

Organizational Coaching and Professional Development: A Valuable Partnership

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Training and education have become prominent features in the professional development curricula of many contemporary organizations. In this essay, I briefly identify several of the reasons for this growing interest. I then suggest ways in which training and education are enhanced by several complimentary coaching activities. I identify the nature of and reasons for shifting concepts of training and education, and the closely related emphasis on retention and transfer of learning. I then suggest some of the reasons why organizational coaching might support and increase retention and transfer in training and education programs.

Coupling Training/Education and Coaching

One of the major interactions between organizational coaching and organization development in contemporary organizations exists in the domain of training and education. This interaction, in turn, seems to be a product of several emerging insights and concerns in 21st Century organizations. Three fundamental issues have emerged recently with regard to training and education that have encouraged the entrance of organizational coaching as an invaluable compliment to employee developmental programs.

First, there has been a fundamental shift in our notions about training and education. Second, we are becoming increasingly concerned about not just the volume of what has been learned in an employee development program, but also about how much and what has been retained from this program and what has been used (transfer of learning) in the workplace. Third, there has been increasing realization that various forms of organizational coaching can assist in this retention and transfer process.

Shifting notions about training and education

The modern model of education and training is based on the metaphor of pitcher and mug: how much can you pour into an empty mug in specific period of time? We assign credits and academic units based on amount poured in. An emerging postmodern model of training and education concerns not how much is "learned;" this model focuses instead on what is retained (3-6 months later) and what is transferred ("application of learning"). These shifting concerns are particularly important in leadership development (and other types of professional development)—in large part because the stakes are often very high. A substantial amount of money is often allocated to these programs, and the present or future leaders must spend valuable time in this program. Administrators at the top of the organization want to be assured that something will be retained from this expensive (money and time) program and that something will be applied.

How do we increase retention and transfer?

This is the logical next question. If retention and transfer are critical, then what will bring about increase in these two dimensions of training and education? There are several traditional means of increasing retention and transfer.

First, *dispersed education and training programs* can be offered. Programs can be divided into multiple sessions, so that there is time to try out a new concept or tool immediately after the session is completed and an occasion to report on and reflect about the learning from this testing phase of the training or education program. Unfortunately, there are several logistical problems associated with this strategy—specifically with regard to scheduling of both participants and trainers/educators. Computers and e-learning makes this strategy more feasible; however, there often are large start-up costs associated with digitally-based training and education..

Second, we can supplement education/training with *follow up* activities, that remind the participants of what they learned, as well as introduce new concepts. As in the case of the first strategy, there are logistical problems and the follow up activities can add additional costs. Once again, computers can help, though start up costs need to be kept in mind. The third strategy involves a different kind of follow up. We can *check-up* on people. We ask our participants to tell us what they are doing with their learning. This follow up monitoring can be peer-based (support and encouragement groups) or staff-based (supervision). This tends to be a control-based and deficit-based strategy, which may seem

punitive to participants and can unravel all the good work (morale boosting) done during the initial development program.

Fourth, we can make use of *mnemonic (memory) devices*. The highly successful Main Event Management, that was run by Harold Hook and his clients at American General, made extensive use of this strategy—through concept symbols, repetitive use of these symbols in corporate policy and procedure statements, and a “cheat sheet” with concept symbols listed and summarized. Other memory jogs, aides and pocket guides can effectively increase retention and transfer—provided they are actually used by the participants and are frequently reinforced (as in the case of Main Event Management) in other organizational publications and activities. These mnemonic devices can be very effective. We need to make more use of them (especially in conjunction with digital learning devices, such as screen savers).

A fifth strategy requires that we encourage immediate application through *practicum experiences and field guides*. Participants learn and retain by "doing." This is an important, but infrequently employed strategy. It requires that participants find or are offered a safe place (sanctuary) in which to try out their new learning; furthermore, there is still the need to reflect on and learn from this “doing”—and the experience itself does not provide the setting for this reflection. Something more (such as coaching) is needed to maximize the use of this fifth strategy.

