Coaching the Young Client

Vicki Foley and William Bergquist

Most of the professional coaching done today is with men and women who are in the midst of their lives—usually between ages thirty and fifty. Though we know of no formal study regarding the demographics of coaching that would confirm this statement, it would seem to be true, given our own experience as coaches and the experiences of the many other professional coaches with whom we have contact. The focus on mid-life is quite understandable. These middle-aged men and women typically can afford a personal or life coach if they are in the middle class. They are also likely to be provided with support from their organization if the focus is on executive or leadership coaching, given that these men and women are likely to be at the peak of their career during these middle years.

Typically, those who are much younger do not yet have the financial resources to afford a personal coach and their position in the organization traditionally has not been sufficiently high to motivate an investment in their professional growth through organization-based coaching services. A similar case can be made for those who are past midlife. They usually have been more concerned with saving for later life than paying for a personal coach, and their organization is likely to consider an investment in a coach as unwise, given the shorter future tenure of these older employees and their unlikely advancement to a higher leadership position at this point in their career.

We propose that all of this is now changing. Young people in many fields are making very good wages. There is also an increasing interest among organizational leaders in the development of young employees—especially (as we will discuss later in this article) those who have been identified early on as "high potential." We also find that the length of active careers among older men and women are rapidly extending. Most of these late mid-lifers can conceive of an active life that continues well into their 70s. There is still much time for coaching and career transitions. With this extension in career length and recognition of the frequency with which mature men and women change careers, there is an emerging recognition that professional coaching can be a wonderful investment for organizations to make, given that their mature employees are likely to be working for many years.

We would suggest that an even more important factor is at play—or should be at play. If professional coaching is for people in transition and for employees who work in organizations that are in transition, then coaching of men and women from all generations should be an imperative. After all, the young adult is certainly in transition and increasingly the mature adult is transitioning to a second (or third or fourth) career and is coping with newly emerging expectations regarding the active life to be found during the later years of life. While we could focus on the challenge of coaching older adults, we will focus in this brief essay on the challenge (and opportunity) of coaching the young adult.

The Opportunity

The absence of much coaching for young adults was vividly displayed in a recent experience that one of us [WB] had while traveling to a conference in California.

> A young woman volunteered to pick me up at the Los Angeles airport. She drove me to a speaking engagement about coaching. Given the heavy LA traffic, we had plenty of time to chat. She mentioned that she was finding it hard getting clients since she was only in her mid-20s and looked even younger. I suggested that she could consider setting up a specialized coaching practice working with young adults perhaps enrolled in a college or graduate school or working in a start-up high tech business. We talked about TGIF get-togethers at the end of a busy work or study week. Young men and women could be introduced at these gatherings to the idea of coaching. Some of the young people might be trained and certified as peer coaches. My youthful driver became quite animated and offered many other ideas about how to market coaching to other people her own age or younger. She was very excited about this prospect. I don't know if she followed through on this or not, but it certainly got me thinking about the opportunities in marketing to and working with this younger population. I began to regret that I wasn't still in my 20s!

In the case of this aspiring coach there was the challenge of being young herself. Young coaches usually do not have much credibility with older clients. Much as in the case of the young psychotherapist, there is an age bias in the field of professional coaching. It is a bias against youth rather than in favor of youth. Most coaching (and therapy) clients want to work with someone who is of the same age or older. This young woman in Los Angeles, however, may have considerable credibility (or at least a shared perspective) with young clients.

Coaching the Upwardly Mobile

There are indeed many rich opportunities for significant work with young middle-class clients. Many options await these potential coaching clients. They are not restricted to a specific career option or a limited range of career options, as was often the case with earlier generations who were confronted with "identity foreclosure" (a limited set of options determined by their parents, their society or their socio-economic status). Given the challenges associated with this freedom of career options, there is the need for coach-assisted values clarification, priority setting, career planning, etc. Without this coaching support, there is likely to be an "escape from freedom" on the part of young adults. This escape can lead to poor career choices, wandering through many short-term jobs, or falling back into a job or career that meets family or societal expectations (based on gender, race, or socio-economic level).

