

The Challenges Facing Contemporary Professional Coaches And Their Clients

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Serving as an organizational coach, I met over lunch recently with a client who has just moved into a position of leadership in his high tech corporation. Robert is now Vice President of Human Resource Development, having previously served as director of his corporation's "Leadership Academy." Robert must now learn about HR policy formation, compensation, employee assistance programs, employee recruitment and retention—even how to organize the annual summer picnic for his organization! This is a steep learning curve for Robert. While he is excited about the challenges inherent in this expanded role, Robert is also concerned about the sense of over-whelm in his work life. He met with me to help him design and initiate a new high potential program—but our luncheon turned into a wide-ranging and often profound conversation.

I had a similar meeting in the office of a chief executive officer in a major health care system in the United States. Susan was confronting profound changes in American health care during the second decade of this Century. None of the old rules still applied and her own role as a leader in her organization is changing. She has to balance off the commitment to quality and affordable health care with the economics of the health care marketplace. Like Robert, Susan is facing a steep learning curve and my coaching with Susan has to do with the nature and dynamics of this learning curve, rather than the content of the learning that needs to take place. Susan is much older than Robert and has faced many more challenges in her life than Robert—yet both of these leaders are anxious about their current situation.

The Global Challenge of Super Criticality

Something must change if we are to re-conceptualize the multiple threats we now confront as citizens of an increasingly complex, unpredictable and turbulent world (Bergquist and Mura, 2005). Thomas Friedman (2005, 2008) offers us the image of a world that is flat; I would add to this an image offered by David Smick (2008) of a world that is curved, with everybody turning back on themselves. Both Friedman and Smick's worlds are in need of major repair and require significant learning and an abundance of wisdom. How do we learn in the midst of chaos and a

constantly changing agenda? How does a 21st Century leader (such as Robert or Susan) learn when constantly faced with new imperatives and constantly-popping up emergencies?

Ronald Heifetz (1998) wrote a wonderful book more than a decade ago about “leadership without easy answers.” The worlds being portrayed by both Robert and Susan do not readily yield easy answers. Perhaps that is why they have asked me to be their coach. Together we can look for answers that are likely to be subtle and that must be frequently adjusted (or even abandoned). The worlds in which Robert and Susan live and work fit into the category called “complex.” They live in worlds that are poised on the edge of chaos. This state of super-criticality (Gladwell’s “tipping point”) is one in which learning is not easily engaged. Everything can change in a moment, so that what we have learned painfully during the past year (or month or even day) must suddenly be discarded or at least revised. How does one learn rapidly? “Just-in-time-learning” is not just a spinoff from the digital systems that can now convey knowledge very rapidly and in easily accessible modes. This type of learning has become a necessity in our curved-and-threatening world—and this type of learning is enhanced when a leader is accompanied by a professional coach.

New Knowledge and a New Epistemology

When I was an undergraduate major in psychology, everything centered on the work of Clark Hull’s model of human behavior and the other major camp in American behaviorism, led by B. F. Skinner. I happened to be at Harvard University during the “cognitive revolution” when eminent psychologists like Jerome Bruner were finally being taken seriously by all psychologists and Noam Chomsky was using the anomaly (Kuhn, 1962) called “language” to minimize the credibility of Skinnerian behaviorism. The cognitive revolution and more recently the neurobiological revolution (often coupled with the cognitive revolution) have forced us to rethink the way in which we think about the processes of learning and, in turn, the way in which we think about our acquisition of knowledge (epistemology). We are now more knowledgeable about the nature of knowledge.

Ralph Stacey (1996) noted in his provocative and deeply thoughtful analysis of organizational complexity and chaos that it is at this edge when organizations are most likely to be creative. However, the potential for learning and creativity require that we understand how these

processes taken place in a white water environment. We need to know more about the nature of knowledge acquired in the midst of turbulence (as well as complexity and uncertainty) if we are to be successful in learning and creating in 21st Century organizations. One of the major challenges facing the field of professional coaching concerns this dynamic acquisition of knowledge within a turbulent white water world.

Irony and Learning

Robert and Susan are confronting challenges that lead us into worlds not only of complexity, uncertainty and turbulence but also of irony—to use the term employed by the philosopher, Richard Rorty (1989). These are worlds in which we often find ourselves holding two or more beliefs and values that are contradictory at a fundamental level. There seem to be four challenges inherent in this notion of an ironic world that hold major implications for anyone engaged in professional coaching.

First, we have to live among co-existing value perspectives. These differing perspectives are often equally compelling—while being contradictory. We long for freedom, yet appreciate protection. We believe in social justice and a global community, yet also want our borders to be secure and our own citizens to obtain jobs (rather than seeing these jobs outsourced to other countries). How do we embrace and live with these contradictions? There is a second challenge. We must be able to recognize these contradictory perspectives, even though they are often embedded in a social unconsciousness (Foley and Bergquist, 2009). Third, we must be able to abandon both (or all of) these perspective—this involves grieving and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Fourth, we must be able to “evolve” new perspectives that either embrace multiple perspectives or move beyond these contradictory perspectives.

Talk about a steep learning curve! How do we accept and then say goodbye to contradictory perspectives? How do we identify or create new perspectives—while living in a constantly changing and turbulent environment? This is where we, as professional coaches, can now (and increasingly in the future) play an important role in the lives of men and women who are faced with profound and perplexing challenges and a steep learning curve.

References

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