# The Art of Organizational Coaching: In Search of Patterns and Variations

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The art of organizational coaching is based on identification and appreciation of patterns and pattern-variations in the life of a coaching client and her organization. We know from the scientists who study chaotic and complex systems that vibrant and sustainable systems incorporate both redundancy and diversity. Systems sustain certain patterns and replicate basic structures everywhere, while also ensuring that each subsystem is a bit different from other subsystems. Scientists suggest that viable systems are in *dynamic equilibrium.* Each viable system fits into a specific ecological niche and sustains a specific operational pattern that is compatible with (adapted to) this niche. The pattern is sustained and reinforced precisely because of this ongoing adaptive outcome.

The story doesn't end here. Any viable system is not totally successful in adapting to its environmental niche. If it were totally successful, then it would dominate and literally take over the niche—leading eventually (and ironically) to its own demise. We see this poignantly and often tragically illustrated in the ways human beings have learned how to adapt with complete success to certain nitches. We have "tamed" nature and in doing so have come to dominate specific environmental niches, which in turn has led to the extinction of certain species and to many environmental disruptions (such as climate instability).

In essence, there exists an inevitable tension between adaptation and mal-adaptation of any system to its environment. Patterns provide stability and the capacity of systems to adapt with some success and in a sustained manner to its environment. The disruptions of and variations in patterns not only enable an organization to adjust to changes in its environment, but also enable other systems to dwell in this environment and enable each system to enter into mutually beneficial relationships with other systems in the environment. Each system is good enough to live in the environment, but not good enough to dominate this environment—this is the beauty of nature when working effectively.

This is all very nice in the abstract—but what does this look like in the real life of organizations and the leaders of organizations and how does all of this relate to the profession of coaching? In this essay, I will specifically identify some of the major benefits and problems associated with organizational patterns and variations, and trace out the implications for professional coaches.

# Patterns in the World: Fractals and Sonatas

There is a remarkable structure to be found in nature that exemplifies the interplay between patterns and variations. This structure is called a *fractal*. We find natural fractals in the structure of pine trees, in the shape of many sea shells and in river deltas. We also find fractals in domains other than nature. One of the places where fractals are beautifully displayed is in classical music—particularly the music of the so-called classical era. In the sonata form, which was frequently used by Classical era composers including Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven, there are usually two major themes presented initially in the *exposition*. These two themes typically are contrasting. One is loud and the other is soft, one is fast and the other is slow, or one is in a major key and the other is in a minor key. It is in the exposition that we find the major tensions and often the energy in a particularly movement. This is not sufficient, however, to make the movement memorable for most listeners.

It is in the second part of the movement that the piece of music becomes most interesting. This second section of a sonata is typically known as the *development* and it contains several (or many) variations on the two major themes. As listeners we may not even be conscious of the fact that these are the same two themes as in the exposition (providing continuity), but also that these two themes are being presented in a wonderfully varied way, often playing off in new ways against one another. The sonata movement then (as a rule) concludes with a *recapitulation* of the original two themes (allowing us as listeners to return to "the home base") and perhaps a *coda* (usually a new theme) that allows the movement to end with a flourish.

If you want to get a sense of how the sonata form operates listen to a symphony by Mozart or Beethoven (though Beethoven often does a whole lot of new things with the sonata form). You can even listen to a later symphony by Brahms or Dvorak to get a good feel for the sonata form. Beethoven's piano sonatas (as the name implies) are built around this musical model. And to get an even more dramatic sense of a theme that is offered in diverse forms, listen to J.S. Bach's amazing *Goldberg Variations*.

Why do I mention the sonata form? This bit of music theory seems to be a bit distant from the fractal forms to be found in nature and a very long way from the processes of coaching within organizations. I begin with this form because we can so vividly (almost poetically) see the fractal being literally "played out" in a musical sonata. We will emotionally experience the divergence (turning outward) away from the comfortable and expected, and then experience the equally-as-emotional convergence (turning inward) back to the origins and to the expected. I would propose that vital and enduring organizations also contain

this balance and sequencing of convergence and divergence. We see two or more fundamental themes (purposes, directions, patterns of behavior, subcultures) playing out against each other in a variety of ways. We see these organizational themes coming together on occasion and then departing from one another. Mostly we see variations on these fundamental themes in the organization. These variations provide both confusion (with associated anxiety) and excitement (with associated energy).

## Coaching Through Patterns and Variations

What about coaching in organizations? I propose that the key dynamic within enduring organizations consists of simple themes being elaborated within organizations and of vital organizational functions (and culture) being embedded in redundant structure as well as multiple variations on these structures. I further propose that organizational coaches can be of great benefit to their clients in helping them identify, appreciate and leverage their decisions and actions around these dynamic features of their organization. Furthermore, as Ralph Stacey has noted, it is in this intersect between the redundant structures and variations on these structures that an organization and its leaders find innovation and inspiration.

