

Coaching in Organizations: A Status Report (Past, Present and Future)

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We live in a world that is spinning rapidly (some would say madly and out of control). The organizations that seek to operate in this spinning world and the men and women who attempt to lead these 21st Century organizations are in need of new forms of assistance. Certainly in recent years, one of the primary (and some would say unique) forms of assistance is professional coaching. The field of professional coaching has matured during the past decade. Now seems to be an appropriate time to offer a status report concerning the past, present and future of this emerging human service endeavor.

I have framed this status report around a fictitious (actually a hybrid) case study and have identified numerous theorists and practitioners who have offered or potentially could offer valuable assistance in the ongoing maturation of this endeavor. In most cases I have not offered specific references, for these theorists and practitioners have written many books and articles on the topic being considered. When there is a specific book that is relevant to the topic being considered, I have indicated the book title. Given these initial guidelines, I wish to venture into the world of a client (Sam) and coach (Rachel) who are facing the extraordinary challenges of early 21st Century life in an organizational setting.

A Case Study: Setting the Stage

Rachel has been an organizational coach for the past eight years, having served for many years as Vice President of HR for a medium-sized high tech firm in the Twin Cities. She met Sam at a Habitat for Humanities meeting several years ago. They struck up a casual friendship and actually worked together in building a home over several weekends. During a lunch break, Sam informed Rachel that he was serving as Vice President for Operations (COO) at a large

hospital in Minneapolis. Rachel let Sam know that she was an organizational coach and often was working with high level leaders like Sam – and had great empathy for the challenges Sam is facing having previously served herself in a C-suite role at an organization that was admitted much smaller than Sam’s hospital and in a different line of work. Rachel noted that Sam’s job must be particularly difficult right now, given the crises in American health care. Sam offered a sigh and a quite turn of his eyes to the heavens above. Then they both went back to work on something they could accomplish that was quite tangible – building a home for a deserving family in St. Paul.

Though Rachel had not given Sam a business card, nor even attempted to solicit his business, she received a phone call several days later from Sam. He sounded very hesitant on the phone, indicating that he didn’t want to intrude on Rachel’s life and noted that he had gotten her business phone number from the Habitat office only after he had lied and told them that he need to call about the coordination of work schedules for the house they were building. After exchanging some pleasantries, Rachel reassured Sam that his phone call was not at all intrusive. With that reassurance, Sam got down to business. He indicated that he wanted to hire Rachel as his coach and wondered if this were possible, given that they were working on Habitat together. Sam indicated that if it were necessary, he would drop off the Habitat project and begin work in several months on another Habitat project.

Before making a commitment to Sam, Rachel began asking some questions regarding why he wanted a coach, what he would hope to accomplish with the coaching session, and how the payment for coaching services was to be structured. Sam indicated that he had been talking with his wife during the past month about work-related stress and, in particular, about the contradictory demands being made on him by the president and other vice presidents of his health care organization. His wife, Marnie, suggested that he consider hiring an organizational coach. Marnie works in an organization that offers coaching services. Sam told Marnie about his chance encounter with Rachel and Marnie immediately encourage Sam to give Rachel a call.

Sam further indicated that he hopes Rachel might assist him in mapping out a strategy for building better relationships with the men and women whom he supervises. While his organization has never done much with coaching services, Sam believed that he could obtain funds to support the coaching services and that Kurt, the President of his organization, would approve of this allocation of funds. Kurt is a strong advocate (at least on paper) for “developmental” services in his hospital.

Rachel and Sam established the contractual obligations and began working together for two hours once a week. They initially met at Sam’s office, but given the frequent interruptions of these coaching sessions by members of Sam’s staff, Rachel and Sam decided instead to meet in a conference room located in a building that was owned by the hospital, but was located several blocks away from Sam’s office. The coaching sessions inevitably began with Sam’s sigh and eyes cast toward heaven. Then something like “everything is a mess” would come out of Sam’s mouth and the work would begin.

There were many issues that Sam wished to confront during his coaching sessions with Rachel—after all everything was a “mess.” Many years ago, Don Schön wrote about the “messes” being confronted by contemporary professionals. These messes are multi-dimensional, requiring multi-disciplinary perspectives and multi-strategy approaches to the coaching process itself. As Rachel and Sam face the initial task of deciding how to proceed and where to leap into the mess, they must make several important decisions that reveal something about the contemporary state of this field called professional coaching.

Personal vs. Organizational Focus

First, do Rachel and Sam focus on the mess through the lens of Sam’s personal life and issues? Do they attend to his stress and his inability to craft a life where the priorities of home and work are in balance? Sam believes that his wife, Marnie, encouraged him to find a coach because she feels that he is devoted too little time to their two pre-teen children and, frankly, to their own marital relationship. He works most weekends, always is writing or editing an email when the family sits down to watch a DVD, and hasn’t been involved in a family vacation for

more than three years. Marnie and Sam own a cottage on one of the lovely lakes in Minnesota but rarely spend any time there.

On the other hand, Sam wants to confront several of the immediate organizational problems that are helping to create the stress and are pushing him to work overtime. These problems include the inability of his subordinates to take on full responsibility for the tasks they are assigned (meaning that Sam himself ends up doing the work) and the failure of his President, Kurt, to remain consistent in his expectations regarding priorities for Sam's department. Are we pushing decreased costs and efficiency, or increased quality of service with a significant reduction in administrative errors? Sam also is quite frustrated with the role he plays at the hospital in relationship to Kurt.

It seems that Kurt is something of a "visionary" and, as a result, Sam must be the "practical" one. Furthermore, Kurt often goes visionary precisely at the point when the hospital is faced with a crisis that needs to be resolved in short order. While Kurt points to and talks endlessly about "the bigger picture" and about taking a "long view," Sam is saddled with solving the immediate problems that seem to land on his desk every day. "Why can't I [Sam] sometime be the one who offers a dream?" "Why does Kurt always have to be the one with the 'big' [but often impractical] idea?" While these organizational issues impact on Sam's personal life, they must be addressed at an organizational rather than personal level.

Somewhere around the early 1990s, the field of professional coaching began to split apart—for good or ill. Many of the early practitioners of professional coaching came out of a personal growth background. They had conducted encounter or sensitivity training groups, or had done career counseling or served as a marital counselor or therapist. These experienced practitioners saw professional coaching as a new way to "package" what they were already delivering or as a way to move beyond the intensive, small group format (which yielded impressive but short-term impact). They saw sustained work with a "client" on a one-on-one basis as a perfect venue for unrestricted exploration of issues in their client's life—whether these issues are about marriage, friendships, finances, emotional life or even spiritual life.