The sixth strategy is the one to which we keep referring—this involves the extensive use of computers through *digital on-line support* (materials, communications, supervision, etc.). While many trainers and educators are turning exclusively to digital learning as the answer to the ongoing “just-in-time” learning challenges facing their organizations, this strategy is not a panacea. It is not just the big start-up costs that can be prohibitive, the lack of human contact can cripple the learning of those participants who prefer more interactive learning environments. This sixth strategy can enhance any learning experience and can assist in significantly increasing both retention and transfer of learning (particularly transfer). However, it can’t take the place of the encouragement and spontaneous dialogue associated with in-person assistance. It is the process of coaching in organizations that provides in-person encouragement and dialogue.

The seventh strategy, *organizational coaching*, is the primary focus in this essay. I propose that two forms of organizational coaching can effectively increase both retention and transfer of learning from educational and training program. In the case of education (or a developmental emphasis on acquisition of knowledge), *executive coaching* is the key strategy. It focuses on decision-making processes that are inherently challenged by a successful educational program. In the case of training (or a developmental emphasis on acquisition of skills), we look to *performance coaching* as a strategy for enhancing retention and transfer. This strategy focuses specifically on behavior and the enactment of newly acquired or modified skill sets in real-life settings.

I will provide a more detailed portrait of these powerful coaching strategies by identifying and illustrating eight principles that point the way to effective use of organizational coaching in the enhancement of training and development initiatives. Before moving to these principles, I wish to offer a cautionary note: we don't really know for sure that coaching helps retention and transfer of learning. However, I do have my own experiences. Furthermore, I have the experiences of other coaches with whom I have worked or with whom I have discussed this matter. Yet, this is not enough, for we might all be kidding ourselves. We might be trying to convince the choir rather than an audience of critics.

We must look to other sources if we are to make the case. Specifically, we can turn to research on the dynamics of organizational change and to research regarding adult learning to find further justification for our proposition. They each offer one or more principles regarding human behavior that suggest something about the nature and dynamics of coaching as a strategy for assisting the retention and transfer of learning following a training or education program. Obviously, there are many other principles that could be added to this list, but this is a start.

Eight Principles Regarding Development through Coaching

I will briefly describe each principle and then illustrate its use in a coaching process by pointing to one of my own experiences as a coach, trainer or consultant to a professional development program.

Principle One: Refreezing

All learning, according to Kurt Lewin, involves three steps: unfreezing, learning (change) and refreezing.ⁱ Coaching enables the third step to take place (the step that is often forgotten). I was working

with a major educational unit of the United States Federal Government. Men and women were being trained to assume high levels of responsibility in their specific branch of government. This meant that they would soon be engaging with the American press—which is not an easy assignment! They received considerable training in working with the press; however, the lessons learned in this training program were soon lost when they actually faced the press corp.

I was involved in setting up an organizational coaching program to support these new government leaders after they left the training program and as they prepared for their first press conference. This involved rehearsal, feedback (including video-recordings) and debriefing after the first conference. Each of these activities was a form of performance coaching and each helped the learner refreeze (stabilize) her learning and maximize the transfer and retention of her learning from the training program.

Principle Two: Focused Attention

The coach encourages a client to keep the learning she has obtained from the training/education at the forefront. The client continues to work with this learning through interactions with her coach. Over a period of ten years, I offered a program at my graduate school (The Professional School of Psychology: PSP) that involved the training and certification of executive coaches. It was a long and somewhat drawn out process, involving a five day intensive training program, followed by a six to eight month practicum. It is easy to lose focus over this extended period of time. To sustain the attention—which, in turn, encourages both retention and transfer (use) of the learning from the coach training program—we introduced an ongoing coaching process into the program.

