given the level of significance the existing culture has
within this company. It also provides a direct and tangible means of supporting the owner-manager in changing the culture.

I also believe that these modelling principles should run through the core of both coaching and mentoring programmes because of the familiarity of the managers with the techniques used. This would minimise the amount of additional training that would need to undertaken by the coaches and mentors. This serves to address some of the concerns about external consultants not understanding the issues of their business. The residual training, which would need to take place to support the mentors/coaches, as postulated by Megginson and Clutterbuck (1995), would provide an opportunity to demonstrate the principles of modelling to the directors and managers. Additionally, because there are only three tiers within this company, directors, managers and employees, actually demonstrating the differences in behaviour to successive levels of employee is no longer as difficult as Wilheim’s (1992) critique of modelling suggests.

Further supporting this strategy would be the integrated use of the GROW technique as outlined by Whitmore (2002), because it has at its centre an emphasis on questioning in a specific sequence in order to achieve improved performance. The rationale behind this choice is based firstly, on the familiarity of the directors and managers with questioning as a technique and the concomitant saving of time in training terms. Secondly, the technique itself provides coaches with a focused and systematic road map of where they need to take their coachees in a relatively straightforward fashion. This is often an area of concern for new coaches; a solid framework like GROW provides a greater degree of safety for them and their coachees. My own experience of using, and getting others to use GROW successfully, also informed this decision. This does not support the critique levelled at it by Parsloe and Wray (2000), who based their comments on its application in organisations who tried to over-complicate and under-support the use of this technique. The structure of GROW can be made more robust and safer for coaches to use by the inclusion of a Personal Development Discussion. This would provide all the benefits of Personal Development Plans as outlined by Tamkin (1996), relating to personal empowerment and ownership, but without the formality and bureaucracy of paperwork. Again avoiding formality and bureaucracy are key areas of concern to SMEs and consequently need to inform design decisions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has aimed to provide a route map for the successful deployment of a coaching and mentoring programme within the specific context of an SME environment. The need to understand organisational behaviour when designing such a strategy has also been evidenced in the way this intervention aimed to incorporate and address the issues identified. This understanding also serves to highlight the areas that need diagnosis in order to inform the design. I have also provided indicative research supporting my contention that the prevalence of the culture of an SME needs to be at the core of such a specific coaching and mentoring strategy. I further sought to argue that supporting this strategy with a range of behavioural skills techniques and incorporating the needs of this specific organisation, has served to provide an integrated and robust solution.
Recommendations for further research

My hope is that this analysis will stimulate further research into the specific effects of the potential issues identified on both coaching and mentoring within the context of SMEs, thereby supporting Storey’s (1994) original call for more SME specific research. Three potential areas for further research have been identified. Firstly there is a need to develop a cause and effect level of analysis to inform the selection of the most appropriate approach from a vast range of techniques. This necessitates the development of a substantial body of research-based knowledge specifically within the context of the SME operating environment. This is turn would provide the opportunity to evaluate the effects of coalescing a range of what can appear to be competing tools and techniques, seemingly without cognition of the consequences of such action. Finally, the significance that integrated professional supervision for coaches and mentors can play in maintaining the cohesive design and deployment of a coaching and mentoring strategy has yet to be effectively established within any work based environment.

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Understanding the experience of experience: a practical model of reflective practice for Coaching.

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Keywords: coaching, reflective practice, learning.

Abstract

Coaching is inherently a reflective process. Constructivist theories of learning are well established and greatly inform thinking on coaching. The coaching practitioner literature promotes activities and offers many tools to aid reflection. While psychology provides some very pertinent theory, a review of practitioner literature finds little to help coaches understand how reflection actually works. This paper proposes a simple four-cornered model of the mechanism of reflection in coaching. The outcomes are illustrated in application to first hand accounts of reflection in a coaching context. This model is intended to have distinct practical utility, while being embedded in underlying theory.

Introduction

Coaching is inherently a reflective process. Coaching manuals use different terms and language but commonly underline the importance of reflecting back, reframing and questioning (e.g. Starr, 2003: Whitworth et al, 1998): all activities that invite the client to look again at how they think, feel and behave. The coaching market appears to accept that this works, and empirical evidence is also building (Grant, 2003). There is also a body of knowledge in the areas of cognitive psychology and learning which examines in detail some of the processes involved. But just how does the action of looking again work in a coaching relationship? Although the theory is there, this is barely examined – at least explicitly - in the coaching practitioner literature. This paper aims to start to build a link between theory and practice in the area of reflection, and offers a practical model for coaches.

Before introducing the structure of the paper, I will attend to definitions. Throughout the study, “reflection” and “reflective practice” are intended in the broad sense to describe any approach that generates individual self-awareness of behaviour or performance. The merits and demerits of different approaches are not considered here. As regards the meaning of “coaching” I follow the general outlook given by Cox & Ledgerwood (2003), namely that coaching is an approach to “helping people increase their sense of self-direction, self-esteem, efficacy and achievement” which is distinguished from mentoring in that it “does not rely necessarily on the specific experience and knowledge of the coach being greater than that of the client” (p4).

The body of the paper is structured as follows: first, I review some of the relevant literature. This includes ideas from both the coaching literature and from contributory theoretical fields. A brief indication of methodology precedes an explanation of a four-cornered model of reflection. Further reference to some of the ideas coming from the literature is made in this section. The model is then illustrated in relation to case studies. (My own reflections have been used in this section in preference to client reflections,
simply to protect their confidentiality.) In one of these, the context is very much in the realm of personal capabilities. Its purpose is to illustrate how the management of reflection can benefit the client. The second example is more directly related to the development of the coach. In the person of a coach with coaching supervision, the two are, of course, intertwined. These illustrations give a more practical understanding of the model and also demonstrate its utility. Conclusions are outlined at the end of the paper.

**Perspectives on reflection**

Two main perspectives on reflection emerge from the literature. Firstly, there are theoretical and empirical perspectives explaining the function of reflection in learning and change. These provide some powerful indicators of some of the underlying processes of reflection. I have also included with these sources an existing model of the reflective process itself. Secondly there is a certain degree of discussion of reflection specifically in a coaching context, especially in recent texts. These show some significant uptake of the theoretical body of knowledge, but provide little in the way of more explanatory models. These general headings are not entirely exclusive and there are certainly some strong links between the two.

**Theoretical perspectives on reflection**

Although we are now used to a constructivist interpretation of learning, it is worth setting this in context. The argument for reflective practice can be traced back to the growth of constructivism and the practical difficulties of positivist epistemological stances. Positivism holds that only that which can be directly observed or logically deduced can be understood to be true. This position encourages a kind of reductionism as in order to prove facts research must focus on that which can be controlled. Schön (1991) describes well the resulting divergence of theory from practice and the effect on real-life problem-solving. In what he calls the model of “technical rationality,” which has traditionally prevailed in the preparation of professionals, practitioners, attempting to act on a body of verifiable knowledge, are forced to narrow their practice to such a degree that they are no longer able to solve “whole” problems. Constructivist epistemology, in contrast, implies that learning is interactional (between individual and environment), active (dependent on the individual’s actions) and relative (different for different individuals) (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988).

Building on both the philosophical and theoretical advances of early constructivists such as Piaget and Vygotsky, Kolb’s theory of experiential learning provides a reference point for the development of reflective practice. Kolb defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p38) in which reflection is an explicit part. Practical applications of reflection have been developed in the fields of teaching (Pollard & Trigg, 1997), nursing (Jarvis, 1992), organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978), professional development (Schön, 1991).

Of all these fields of application of reflection, Schön’s (1991) descriptive analysis of the development of professional effectiveness is the most readily recognizable in coaching scenarios. Despite the gulf between theory and practice mentioned earlier, Schön notes that many practitioners deal effectively with ambiguity and complexity. They do this not through greater mastery of the body of knowledge, but through “reflecting in action”: 
engaging in a constant process of rapid feedback and adjustment by which skilful operators can adjust to circumstances and sustain high levels of effectiveness. It is an exploratory process rather than a finite act: “Exploratory experiment is the probing, playful activity by which we get a feel for things. It succeeds when it leads to the discovery of something there” (p145) which, according to Schön, requires active attention.

This idea is picked up by Cox (2003) in relation to the professional development of coaching and mentoring practitioners, highlighting the difficulties with competence-based standards in contrast to a constructivist approach that “would nurture professionals through reflection, enquiry and creative action” (p17).

Griffiths & Tann (1991) have further elaborated a model of reflection similar to Kolb’s learning cycle by introducing different timeframes, arguing that without a conscious effort, the most immediate reactions to experience can overwhelm the opportunity for deeper consideration and learning. They describe the reflective cycle of action-observation-analysis-evaluation-planning spiralling through five levels or timeframes: rapid reaction (immediate); repair (momentary); review (after the event); research (systematic); and re-theorise/reformulate (formal and rigorous reappraisal).

Turning to the psychology literature, Locke (2002) discusses the relationship between needs (physical, psychological or philosophical), values (which prioritise needs), goals (which operationalise the meeting of needs) and emotions that are “the form in which people experience automatized, subconscious value judgements” (p302). Locke does not discuss reflection specifically, but notes both that “people discover their needs, how to satisfy them and how to anticipate them through reason (thinking)” (p301), and that “errors of introspection may lead people to profess value hierarchies that differ from their conscious hierarchies” (p303). He thereby points to a function of reflection in the areas of both goal-orientation and in attending to emotional responses and their meaning. This also helps explain Griffiths & Tann’s (1991) levels.