This coaching relationship would also, of course, include exploration of the client's work life. In many instances, work life became the central focus of the coach's work because their client was gaining much of their meaning-in-life from work and because the other domains in life seemed to be profoundly impacted by what occurred on the job. The training and past experiences of these "life-coaches" and, more broadly, "personal coaches" often did not prepare them for this organizational work. They encouraged their clients to follow their bliss, but were often not themselves quite sure what is the nature of organizational bliss and how one might follow it in an organizational setting.

There was a second group of professional coaches. Like Rachel, these coaches tended to come out of HR backgrounds or were organizational consultants. Many of these men and women had been marketing themselves as "organization development" consultants. Like the personal coaches, they found the field of professional coaching to be quite tempting both as a new way to package the services they were already offering and as a way to work more closely with individual clients in the challenging task of implementing a new organizational initiative. The problem is – as Rachel soon discovered—the client is hurting at an individual level. They want some help in reducing their personal stress. Not too many years ago, in *The Culture of Pain*, David Morris provided us with an insightful analysis regarding the nature and meaning of pain. He observed that prior to the discovery of analgesics (pain-killers), patients had to live with pain and therefore had to assign some meaning to the pain (a sign from God that one must lead a more virtuous life, a sign that something is indeed wrong with my leg and I have to have it examined by a doctor). Once the pain-killers became available (early 20th Century), patients wanted first-and-foremost an absence of pain. While the physician wanted to use the pain as a way to discover what was injured or diseased, the patient wanted the pain to go away.

A similar dilemma exists in the world of psychotherapy—the client comes to see a "shrink" so that she will hurt less (less depressed, less anxious, much happier). It will be great if a drug will do the trick. If not, then let's do short-term symptom-oriented psychotherapy. To what extent are professional coaches caught in the same dilemma: do I help my client reduce his stress or do I encourage him to address the sources of this stress – which may initially actually increase stress for my client? Sam may initially have to work even harder and spend even more week-

ends at the office or at his home computer in order to resolve some of the problems he is confronting. How will Marnie feel if Sam's work/life balance is initially worst than it is today?

Neutral vs. Normative

At another level, we see this pull between pain-reduction and problem-solving in the presence of something called “cooling-off-the-mark” in the professional of coaching (and in many other human service fields as well). Erving Goffman introduced this concept in describing the ways in which legitimate grievances are stifled and painful conflict is avoided. At a carnival, the customer (called the “mark”) is encouraged to play arcade games (such as knocking over the milk bottles) that are rigged. If a “mark” becomes upset because the milk bottles he is hitting with the baseballs he is throwing don't tip over, then a second customer will come up to the booth, also attempting to hit and tip over the bottles. After appearing to be equally as “frustrated” with the failure to tip the bottles (and win the prize) the second customer invites the first (the “mark”) to go off and join him for a beer or cup of coffee. This second customer is actually hired by the carnival to “cool off” the mark, thereby helping the carnival owners avoid any confrontation with the local police.

To what extent, do professional coaches enter the business of “cooling off the mark” when they begin working with clients inside organizations – especially if the coaching is being offered as part of an outplacement package for employees who have been victims of downsizing, outsourcing or reorganization. Pain is reduced and the “mark” is appeased – but what about the legitimate grievance and the deep-rooted organizational problems that need to be addressed? The social-critical (“Continental”) school of organizational analysis poses just such a question. It is often identified with the neo-Marxist perspectives of many European theorists—such as Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer—as well as a few North American theorists—such as Nevitt Sanford, Christopher Lasch and Richard Sennett.

While this “Continental” school is rarely found to be influential in the work being done by most organizational (or personal) coaches, the questions that it generates are certainly consequential and should be addressed at least tangentially by Rachel and Sam. In general, professional coaches and their clients might wish to consider how the client's organization and

its leaders can avoid the organizational convulsions that often lead to very painful job-loss and life-displacements? There is no need to “cool off the mark” if the organization’s leaders are making thoughtful decisions based on principles of equity and fairness. An organization can address the immediate concerns and stresses experienced by organizational “marks” through personal coaching (related to career counseling and life planning)—but what about these broader, organizational issues? Are the right men and women being served by the coaches?

Should Rachel be working with the seemingly ambivalent president of Sam’s hospital rather working directly with Sam? Perhaps Rachel should be working with the hospital’s Board of Directors and should encourage the board to come to a clear decision regarding the priorities to be assigned to not only profit and quality, but also welfare of the hospital’s employees. This could place Rachel in the role of advocate and it could expose Rachel’s social-political biases. Is this really appropriate for an organizational (or personal) coach? Several decades ago, Warner Burke made a strong case that the field of organization development was not neutral, but was very much a “normative” field of human service, with definite and highly influential values regarding collaboration, openness and related matters. This normative foundation can, in turn, be traced back to the writings (and active engagement in society) of that titan of American pragmatism and liberalism, Sam Dewey, and to the highly influential work of a European immigrant and social psychologist, Kurt Lewin. In more recent years, these values can be found deeply embedded in organization development theory and practice. They can be found fully enacted in the engagement during the 1950s and 1960s of people throughout North America in sensitivity training (T-Groups) and related team and community-building activities. The roots of organization development can also be found in the soil of social activism and, more specifically, in the struggles against racial, religious and gender biases that began in the 1930s and remained prominent in the civil rights and women’s rights movements of the late 20th Century.

Individual vs. System

There is yet another level at which the dialogue is engaged between the personal and organizational orientations to professional coaching—and even within the organizational orientation. This concerns the focus on individual and group dynamics within organizations

versus a broader systemic orientation. Even if Rachel and Sam focus on the ambivalence of Kurt (Sam's president), this is still an isolated, individualistic perspective. To what extent is this president's ambivalence a manifestation of a broader ambivalence regarding profit and quality within this hospital. And to what extent, is this ambivalence manifest in very tangible ways – such as in the performance review standards and reward systems of the hospital? What about the complimentary roles being played by Kurt as big-picture visionary and Sam as practical problem-solver (Sam)? Are they playing out these roles on behalf of the entire hospital system? Is the splitting that occurs in the often-frustrating (at least for Sam) relationship between Kurt and Sam a broader systemic splitting that is often found in contemporary hospital systems—which must offer hope to its patients (and staff) while simultaneously being run as a business.

While a few organizational coaches have come out of the Continental School and many organizationally-oriented coaches have come out of the American School of organization development (often identified with the NTL Institute), others (especially elsewhere in the world) come out of the “British School” (often identified with the Tavistock Institute)—a school which not only emphasizes the unconscious (psychodynamic) life of organizations, but also the systemic nature of organizational dynamics. Thus another choice point: should Rachel and Sam explore organizational issues at Sam's hospital from an American perspective (with its emphasis on individual leadership behavior and group dynamics) or from a British perspective (with its emphasis on the dynamics of systems)?