Each participant joined with two other participants to form what we called a “home trio.” The three members of each trio met in person or by phone approximately every three weeks. This hour-long session usually focused on the coaching process that was being engaged by each member of the trio; it also was often devoted to other issues that emerged in each trio member’s life. Thus, each member of the trio was being coached by the other two members at both the performance (behavior) and executive (decision-making) levels. In addition, the home trios allowed each participant to observe the coaching strategies being used by two clients who have participated in the same coaching program. This learning-from-one-another was particularly appropriate in our training program, because we took an appreciative approach that highlights strengths and encourages peer learning among participants.ⁱⁱ These trios often

continued after the practicum was completed—for the participants gained much from their interaction and from the high quality coaching they were receiving from one another.

Principle Three: Bridging/Integration

The learning from the training/education is linked to other ongoing learning that occurs on-the-job and elsewhere (and to past learning) through the coach/ client interaction. I conducted a program more than fifteen years ago that involved the training of faculty members in liberal arts colleges throughout the United States to lead a process called “faculty development.”ⁱⁱⁱ This program, like the Executive Coach Training program mentioned above (Principle Two), was lengthy—involving a series of training programs and practica experiences that extend over a period of 18 months. Many concepts were offered in this program, and participants began using these concepts immediately in their role as directors of faculty development programming on their own college campuses.

A bridging and integration mechanism was clearly needed to bring the learning into the programs on each campus. The presidents and deans of these colleges were unwilling to wait until the end of the 18 month period of time to witness the payoff from their investment of time and money in training their faculty development directors. They wanted immediate use of the training program concepts. Long before organizational coaching had been “discovered” or “invented,” we included a component in the program that, in retrospect, was clearly a combination of performance and executive coaching. This component was specifically intended to bridge between sessions and to accelerate application.

Each participants was assigned a coach (we called them a “consultant” at that time), who had extensive experience in the field of faculty development. The program participant and coach talked on the phone every two to three weeks and met together at each of the quarterly training programs. These coaching sessions enabled the program participants to begin immediately to apply the tools being offered in the training program, as well as integrate concepts across sessions of the training program. They could do the bridging and integration because their coaches were themselves part of the training team. The coaches were involved in all aspects of the training program, and were themselves active faculty development practitioners.

Principle Four: Provision of Interpersonal Support to Contain the Anxiety

Learning from education/training may be difficult to absorb (anxiety provoking, dissonant with self-image, dissonant with current social constructions of reality). The coaching relationship is a safe place in which to address this difficult learning. This relationship provides a supportive, safe and private setting. Nevitt Sanford suggests that we must always find sufficient interpersonal support to match the challenge of profound learning—otherwise the potential learning experience is overwhelming.^{iv}

This principle played a central role in the creation of performance coaching laboratories inside an intensive professional development program that I was conducting with a client (Steven Phillips) through a consortium of American colleges and universities in the Pacific Northwest. As in the case of the example used with Principle Three, this program involved faculty members. However, it was not a program to train faculty development consultants; rather, it was to train faculty members as collegiate instructors in new ways to engage students in the teaching/learning process. These innovations in education can be quite threatening to senior faculty members who have always done things in the traditional manner. In this Pacific Northwest program there had previously been little success with regard to teaching new tricks (more interactive teaching methods) to old dogs (seasoned faculty members) The excitement of an instructional improvement workshop soon wore off when faculty members returned to their routines of lecturing to uninspired youth in large classrooms.

In order to reduce some of the anxiety associated with these educational innovations and to test out the learning in a realistic (yet safe) setting, the week-long, residential faculty development workshops included performance-based coaching sessions (called Teaching Laboratories), where faculty members tried out the new instructional methods. These teaching labs included four or five other participants in the workshop as well as a coach/facilitator. The faculty member offered a brief sample of their teaching, making use of one of the new methods (such as guided design or role playing). The performance coach and other workshop participants offered feedback (based on criteria provided by the faculty member) as well as suggestions for ways in which to modify the teaching strategy. The faculty member usually taught the same teaching sample a second time, making use of the feedback and suggestions they received.