Carver & Scheier (2001) propose a cybernetic model of feedback in the self-regulation of behaviour. They examine approach loops (towards desirable outcomes) and avoidance loops (away from undesirable outcomes) and argue that positive affect is associated with rate of progress (rather than simply progress) towards goals. They note that avoidance loops are inherently less directional (p52). They also argue that goals are hierarchically structured, “differentiated by level of abstraction” (p67), and that attention may shift towards lower level goals when the effort required to perform them increases (pp74-5). It follows from this that there may be times when the individual is preoccupied with low level goals and/or avoidance behaviours and that at these times less attention is paid to broader, more abstract and more positive goals. This again underlines the influence of attention.

Grant identifies self-reflection and insight as stages within a model of goal-directed self regulation (Grant 2003, p 255). Self-reflection and insight are independent constructs and Grant notes the strong association between self-reflection and psychopathology. In a field test of the Coach Yourself (Grant & Greene, 2001) programme, participation was associated with increased goal attainment, quality of life and insight, as well as lowered depression, anxiety, stress and self-reflection. It is important to note that the self-reflection items used in the study were “expressed in a global, trait-like fashion” (p261) and hence do
not equate with Kolb’s concept of reflective observation which is a process. Grant notes the potentially counter-productive tendency of trait self-reflexivity when it is not linked to gaining insight and goal achievement:

*It appears that over-engagement in self-reflection may not facilitate goal attainment. This finding serves to remind coaches that life coaching should be a results-oriented solution-focused process, rather than an introspective, overly-philosophical endeavour.* (Grant, 2003, p262).

Reflective practice might be seen as combining the monitoring function of self-reflection and the evaluative function of insight in Grant’s model.

In summary: Kolb provides a fundamental interactional model of learning; this is applied to professional practice in general by Schön and to coaching by Cox (2003); Griffiths & Tann propose a temporal model of reflection; Locke relates learning to goals, and Carver & Scheier explain the function of feedback; Grant tests these processes in a coaching context and finds that reflection must be goal-oriented. Broadly speaking, we therefore have complimentary theories of knowing, theories of application, and theories of change. In the next section, I turn to the coaching practitioner literature to see where these theories have been put into practice.

**Reflection in coaching practitioner literature**

The coaching practitioner literature is expanding all the time. Rather than review the whole body of literature in this section I have selected some notable examples for the purposes of illustration.

Conceptualisations of the coach in this literature are highly consistent with Schön’s description of reflection. Whitworth *et al* (1998) provide one of many examples of this convergence: “[The coach’s] curiosity allows the client to explore and discover. It opens a wider range of possibility by being more flexible. Curiosity invites the client to look for answers.” (p65) The function of reflective observation is also evidently influential. Whitworth *et al* (1998), recommend posing thought-provoking questions as client homework, “for the purpose of introspection and reflection” (p73).

Echoing Locke’s perspective on values and goals, Rosinski (2003) specifically recommends journaling for the practising coach: “A coaching journal is a valuable tool to help you reflect on your own personal journey, to aid your thinking about what is truly important to you. It is a place where you can capture insights and learn from experience” (p16).

The significant contribution of feedback is explored by a number of writers. Skiffington & Zeus (2003) put heavy emphasis on the feedback loop, describing three steps of their seven step coaching process respectively as “data gathering”, “measurement” and “evaluation”. Similarly, Chapman, Best & Van Casteren (2003) devote a whole chapter to assessment, arguing that it enables insight for the coaching client. This is further extended in a chapter on experiential learning as well as a 360 degree feedback instrument on the coach’s own capability and performance. Kolb’s model is a cornerstone of their approach to experiential learning. They comment that reflective observation is “the most important part of the
process from a learning perspective” (p107) and that reflecting on experience through feedback “leads to making sense of that experience in a new way, leading to deeper understanding” (p108). They give a practical example of how this can be self-managed by the client using a learning log (p121).

Zeus & Skiffington (2000) refer to the benefits of self-awareness, its function as a coaching capability and its role in various coaching contexts. They describe how this capability could be developed through diagnostic instruments and mechanisms of feedback. The theme is developed in Skiffington & Zeus (2003) where the same authors argue for helping the client “become aware of their own unique structure of interpretation” (p24), increasing their self-awareness, making emotional states more explicit, and developing “mindfulness”, the conscious attention to automatic responses. Flaherty (1999) relates observed behaviours to desired goals and the development of an action plan, proposing a process of self-development for the practising coach founded on self-assessment.

We can see from these examples that the theoretical work relating to reflection certainly feeds through to the practitioner literature. There are numerous tools and practices offered by these writers. Yet there is no simple practical model of how reflecting itself plays such an essential part of the learning process. How does slowing the transformation of experience into knowledge add value for the individual? This is the question for coaching practitioners.

Methodology

The study material is gathered through observation rather than experiment. Data consisted of my own first hand reflections, the reflections of my clients, as well as records of reviews we carried out in coaching sessions. Reflections were recorded at or near the time of the relevant events, expressly as part of a coaching process. Reflections were recorded in writing and structured under the following headings “What happened and why?” “My reaction (thoughts, feelings, behaviours)”; “What did I learn/discover?”; “What am I going to do about it?”

The model was developed through an iterative search for meaningful explanations for the impact of each reflection. In as sense, simply asking the question “Why did this help?” The resulting model is inevitably conditioned by my prior knowledge and preference.

The model has been applied to two case studies for illustration purposes. Identities have been obscured in each account and the accounts appear with the consent of the individuals mentioned therein.

A four-cornered model

This model is intended to explain the process of reflective practice: the ways in which I believe reflection contributes to individual learning. These are fourfold: Balance by activating less preferred learning styles; Objectivity by distancing the subject from immediate emotional response; Perspective by framing events in the context of strategic objectives; and Capability by rehearsing the skill of reflection itself. After presenting the model, I have then applied it to two specific recorded reflections in the following section.
1. Balance: activating less preferred learning styles

The learning cycle and a system of learning style preferences were developed by Kolb from the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. They have been further operationalised by Honey & Mumford (1993). As noted above, Kolb (1984) characterised the learning process as “transformational”. He argues that higher order learning is achieved through the combination of prehensional and transformational processes and that the longer the string of processes through which the knowledge is passed, the higher the order of learning. “Reflective observation” or “transformation via intension” (Kolb 1984, p42) is itself one of these processes. Typically operating on concrete experience, reflection creates an expectation of how the world works and, in turn, a desire to test that expectation: “It is in this interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs. In Hegel’s phrase, ‘Any experience that does not violate expectation is not worthy of the name experience’”(Kolb, 1984, p28).

Formalised reflection therefore stimulates the other learning processes, and can serve particularly to enrich the learning of an individual who has a strong preference for other styles.

At another level of analysis, formalised reflection can be seen to trigger even more profound change regardless of current learning styles. This is at the level of reflection as part of the process of learning about learning and is effectively the drawing of the individual’s own learning processes into their conscious awareness, thereby opening the possibility of conscious decision-making about learning.

Both these effects will be illustrated in the ‘case story’ examples.

2. Objectivity: distancing the subject from immediate emotional response

A second effect of reflection is that it brings events back to attention at a time when immediate emotional content is less predominant.

Goleman notes that the more primitive emotional responses to environmental stimuli are less conscious and are less consciously controlled than are higher order cognitive processes. These are typically instinctive responses to threat and danger and trigger hormonal reactions which prepare the body for fight or flight. They are immediate and overpowering (Goleman, 1996). While many immediate threats to survival have been removed from modern life, these responses also occur at a second level as a response to psychological threat: particularly threat to self-image (defensiveness) and to adopted schemas (resistance). These more modern threats generate similar hormonal responses and while emotions are an important element of cognition, they are by definition irrational. Kegan and Lahey (2001) describe one of the roots of resistance to change as “competing commitments”: deeply held beliefs which people are not necessarily able to articulate, not least because they are "very personal, reflecting vulnerabilities that people fear will undermine how they are regarded both by others and themselves" (p88). Locke’s “automatized, subconscious value judgements” (Locke, 2002, p302) is another way of putting it.

Reflection creates the opportunity to consider experience ‘objectively’ from a distance. It allows the individual to return to events at a time when they are more able to be free of
conditioned or instinctive emotional responses. They are therefore better able to understand more of what has happened and to draw more accurate conclusions from that event.

3. Perspective: framing events in the context of strategic objectives
A third effect of structured reflection is to allow the individual to consider events not just in the context of the immediate situation and relationships, but in the context of goals they wish to pursue. This is predicted by Carver & Scheier (2001), and Grant (2003), as discussed earlier.

Perspective is related to the objectivity effect: both are about moving up Griffiths & Tann’s (1991) levels. Perspective is more particularly the benefit of relating incidents to longer-term objectives. Reviewing incidents with perspective poses the question “What do you really want?” It is differentiated from the objectivity effect because it is this goal-orientation which will encourage the individual to re-enter uncomfortable situations with a view to generating longer-term benefits. Potentially, the context of strategic objectives can become a habitual and immediate mode of thinking.