Coaching the Underground

Professional coaching also makes sense regarding work with young lower middle class clients and others without a job or very good prospect of a job. We wrote several years ago about the *organizational underground* that is filled with underemployment, unemployment and despair associated with loss of hope and opportunity (Foley and Bergquist, 2010). Unfortunately, this underground has grown even larger since we wrote about it. Jennifer Silva (2013) has recently reported on her studies regarding the "coping" of many young men and women. Her work is reminiscent of Lillian Rubin's (1992) classic portrayal of lower middle class lives in *Worlds of Pain*.

While there is considerable need for coaching that is offered for those young clients living in the organizational underground and seeking to cope with a non-supportive world, we will focus in this essay on those young people who are hopeful--and justifiably so. They are the potential young clients enrolled in graduate schools and those identified as high potentials by leaders of their organizations.

Making It Happen I: Coaching in Graduate School Programs

Within the last five years, we have seen a significant increase in the number of graduate schools integrating coaching skills into their curriculum and providing the opportunity to work individually with an executive coach throughout the graduate program. The use of coaching in graduate programs, particularly MBA and Executive MBA programs, started as a value added competitive advantage for some programs, while others recognized the impact that coaching would have on the success of their

graduates in program and post program because the Deans or faculty had experienced coaching themselves or, in some cases, were executive coaches.

Coaching in Management Schools

One of us [VF] worked extensively with a university whose Executive MBA program includes 32 hours of coaching over 21 months for each student. We found that this university was a pioneer in integrating coaching on many levels into a business graduate program. We might describe it as "deep and wide" coaching. The objective of the coaching is to be a catalyst of change in the lives of the participants, using an integrated systems approach to learning. The coaching is applied in multiple delivery modalities. For example, individual executive coaching with an assigned coach is offered to facilitate the transformation of the emerging executive leader. Learning cell coaching reinforces critical reflection, inquiry and questioning, problem solving and decision making, and reinforces the team formation and performance model. Classroom-based coaching integrates classroom instruction and key learning points with practical application for the participants in their organizational roles. Finally, self-directed peer coaching in small groups builds relationships, enhances problem solving, and provides support. The selection process for the executive coaches includes coach certification, diversity in terms of industry, functional expertise, and diversity of gender and ethnicity. The coaches participate in an extensive orientation process which includes meeting with the faculty to understand course content, key learning objectives, and expectations of the coach and the participant. In addition to the coaching components, the curriculum includes an executive conversations course to teach the students core coaching skills such as listening effectively, envisioning new possibilities, exploring assumptions, and giving and receiving feedback.

We can offer several other examples where coaching is used effectively in a graduate school setting. As described in its literature by the Wharton School of Business (University of Pennsylvania), the MBA program at this prestigious institution provides coaching and mentoring to students in two applications using second-year Leadership Fellows in two ways: (1) facilitating quarterly learning team feedback sessions, provide coaching and help solve team conflicts; and (2) coaching first year students in their leadership development. We would expect that using second-year Leadership Fellows in this capacity has a dual objective as the first year student receives the benefit of the coaching and the second year student increases his coaching and facilitation skills.

Graduate program coaching is not limited to the United States. We have seen an increase globally as well. INSEAD's global Executive MBA programs have included coaching for many years. The program

includes a full day of group coaching that begins the coaching process. Students receive feedback on several leadership assessments. Small group coaching (provided by an executive coach) is a core, clinical approach that helps students go beyond the feedback. After the group coaching day, students continue with individual coaching sessions, self-directed group coaching sessions, and a peer exchange where pairs in their locations observe each other in their daily work and provide feedback. Within the curriculum, students participate in teaching sessions where they practice the role of leader as coach.

Potential Coaching in Professional Schools

Clearly, coaching services are becoming more common in graduate schools of management. This is quite understandable given that professional coaches are being engaged with increasing frequency by managers and other organizational leaders throughout the world--so why not begin providing these services even before the young man or woman enters the workforce. We also know that effective coaching skills are critical for leaders at all levels in organizations--so why not teach these skills to young men and women while they are still in graduate school.

We would also suggest that coaching services should be provided in other graduate programs that prepare young men and women for lives in specific professions. Professional coaches are now being used extensively by dentists, veterinarians and other professional service providers (usually providing these services along with consulting services are offered under a rubric often called *practice management*). Doesn't it make just as much sense for these professionals to receive coaching services while still preparing in graduate school for their careers as dentists, veterinarians, lawyers or accountants? What about medical schools? Shouldn't coaching be provided to medical students as they face the complex, turbulent and changing world of health care? (Cassatly, 2010; Cassatly and Bergquist, 2012).