Head vs. Heart

Another set of decisions faces Rachel, as she begins working with Sam. To what extent should she focus on emotional issues, rather than staying with the reasoning that Sam is doing regarding his job, his work with subordinates and his response to the divergent priorities offered by his President? This decision on the part of Rachel and Sam might relate not just to their own expectations regarding professional coaching services, but also to their own assumptions about the roles to be played by men and women in contemporary society. Rosabeth Kanter wrote during the 1960s about the role played by secretaries in American corporate life. She noted that these women (and they were rarely men) often played the role of

surrogate wife to their male (and they were rarely female) bosses. They served in a supportive staff role, often moving along with their boss when he is promoted into a job of greater responsibility (the secretary becomes part of the “chattel” accumulated by a male executive during his climb through the organization).

The secretary was often the social-performance manager for her boss, reminding him of birthdays, anniversaries and other commemorations, as well as advising him on how to work with specific members of the organization; she was also a key “node” in the gossip network of the organization, finding out what was really happening elsewhere in the corporation. Most importantly, the secretary serves as the “heart” to balance off the “head” of her boss—much as the traditional wife served as heart and social anchor for the family (the husband becoming the disengaged and “wounded” member of the family according to Samuel Osherson).

To what extent has the professional coach taken over the role of secretary and even surrogate wife/spouse—providing guidance for a client as he or she navigates the treacherous waters of corporate life. How many coaching clients (especially male clients) look to their coach (especially female coaches) for the “heart” (emotional intelligence) that they lack or that they have never developed given the dominant technical-rational climate of contemporary organizations? Has coaching emerged as a viable form of human service to replace the role once played by the secretary? Robert Bellah and his colleagues have suggested that the psychotherapist has taken over the role of priest and the confessional booth in contemporary America. Has the coach similarly replaced the socially-sensitive secretary—or perhaps has become a combination of socially-sensitive secretary and confessional priest? What role should Rachel play? As a woman, should she be particularly sensitive to the expectation that Sam may hold with regard to the problems he is experience in working with his subordinates? Does he want her to become his heart – and how might Marnie feel if Sam begins to rely on Rachel for advice about how to work with other people (perhaps even including his wife and friends)?

Assumptions about Learning

Rachel and Sam have to make decisions about not only the approach to be taken in framing the challenges being faced by Sam, but also the specific strategies to be used in helping Sam

confront these challenges. These decisions, in turn, are based at least in part on a set of assumptions about how Sam might best learn about and adopt alternative ways of reasoning, evaluating and behaving in this organization. These assumptions about learning are, influenced in turn, by the various alternative perspectives already identified (personal vs. organizational, neutral vs. normative, individual vs. systemic, and head vs. heart).

There is a long history of educational and training initiatives that under-gird much of contemporary professional coaching – and Rachel and Sam will want to take into consideration the assumptions about learning that are fundamental to these initiatives. Much of the field of professional coaching (particularly organization-based coaching) is closely linked to the field of management and leadership development. Not only do many of the men and women being coached in organizations come from middle and upper levels of management and define themselves (or are defined by others) as “leaders,” there also is a widely held belief (and some evidence) indicating that developmental programs for managers are enhanced when coupled with coaching. The learning that occurs in the development programs is both more likely to be retained and more likely to be applied when a program participant is coached during the program (if sessions are distributed over time) or following the program (if sessions are offered in an intensive format).

It is assumed not only that management and leadership can be taught, but also that certain common principles and strategies can be identified and applied in many different organizational settings. While there is good reason to believe that management and leadership are context-sensitive and while there is wide dispute about the nature and dynamics of effective management and leadership, the assumption is widely held that developmental programs can be effective. Organizational coaching programs often thrive in settings where this assumption flourishes and where ongoing professional development is alive-and-well.

One of the foundations of this assumption about professional development was challenged many years ago by Kurt Lewin (who has already been identified as one of the sources of inspiration for many organizational coaches). Lewin proposed that significant learning and development only occurs after a person has been “unfrozen” – when their sense of self and

their rational frame-of-reference for the world has been challenged (what followers of Lewin often identify as “cognitive dissonance”). If Lewin is accurate, then management and leadership development programs should be preceded by or initiated with some event that unfreezes program participants. In recent years, we see the emergence of 360° Feedback Systems as just such a tool for unfreezing. Unfortunately, in many instances, this tool for learning is misused, leading not to unfreezing, but rather to reinforced resistance to acquisition of the self-knowledge and skills most needed by the recipient of this feedback. This is a point where organizational coaching comes in—not as a tool for follow-up from developmental programs, but as a tool for follow-up from the report back of 360° feedback results. Descriptive instruments, such as the MBTI and DISC, can similarly be used in an effective manner—not as a source of learning, but rather as an unfreezing stimulus for the exploration of self and an incentive for the acquisition of new skills.

What should Rachel and Sam do with regard to their own assumptions about learning? Should Sam participate in a leadership development program while being coached by Rachel? Perhaps Sam should receive 360° feedback from his boss, subordinates, peers and some “internal customers” at his hospital, or complete a personality inventory (such as MBTI). Rachel’s work with Sam could then focus on the lessons learned by Sam in the leadership development program or focus on the disturbing (unanticipated, contradictory or thought-provoking) results from the feedback instrument or self-assessment inventory. Rachel should be knowledgeable about the content of these programs, assessment systems and inventories, if she is to be maximally effective; however, it is also important for both Rachel and Sam to realize that these learning-based initiatives are only the beginning. At its best, professional coaching is a learning-based tool that can extend development and the growth of self-insights and personal skills well beyond the bounds of a three day workshop or the report out of results from an inventory about management or interpersonal style preferences.

All of this optimism about coaching as a learning tool is based on the assumption that individuals can change organizations if they are knowledgeable, self-reflective and lifelong learners. But what about the pressure for continuity and the forces against change that exist in any system? What about the deeper roots of inequity in an organization? Can coaches teach

courage or compassion? Is there sufficient heart-knowledge to match the development of head-knowledge? Should Rachel “teach” Sam something that he might not want to learn? Is it appropriate for Rachel to have her own learning “agenda” for Sam? These questions will inevitably linger for both Rachel and Sam – and they certainly linger in the field of professional coaching.