4. Capability: rehearsing the skill of reflection
Finally, structured reflection through the effect of rehearsal creates a more accessible habit or capability of reflection. This enables the individual to manage their immediate responses to events, not as a question of resolve, but because they become more able to reflect in the moment. Because they have the practical experience of doing so, they are more able, more automatically and more rapidly, to cycle through the levels described by Griffiths & Tann (1991), to become a “reflective practitioner” in Schön’s (1991) sense. This, of itself, helps them to respond more positively and constructively to circumstances.

Applying the model to accounts of reflection
As described earlier, I now present two example ‘case story’ reflections from my own learning drawn from a period early in my own coaching practice. For each example I have given an outline of the context and the scenario, my own reactions, then an analysis based on the framework set out above.

The first event was a meeting with a close contact (J) who was professionally active in a particular field of coaching. I visited J’s office expecting a friendly lunch, but, on being introduced to J’s business colleague had found myself in a situation for which I was unprepared. I was unsure how to respond and found myself working hard to present myself as knowledgeable and competent. I was uncomfortable at the time, and no less so when J fed back subsequently that I had "missed an opportunity" to learn something significant about business from his colleague. I had talked too much and not listened enough. In the context of my professional experience the impact of this feedback was at best upsetting.

My reaction at the time was that I had felt "ambushed" and let down by J. In part I felt angry, but there was ambivalence as J’s intention was clearly to help me out, he is a close supporter and is someone whose opinion I respect. Without reflection, I believe that is where my thinking would have stayed. The strength of feeling, however, was a clear indicator that here was valuable raw material for reflection: an experience that violated expectation!
I recorded the circumstances and the reaction described above, then considered what I could learn from the incident. Through reflection, I was able to consider some rational aspects of the event (Objectivity). Firstly, this was an example of a very normal business situation: one runs into opportunities to network and learn from the experience of others at the most unlikely of moments, and in the end this was not the most unlikely of moments. I could choose to be more comfortable with this kind of situation. I had to accept, therefore, that it was an event to learn from. I could also see (Perspective) that what I chose to do and say had not best supported my wider agenda which on this occasion was to develop a knowledge of a certain market. I could also see that J might have been disappointed himself that I had not benefited as well as I might from his support. Clearly, these reflections together gave me the opportunity to see the situation in a far more constructive light than I had been able to at the time. I came to the conclusion (whether it is right or wrong is a discussion for elsewhere) that it is easy to miss opportunities when behaviour is driven by defensiveness. This observation itself became hugely informative on some future occasions (Capability) where it helped me to gain a far more positive outcome from a difficult situation than I would otherwise have done. In terms of balance in learning styles, I believe the reflection helped me to avoid a conditioned and self-fulfilling "theorist" response. The archetypal “theorist” response to this discomfort would be to withdraw, seek a definitive answer, and avoid a repetition. The reflection note allowed me to see the event differently ("reflector"), to frame future events more positively, and to plan my approach to them ("pragmatist"), if nothing more, to generate learning opportunities ("activist").

Although this was a relatively small incident, it was recorded formally and illustrates well the functions of reflection proposed in the model above. While based on an event outside my coaching practice, it clearly has important practical and professional implications. It illustrates the benefit and power of reflection.

The second example is drawn from an experimental coaching relationship established with a volunteer (K) with whom I was already acquainted: a situation which made it easy to overlook some of the essential rapport-building steps such as agreeing a way of working together and agreeing a formal contract (as described by Megginson & Clutterbuck 1995, p31).

Throughout the first session, K presented her issues: she felt she wanted to end up "somewhere else" professionally. At the same time, she talked a great deal about how comfortable and successful she was presently, and the considerable downsides of setting off in a new direction. These ideas were so intertwined that in response to my questions, she focused heavily on how positive were her current circumstances. She also frequently underlined that she was only able (or prepared) to undertake the minimum of work between coaching sessions. She seemed pleased by the impenetrable nature of her dilemma, and even, to divert the conversation from any possibility of progress.

This is a familiar coaching problem and, indeed is predicted by Megginson & Clutterbuck (1995) as a feature of the rapport-building stage. Nevertheless, my main responses were of anger, confusion and depression. I felt I was being toyed with and tested, that K was drawing me into her conundrum (a common phenomenon), not with the desire to be helped, but to prove that I was unable to help her. This was personal. I was also at a loss as to how to progress and I thought about terminating the experiment. I was grateful for the support of my own coach at this point who helped start the reflective process.
Again, the reflection immediately brought the benefit of some *Objectivity*. In this case I was able to appreciate the familiar patterns that were being played out in the session: the client wishes to embrace new challenges at the same time as being reluctant to let go of what she has already built up; as there is a cost to making progress, there is also an element of ambivalence around the process; K is a successful person with a keen critical eye, and as such might be expected to enter more slowly into a change process. Peculiar to this relationship, I also realised that because of our existing acquaintance, I had failed to contract my role effectively. Seen in this way, clearly none of these dynamics is as personal as I had experienced them at the time.

Reflection also allowed me to address the problem from the *Perspective* of strategic objectives. I had wished to develop and test the feasibility of a particular approach to coaching and it was in that context that the coaching relationship had been agreed. These were explicit goals that risked being lost in my immediate response. I used the ABCDE model (Palmer, 1997) to support my reflection by exploring my own thinking on what might lie behind my emotional responses, that is, any implicit goals motivating my behaviour. This strongly informed my conclusion to return very consciously to my adopted process. It also allowed me better to plan for future sessions (and thereby benefit from greater *Balance* of learning styles) and during that session, I was able to recall these analyses and to react more positively to circumstances (*Capability*).

These case studies illustrate both the model itself and its practical utility. It is possible to encourage reflection, not just because it is a good thing, or because it is part of learning, but with these specific outcomes in mind.

**Conclusion**

From a theoretical perspective, the constructivist model of learning is widely accepted: dealing first hand with problem-solving creates more durable and yet more adaptable schemata than is possible with instructional techniques alone, and furthermore, that some form of reflection is an essential part of accommodating or assimilating experience. These perspectives are close to the heart of coaching. Cognitive psychology further provides us with insight into how feedback, attention and self-awareness relate to individual change. At the same time, the practitioner literature promotes activity in these areas and offers some tools. How does the four-cornered model add to this?

A business associate recently told me how, after years of avidly absorbing self-help and self-improvement literature, he was embarking on the study of psychology in an attempt to make sense of all the conflicting advice, yet the fundamental science seemed difficult to apply. Practical implementation is like the sail of a yacht, I suggested. It catches the wind. Theory and science are like the keel. It is what keeps you going in the right direction.

The four-cornered model presented in this paper brings those two essential functions together. It provides a method of understanding that is sufficiently linked to both theory and to the reality of practice. Reflection works because it helps the learner to *Balance* the process of learning from experience and to generate new learning opportunities; it affords them an *Objective* stance; it helps them see their actions from the *Perspective* of their overall goals; and it helps them to develop the *Capability* to react more quickly and
effectively to future challenges. These benefits are demonstrable in a coaching context and may provide an understanding of the importance of reflection to support and guide coaching practice.

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Leadership Coaching as Design Conversation

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Abstract

This paper seeks to bridge and integrate the disciplined and rigorous practice of *Design Conversation* with the professional practice of coaching within the organisational setting. Argument is made that coaching is uniquely positioned to serve as a tool and process for facilitating genuine and effective dialogue at the organisational level. It explores current literature, understanding and issues in the areas of organisational learning, systems research, dialogue practice in organisations, and coaching as a professional practice. In conclusion, the article suggests that a design conversation of vested stakeholders is needed to further explore and synthesize the integration of dialogue, conversation, and leadership coaching.

Introduction

The design conversation, as proposed by Banathy (1996, 2000) integrates both generative and strategic dialogue for the process of evolutionary and idealised human systems design. The design conversation, integrating two differentiated forms of dialogue among stakeholders of a system, does not so much seek to improve current conditions, but to envision ideal futures and design future systems. Design, unlike planning, is the creation of something new. It could be compared to the work of the architect who designs a future building, rather than the planning and implementation of building conducted by the contractor. The process of future design is unencumbered by the limits of existing systems, and when the design process is integrated with knowledge and understanding of systems thinking, future systems can be designed that remain viable over time, demonstrating the capacity for ongoing evolution within their environments. This new capacity for organisations, indeed all human systems, to effectively design their own futures is more than a nice idea, it is becoming a required capacity to deal with rapid changes in our larger social, economic and societal environments.

In earlier times, when social evolution was rather slow and gradual, adequate time was available for our various systems to keep up with changes and maintain a balanced state with their societal environments. The mechanisms for attaining such a balanced state were adjustment and adaptation. […] Today, however, we are faced with a change in the nature of change. We are faced with constantly emerging new realities and massive transformations that call for changing and transforming the whole system (Banathy, 1994).

In the USA the International Systems Institute (ISI) has been using the design conversation for over 20 years, with most fellows focusing on large societal change or transformation within education systems. Dialogue and conversation as practiced and understood from the systems perspective has been used at the organisational level by such scholars as Alexander Christakis, using the CogniScope ™ methodology (1996, 2001), and more popularly by application of principles outlined in Peter Senge’s *Fifth Discipline* (1990) approach, but
fundamental resources for building dialogue skills at the organizational level seems largely unaddressed. A search of the terms organization and dialogue (in article text—not even limiting the terms to article abstracts) through EBSCO Premier, Business Source Elite and Proquest revealed only 6 relevant results.