Making It Happen II: Coaching the High Potentials in Organizations

Another area where we are seeing increased investment in coaching is for early career high potentials. Organizations recognize the importance of developing and retaining critical talent not only at the mid and senior leader levels but also for new professional entrants that are the future of the organization. While we aren’t seeing a significant investment in the more traditional individual coaching engagements, we are seeing significant investment in programmatic development offerings that include coaching components (much like the graduate school design). The man or woman showing great

promise often will be given the opportunity to participate in leadership or managerial development programs – this is a frequent component of "fast-track" programs.

Focus on Unique Strengths

Something more, however, is operating with the high potential. This coaching often focuses in particular on the high potential's strengths and on the leveraging of these strengths for the benefit of the organization. The high potential typically possesses some distinctive abilities that are not easily learned by or "trained into" the average manager or formal leader. The high potential, metaphorically, is a race horse who should never be strapped to a plow.

We have discovered that there are additional strategies that have been or should be engaged when addressing the distinctive challenges of working with young, high potential employees: flexibility, reflection, alignment, experimentation and career planning. We have benefited in this strategic analysis from perspectives offered by a group of experienced professional coaches in Istanbul Turkey with whom one of us [WB] worked in collaboration with Dorothy Siminovitch. (Bergquist and Siminovitch, 2010)

Flexibility

While organizational coaches must always be flexible in their work with colleagues, the challenge of flexibility is particularly important when working with high potential clients. High potential coaching clients are inclined to assume an internal locus of control. They tend to "take charge," even when interacting with their coach. This means that the coach must move with the client. These clients set the agenda and shift from session to session with respect to the issues they want to address and the way in which they want to work with their coach. This also means that a coach must often encourage their clients to find their own solution to the issue being addressed. While all coaching should focus on client-generated solutions, this orientation is particularly important when working with the high potential client. The coach must therefore be flexible and responsive with regard not only to a client's definition of coaching issues, but also solutions being generated by the client in response to these coaching issues.

This flexibility and responsiveness comes with a caveat. On occasion, a coach must take a firm stance or at least a persuasive attitude with regard to the client's issues and ways of working in the coaching relationship. High potential clients want to believe in their own ability to resolve the issue using their own expertise and energy. The coach must, at times, challenge the client to recognize the complexity of the issue being faced—such that it will only be successfully addressed with the assistance and support of

other people—because the client is unaware of the need for more information and the creative benefit of dialogue. In conjunction with an internal locus of control (so familiar to these clients), an external locus of control must be acknowledged if the coaching issue is to be confronted in a realistic manner. Thus, flexibility on the part of the coach must at times be tempered with a dose of coaching persistence and confrontation.

Reflection

The high potentials are probably already performing above expectations and are ready to excel in their current job or in a new job. The high potential clients might be encouraged by their coach to pause for a moment to reflect on the reasons why they are considered to be above-expectation performers. High potential employees are often worried that they can't meet the expectations—they might be "found out" and be a disappointment to people they wish to impress. The coach can be supportive by being empathetic, and by assuring these clients that it is common for high potential employees to be concerned about their future performance. In coaching a high potential, the coach must be able to assist their client in facing uncertainty with imagination and best practices.

Sometimes, an organizational coach must be ready to assist in the identification or definition of results. The client can benefit greatly from articulate statements from the coach regarding what successful results look like in a specific organizational context. Results are congruent with the culture of the organization and with the tactical or strategic plans of the organization. At other times, the organizational coach asks the provocative questions that challenge the client to be more thoughtful about the results she wishes to achieve or is already achieving: "How will you know that you have been successful?" "How will other members of this organization interpret the outcomes of your work?" "What are the short-term and the long-term implications of your successful performance in this organization?" These provocative questions often lead the client to be more grounded in the real world. The questioning of the coach often turns to the even more basic issue: "What exactly are the expectations of this organization regarding your performance?" For the high potential client, an even more specific question might be: "Why do you think you have been identified as a high potential employee?" The answer to this question may say something about the values of the organization and about the alignment between these organizational values and those held by the client.