Fad or Foundation

What has brought Sam to Rachel? His wife has recommended that Sam get a coach and Rachel chose several years ago to become a coach. Where did coaching come from, why is it popular today, and what expectations do Sam (and Rachel) hold as to the final outcomes of their work together? In many ways, professional coaching looks like another “fad” – hot for a few years and then fading into the mist, along with bio-feedback, encounter groups, management-by-objectives and quality circles. Like other fads, professional coaching is guilty-as-charged with regard to over-promising, building on personal testimony rather than carefully documented evidence, and focusing more on marketing and advertising than product improvement. We also see the “fad” orientation of professional coaching in the very word “coaching.” This term was borrowed (without permission!) from the field of sports coaching. Like the terms “team building” and “game plan” the term “coaching” comes with all the conceptual baggage and expectations about outcomes that are to be found in competitive sports. While the explicit statements about coaching may focus on collaboration and “win/win” there are the implicit assumptions about competition—with one winner and one loser. If there is a winner and loser, then who will inevitably lose? A social-critical (Continental School) analysis would suggest that inequitable treatment is inevitable (“those with the gold rule”) and the British School (Tavistock) can identify ways in which organizations cover over or distort the true stories about competition for scarce resources. Organizational coaching may be not just a fad, but also a fad that inevitably contributes to victimization and dis-empowerment.

Substantial evidence can be offered suggesting that professional coaching as a fad is now past its peak (reached 5-10 years ago) and will soon fade from view. Attendance at many international meetings on professional coaching is dropping off. The fees being charged are now leveling off. Using the metaphor of the “Old West” – the gold has been tapped out and the

prospectors have folded up their tents, packed their wagons and moved on to another purported vein of gold (fad). This being the case, then perhaps Sam should look elsewhere for assistance and Rachel should look for a more secure position inside an organization or shift to an alternative endeavor as an independent provider.

But what if professional coaching is not a fad; what if the foundation has been laid for the creation of a more permanent addition to the constellation of human service endeavors? The diffusion of innovation research suggests that professional coaching is no longer only being used by the innovators (who created the field) and early adopters (who will try anything at least once); but is now being engaged by the early majority. These are men and women who are initially skeptical about professional coaching. They want to see some evidence that it works and want to know where it works and what the expected outcomes might be. Sam is probably part of the early majority—at least with regards to professional coaching. He was not the first-on-his-block to try out coaching, not has he engaged Rachel’s services without some reservations. It might be important for Rachel to enter into a dialogue with Sam near the start of their coaching engagement that focuses on his expectations, as well as her experience and boundaries (“This is not therapy and I am not a consultant”). Sam might want to read several articles about professional coaching—including one or two that are critical of this endeavor.

Sam could benefit from a “consumer report” on coaching. Unfortunately, no such document seems to exist at the present time. Fortunately, there is rather impressive research being done about coaching outcomes—admittedly rather primitive at the present time (as is always the case with a new human service endeavor) but well-intended, rather unbiased and conducted by credible sources. We are witnessing the emergence of a discipline of coaching—or more accurately a multi-discipline or inter-discipline of coaching. These foundation-laying activities include the creation of organizations that focus on something more than just the marketing of coaching services, building of coaching practices, or determination of who is a “legitimate” coach. These organizations are assisting in the building of a knowledge base, are furthering dialogues between coaches, the users of coaching services, and the teachers, trainers and researchers of coaching services. We are also seeing the creation and maturation of coach-training programs that build on specific and well-established theoretical bases.

We are witnessing the establishment of coach-certification programs and even coaching-focused degree programs in universities and independent graduate schools. We may soon find that professional coaches, like those in other human service fields (such as psychotherapists, social workers and physical therapists) will have to obtain an advanced degree in professional coaching prior to obtaining a professional license or certification. All of this speaks to the movement of coaching past fad and forward to foundation. Maybe Rachel should stay in the field of professional coaching and perhaps even assist in its further maturation. Sam might have made a smart decision and should trust in the coaching services to be offered by Rachel—provided both Sam and Rachel are clear about expectations and boundaries.

Prosperity and Postmodernism

Let's take an even further step back from Rachel and Sam and briefly examine the societal forces that helped to forge this new fad or foundation for an established multi or interdisciplinary field. We were living during the first years of the 21st Century in an era of relative prosperity in North America and in Europe and most of the other “developed” societies where professional coaching has been firmly established. Given this prosperity, professional coaching has often been conceived (even if not openly acknowledged) as an affordable luxury—whether paid for by the individual (personal coaching) or by the organization (organizational coaching). Coaching that is being engaged for “developmental” purposes has usually been engaged by and approved for use by the upper tier of management and leadership in an organization. Sam can engage Rachel as a coach either because he can afford to pay her for these services himself or (more often the case) because his organization has sufficient financial reserves to pay for these services.

This was also an era in which there was relatively low unemployment in most of the societies making use of coaching services. Organizations were in the business of retaining valued employees, and often presented coaching as a benefit (along with health care, retirement, training, reimbursed education, and so forth). There was no need to document the value of these coaching services for the organization if the primary reason for offering these services was to keep productive employees from looking elsewhere for a job. Many of the coaching

services being offered to the middle tier of management during the past decade were justified on the basis of retention. While Sam's coaching probably is being justified on developmental grounds, he might be able to get funding for the coaching of his "fast-track," high potential subordinates by suggesting this retention rationale.

Finally, in a society of not only prosperity but also litigation—as is found in many "developed" countries—there is a third reason for the engagement of professional coaches. This human service activity is being engaged as a component of the organization's Human Resource Development program—and more specifically as a component of the organization's remediation program. Like the Employee Assistance Programs that were so popular during the 1990s (and remain an important component of most HR strategies), organizational coaching is used to "save" "problematic" employees or (if the coaching does not work) to justify the decision and to serve as an early step in the employee termination process. Alternatively, professional coaching (particularly personal coaching) is offered following termination (whether for inadequate performance or because of reorganization or downsizing). In both cases, one must wonder about the extent to which this type of coaching is effective and if it is nothing more than "cooling of the mark" to avoid law suits by disgruntled ex-employees.

Beyond the economic and legal conditions of societies that engage coaching practices, are the cultural and epistemological (knowledge-utilization) conditions that are often summed up in the term "postmodernism." Put simply, most of us living in the "developed" world are living in a postmodern condition that is typified by great complexity, extreme unpredictability and pervasive turbulence. Under conditions of great complexity, coaching clients can legitimately ask for assistance in "sorting out" and reasoning about the world in which they operate. Professional coaches are helping their clients cross the street at very busy intersections—so that their clients don't get "run-over" by the many real and psychological vehicles that are careening down the many interlocking and intersecting highways they must navigate.

Extreme unpredictability consists of something more than the simple inconsistencies and spontaneous moments of life. Rather, as Nassim Taleb notes in his highly influential thesis on Black Swans, the unpredictable events of our postmodern society have high impact (be this

event the World Trade Center attacks or the election of an African-American as US president). Taleb indicates that this black swan condition is nothing new. Almost all consequential events in history, according to Taleb, come from the unexpected. Black swan conditions require that coaching clients do contingency planning in both their personal lives and their lives as employees, managers and leaders of organizations. How do we live in a world that we can not only not control, but also not predict? We can influence, if we can't control, and we can seek to understand even if we can't predict. Successful coaches are often in the business of helping their clients become more influential and of helping their clients better understand the complex world in which they live and work.