Exploring the potential and use of dialogue and the design conversation in business environments addresses several relevant questions:

- Is the design conversation process and methodology useful in a traditional business organizational environment to reframe the concept of leadership coaching?
- How can design conversation, practiced as a coaching methodology, best serve traditional organisations?
- What are the obstacles to design conversation and dialogue in traditional organisations and in a coaching relationship?

Fundamental to the process of the design conversation as practiced by ISI and proposed by Banathy is that the philosophy people must be empowered to design their own systems. There are strong values for shared leadership and democratic methods in the ISI conversations. These fundamental values raise additional issues when considering the use of dialogue and the design conversation at an organizational level. This paper explores some of these issues. First, an exploration into the nature and role of leadership enables a bridge to be built to the concept of shared leadership. With a call for committed accountability, shared leadership and responsibility by all organizational stakeholders regardless of title or position, exploration is then made to define what leadership competencies might be important in today’s rapidly changing organizational environments. Once the competencies are explored, the question arises, “how can individuals and groups gain these leadership skills and knowledge?”

The profession of coaching as a learning process is compared and evaluated with traditional training or consulting efforts and argued to be congruent with Banathy’s ethical position that no ‘outside expert’ should presume to design systems for others; that stakeholders are experts of their own systems (Appendix I). Coaching competencies are then explored, along with a deeper inquiry into the process of dialogue, the design conversation and the coach’s role as facilitator of these dialogues. Finally, discrepancies between ‘theories in use’ and ‘theories in practice’ (Argyris, 1991) at an organizational level are explored from a psychological perspective so that obstacles to the dialogue process at the individual and organizational level can be brought to awareness and dealt with effectively.

A Systems View of Leadership

The late singer and songwriter John Denver once related a story to his audience told to him by a friend. “I’m an agitator,” his friend said, “You can throw dirty clothes in a washing machine, add soap and add water, but unless you agitate them, they won’t come clean.” Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1968), author of General System Theory introduces a key principle of systems theory that seems to be widely ignored, even among the systems theorists. This principle states that open systems evolve themselves around “dominant” triggers that determine the behavior of a whole. “Ascending the evolutionary scale, increasing centralization appears; behavior is not a resultant of partial mechanisms of equal rank, but dominated and unified by the highest centers of the nervous system” (p. 70).
Contemporary social systems scholars seem to exclude this principle in their work, even those whose focus is through a systems perspective. Perhaps it is the English translation of his theory that causes this exclusion. After all, most of the progressive social scholars and organizational theorists embrace a more holarchical rather than hierarchical perspective for modeling organizational behavior.

So should we presume that Bertalanffy was a proponent of a top-down, control-driven hierarchical perspective for the design of our social systems? Not at all. First, Bertalanffy wrote his General Systems Theory in German. The word he uses in regards to these centralizing forces is “anstosskausalität” which translates in English to ‘instigation causality’—or, that which is an impetus or cause of change. Bertalanffy was also a biologist, and was obviously very aware of the structure of natural and biological systems as one of being in holarchical order—integrated multiple levels—versus a hierarchical order, which is singular, linear (and thus rigid and inflexible). He places this ‘dominant influence’ of a system at the center of the system, and regards it as a trigger or motivator for action, rather than a ‘dominating’ role (even though this is the word used in the English translation of the theory), which presupposes a mechanistic or political power-based linear chain of command. Systems scholar Alexander Laszlo agrees, noting in a personal correspondence:

The point is ‘dominant’ does not mean ‘dominating.’ In the way von Bertalanffy is using it, I think we might like to think in terms of ‘predominant,’ such that the predominant role of certain people in a social system does not mean they necessarily have ‘dominating’ roles in that system. The former relate to issues of the significance and prevalence of the role, while the latter relates to issues of power imbalances (personal correspondence, April 2000).

This perspective necessitates some reconsideration of our traditional notions of leadership within our community and organizational settings. Shared responsibility and genuine and effective group participation may seem like strong ideals for small groups who strive for collaborative, shared leadership and ownership, but in a more traditional business organizational setting, arrangements designed with full equality are unlikely, and according to von Bertalanffy, would probably be ineffective. As von Bertalanffy notes, the more complex a system becomes, the more it evolves around highly influential ‘centers.’ In large, complex organisations, the task of ‘instigating’ action rests squarely on its leadership. One might ask whether it is realistic to hope for real, committed participation and shared responsibility by all the members of a large organization if the ‘power’ or influence still rests with its leadership. It all depends on how one defines the nature of leadership’s power or influence.

Shared Leadership

“Our current notion of leadership,” Banathy (1996) wrote, “is associated with taking initiative, controlling, and knowing what is best for others” (p. 235). One of the resulting challenges of traditional leadership is that leaders believe it is their task to make their people ‘buy in’ to their vision. The problem with this understanding of leadership is that ownership remains with the leadership, preventing stakeholders throughout an organization to feel committed to participation in its success. Instead, leadership can be viewed as a more “influential, prevalent or predominant” stewardship role. Riane Eisler (1987, 2000) promoted the idea to move from ‘dominator’ models to ‘partnership’ models in our social
structures. Instead of considering leadership as a role in which we have ‘power over’, we could understand leadership as a role where we have ‘power to’.

Margaret Wheatley (1999) described shared leadership as a commitment and accountability to results and tasks without concern about identifying and defining specific accountabilities and roles. She cites Jill Janov who proposed that leadership is a behavior rather than a role (p. 24). The concept of leadership as a practice rather than a position can help organisations embrace the need for leadership skills and competencies across all levels of the organizational system. Centralized leadership inspires, motivates and ‘instigates’ empowerment, commitment and participation at all levels of an organization. Leadership practice can be seen as a stewardship role, and “when we serve, we build capability in others by supporting their ownership and empowerment, their right to participate at every level of the system” (Banathy, 1996, p. 236). With this model of steward leadership, even large organisations can be designed to be equitable even though they couldn’t possibly strive for across-the-board equality.

In a healthy, authentic community intentionally designed within the environment of a large organizational setting, it is the central role of its leadership to express the values and purpose of the community, to nurture the emergence of vibrant, healthy cultures in which all members of the system feel committed to, part of, and accountable for the success of the whole. It is a much more daunting role than that of a traditional supervisor who reports to the general staff that management created a new vision statement at their last retreat and in essence relay, “Here it is. Adopt it for yourself.”

The International Systems Institute proposes that the design of sustainable and viable human systems must be conducted by the stakeholders of the system, and that all stakeholders participate authentically in a shared leadership of the organization or community (Appendix 1). In viewing the stewardship role of leadership as described above, it becomes clear that leadership capacity is not relegated to those who happen to fill supervisory or management roles within an organization or group. In order for shared participation and accountability to manifest throughout an organizational system, leadership competencies, knowledge, skills and qualities must be developed, empowered and practiced at all levels of the system, regardless of formal position or title.

Leadership Matters Locally and Globally
The influence of the business organization on larger societal systems makes addressing the practice of leadership a worthwhile and important endeavor.

Initiatives relating to fundamental human rights and dignity, democracy, and the protection of our precious wild places and valuable natural resources represent noble and courageous efforts. But transformation and human evolution at a global scale must manifest comprehensively at all systemic levels. One environment with the potential to dramatically impact others on a global scale is the environment of business. From small home-based entrepreneurial micro-businesses (accounting for 60% of the new jobs in the US between 1990-1996), to multinational corporations, private and publicly held enterprises impact almost every human on the planet, as well as our political, economic and natural systems (Stalinski, 2003, p. 675).
In 2001, The State of the Future Report of the United Nations University’s Millennium project identified 15 “global challenges” facing humanity’s future. Each challenge included regional perspectives and reflections. In North America, a change in thinking, attention to culture and an emphasis on education and appropriate training for leadership were all identified. "North Americans need to move from cause-effect, single issue problem analysis to integrated, holistic visions and problem solving, using futures research, systems thinking, and technology assessment. [...] More courses in future-oriented studies should be established that stress relationships to decision-making [...]" (Glenn and Gordon, 2001, p 25). The report identified a "remarkable lack of training" among American politicians, but also cited the need for leadership at a global level, including the leaders of corporations, NGOs and other arenas to be provided appropriate training, especially in the area of decision-making in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. This training and education is needed to address complexity that is "growing beyond our abilities to analyze and make decisions" (Glenn and Gordon, 2001, p 25.).

The Millennium Project report underscores that new competencies for leadership are not just a matter of economic viability for organisations, but directly impact our collective global future. The relationship between organizational success and our global future is also articulated by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General for the UN Global Compact for Business. He states that "Thriving markets and human security go hand in hand; without one, we will not have the other" (http://www.unglobalcompact.org).

**Developing Leadership Competencies**

*Criteria for defining leadership qualities and competencies*


Jim Collins, in his best-selling book, *Good to Great* (2001), identified five levels of leadership competency:

- **Level 5 Executive:** Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.
- **Level 4: Effective Leader:** Catalyzes a commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.
- **Level 3: Competent Manager:** Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of pre-determined objectives.
- **Level 2: Contributing Team Member:** Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting.
Level 1: Highly Capable Individual: Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills and good work habits. (Collins, 2001, p. 20).