This laboratory setting provided interpersonal support and encouragement for these faculty members. Their anxiety was contained within the safe boundaries of the laboratory. They controlled the nature and

scope of the feedback they received and knew that they would be protected by the lab coach/facilitator along with carefully crafted guidelines and norms established for these teaching labs. With their experience in this educational laboratory, the faculty members participating in the workshop could return to their classroom with more self-assurance and a strong feeling of support from their fellow faculty members. Follow up “home trios” involving other workshop participants (similar to those described with regard to Principle Two) further reinforced the support and provided an additional and ongoing “container” for each faculty member’s anxiety.

Principle Five: Complexity

Learning is often complex and related to multi-dimensional and paradoxical problems or mysteries (rather than uni-dimensional puzzles).^v The client has someone with whom she can sort out and make sense of this complex material. The coaching relationship keeps the process of learning moving forward. I bring forth an example of complexity that is particularly salient, for it involves establishment of an executive coaching program in a major utility company in the United States. As you may be aware, utility companies throughout the world are currently undergoing profound changes. They are becoming self-sustaining businesses that often have to compete with unregulated competitors. This is the case whether we are talking about telephone companies, energy companies or sewage treatment facilities. There are many stakeholders that have considerable influence in these 21st Century utilities. I have described these organizations elsewhere as “intersect” organizations, for they operate at the intersection between private and public and between profit and non-profit.^{vi}

Those who must lead these organizations are faced with enormous complexity, as well as unpredictability and turbulence. Those who are preparing to assume positions of leadership are similarly faced with the task of assimilating a vast amount of information. The leadership development program being offered by the utility company with which I worked was very demanding and graduates from this program were often overwhelmed by what they had to retain and transfer to the workplace. I suggested that each of the newly minted leaders who participated in this program be assigned a coach, who could assist in this assimilation and application. We trained more than two dozen coaches to provide executive coaching to each leadership program participant—much as in the case of the Yukon government program that Richard Wale describes in the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*. (IJCO)^{vii}

It is not that the newly minted leaders are not qualified to assume higher levels of responsibility in the organization. Rather, these competent leaders are faced with a steep learning curve and it is of value for these leaders to have someone else to talk with, to bounce ideas around with, and, where appropriate, to learn from. This coaching relationship is particularly valuable if the coach is someone who is not directly associated with the leader's own work unit. The coach can be of even greater value if she has been trained to be appreciative (helping to identify strengths in the new leader), and if she has faced her own comparable learning challenges as a leader in this utility company. Their appreciative perspective and personal experience enables coaches to empathize with the new leaders, yet also respect and support the new leaders' own abilities to identify, diagnose and take action on the complex issues they face.

Principle Six: Feedback

In testing out new strategies and behaviors in the workplace and elsewhere in life, one learns. John Dewey proposed many years ago, in his philosophy of pragmatism and his emphasis on experiential learning, that we learn about something by engaging with it and trying to change it.^{viii} A coach can help her client sort out new learning from formal and informal feedback received from the client/client's environment.

The leadership development and executive coaching project that Richard Wale coordinated in the Yukon Government (YG) exemplifies the benefits inherent in the application of this principle.^{ix} I have had the opportunity to work closely with Richard Wale and his clients in the Yukon Territory. As Wale noted in his article, YG had initiated a major leadership development program for its employees. A major part of this program involved the collection of information about the program participants through 360-degree feedback processes. This type of feedback can be very damaging to an employee if it is not supported by a carefully crafted organizational coaching program.^x The 360-degree feedback process provides the program participants with challenging new information about their own performance. The coach who is assigned to each program participant can help their coaching client make sense of this feedback (relates to Principle Five: Complexity). The coach can also provide support and a "container" for the anxiety that is inevitably generated by this feedback (Principle Four), and can help their coaching client relate this feedback to the content of the leadership development program (Principle Two).