Alignment

The challenges of work/life balance and workaholism are often wrapped up in the young, high potential clients' inability or unwillingness to identify all of the priorities that are operating in their life. To what extent are the intentions embedded in their work life aligned with the intentions embedded in their personal life? When they spend that extra four hours at the office or bring two hours of work home with them every night, are they damaging their family life? What about devoting time to their own restoration? As Roger Rosenblatt has noted, the appointment we are most likely to cancel is the appointment we have made with ourselves (healthy exercise, an unhurried lunch, an evening spent with a novel).

There are also the alignment issues associated with ethics and organizational values. Are there times during the coaching session when the coach and client should explore the extent to which the client's exceptional or potentially exceptional performance is misaligned with specific organizational values or with fundamental ethics? Do the ends always justify the means? Are the client's personal values aligned with formal organizational values or with the unacknowledged values that "really" operate in the organization? While being very busy and very successful (or potentially very successful), has the client spent sufficient time reflecting on these deeper issues? Is it appropriate for the organizational coach to challenge the client regarding these alignment issues? Youthful high potential clients are likely to ignore this misalignment, having focused their attention and energy on getting the work done rather than on the reasons why their work is of value to themselves and their organization.

Experimentation

Young high potential employees are often risk-takers. They like to leap over the cliff, and are confident about their own ability to fly when leaping over that cliff. They set the bar high and find *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 2008) by progressively moving the bar upward. This also means that these clients sometimes take the wrong risk and not only crash themselves, but also bring other employees down with them. Alternatively, they may often expect their co-workers to be risk-takers or make great demands on other employees in order to tackle unrealistic goals. The high potentials often do not pay sufficient attention to reality—and when they leap off the cliff, they do so without knowing how far they will fall or the size of their parachute (or even if they have a parachute!).

Under these conditions, the coach can be very helpful by encouraging and guiding the client in the identification of and planning for a responsible and reasonable risk. This often means that the coach helps the client set up one or more possibilities for "experiments"—pilot testing a new idea, running demonstration projects, creating a "sanctuary" in which new ideas can be moved to action in a manner that allows for "safe risks" and encourages organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Senge, 2006). The coach might ask: "Where can you safely test out this idea?" or "What are some ways in which you can learn much more about the feasibility/practicality of this idea?"

Career Planning

One of the greatest challenges we see with young, high potential employees is managing expectations. When an early career high potential completes a one or two year program, what's next? Many are asking, "When will I be promoted and what is my new compensation package?" Expectations of a rapid and vertical career trajectory are common and create dilemmas for the high potential, the organization and the coach. We know that organization hierarchy has shifted to wider spans of control creating flatter organizations and limiting talent mobility. There is an additional factor that compounds this challenge: as we noted earlier in this article, older employees are staying in place and working into their 70s. This is wonderful for the older employees (unless they are working longer because of economic insecurity). For the younger workers, these extended careers are talent blockers.

For these reasons, we have found that coaching in early career is most successful when an element of career coaching is included. For example, coaches can help their young clients understand the importance of perception and managing their reputation. We have found in our work with this population that very often they do not seek out feedback nor realize the importance of doing so. In addition, because individual coaching is limited at this level, it's almost a necessity in their early career to build their own "board of advisors" for mentoring, introductions, and increasing visibility within the organization and within their professional network.

Coaching and developing the early career high potential comes with a unique challenge--the "busyness" of the early career life. Ed Franzone, Director of Worldwide Learning and Development at BD (Becton Dickinson and Company), designed BD's early career high potential program. He tells us that the high potentials are facing a "busy time of their lives--marriage, babies, buying homes for the first time. People who may have initially checked the box saying they are geographically mobile, may have to accept that these big life events have affected their true mobility. In order to eliminate false positives

around geographic mobility, we ask each high potential to engage his or her spouse in the conversation before making this determination. Each family has unique needs that must be balanced against the reality that the more mobile you are, the more opportunities you will have." This is an area where alignment coaching (discussed earlier) can be an appropriate coaching technique.

Franzone continues, "Unlike their mid or late career counterparts, early career high potentials have a healthy dose of skepticism regarding experts. They usually like to collect data from experts, then talk among their peers to validate the data. They need multiple data points for anything they learn." Working with a younger coach who is "like me" could serve this population well and supports the opportunity of advancing the coaching profession with new entrants.