### Identification of Patterns and Variations

The coach assists her client first by helping him look for patterns, repetitions that reside inside the organization (and inside the client himself). These patterns and repetitions are found at all levels. They may be found at the "micro" level in the daily speech of the client and of other members of his organization. They are found in frequently used words and phrases and in the metaphors being used to describe specific events or desired outcomes in the organization—for example, the use of specific sports or technological metaphors. While some sports metaphors, such as "team work" and "winning" are commonly used and are not unique to an organization, other sports metaphors are unique and specific to your client and your client's organization. Similarly, some technological metaphors, such as "interfacing" and "module" are common, but others are unique to a specific organization or to the client himself. Look for the unique words and phrases that keep getting used.

At a second level, we find the more extended personal and organizational stories that are frequently repeated—especially offered to new employees or visitors. These stories might be about the founding of the organization, about triumphs or failures, about specific leaders and villains or enemies of the client or organization. It is not important to know whether or not the story is true, but it is important to determine what message is being conveyed or lesson learned, why this story keeps getting offered, to whom the story is being offered, and why it is being offered repeatedly.

At a third level we are likely to find fractals and sonatas being observed in the personal behavior patterns of the client and in the widely exhibited behavior patterns of those working in and with the organization. Does your client have a routine each day when he comes to the office (or when he works from home)? Is there a certain sequence of informal or formal meetings he has each day with his staff? Why do these routines and sequences occur and what happens when the pattern is broken? Is there a common sequence of interactions that occur between your client and one or more of the other members of his organization? Gregory Bateson wrote about complimentary interactions in which the behavior of one person tends to induce the opposite behavior in the other person (for example as one person becomes more assertive, the other person becomes more submissive or passive). Alternatively, the behavior of one person tends to induce the same kind of behavior in the other person (they both get more assertive or more submissive)—leading to an escalation and eventually to a termination of the interaction. Do these interaction patterns exist in the daily life of your client and are they repeated many times with one other person or with many other people in the organization?

At the organizational level, we can readily observe behavioral patterns that often involve the actual movement of people in the organization. For example, we might observe the repeated gathering of people at a specific place in the organization. Those involved with observing social patterns (or those designing buildings and social spaces) describe "socio-petal" (as in centripetal) movement of people toward one another—the pull toward some favored meeting place. Why do they meet there and what transactions occur in these places? I am reminded of the legendary meeting of the Banians (Indian traders) underneath the spreading Banyan Trees. These traders and travelers met to converse, exchange and learn from one another—a bit like those who once met (and in some communities still meet) at the country store (or now at a McDonalds or Starbucks) to converse, exchange and learn. What is the equivalent in your client's organization?

Finally, we find patterns existing at a much subtler, more pervasive and more profound level with regard to norms (implicit rules) of the organization. What is rewarded repeatedly in the organization and what is punished or ignored? About what can members of the organization speak and about what can't they speak? With regard to your client, what is he "allowed" to do in the organization and what can't he do without taking a big risk (with regard to his reputation, power or status)? We often find that the norms of an organization are "self-sealed" – indicating that they are enforced but can't be discussed. The sealing is usually even more pervasive. We can't even mention that we can't talk about these norms.  As coaches we can be of great benefit to our client when we seek to uncover the norms and encourage our client to talk about that which can't be discussed with anyone else. This sometime means that we serve as "naïve" questioners: "Why do you do that?" Or "Why don't you do that?" I have a colleague from Argentina who

has lived in the United States for many years; however, as a coach he sometimes will deepen his accent and ask unforgiveable question: "I don't fully understand this culture, but if you will pardon me, I would like to ask you a simple question . . ." At this point, he invites his client to explore some fundamental norm of her organization in great depth.

What about variations in these patterns. We find variations at each of the levels I have just mentioned. It is through variations in the patterns of organizations that we find creativity. Ralph Stacey writes extensively about this creative dynamic in organizations, noting that organizations grow and adapt precisely because they are not orderly. As I noted at the start of this essay, systems survive (and thrive) in a specific niche precisely because they are not fully adaptive and therefore cannot dominate their niche. We see what happens when one organization builds a monopoly in a specific sector of our society and when one leader dominates the decision-making processes of an organization. Some sloppiness and competition is needed to not only keep us honest but also to allow for creativity and change.

What do the variations look like in organizations? When listening to a sonata-form symphony we are often unaware of the subtle variations that are occurring—unless we are trained in musical composition and have a musical score in front of us. Similarly, we are often unaware of variations in organizational patterns unless we have a "trained ear" or have organizational documents to review while observing the operations of the organization. The trained ear (and eye) often requires that we do one (or more) of three things as organizational coaches and consultants.