Further, systems research and contemporary organizational development practice is highlighting the need to develop organisations that are more than simply financially sustainable. Albrecht (2003), Laszlo & Laszlo (1996), and Collins (2001) emphasize that long term viability of organizational systems depends on more than financial profitability. Laszlo and Laszlo (1996) identify 8 criteria for long term viability of human systems. They propose that such systems must be:

- Operationally viable
- Economically sustainable
- Technologically feasible
- Culturally appropriate
- Psychologically nurturing
- Socially acceptable
- Environmentally friendly
- Generationally sensitive

In order for leaders at all levels of an organizational system to design and develop organisations that meet all the requirements for systemic viability described by Laszlo et al., it is clear that a comprehensive approach to leadership development be provided to stakeholders at all levels of the organizational system. To summarize the core leadership competencies highlighted, a comprehensive leadership development process would address learning competencies in these areas (addressed in various places throughout this article):

**Systems Thinking:** Effective leaders have an understanding of the principles that determine whether an open system can thrive and evolve in rapidly changing environments.

**Inner Awareness:** Effective leaders are self-aware and emotionally mature.

**Other Awareness:** Effective leaders are aware of, and seek to enhance the skills, competencies, knowledge and emotional well-being of others. Further, effective leaders are aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the impact of culture on their organization.

**Organizational Awareness:** Effective leaders have the knowledge and skills needed to manage and guide both the complex human and process systems of organisations.

**Design Competence:** Effective leaders can design complex systems capable of ongoing evolution, unencumbered by the constraints of current systems.

**Learning & Intelligence:** Effective leaders are skilled learners. They are curious, open to new perspectives, and continually evaluate the usefulness of their learning. They are knowledgeable and skilled in the work and tasks of their organizational role, and are aware of the skills and knowledge used and needed for related roles and tasks.

**Authentic Participation:** Effective leaders are engaged, committed and willing to “step up to the plate” to take personal responsibility for their contribution to the organizational mission.

**The Leadership Coach**

Traditionally, job skills training has been the method of choice in developing competencies required for individuals to perform well within their organizational roles. Such training has evolved to include ‘soft skills’ training in addition to more traditional “hard” skills
training. Training from a traditional and even contemporary perspective involves the transfer of knowledge from a teacher or trainer to training participants or ‘students’. Even training designed around adult learning styles maintains this foundational transfer of learning model. Whether implemented in a training room, a classroom, or in on-line environments through e-learning technologies, training and development continues to play an important role in helping workers learn new information, and gain broader conceptual understanding of their work roles and needs. However, whether such training interventions results in increased performance, especially where ‘soft skills’ are concerned, is difficult to assess.

Often training does not result in enhanced performance. One issue in this lack of transfer of training is that, in general, training programs do not explicitly impart metacognitive skills to trainees. Yet metacognitive skills – the ability to think about one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours – are essential factors in mastering new skills (Grant, 2002, p.12).

Boyatsis & Burrus (1995) discussed the traditional roles of training, development and Human Performance Improvement within organizational settings, and bemoaned the problems of commercialization of ‘cookie-cutter’ training programs: Distinctions are often made between the fields of HRM, HRD, OB, OD, OT, MD, CD, PD, and T/D (i.e., human resource management, human resource development, organizational behavior, organizational development, organizational transformation, management development, career development, professional development, and training and development, respectively). This provides fodder for academic debate and disaggregates the HRM function’s activities (p. 2-3).

Besides traditional training, organisations often seek the advice and guidance of external consultants to help with the development of their organization and the key stakeholders who are responsible for its ongoing success. Like training, the consulting solution creates an emphasis on the need for an organization or individual to learn from a perceived expert; that the expert, not the stakeholders, has the knowledge and skills needed to enable development. Both the training and the consulting paradigms conflict with the fundamental philosophy of social systems design: that only a system’s stakeholders have the right and the responsibility for the design of their own systems; that it is unethical to design systems for someone else (Appendix 1). Grant (2001) also described this differentiation: At one end of the orthogonal dimension is a client-centred approach, which is primarily associated with asking questions that facilitate client self-discovery and self-directed learning, as compared with an expert-centred approach, which is primarily associated with directive advice giving. (Grant, 2001, p. 14)

The practice of coaching, on the other hand, is uniquely positioned to provide the kind of learning resources and processes needed to effectively develop leadership competencies. Coaching practice has enjoyed a boom in the organizational sphere in recent years (Grant, 2002, 2003, Seamons, 2003) and yet descriptions of coaching practice vary greatly. Seamons (2003) noted that the original meaning of coach can be traced to the concept of a horse drawn carriage or coach and that essentially, a coach conveys “a valued person from where he or she was to where he or she wants to be” (p. 6). Additionally, current scholarship in the field of coaching is careful to note differentiation between a variety of coaching practices such as executive coaching, life coaching, career coaching, skill coaching, etc., and differentiating such coaching practices to other forms of development.
such as mentoring, therapy, consulting and training. (Seamons, 2003; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003).

In differentiating coaching from other “expert-centered” models, Grant has articulated:--

In summary, the core constructs of coaching include: a collaborative, egalitarian rather than authoritarian relationship between coach and coachee; a focus on constructing solutions not analysing problems; the assumption that clients are capable and not dysfunctional; an emphasis on collaborative goal setting between the coach and coachee; and the recognition that although the coach has expertise in facilitating learning through coaching, they do not necessarily need domain-specific expertise in the coachee’s chosen area of learning. Further, to expedite goal attainment the coaching process should be a systematic goal-directed process, and to facilitate sustained change it should be directed at fostering the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee. (Grant, 2001, p. 9)

Grant’s differentiation of coaching as a collaborative and egalitarian relationship, rather than an expert-novice dynamic suggests that coaching is uniquely positioned as a practice to provide leadership development competencies in ways that remain in alignment with the ethics and values of social systems design. Such a coach could be considered a “design professional” as defined by Banathy (1996), who described the role of such professionals as being able to “develop resources and create arrangements and opportunities by which a designing community can learn how to engage in the design of their system” (Banathy. 1996, p. 244).

Leadership Coach vs. Executive Coach or Life Coach
Almost all of the coaching literature differentiates executive coaching from life coaching, describing executive coaching as including “a key contributor who has a power position in the organization” (ICF in Seamons, 2003) and emphasizing organizational performance and development as well as leadership development. Life coaching, in contrast, usually focuses on life goals and personal development that may or may not include the individual’s role within an organization (Seamons, 2003; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003). For the practice of coaching to become useful as a tool and process to develop specific leadership qualities and competencies, neither of these specific coaching definitions is exclusively sufficient. Instead, a third differentiation of Leadership Coaching is proposed here with the following focus emphasized: The focus of Leadership Coaching is to engage individuals or groups in learning arrangements that enable them to develop leadership competencies, skills and knowledge.

This definition allows that such participants may include stakeholders at all levels of an organizational system, and that such leadership skills and competencies are not necessarily exclusive of personal goals and aspirations. Such coaching with a focus on leadership development could potentially help provide the skills, knowledge and competencies for individuals at all levels of an organization to effectively and authentically participate in the ongoing design and development of the organisations and systems in which they work and live.

Competencies of the Leadership Coach
Most coaches, OD professionals, scholars, practitioners and HPI trainers seem to focus their work either on the human systems (personal development, human potential, group psychodynamics, etc) or on the process systems (systems design, work skills training, quality improvement, process improvement). Instead, organizational leaders and the coaches and consultants who provide interventions and development, need to have a comprehensive understanding of both of these key ingredients to bottom-line organizational results in addition to ongoing, sustainable organizational viability (determined by more than simple bottom-line criteria). Inasmuch, coaching competencies would closely mirror leadership competencies in that coaches, as “design professionals” would need:

*Systems Thinking*: An effective leadership coach would have an understanding of the principles that determine whether an open system can thrive and evolve in rapidly changing environments.

*Inner Awareness*: An effective leadership coach would be self-aware and emotionally mature.

*Other Awareness*: An effective leadership coach would be aware of, and seek to enhance the skills, competencies, knowledge and emotional well-being of others. Further, an effective leadership coach would be aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the impact of culture on their coachee’s organization.

*Organizational Awareness*: An effective leadership coach will have the knowledge and skills, either through education or experience, needed to understand both the complex human and process systems of organisations.

*Design Competence*: An effective leadership coach can facilitate their coachees’ ability to design complex systems capable of ongoing evolution, unencumbered by the constraints of current systems.

*Learning & Intelligence*: An effective leadership coach is a skilled learner. He or she is curious, open to new perspectives, and continually evaluates the usefulness of their own learning. He or she would be knowledgeable and skilled in the work and tasks of their role as a coach, and would also be aware of the skills and knowledge used and needed for their coachees’ roles and tasks. Additionally, an effective leadership coach would facilitate evolutionary learning at the group level through dialogue practice.

*Dialogue*: Additionally, if coaching is practiced as a collaborative, egalitarian dialogue, coaches will need to develop theoretical and practical grounding in various dialogue methodologies.