"This group of people tends to be impatient and has high expectations regarding the rate at which they will advance through the organization, which was not tempered as a result of the economy," states Franzone. The coach would serve the individual well by reframing career options to include lateral movement. This approach is aligned with the new world of work where gaining breadth of experience (potentially through a lateral move rather than a vertical move upward) is critical to future success. This breadth of experience should position the early career high potential for significant vertical movement by mid career. A coach to the young high potential client should keep this approach in mind.

Another aspect of coaching the younger client is her readiness to be coached. Brendan Geary, Area Head of HR USA for Panalpina, a global provider of end-to-end supply chain solutions, has been coaching early career high potentials for many years. Geary observes that the coach has to play a role in generating the coaching topics, what he calls "helper mode" instead of coach mode. Geary links this need for the generation of topics to the transactional work that many of the high potentials are involved in on a daily basis. Geary has found that when the coaching conversation is architected around "task, relationships (360), and aspirations," the younger client becomes more engaged in the coaching, while increasing self-awareness and perceptions of self by others. Over time, when the high potential becomes involved in challenging projects and solving complex problems, she is able to identify coaching areas that are meaningful to her development. It is here where Geary can revert to coach mode and have impact on the development of younger high potentials.

Concluding Comments

In this essay, we have tried to make the case for extending the demographic range of professional coaching to those who are older than the typical current client and, in particular, to those who are younger. We have focused in particular on young adults who are in graduate school or are working as high potentials in organizational settings. What about those potential clients who are even younger? There are now "learning coaches" in colleges who assist students with their study habits, retention of information, analysis of complex academic themes, and, even more basically learning, how to live away from home (if they are enrolled in a residential college or university).

Can professional coaching extend to an even younger age? Wouldn't high school students benefit from a "learning coach"? What about training young men and women to be peer coaches in a high school setting? Can coaching be of value when addressing the problems of bullying in junior high schools and high schools? Can coaching be of value in reducing the rate of drop out in many high schools? What would coaching look like with children in elementary school? Two of our colleagues, Jeannine Sandstrom and Lee Smith, had their remarkable leadership training program (Sandstrom and Smith, 2008) revamped for use with students in elementary school—and it works!

So the demographic challenge is there. How young can a client be if they are to benefit from professional coaching? What might this coaching look like and what issues might be most effectively addressed through a coaching process? Perhaps, as a colleague of ours in Asia has noted, professional coaching is a bit like having an uncle or aunt (rather than a parent) assist us in addressing the issues we face as leaders. Maybe the older coach serving young people is like having a wise aunt or uncle. Perhaps the youthful peer coach is like a wise (or at least empathetic) brother or sister. Couldn't we all have used this type of wise and empathetic counsel when we were young!

References

Argyris, Chis & Schon, Donald (1978) *Organizational Learning*. Reading MA: Addison-Wesley.

Bergquist, William & Siminovitch, Dorothy (2010) Coaching High Potential and High Performance Clients, *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations,* issue #29, v. 8, no. 1, pp. 78-92. Also available in Library of Professional Psychology:

http://libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com/applicationsuses/executive-coaching/coaching-high-potential-and-high-performance-clients/

Cassatly, Michael (2010) Coaching the Patient-Physican Relationship. *Journal of Medical Practice Management*, Jan-Feb., 25 (4), pp. 229-234.

Cassatly, Michael & Bergquist, William (2012) *Coaching in Health Care: The Patient-Physician Relationship and The Role of the Physician Leader*. Library of Professional Coaching. http://libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com/case-studies/health-care-sector/coaching-in-health-care-the-patient-physician-relationship-and-the-role-of-the-physician-leader/

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly (2008) *Flow*. New York: Harper.

Foley, Vicki. & Bergquist, William (2010) The Organizational Underground: Organizational Coaching and Organizational Development Outside the Formal Organization. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*. issue #29, v. 8, no. 1 pp. 93-123. Also available in Library of Professional Coaching: http://libraryofprofessionalcoaching.com/concepts/ethics/sustainability-ethics/the-organizational-underground-organizational-coaching-and-organization-development-outside-the-formal-organization/

Rubin, Lillion (1992) *Worlds of Pain.* New York: Basic Books.

Sandstrom, Jeannine & Smith, Lee (2008) *Legacy Leadership*. Dallas, TX: CoachWorks Press.

Senge, Peter (2006) *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday.

Silva, Jennifer (2013) *Coming Up Short*. New York: Oxford University Press USA.