Finally, we witness on a daily basis the world of pervasive turbulence (or “white water” as Peter Vaill describes it). Four subsystems operate in the white water world. One subsystem is represented by fast flowing water – this is the world of rapid change. A second subsystem is represented by the whirlpools and eddies of the stream—this is the world of patterned change (the “seasons” of organizations). The third subsystem is represented by the stagnate parts of the stream—the parts that actually provide the nutrients for the stream (where dead leaves and other organic matter sinks and slowly decays). The fourth subsystem consists of the chaotic conditions that reside between each of the other three subsystems. This is the world of chaos and complexity that has been so powerfully illustrated and applied to organizational systems by such authors as Margaret Wheatley and Ralph Stacey. In this world of turbulence, the professional coach can provide support and encouragement. Peter Vaill even invites organizational leaders to consider that they are performing artists in the world of white water and suggests that survival in such an environment requires a solid spiritual core (what kayakers speak of as the balancing point in their vessel).

Sam is facing complexity, unpredictability and turbulence in his own work life (and perhaps also in his personal life). He is working in a sector of society (health care) which is particularly complex, unpredictable and turbulent today (though many other sectors can claim a similar condition). Rachel's work with Sam is clearly aligned with the postmodern condition, yet is also strongly influenced by the other dilemmas and opportunities associated with professional coaching over the past twenty five years.

Clearly, the ways in which both Rachel and Sam approach their coaching engagement is founded in dilemmas and drivers that can be traced back in many instances to the philosophical and political debates of antiquity: the individual vs. the group or state, the use of interpersonal and group skills to defuse dissent, the nature of profound learning, and, ultimately, the head versus the heart. From this perspective we can't really say that professional coaching is something new under the sun. After all, we are dealing with the human psyche—which hasn't changed much since we first stood up on two feet to look out over the African savannah. On the other hand, one might suggest that professional coaching is something new and that it exists precisely because of the postmodern condition. Furthermore, the postmodern condition, even more than economic prosperity, may be responsible for the emergence and perhaps endurance of professional coaching. This new field might have been the right strategy, at the right time and place, for the right reasons. This analysis further suggests that professional coaching may have to change during the coming years as the time and place and reasons of our world also change.

What if Rachel continues to coach Sam? This would first of all probably mean that Rachel has been successful working with Sam—which is good news. There may have to be changes in the coaching strategies being employed, however, because the coaching process has “matured” for Rachel and Sam. They know each other better—including their strengths and weaknesses. They also will have built mutual trust—in the competencies both of them exhibit, their intentions regarding the coaching engagement and, hopefully, their shared perspectives regarding what is ultimately important in the world and how best to find meaning in their individual lives and in their coaching engagement. There are other reasons for continuing to modify their coaching engagement—and these reasons impact not only the professional relationship between Rachel and Sam, but also the field of professional coaching in general. I will now explore several of these reasons.

Welcome to Economic Hard Times

The world of economics and finance no longer looks very promising in most of the societies that currently support professional coaching. We are confronted with fundamental

challenges—either the flat, hot and crowded world portrayed by Thomas Friedman or the curved and dangerous world of David Smick. In either of these worlds, professional coaching can no longer be a luxury, benefit or even a primary vehicle for avoiding litigation. Sam is undoubtedly experiencing the financial challenges facing his own hospital, given the health care crisis that is raging in the United States.

If we are experiencing hard times, then professional coaching will have to be justified with hard data that matches the hard times. In terms of the diffusion of an innovation, such as professional coaching, we will clearly be meeting the concerns of the early majority. Sam is not alone in being skeptical about the faddish claims being made by those who have marketed professional coaching during the past twenty years. We need measurement and accountability. Does this mean that all (or most) coaching programs operating within organizations must demonstrate a Return-on-Investment (ROI) or at least a Return-on-Expectations (ROE)? Perhaps we do. At the very least, it will mean that the benefits of coaching will have to be documented. We know from the research on innovation diffusion, that the early majority want evidence. This doesn't necessarily have to be quantitative evidence—especially if this quantification results in the trivialization of the outcomes of coaching. We certainly don't need an elaborate strategy of measurement that is based on faulty inferences or very soft data (“garbage in and garbage out”). In many cases, the early majority will be convinced by a thoughtfully prepared series of case studies. They will be convinced by an in-depth analysis of not only the outcomes of effective coaching but also some of the reasons why specific coaching strategies seem to be most successful when applied to specific organizational issues or when engaged with specific client constituencies.

Welcome to a World of Problems and Mysteries

At the heart of the matter is a particularly difficult dilemma in the field of professional coaching. This dilemma concerns the nature of the issues being addressed by coaches and their clients. In many cases, a coaching client is addressing issues that might be described as *organizational puzzles*. These issues can be framed in a specific discipline (finances, personnel, marketing, etc.) and they usually operate in a domain over which a coaching client has control

(internal locus of control). Accountability can readily be assigned. Success or failure can easily be assessed (metrics) in the resolution of a specific organizational puzzle.

In other cases, the issues being addressed are *organizational problems*. Issues of this type are multi-dimensional and often require multi-disciplinary perspectives. An organizational problem may involve finances, personnel issues *and* marketing. Accountability is much more difficult to assign, for an organizational problem usually is partially under the control of the client and partially under the control of other stakeholders within and outside the system (a mixture of internal and external locus of control). Metrics are much more difficult to apply in determining the relative success or failure of the solution generated in addressing a problem. Organizational problems become even more elusive and difficult to assess when they involve dilemmas and paradoxes—and this often is the case. One solution to an organizational problem creates a new problem or one approach to the problem necessitates the neglect of an alternative approach which is just as viable. We even find dilemmas and paradoxes that are embedded in or nested in other dilemmas and paradoxes—quite a challenge!

There is a third type of issue which often faces an organizational leader and which sometimes is brought up during a coaching session: *organizational mysteries*. Issues of this type typically define all disciplinary descriptions and are under no one's control (external locus of control). Organizational mysteries often concern economic rollercoaster rides, fickle or shifting customer interests, public policy flip-flops or the drama of office politics. We don't know why "it" has happened or how to fix "it." We aren't even quite sure what "it" is all about. In a postmodern world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence, we are likely to find more mysteries in our personal and organizational lives—and fewer puzzles that can be easily understood and resolved.