There is an additional type of feedback that a program participant at YG received. This is the “talk-back” and “kick-back” from their fellow employees, as they try out new ideas and assume new roles in the organization. As John Dewey suggests (and Richard Wale described in his IJCO article), there is much to be learned by doing something new—provided there is a skillful coach to help one make sense of, integrate, and enact learning-by-doing.

Principle Seven: Encouragement

A coach can support her client and encourage her to identify new learning, apply it, see what happens, and (in an appreciative way) note (and learn from) occasions of success.^{xi} In other words, the coach can be a terrific cheerleader for the person she is coaching—particularly if she, as the coach, is knowledgeable about the challenges being faced by her client. Encouragement is not about naïve and pollyannish enthusiasm. It is about thoughtful and experience-based support.

I think back upon an unintentional intervention I made in the lives of several university presidents—an intervention that reflects this seventh principle. I was consulting to a large statewide program in a state located in the middle of the United States. It involved the leaders of seven public universities who were to be involved in a major educational reform effort. Supported by a large grant from a charitable foundation, this program was intended to bring these institutions together in a single coordinated effort—at a time when these universities were intensely competing for scarce tax dollars.

As a small part of this program, I worked for one day with the presidents of these seven universities. They were to play a supportive role in this ambitious, cooperative reform program. We set up an arrangement whereby the president of university A was to spend several hours at university B with the president of that institution. The president of university B was to visit with the president of university C and so on. These meetings were to focus on the reform program and were to be held once every other month for the twelve months duration of the program. During our one day meeting I provided some informal training for these presidents regarding the processes of peer coaching—especially from an appreciative perspective (focusing on the lessons to be learned from successes, rather than focus on learning from failures).

When the program was completed and all thirty-two components of this large-scale initiative were

evaluated, one component stood out from all the rest: the presidential visits. While this was the smallest component in terms of money spend and time invested, it was rated at the top with regard to “customer-satisfaction” and institutional impact. We soon discovered, however, that the presidents had not done what they were told to do. First of all, they didn’t focus on the reform program. Second, in most instances, they spent the entire day together. We found that the presidents wandered off in their conversations. They focused on many topics that were of personal relevance to them. Even though these men (no women yet in presidential roles in this state) were competing for scarce resources, they found that they had much to say to one another, and readily used their fellow president as a coach. Their peer coach could be empathetic and was knowledgeable about the educational issues swirling around the head and life of their fellow president.

While there was a sharing of expertise and some advice-giving, the key successful factor appeared to be the support and encouragement that the presidents gave one another. Obviously, in small university towns (which were common in this state), the president of a university doesn’t have many people to talk with. The president can’t talk to other business people, for they often have important ties to the university and don’t really appreciate the unique issues being addressed by a university president. The leaders of other government agencies or other nonprofit organizations usually are too busy to talk or they work in a very different world from public higher education. It is only another university president who can break the isolation and offer thoughtful, genuine support and encouragement. Our program provided the mechanism (and excuse) for this to occur. Excellent peer coaching occurred—even though it was not included in the initial blueprints for this program.

Principle Eight: Planning

A coach can help his client sort out what has been learned, what is still to be learned, and (most importantly) what the client has learned about herself as a learner (what Gregory Bateson describes as “second order” learning).^{xii} With this reflective practice as a base,^{xiii} the client (with her coach’s assistance) can begin planning for the future.^{xiv}

I offer, as an example of this eighth principle, a coaching program that was implemented at my graduate school, under the capable leadership of Marilyn Taylor. The graduate school over which I preside (PSP) is geared primarily to mature and accomplished adult learners who wish to obtain Masters or Doctoral

degrees in clinical or organizational psychology. These are very busy men and women, who must somehow fit a demanding graduate program around their own lives as leaders, parents, spouses, friends and (often) caregivers of older parents. Their educational enterprise requires planning, as well as the integration of course learning at PSP with the challenges of their work life and, more generally, their career.