One of the current issues of coaching practice by executive and life coaches is the training, development and education of coaches themselves. Several scholars (Boyatzis, 2002; Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003; Kilburg, 1996), and the International Coach Federation (2003, online) highlight different competencies from grounding in psychological or psychodynamic theory to competency through experience. Boyatzis (2002) argued that research results showing the emotional intelligence competencies of counselors demonstrated more impact on counseling effectiveness that the type or focus of intervention and concludes that the same findings could be extended into the arena of executive coaching, inferring that emotional self-awareness and empathy (within the cluster of emotional intelligence competencies) were of utmost significance in determining the effectiveness of counselors (and likewise, he argues, executive coaches).
The International Coaching Federation (ICF) ([www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)) requires coaches to have set amount of professional, billed coaching hours plus coach-specific training in order to qualify for ICF certification. Dr. Grant addressed the ICF in November 2003 and called for a scientist-practitioner model of professional coaching founded in the behavioral sciences. This understanding then enables them to apply informed critical thought to the evaluation of their practice, drawing on and being informed by relevant academic literature to design and implement evidence-based interventions, evaluating client progress and adhering to ethical practice (Grant, 2003b, p. 2).

At the time of writing, few coach training programs are delivered at the university level. The professional coach certification program at Georgetown University and the Academy of Management at Babson College in the U.S., MA programs in Coaching and Mentoring at UK universities Oxford Brookes, Sheffield Hallam and Wolverhampton, and the Coaching Psychology program at the University of Sydney designed by Dr. Anthony Grant, are among only a few coach training programs grounded in university level academic theory (Stalinski, 2003a). On the other hand, the profusion of private, non-academic ‘coach training’ schools, especially in the United States, has helped fuel the growing popularity of coaching practice (Grant, 2003b). There is clearly a need for such coach training to be designed to include solid theoretical foundations in the behavioral sciences and/or psychological sciences (including group dynamics) as well as relevant grounding in systems thinking focusing on complex, evolutionary systems design. Likewise, such coach training would provide coaches with experiential practice and not mandate ‘billable client hours’ as a requirement to demonstrate coaching skills.

Movement towards a scientist-practitioner model requires that coach training programs explicitly address the theoretical and empirical foundations of coaching, and provide training in sound research methodologies, basic statistical and data analysis skills, and foster informed critical thinking skills in student coaches. Such an approach would form the basis of an evidence-based coaching paradigm (Grant, 2003b, p.4). However, such training would be incomplete in this author’s perspective if it is delivered as only grounded in the behavioral sciences without balanced emphasis on organizational and systems research.

**Individual and Group Coaching**

While Banathy (1996) described design professionals in terms of working with communities or organisations as wholes, it is not contradictory to place such a definition of design professional on professional coaches, who traditionally work one-on-one with individual coachees. Seamons (2003) noted that “group coaching is a concept which means the same as team building, but using the popularity of the coaching model. Where a consultant might have been deployed to develop an entire team together, he or she might now be a team or group coach” (p. 9). Devero (2001, abstract), in a presentation to the Society for the Advancement of Management proposed that:

> Coaching, which is designed to address specific areas of organizational paradigm, such as company-wide fears, expectations, limitations, resentments or beliefs, can alter the paradigm itself. This alteration of the paradigm creates new opportunities for action, goals, teams and leadership – ultimately leading to profoundly different results. The expectations of the organization for itself rise concomitantly with the new results, expanding the cultural range of goal
setting and accomplishment. Systematic and repetitive application of public coaching sessions lead to ever-increasing levels of honesty, introspection and coachability for the entire organization, leading to an actively learning organization that can positively receive and assimilate feedback, and so continue to break through its own levels of productivity. (Devero, 2001)

In considering the role of the leadership coach as proposed here, it is clear that coaching as practice is not relegated to one-on-one dialogue between a coach and an individual, but that coaching practice can be employed at the group, team or organizational level.

**Coaching as Design Conversation**

**Dialogue**

Dialogue, as a communication practice that can be differentiated from adversarial forms of communication such as discussion and debate, was brought to popular practice by physicist David Bohm. According to Bohm and Peat (1987) sharp distinctions should be made between dialogue and discussion. In discussions the objective is to present one’s view in order to convince the other. With some luck, this process may result in some sort of compromise, “but it does not give rise to anything creative” (p. 241). At worst, this sort of back-and-forth discourse leads to conflict or even avoidance of the issue. Dialogue, in contrast, is rooted in the Greek word *dialogos*, literally meaning “through (dia) the word (logos)” (Bohm and Peat, 1987; Pattakos in Banathy, 1996). Pattakos, notes Banathy, further suggests that various interpretations and translations of *logos* suggest a much richer, deeper meaning than “the word” or “the meaning of the word.” *Logos*, according to Pattakos carries significant spiritual implications, that it can connote “a manifestation of spirit or soul” giving the concept of dialogue a much more meaningful and significant definition. This deeper understanding can be conceptualized then as a spirit that connects the members of a dialogue, creating a collective mindset or ‘collective learning.’ (Pattakos, in Banathy, p. 216).

Cayer (1997) compared and contrasted Bohmian dialogue and the action science approach first introduced by Argyris & Schön (1974, 1978). Cayer argued that dialogue is most popularly utilized at the organizational level to promote organizational effectiveness and proposed that dialogue could be used to address comprehensive societal transformation. Even with its emphasis on societal transformation, the article is useful as a foundational understanding of the contributions of David Bohm’s popular dialogue process and the action science approach introduced by Argyris & Schön.

Isaacs (1999) underscored this collaborative, rather than adversarial, understanding of dialogue by noting that true dialogue has a “center” rather than “sides.” Lopez-Garay (2001) discussed the fundamental concepts of dialogue and civilization. His definition of “civilization” could readily be applied at the organizational level, although his article focused on geopolitical societies: “Civilization is considered to be a group of peoples, which through an extended period of time have developed a common culture” (p. 15). Like Bohm, Lopez-Garay differentiated dialogue with forms of adversarial communications. He clearly distinguished the objective of negotiation or polemics as resulting in either/or, “win/lose” or compromise solutions. In contrast, dialogue is “a cooperative search for truth” (2001, p.16). He also contrasted dialogue with “narrative” which has a historical, rather than future orientation.
The Design Conversation: Generative & Strategic Dialogue.
The design conversation as proposed by Banathy (1996) and used within the context of the International Systems Institute integrates both generative and strategic dialogue. Its purpose encompasses not only how to create our social systems, but defines those strategies based on a clear, comprehensive vision of the purpose and values of the system. The strategy then is measured and tested against its ability to reflect and demonstrate the implementation of those values. Generative dialogue could be understood in terms of exploring the “why” and the “what” that dialogue participants and organizational stakeholders seek to design. These are generative questions in that they focus on the future of the system. The strategic dialogue could be understood in terms of exploring the “how”, “who” and “when.”

The root meaning of conversation, Banathy wrote, is “to turn to one another.” (p. 219). Systems scholar Alexander Christakis shared with members of the ISI research community during the 2000 annual conference at Asilomar that the Greek word for conversation is syzitisis, which means “to search together.” Through such conversation, a demosophia emerges within a group, which is experienced as the “wisdom of the people.” Such understandings of the nature of conversation as an integration of generative and strategic dialogue, gives rich context to its meaning and purpose. Indeed, Banathy noted the purpose of giving appropriate time and energy to the generative dialogue within a conversation is to create a shared worldview and shared meaning within and among the group (p. 218).

Most of the current emphasis on dialogue practice emphasizes the generative forms of dialogue: the creation of shared values and mental frameworks. It is this mutual exploration of meaning and values that help stakeholders build a sense of commitment and community within an organization. Banathy (1996) argued that failure to spend adequate time in this generative phase of dialogue risks under conceptualization of the design results.

Laszlo and Laszlo (2003) propose 4 spirals in the development of “evolutionary competence”—the ability for individuals and human systems to become catalysts for positive change, rather than simply reacting to change, within their environments. They discuss the need for a generative dialogue that emphasizes evolutionary ethics: ethics with a future orientation. Dialogue, they say, is otherwise “just optimizing what is, not working in stewardship of what should be”: (p. 3). When we engage in conversation with each other, if we do so authentically and inclusively, we end up also conversing internally—with ourselves, as well as externally—with the more-than-human world of which we are a part (Laszlo, A. and Laszlo, K.C., 2003, p. 2.) Laszlo and Laszlo highlight the development of human activity systems into healthy, authentic communities as the foundation from which evolutionary learning communities can form. “Generative dialogue can be considered as the core transformative process for a group to become an authentic community” (p. 12). The Laszlos also heavily emphasize Banathy’s design conversation methodology in their approach. There are a variety of dialogue methodologies available which focus on these generative inquiries, such as World Café, Open Space™, roundtables and time-shares (Benking, Lenser & Stalinski, 2003).

Strategic dialogue, with its emphasis on how, when, where and who is usually approached from a traditional discussion or debate framework. Indeed, strategic discussions are often where conflicts emerge within organizational teams. With a fully conceptualized design, grounded in a clear sense of “why” and “what,” however, strategic dialogue can take place with minimal conflict simply by evaluating strategy against the design created during the
generative dialogue. Alexander Christakis (1996, 2001) and his associates at CWA Ltd. have been using a computer-aided dialogue process to facilitate strategic dialogue with organisations for over 30 years. His research on the dialogue process has resulted in several principles of effective strategic dialogue, especially when dealing with large, messy, complex problem situations or design situations. The limits of the CogniScope™ computer-aided process is that it is not widely available, is expensive, and is useful mostly with large groups addressing very complex issues. However, CWA Ltd. introduces six principles of dialogue in an experiential “Dialogue Game” often used to introduce participants to the CogniScope™ process. The game is extremely useful even to small groups seeking some way of providing structure, rigor and discipline to the strategic dialogue process.