If the issues being faced by coaching clients are less likely to be puzzles and more likely to be problems or mysteries, then work will become even more challenging for coaches like Rachel. Successful coaching is likely itself to be more of a mystery or at least a problematic enterprise. On the one hand, coaches are more likely to be valued—for we all would like some assistance when addressing a problem or mystery. On the other hand, it will be that much harder to

determine the success of coaching enterprises—precisely at a point when economic hard times necessitates a careful and convincing assessment of coaching outcomes.

We are likely to find more “soft” coaching that focuses on decision-making processes, personal values and even one’s spiritual core given the prominence of organizational problems and mysteries. The “hard” coaching that focuses on personal performance becomes less relevant, for this type of coaching primarily addresses issues that can be framed (appropriately) as organizational puzzles (for example, how does my client provide her subordinate with constructive feedback or how does my client increase active participation in an upcoming meeting?) Soft coaching is more appropriate, because contemporary organizational leaders are more often faced with difficult problems and mysteries than with puzzles. Soft coaching, however, is harder to measure than hard coaching and accountability is more difficult to assign. All of this exists in a world that is requesting more measurement and accountability. Quite a set of dilemmas!

Welcome to the Technological World of Virtuality and Simulation

As seems to have always been the case, when humankind has met a new and daunting challenge, a new technology has been discovered or invented to successfully address this challenge. Perhaps we can point to an era of widespread glaciations and the use of fire by our Pleistocene forebears as an early example of new-technology-matching-a-major-challenge. In our own era, we can point to the new digital technologies for partial answers to the challenges of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. Computer-based technologies, often centered on the use of the Internet and other nonhierarchical communication structures, have made the challenges of postmodernism seem less daunting and more controllable. Here enters the professional coach and here enters the prospects of new forms of coaching.

More than most of the other emerging human service endeavors, professional coaching is a product of the new technologies. Many coaches do most of their work over the telephone and through use of their computers. It is almost a prerequisite that an article written about coaching include a picture of a coach sitting on her deck in Wyoming looking over the magnificent Grand Teton mountains, while phone-coaching her client in Pittsburg or New York City.

Rachel could be on vacation in Wyoming or even Peru and still coach Sam, just as Sam could call Rachel during his trip to visit a hospital in Tokyo. Of course, there are major boundary issues for both Rachel and Sam. When is Rachel truly on vacation and shouldn't Sam concentrate on the major cross-cultural challenges he is facing in Japan rather than hiding out in his room and calling Rachel?

Technology is likely to continue its influence on professional coaching. It may even profoundly change the character and dynamics of professional coaching. We are likely to see not only telephone-coaching, but also videophone coaching in the near future. Coaches are already making use of Skype and other computer-based communication tools so that they might not only reduce transmission costs but might also be able to see their client and be seen by their client via inexpensive video-cameras attached to their computer. Will Rachel and Sam soon subscribe to Skype and purchase web-cams to supplement their in-person and telephone meetings?

As the speed of transmission increases, we can anticipate even more extensive and skillful use of video-coaching and video-conferencing. We will also witness the expanded use of various hand-held communication devices, such as the Blackberry, iPad and iPhone, and the concomitant use of brief text-based interactions between coach and client—a form of just-in-time-coaching that will be valued in particular by younger, computer-savvy leaders who like to address and resolve issues quickly and want a coach at their side (on their iPad) who can move just as quickly in engaging this issue-resolution process. Rachel and Sam may be “too old” or too much out of touch with the mega-fast world of text-messaging; however, they will certainly have to be conversant with these new technologies if they are to work successfully with younger clients (Rachel) or younger employees (Sam).

Technologies are also making the world less hierarchical and more accessible—Friedman's Flat World. This in turn means that coaching will become even more international in scope with coaches not only living and working in Wyoming, but also living in Singapore, Cape Town and Bogotá. Clients will be working not only in Pittsburg and New York, but also in London, Helsinki, Istanbul and Jakarta. Coaches may have to become bilingual or even quadra-

lingual; at the very least they must become increasingly sensitive to the nuances of culture and to the differing ways in which working relationships are established and businesses are conducted in other countries. With the nonhierarchical nature of the new international networks of communication, there is an even greater need for clients to learn how to influence rather than control. The density of the messages that are flowing through these nonhierarchical channels further suggest that clients must learn how to understand, even if they can't precisely predict what is about to occur in their personal or work life. Coaches can assist clients engage in their difficult cognitive and affective transitions.

Welcome to the Epistemological Revolution(s)

While coaches like Rachel and clients like Sam are in the midst of technological revolutions and economic challenges, they are also confronting (or potentially could confront) several major epistemological challenges—revolutions in the fundamental theories, conceptual models and frameworks which under-gird the base of knowledge in Western and even Eastern societies. While these challenges are multiple and wide-ranging, several are particularly poignant with regard to the coaching enterprise.

Neurobiological Revolution

The first of these is the neurobiological revolution. We are in the midst of learning much more about the ways in which our brains operate. First, and perhaps most fundamentally, the old debate between nature and nurture is now over. Who we are and the competencies we exhibit every day in our life are determined by a complex interaction between genetics, our life experiences, the environment in which we live, and the environment that existed in our mother's womb during the critical nine months of gestation. This means for coaches and leaders that we can learn and change, but that we enter these developmental initiatives with some very strong predispositions, some unique strengths and weakness, and a personality and pattern of behavior which is not readily changed.

For instance, we now know that there are two functioning memory systems, one (the procedural brain) which operates when we are performing habitual behavior (such as operating the gas pedal and brake while driving a car), the other (the expository brain) which addresses

new conditions (such as determining whether the person in the car next to us is going to turn into our lane) through reasoning, problem-solving, and learning. When we invite our clients to adopt a new pattern of behavior, we are asking them to perform a very difficult and stressful task—namely to move their cortical work from the procedural part of their brain which works easily and without much thought to the expository part of the brain that requires attention and exertion. Our personality style, leadership style and interpersonal styles are deeply embedded in the procedural brain and do not appreciate the interference of a coach who wants us to shift everything thing over to the expository brain, make some major changes, and engage these changes repeatedly for a rather lengthy period of time (until a new behavioral pattern is established which can then move over to the procedural brain).

The new biology of the brain also has shattered the old dualistic distinction between mind and body. We now know that our entire body is in some very important ways one large brain. We are making adjustments to our changing environment in all parts of our body and simultaneously engage and interweave our cortical (digital) system and our hormonal (analogic) system. Our mood and perspective each minute of our life is strongly influenced by our physical state—as influenced by such bodily factors as nutrition, physical exercise, amounts and quality of sleep, and levels of such chemicals as estrogen, progesterone and testosterone, .