Taylor created a “conspectus” process that encourages students to reflect on their past learning experiences and to plan for their academic work at PSP. The conspectus also enabled students to relate their academic work to longer term learning objectives, to engage in and reflect back on their learning at PSP, and to learn much more about themselves as learners (“second-order” learning). This is not easily done. To support this challenge, each PSP student was assigned a “learning coach” who assisted this retrospective, planning and reflective process.

The learning coach was a peer at PSP who had already completed their own conspectus and received training at PSP as an executive coach (the program I described above: Principle Two). The conspectus process took the place of traditional comprehensive examinations and regimented internships. With the assistance of their coach, the PSP student could identify and engage in learning experiences that relate directly to their career and life goals, and can reflect back on these experiences and gain much more insight into how this process of learning might successfully continue over a lifetime.

Concluding Comments

There is perhaps no more poignant use of an organizational coach than to join with her client in reflecting upon past and present learning, and to engage in planning for future learning. Twenty First Century organizations are to be successful if they are “learning organizations.”^{xv} The role of an organizational coach, as one who assists individual members of the organization with their own learning, is critical in this transforming process of moving from a stagnant and mechanistic organization to a dynamic and learning-full organization. All training and education activities in the learning organization must be coupled with complimentary services that assure both retention and transfer of that which is learned. Organizational coaching can serve this vital complimentary role

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- ⁱ Best summary of Lewin's three steps is to be found in a book written by his successors: R. Lippitt, J. Watson and B. Westley, *The Dynamics of Planned Change*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1958.
- ⁱⁱ William Bergquist, Ken Merritt and Steven Phillips. *Executive Coaching: An Appreciative Approach*. Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 1999. William Bergquist and Agnes Mura, *Coachbook: A Guide to Organizational Coaching Strategies and Practices*, 2011.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Many of the ideas contained in this program, which was conducted by the Council of Independent Colleges, are to be found in a three volume series: William Bergquist and Steven Phillips. *A Handbook for Faculty Development*. Volumes I, II and III. Washington D.C.: Council of Independent Colleges, 1975, 1977, 1981.
- ^{iv} Nevitt Sanford. *Learning After College*. Berkeley, CA: Montaigne Press, 1980.
- ^v See further: Robert Kegan: *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- ^{vi} William Bergquist. *The Postmodern Organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.
- ^{vii} Richard Wale, "Leadership Development and Coaching in the Yukon: Two Case Studies," *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, v. 2, n. 1, 2004, pp.36-47.
- ^{viii} John Dewey. *The Quest for Certainty*. New York, CA: Putnam, 1929.
- ^{ix} Richard Wale, "Leadership Development and Coaching in the Yukon: Two Case Studies," *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, v. 2, n. 1, 2004, pp.36-47.
- ^x William Bergquist, "The Future of Executive Coaching: Coaching with Appreciation through a 360 Degree Feedback Process," *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, v. 1, n. 2, 2003, pp. 12-22.
- ^{xi} William Bergquist, Ken Merritt and Steven Phillips. *Executive Coaching: An Appreciative Approach*. Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 1999. William Bergquist and Agnes Mura, *Coachbook: A Guide to Organizational Coaching Strategies and Practices*, 2011.
- ^{xii} Gregory Bateson was one of the earliest theorists/practitioners to articulate this notion of second order learning (cf. Gregory Bateson. *Mind and Nature*. New York: Dutton, 1979). In more recent years, this notion was fully articulated by Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (*Theory in Action*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1974) and their student, Peter Senge (*The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990).
- ^{xiii} Donald Schon, *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- ^{xiv} An appreciative approach: "leaning [and learning] into the future" [William Bergquist, Ken Merritt and Steven Phillips. *Executive Coaching: An Appreciative Approach*. Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 1999. William Bergquist and Agnes Mura, *Coachbook: A Guide to Organizational Coaching Strategies and Practices*, 2011.
- ^{xv} Argyris and Schon. *Organizational Learning*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1990; Peter Senge. *The Fifth Discipline*. New York: Doubleday, 1990.