Disciplined Inquiry
Whether dialogue takes place between an organizational stakeholder and a coach, or with other stakeholders, what is clear is that the design conversation is indeed a rigorous, disciplined inquiry (Banathy, 1996). It requires participants to gain design competence and commit to the process of ongoing learning and evaluation.

The practice of dialogue offers a disciplined approach to collective communication. It penetrates the polite superficialities and the defenses in which we armour ourselves. The act of reaching beyond the self to relate to others, the desire to understand others and the intent to build healthy and mutually supportive communities emerge from a profound human aspiration, a deep yearning. So we ask: If this aspiration and yearning are so widespread: Why is it that the practice of dialogue is not widespread? The answer to this question is that people, groups, organisations, and communities have not yet learned and do not know how to engage in the disciplined inquiry of dialogue. Dialogue calls upon knowledge and competence that impose a rigorous discipline on participants. Unfortunately, most people don't have easy access to comprehensive and appropriate learning resources to acquire competence in dialogue (Banathy, 2001, p. 1)

Behavior & Experience as Dialogue
These rich concepts of the nature of dialogue and conversation inspired the research team on the Design of Healthy & Authentic Community at the International Systems Institute to explore possibilities for design conversation that transcend the idea of ‘searching together’ beyond processes of verbal communication. For two years the team collaborated with the team on Evolutionary Learning Community, and included non-scholars and youth in their inquiry process. Understanding the importance of experience to bring meaning to conceptual, often abstract ideas, the combined teams engaged in various activities in addition to traditional, verbal communication. The teams integrated a variety of supportive experiential conversation “tools” such as co-created art, music, a trip to an equine sanctuary in the exploration of stewardship, and discussed other ways cultures expressed and experienced themselves, including food and meals, dance, and its relationship with the natural world. The contribution of Christakis’ expansion on the definition of ‘conversation’ provides depth and breadth to the idea and its meaning, suggesting that groups can “engage in a conversation-guided process that will seek to experience and convey [a community’s] evolving demosophia through consciously co-created cultural expression” (Stalinski, 2001b).

Schein (1992) emphasized that culture is largely an unconscious process of learning, driven more by non-verbalized “basic assumptions” than “espoused philosophies.”
Communication and learning go far beyond verbal exchanges of conceptual ideas and transfer of information. To define dialogue simply in terms of words exchanged without including what is communicated through behavior and emotional experience limits the usefulness of dialogue and dangerously ignores the many ways in which we communicate, of which language is often a small part. From the perspective of using dialogue as a means for consciously guiding evolution of human cultures, it is important to understand the hidden and unconscious aspects of culture as well. Inasmuch, Schein’s perspective has much to offer the systems perspective proposing the need for conscious cultural evolution.

Obstacles
Certain obstacles to effective dialogue can best be understood with a solid conceptual understanding of the behavioral sciences and psychological theory. Such knowledge, especially when held by the design professional or coach, can quickly identify and address issues that might derail dialogue as they occur. These obstacles may include defensiveness, ineffective approaches to conflict management, the impact of enculturation and unconscious habitual behavior, and the group psychodynamic processes, which might be understood in terms of the “organizational shadow” (Sievers, 1999). Lack of trust, safety and healthy, authentic participation prevent effective dialogue from taking place within any human system. Understanding and addressing these obstacles is the responsibility of the professional coach.

Where coaching practice could benefit from integrating more organizational and systems research, the organizational and systems research communities could benefit from a more effective integration of the behavioral sciences and psychological theory, including cognitive psychology, humanistic psychology, psychoanalytic theory, and group dynamics. Such integrated knowledge and competencies would enable coaches and other organizational development practitioners to address the common obstacles to development.

Integrating Perspectives
As discussed earlier, all systems evolve around “instigating causalities” or highly influential centers. The same principle applies to human systems, and leadership is charged with the role of catalyzing action and results at all levels of a system. The human factors of the personality, psychological and cognitive styles of leadership cannot be ignored when addressing ways in which groups and organisations can participate authentically in effective dialogue. Kaplan (1991) took a psychological perspective of the role of leaders within organizational systems, and specifically the issues and challenges that “driven managers”—which Kaplan referred to as leaders with “expansive” personalities—face for themselves and those they lead.

Kilburg (1995, 1997, 2001) specifically addressed a systems and psychodynamic perspective in organizational development and executive coaching practice, although his use of systems research seems limited to the principles of feedback loops, input, output and throughput of systems dynamics. He, like most other psychodynamically focused scholars, do not integrate an understanding of evolutionary systems design.

McWhinney (2003) provided in depth exploration of the foundation of discourse, dialogue and language use as reflective of our construction of reality is an extremely relevant variable to include in an exploration of the use of dialogue within organizational systems. One way or another, we convey intent, exchange data, and establish shared meaning. We
acquiesce to the other’s demands, come to an agreeable harmony, or just leave issues unresolved. We do so through spoken and gestural languages, using the rules of grammar to separate our thoughts and organize them for our enunciations. Grammars standardize means for articulating intentions and knowledge into a communicable form. They are the rules by which we hang thoughts on a ‘clotheslines’ (2003 p. 5.)

Robb’s (2003) dissertation proposed an integration of Jungian psychology and systems theory which is well articulated and introduced powerful ideas and issues to the nature of group existence, culture, individual consciousness and double-loop learning. He then described how these various dimensions and issues impact an organization’s ability to enable its human “components” to engage in meaningful relationship and collective learning. Robb clearly articulated in his dissertation the role of the authentic and individuated individual within the group or collective setting. In order to build truly resilient human systems, he proposed several interwoven concepts and practices, among them, to “regard the shared domain as an object for ongoing collective reflection and co-construction” (p. iii). In other words, a context for dialogue, which, he argued, must be addressed by actively supporting “both individual and human systems development as interpenetrating and interdependent phenomena” (p.iii). Robb eloquently presented an integrated systemic and psychodynamic understanding of the role of the individual as individual and as individual within community.

Conclusion & Summary

Leadership coaching as a disciplined dialogue requires an integration of knowledge and conceptual understanding from the fields of organizational development, coaching, systems research and evolutionary systems design. While this paper has sought to bridge and integrate these domains of understanding, the design of coaching practice and professionalism calls for a design conversation of its own; a dialogue that would include stakeholders from a multiple of perspectives such as coaching clients, organizational leaders, organizational development practitioners, organizational scholars, psychologists and counselors who practice coaching, and those involved in training coaches. Such a design conversation could result in a comprehensive vision of ideal practice in the coaching profession.

References


Bohms Dialogue (no date, accessed October 1, 2003) http://www.muc.de/~heuvel/dialogue/


http://www.psych.usyd.edu.au/psychcoach/anthony_m_grant.htm


Appendix 1

Propositions that Underlie Social Systems Design
(International Systems Institute, Carmel, CA)

It is the basic right of individuals, groups and communities to be involved in making decisions that affect them.

They can reclaim and exercise this right and forge their destiny only if they develop competence that empowers them to take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems and communities in which they live and work.

It is unethical to design social systems for someone else. In social systems, people who live in the system are the experts.

The role of the design professional is to develop resources and create arrangements and opportunities by which a designing community can learn how to engage in the design of their system.

A designing community is comprised of people who serve the system, who are served by it, and who are affected by it. They collectively are the designers and users of their design: they own the design. They are user-designers.

Designers of social systems are trustees for future generations. They must constantly ask: How will the system we design affect the unborn?

Collective design capability empowers us to practice authentic, truly participative democracy. It enables us to guide the activities that enrich the quality of our lives, add value to the systems in which we live, and organize our lives in the service of the common good.

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Book Reviews

Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming your practice
ISBN: 039370341X

Reviewer: Pam Richardson, Head of Ethics, UK College of Life Coaching, www.ukclc.co.uk

Therapist as Life Coach makes a bold statement at the outset that “therapists are the professionals best positioned to move into this rapidly growing field” and that “becoming a coach usually requires only a little additional fine-tuning, specific skill building and marketing know-how. This book is one-stop shopping for the therapist wishing to explore the coaching field”. Are the authors suggesting that by reading a book, therapists can simply convert themselves into life coaches? Life coaching is a much more upbeat term and a more ‘lucrative’ profession than therapy in the U.S.A. and my curiosity was raised – I had to read on.

As a Life Coach with a keen interest and involvement in the training of coaches and the setting of standards in Britain, I was intrigued to understand the position and viewpoint of our American colleagues. In Britain, where Life Coaching is still a very young profession, we are keen to define boundaries between coaching and therapy/counselling, honouring each as a distinct intervention that serves a client in a unique way. Professional integrity is upheld within each intervention when the client is aware of which intervention they are seeking and that this is the most appropriate one for the outcomes that they are wanting to achieve.

From the introduction onwards, the authors set a balanced and grounded tone to this book which encourages the reader, whether therapist or not, to continue to explore what is written. The perspectives shared come from genuine experience and understanding of the potential of coaching for the prospective client as well as the benefits to those who have dedicated themselves to the helping professions in the U.S.A.

A section on the characteristics of successful coaches provides a comprehensive and insightful list of qualities that the authors believe ‘well-adjusted, masterful therapists’ also possess.