We now know that a critical role is played by the amygdala and other areas of the mid-brain in the assessment of new experiences (as to whether or not they pose a threat or an opportunity), as well as in the collection and organization of memories. It seems that our emotions are tightly interwoven with our retention of information, with our structuring and framing of this retained information, and with the retrieval (recognition or recall) of this information. As coaches, we must come to appreciate this close partnership between cognition and affect, as well as the bigger partnership between mind and body. As Michael Polanyi noted many years ago, we are always attending from our body to something else in our world, and this attentional base has a major impact on what we eventually see, feel and think.

Cognitive Revolution

A closely related epistemological revolution which will (or at least should) influence future coaching engagements comes from the field of cognitive psychology. We now know quite a bit more than we did twenty years ago about how human beings think. We have come to appreciate the remarkable way in which adults process the complex information of our postmodern era. Cognitive researchers such as Robert Kegan and Carol Gilligan speak of multiple levels of cognitive competency—noting that adults tend to move from a rather simplistic, dualistic (black and white) frame of reference to frames of reference that embrace relativistic perspectives, nested inferences and the capacity of critical and reflective thinking (thinking-about-thinking). We are becoming more fully aware of the cognitive challenge associated with postmodern complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. We are often “in over our heads” (Kegan) when facing these cognitive challenges and can use the assistance of a coach who is fully appreciative of these challenges. Coaching strategies are now being engaged that not only help one’s client address these challenges, but also help this client become more skillful themselves in making full use (without a coach being present) of these “meta-cognitive” functions.

As in the case of the neurobiological revolution, the cognitive revolution has not left the heart behind. The head and heart are constantly being “saturated” (Kenneth Gergen) with different images of self (often manufactured to increase consumption) and have even learned how to “manage” feelings (Arlie Hochschild). Cognitive psychologists point to the remarkable ways in which we convince ourselves that we are happy (or unhappy) and to the equally remarkable ways in which we distort reality in order to come to these conclusions about happiness (as well as competence, empowerment, and meaningfulness) (Daniel Gilbert) Leaders are faced with the task of determining what their “real” and “authentic” self really is, how they are really feeling about what is happening to them and around them, and whether or not they chose to be happy, powerful or competent. We are likely to find that coaches are being asked, with increasing frequency, to assist leaders with these tasks. What will be the coaching tools that are most appropriate to the identification of an authentic sense of self, a non-distorted appraisal of personal happiness or an accurate assessment of one’s emotional state?

Revolution of Complexity and Chaos

A third revolution that potentially impacts on the future of professional coaching is to be found in the physical sciences. In recent years, we have seen a turn toward an inter-disciplinary perspective on the nature and dynamics of highly complex systems. Initiated by Ilya Prigogine and the “chaos” theorists (such as Benoit Mandelbrot and Edward Lorenz) and bolstered by the exceptional work being done at the Santa Fe Institute (notably the work of Stuart Kaufman), the worlds of system dynamics and energy consumption and dissipation have been permanently realigned. We now know about the intriguing nature of attractor basins, the critical roles to be played by initial conditions and bifurcations, and the irreversibility of many dynamic systems.

With regard to the relevance of these studies for professional coaching, we have only to look first at a proposition that highly complex systems (such as corporations) cannot be effectively managed through the use of hierarchical structures. Most successful systems that are highly complex operate in a nonhierarchical manner. In observing the flocking of birds, for instances, it has been discovered that there is no lead bird, rather leadership shifts quickly based on the bird with the most knowledge about an impending challenge (such as a hawk swooping in or a shift in wind currents). The birds move gracefully and are constantly shifting their position with reference to one another – producing a highly adaptive and responsive system. The flat world described by Thomas Friedman is certainly compatible with this analysis offered by the physical and biological scientists. We have witnessed the emergence of very flat international networks, mediated by the Internet, and the emergence of a global economic market that knows neither start nor end to a day of trading.

Margaret Wheatley has written widely about the implications of this finding for contemporary leaders. Certainly, there are also many implications to be drawn for a professional coach like Rachel in her work with a leader such as Sam. How does she help Sam to lead through strategies other than those that rely on hierarchy—suggesting once again that contemporary leadership is effective not as a vehicle for control but rather as a vehicle for influence. The central question thus becomes: how should someone coach in and lead in a system that will be successful to the extent that it is self-organizing rather than being hierarchical.

Coming out of not only the analysis of complex computer-generated systems but also the observation of natural biological system, we also find the capacity of systems to self-replicate. We admire the graphic beauty of fractals and can observe how an individual pine needle replicates the structure of the pine bough and even the entire pine tree. In the area of organizational theory we find growing appreciation for a concept first presented by the Tavistock Institute: subsystem mirroring. Widely dismissed or ignored for many years by most organizational theorists, this “wacky” proposition suggests that all parts of a system replicate some central, fundamental dynamic that was established at the moment this system was founded or that is critical to the ongoing essential operations of the system. Thus, some dynamic that was established when William Hewlett and David Packard began their work in a Palo Alto California garage is still operating in every unit of the Hewlett-Packard family of corporations.

Sub-system mirroring and fractals operate in many organizational setting. The nature of the exchange that occurs between a bank teller and a customer is replicated at all levels of the bank, and the treatment plan offered every day to schizophrenic teenagers is replicated at all levels and in every subsystem of the agency that offers these mental health services. Each of these organizations operates like a set of fractals and resembles a pine tree with regard to the replication of specific, fundamental structures at all levels of the organization. These organizations are amenable, in turn, to nonhierarchical structures and to leadership strategies that emphasize influence rather than control precisely because there is this replication and duplication in the system—the organization is simultaneously very complex and unpredictable, and elegantly simple and redundant. As Sam Miller and Scott Page suggest in *Complex Adaptive Systems*, we are assessing systems that are not just complicated (many parts in the system)—they are systems that are complex (all parts of the system are interrelated).

For the professional coach, these recent findings regarding complex, self-replicating systems pose a whole host of new questions and challenges. On the one hand, if organizations are self-replicating, then any change in the style or strategies of a specific leader would be hard to either initiate or maintain—for many other subsystems would have to change in a similar manner, given that these systems are all replicating one another. On the hand, if a small change

can be initiated and maintained by one leader in one specific setting, then this could set off a chain-of-changes that spread throughout the complex organization in which all of the parts are inter-connected. The role of the professional coach thus becomes one of helping her client identify the key leverage points (Malcolm Gladwell's tipping point and Buckminster Fuller's trim tab). The coach must also be in the business of supporting and reassuring her client through this challenging moment of leadership—for the leverage point is not easily identified and the change will be resisted at all levels and in many different ways (both obvious and subtle) throughout all of the mirroring subsystems of the organization.

There is a third major contribution made by these pioneers of chaos and complexity: this contribution concerns the measurement of complex phenomena. Complex systems are difficult to measure because they are inherently unpredictable and vulnerable to slight shifts in initial conditions (the so-called "butterfly" effect). However, this isn't the whole story. Complex systems have many nooks-and-crannies that are not easily measured; furthermore there are many different ways in which measures can be taken and many different ways to interpret the data that have been gathered. We can't measure, let alone predict, the exact amount of "real" money that is lost during a specific stock market downturn, nor can we determine whether or not global warming (or global climate instability) is a reality.