The chapter on the History and Evolution of Life Coaching is a very approachable exploration of the contributions made by eminent people in their fields such as Jung and Erickson, which have contributed to the emergence of Modern Life Coaching at the end of the 20th Century. A pity that Socrates did not get a mention as coaching as we are now coming to understand it started long before the last century.

Nevertheless, this is one of the few books amongst the many that are now flooding the market that make reference to the fact that systematic literature reviews and comprehensive historical accounts of life coaching are yet to be undertaken and that this entire field is waiting for the academics who enjoy this rigorous approach. Their input will assist in further validating this emerging profession.

The book continues with a clear debate of therapy and life coaching that I believe will
assist professionals from both sides of the fence with further understanding of the similarities and essential differences between these interventions, before launching into encouragement and support for the therapist in developing a practice.

The Marketing section, although intended for the American therapist wishing to diversify, holds many sound ideas that are cross cultural and that could be recommended for any individual setting out in practice.

Self care for Life Coaches is vital and again this section contains solid ideas to support the Coach. The topic of ‘burn out’ was dealt with as one major reason for therapists looking to convert to coaches, so I was slightly bemused to see ‘burn out’ appearing as a problem for coaches. Having had the pleasure of meeting Patrick Williams at a recent Coaching Convention, I was pleased to have the opportunity to quiz him on this for greater clarity to discover that for those who do suffer this, they may need to address how they see themselves as coaches in relation to their roles as therapists. Clearly, therapists who look to convert to Coaches need to unlearn the therapeutic approach, which may not always be easy. And for those of us to come to Coaching without a therapists training we do not have this challenge.

This is a very comprehensive book that will be an important contribution to the Life Coaching profession on both sides of the Atlantic. A book that has equal value for an understanding of coaching vs. therapy for Coaches who come from a non-therapeutic and therapeutic background.

Behavioral Coaching: How to build sustainable personal and organisational strength
ISBN 007471328-0

Reviewer: Dr Grant Ledgerwood, University of Greenwich Business School, London

This volume comprises an important entry in what will become in coming years a busy field – the production of comprehensive textbooks useful in training coaches. That it has been produced as their third volume in 3 years by the prolific partnership of Dr Suzanne Skiffington and Perry Zeus, leading exponents of coaching in that spiritual home of coaching, Australia, is only fitting.

Its chief strength is that for the first time we have a referenced and historically attuned approach to teaching the theory and core skills of coaching. This gap in the market emerged as courses in the field have bloomed since the turn of the century. Whereas there were one or two Masters level courses in the UK in 2001 there are now a half dozen or more, with additional entries on the way. In the USA, seldom slow to grasp a new trend, recent developments suggest graduate coaching courses in a dozen or more universities. This text should assist course leaders in a wide range of coach training institutions in providing a core overview of the field. The book is laden with many of the typological and formalizing devices that have been so far absent from coaching books appearing monthly. The explicit focus on validation through evidence-based research, on certification and on coach training and coach practice standards is welcome. There are good links with traditions out of which coaching is
emerging, including sports, performance and management development coaching. Useful
aspects of professional coach’s lives, including their involvement in public education,
training and development of professional ethics and professional communities, are
positioned within the wider professional responsibilities which new members of an
emergent acquire. There is an extended discussion of the various marketplaces in which
coaching is becoming one of the preferred methods of performance enhancement.

A number of points occur where future editions may provide improvement. The
publication references, while engaging, do not access literatures in all relevant disciplines,
e.g., human resources development. Several times in the early pages of this book, while
configuring the conceptual universe for a new profession, the authors remind us of their
own entrepreneurial coach training institute. This drumbeating stands ironically against
inveighing in later chapters against self-appointed professional coaching bodies and
commercial coach registration and training organisations.

There is enough of a common framework in this book to springboard a step further
academic development of the profession. Trainee coaches will feel they have an overview
of their new professional identity by close absorption of this excellent text.
Events

6th ANNUAL OSC&M CONFERENCE 2004
PRACTICAL PERSPECTIVES OF COACHING AND MENTORING
7th / 8th July, The Oxford Hotel, Oxford

• Coaching in a Thinking Environment
• Customers expectations from professional coaches and mentors
• The Professional Coach and Mentor as a Thinking Performer
• Key issues for coaching and mentoring Senior Executives
• Developing internal coaching capacity in the BBC
• The Non-Executive Director: a coach in disguise?
• Coaching & Mentoring for developing leaders: the Amadeus experience
• Sensible supervision for effective Coaches and Mentors
• Developing a mentoring culture in Hilton International
• Techniques in mentoring
• Executive coaching for personal performance improvements
• Seven layers of dialogue for coaches and mentors

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SPEAKERS INCLUDE:
Nancy Kline, Peter Honey, Judy Whittaker, Elizabeth Walmsley, David Megginson,
Tea Colaianni

COSTS:

7th July
EMCC Professional Standards Workshop with John Whitmore and Peter Bluckert - FREE

Conference Keynote and Awards Dinner - £75.00 plus vat

8th July
All day conference £395 plus vat (special rates apply for OSC&M Candidates and
Graduates, voluntary organisations and members of the EMCC).
Lynn McGregor, Eric Parsloe, Michael Carroll, Steve Nicklen, Eunice Aquilina,
David Clutterbuck
Contributors to this Issue

Michael Cavanagh is the deputy director of the Coaching Psychology Unit at the University of Sydney. A coaching and clinical psychologist, Michael has over 17 years experience in facilitating personal, group and organizational change. He has designed and facilitated training and personal development workshops in Australia, New Zealand and the UK. As a coach he has worked with a wide range of individuals, drawn from every level of management and from a diverse range of industries and organizations. Michael's research and practice has been published nationally and internationally in the professional press and popular media.

Clare Hannah is Regional Head of Human Resources within the UK's largest Bus and Rail public transportation Plc. For the last 6 years she has developed and led several people strategies that created cultures of organisational performance management; producing enhanced behaviours, higher skills levels and better customer service. Much of this was achieved through learning interventions that included workplace coaching and NVQs as a guided learning framework. Her earlier work in this field has been published in People Management and Personnel Today.

Anthony Grant is the founder and Director of the world's first university-based Coaching Psychology Unit at the School of Psychology, in the University of Sydney, Australia. His PhD is in the Psychology of Coaching and he a registered psychologist. He is both an academic and a practitioner and his coaching research and practice have been frequently reported in the national and international media. In addition to developing and teaching courses in the Masters degree program in Coaching, Tony has extensive experience in personal and executive coaching at senior levels and has worked with many of Australia's leading companies and with Global organisations as a coach, a consultant and as a teacher of coaching.

Peter Jackson is a professional coach and consultant. Peter has a background in corporate IT and Human Resources in the UK, where he specialised in careers, resourcing and organisational development. He has an MSc in Organizational Behaviour from Birkbeck College, University of London, and is currently preparing an MA dissertation at Oxford Brookes University.

Dave Peel has nearly 15 years experience of coaching and mentoring business executives and management consultants in both the private and public sectors in the UK. He specialises in coaching SME owner-managers in personal and business performance and policy development. Dave is also Director of executive coaching and mentoring programme development with Hartnell Training Ltd who specialise in supporting corporate change initiatives through coaching and mentoring interventions. Dave holds an M.Sc. in Training and is currently completing an M.A. in Coaching and Mentoring Practice at Oxford Brookes University, UK.

Sherryl Stalinski has nearly 20 years of executive leadership experience in organizational development, management and communications in both corporate and non-profit environments. Sherryl co-founded the Aurora Now Foundation in the USA in 1998, and continues to manage its research and programs enabling communities and organisations to design futures that are meaningful and sustainable in a complex and rapidly changing world. Her work has been published by research and education organisations in the U.S. and internationally. She is a research fellow of the International Systems Institute and a member of the International Society for the Systems Sciences. Sherryl holds an M.A. in Organizational & Community Development and is currently pursuing plans to complete her doctoral research in Organizational Systems.
Notes for Contributors

Papers should normally be between 3,000 and 6,000 words in length, accompanied by a 100/150 word abstract and about five key words on a separate sheet.

Manuscripts should be prepared double-spaced throughout, and printed on A4 paper with generous margins. Contributions should have been word processed using Word for Windows or other PC compatible format and supplied on disk or via email. **Hardcopy manuscripts should be sent to Dr. Elaine Cox, Westminster Institute of Education, Harcourt Hill, Oxford, OX2 9AT.**

Footnotes should be kept to a minimum and numbered consecutively throughout the text. References should use the Harvard system, and in the following style:

**Books**

**Journal Articles**

**Websites**

Bibliographic references in the text should use the author-date system (e.g. Kram, 1988). All figures and tables should be of a reproducible standard and submitted on a separate sheet with their position indicated in the text.

Authors should use double quotation marks, except for quotes within quotes, which should be single. Quotations of more than three lines should be displayed indented, i.e. to a narrower measure than the main text. A clear style should be used. Authors should avoid jargon and should define technical terms and acronyms when first used. Use non-discriminatory language and plurals rather than he/she.

In order to assist refereeing, which is anonymous, the title, name of author and biographical material should be typed on a separate sheet. This will accompany your article upon publication and should not exceed 50 words for a single author and 25 words each in the case of multiple authors.

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Authors will receive reviews of their articles and will be asked to send corrections to the Submissions Editor, Dr. Elaine Cox, at the above address, within 3 weeks. Following publication, they will receive two complimentary copies of the journal.