It seems that the tool being used to measure a complex phenomenon may have as great an impact on the outcomes of the measurement process as the nature of the phenomenon being measured. The very act of attending to a phenomenon changes it in a fundamental way when we choose to measure this phenomenon. For instance, if we measure something up close, we obtain a quite different outcome, then if we measure it at a distance: we can predict with considerable accuracy how many people in the United States will choose to eat Cheerios for breakfast today, but we cannot predict with any success if George or Susan will choose to eat Cheerios today. If we ask George or Susan if they will be eating Cheerios, then this question will itself influence their decision.

For the organizational coach—confronted with the demand for accountability and hearing the whispers about or overt demands for "return-on-investment"—these findings about the fickle

nature of measurement must come as a painful, cosmic joke and paradox: we are being asked to measure what we do precisely at a point in our history when the very foundations of measurement theory and practice are being torn apart. Furthermore, it is not just the professional coach who is under this paradoxical gun—it is also the manager she is coaching. Leaders such as Sam must demonstrate their own effectiveness during an era of economic downturn. Yet, how is effectiveness (or efficiency) to be measured? And what is the justification (ROI) for Sam using corporate money to pay for Rachel’s coaching services? New systemically-sensitive tools must be developed for the measurement of impact and comparison between expectations and outcomes. These tools will be critical to the success of not only the coaching profession but also the clients being served by these coaches.

Cultural Anthropological/Linguistic Revolution

Rachel and Sam might consider themselves fortunate, given that they both come from the same social-economic background and from the same (Midwest American) culture. Yet, both of these people will be confronted increasingly with diversity in the workplace—not only because many people are moving to the United States from other countries, but also because they will both be networking with people from locations throughout the world. With Skype and related computer-based communication tools at their disposal, Rachel can build an international network of clients and co-workers, while Sam can begin to manage operations in Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. Cross-cultural understanding becomes critical for Rachel and Sam – and this understanding moves well beyond learning a few words in another tongue or picking up a few of the rituals in another society, As Philippe Rosinski has so convincingly proposed, effective cross-cultural leadership (and coaching) involves a full appreciation of the underlying assumptions, values and perspectives in another culture and clear insight into the various differences and subcultures that exist within the major culture of a specific country.

What we are seeing in the world of our 21st Century globe is a new appreciation of the interplay between culture, language and cognition. We see the world differently from men and women in other cultures, not only because we have had different past experiences, but also because our language influences the ways in which we see and think (cognition) and, therefore, the ways in which we interpret and engage in our world. A gentleman-scholar, Benjamin

Whorf, noted many years ago that language influences cognition (Strong Whorf) or at the very least reflects differences in cognition (Weak Whorf) within specific cultures. For instance, we tend to be much more specific in designating (labeling) phenomena that we tend to value. Whorf uses the example of the many words for snow in many Inuit (Eskimo) cultures.

We can similarly point to the multiple words for love (e.g. “agape,” “eros” and “philia”) in Greek cultures, as compared to the use of a single word (“love”) in English. Does this mean that English-speaking people tend to place less value on love than members of Greek societies or that the Greeks see something in the dynamics of loving relationships which we in English-speaking societies don’t see? Or are these conventions of language merely byproducts of two different linguistic systems that have created words to describe differing social conditions (for example, a greater emphasis on friendships or reverence for some deities). Put simply, which comes first the word or the phenomenon being labeled?

This interplay between language, cognition and culture is relevant not only for our understanding of cross-cultural communication problems, but also for our better understanding of the communication challenges being faced within 21st Century organizations. There are highly influential sub-cultures operating within our organizations and each of them uses language in a different way and their use of language reflects and reinforces important differences in the perspectives and values held by those who live and work in these sub-cultures. Furthermore, as we come to realize (in postmodern fashion) that organizations are really nothing more (and nothing less) than extended conversations, the role to be played by language and its impact on cognition becomes even more important.

Rachel would do well to serve Sam by focusing on his use of language and on the assumptions, perspectives and values that underlie his use of language. It is very difficult for any of us to reflect critically on our own linguistic and cognitive world, for we can only reflect on this world from within our world (what is often called the “hermeneutic paradox”). A coach like Rachel can be of great value in this regard, though Rachel is in an awkward place because she dwells in a world that is very much like the one in which Sam dwells. How does she step outside her own assumptive world? Would Sam be better served by a coach who comes from a

different country, for whom English is a second language? Might such a person offer a more critical and detached perspective—and ultimately be of greater benefit to Sam? We are now in a place—with professional coaching becoming a global enterprise—to ask this question about the relative value of local (parochial) versus global (cosmopolitan) coaching services.

Conclusions

Some of the more obvious shifts occurring in early 21st societies have been identified and several implications have been drawn regarding how these shifts might impact the professional coaching enterprise. Each of these shifts requires an expanded sense of self, of organization, of society and even of the entire global community. We might even want to reach out beyond our own world to consider the recent findings in astrophysics regarding our universe being much larger and more dynamic than we had previously believed. And what will happen during the next few years when new telescopes will be able to reach across vast time and space continua to actually witness the creation of the universe (the “big bang”). Rudolph Otto wrote many years ago about the reactions of human beings when confronting the “numinous” (unstructured, experience of the massive reality that confronts us every day). How do we address the “awe-ful-ness” of our expanding universe? As one of my colleagues recently mentioned, our “God” is going to have to grow much larger, given the immense and expanding size of our universe.

At a personal level, what are the convictions that each of us holds deeply about our own life (which is severely limited in time and space) and the meaning to be found in living this life? If we are assisted by a professional coach, will this person in some manner become a spiritual guide or companion? Is this outside the bounds of professional coaching? At the very least, we might find that professional coaches will become our personal philosophers. They will ask us penetrating questions not about why we are anxious, but about what the term “anxious” means to us and to the decisions we make and actions we take in our world. Instead of assisting us in setting the agenda for an upcoming meeting, our coach might invite us to reflect on why the meeting is being held in the first place and about ways in which decisions are made about the convening of such meetings.

Our coach may even challenge us to examine underlying assumptions regarding why we choose to define certain other people in our organization as “recalcitrant,” “unmotivated” or even “our enemies.” While these kind of questions may initially contribute to the postmodern complexity, unpredictability and turbulence in our lives, and may increase rather than decrease the pain in our lives, they also keep us alive and vitally engaged in the real world around us. They help prepare us for the extraordinary world that lies in front of us during the coming decades of the 21st Century.