First, we look for the obvious and seemingly-trivial clues regarding variations. These are the *surprises* that occur in the organization: an embarrassing statement made by someone in a meeting (that may be revealing a truth about the organization), a miscommunication that occurs between two leaders (that may indicate two or more contradictory truths in the organization), a set of contradictory decisions or actions taken by two different subsystems (e.g. a commitment made by the marketing department that can't be fulfilled by the production department).

Second, we look for *emotionally-charged events*. Disrupted patterns will inevitably generate emotional responses: anxiety, disappointment, embarrassment, anger, hope. We can begin our investigation of variations by looking for emotional reactions that exceed those or differ from those occurring on a regular basis in the organization (the regular emotional reactions being part of the organization's pattern). Once we identify the unique emotional reactions, then we seek out the events that generated these reactions. A variation of the pattern often underlies and has generated the emotional reaction.

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Third, we look for *rogue events*. These are big things that occur in the organization and often serve as the base for the powerful narratives that are to be found in all organizations. These are the narratives about heroic actions, foolish events, a moment of courage or honesty, the critical and unanticipated decision made at the crossroads in the life of the organization, the success of an underdog (person or department) in the organization.  An event is rogue if it totally unexpected and often if it is preceded by a set of very predictable events. Taleb uses the term *Black Swan* when describing those remarkable and powerful events that have caught our world by surprise. We all know that swans are white—but what happens when a black swan is discovered. Similarly, how could we have predicted the Arab Spring, the election of an African-American as president, or the rapid expansion in the global use and influence of the Internet. As Taleb has noted, rouge events are not only unanticipated, they are also often governed by power laws (exponential increases) that move quickly from small to large. Within organizations, small variations in the major pattern of the organization can lead to major changes in certain, unanticipated ways. These are the rogue events and the emergence of a whole flock of Black Swans.

These small- and large-impact variations will generate a host of important questions and often elusive answers. The fundamental question is: why the variation? What causes it and what do we do about it? Do we ignore the variation or seek to eliminate it in the future? Do we instead appreciate and even praise the variation as a sign that our organization is creative and ripe for innovation? As Taleb has noted, the rogue event is often preceded by periods of great stability (strongly entrenched patterns). This is what makes the rogue event so surprising and is often the reason why this event has such a powerful impact. Does this mean that we look for variations and rogue events at the very point when the pattern in most firmly established and reinforced? As a coach how do we help our client best appreciate the variations—as they might appreciate a sonata-form symphony—and how do we help our client prepare for the variations if they have grown accustom to (and content with) the pattern?

**Investigation of Patterns and Variations: Source**

The questions I have posed regarding both patterns and variations lead us directly into the second phase in the investigation of personal and organizational patterns and variations. As coaches we help our client identify the sources and motivations producing, sustaining, and driving the pattern. Talcott Parsons wrote many years ago about the latent patterns maintenance in any system. What maintains the patterns that are latent (deeply embedded and often implicit) in the life of our client or in her organization? Why was this particular pattern established initially and why does it continue to operate? What gives it energy as it is sustained in the life of the client or organization? These are the source, maintenance and energy questions

associated with pattern investigation. Several hypotheses can be identified that often prove to be valid when a coach and client are exploring the source of a pattern.

*Expertise:* The first hypothesis is embedded in the daily operations of the client or organization. What is the product or service being rendered by the client or organization and what competencies, perspectives and attitudes are required to produce or serve? For instance, I have often found that members of health care departments replicate a pattern of wounding and healing one another. The wounding can take place through verbal hostility, miscommunication, or the running of rumor mills.  The wounding is acknowledged, feelings are expressed and shared, comfort and empathy is offered, apologies are sometimes offered, and business goes on as usual. Great expertise (skill and knowledge) is manifest in both the diagnosis and treatment of the wound (in this case psychological). One would expect this expertise, given that this is what health care staff members do every day of their life in working with "real" patients. I find that educators get into similar cycles of ignorance, teaching and relearning, and that production workers establish a deeply-rutted routine that expands well beyond their work on the assembly line. I can produce a much longer list. In each case, it is the expertise that is needed to do one's job that is applied in the creation of the need for this expertise beyond the confines of the product or service being generated—and this expanded use of the expertise creates personal and organizational patterns that are resistant to change.

*Primacy:* A second hypothesis concerns the early career of the client or the early life of the organization. Which patterns were established initially that continue to operate? We know from the long history of psychoanalytic practice that our responses to childhood events continue to impact on our behavior patterns as adults. We also know from systems theory that the initial conditions faced by any system establish persistent patterns in the system. For example, the wave form established in one region of the ocean (produced by an earthquake or storm) will be replicated all the way across the ocean in a far distant sea and on a far distant coastline. We can even carry this analysis a step further by pointing to the so-called entanglement of quantum particles that leads to the replication of specific behaviors in two particles that were once together but now operate at great distances from one another.  This powerful phenomenon is often identified as primacy—the sustained impact of an initial condition or event.

*Secondary Gain:* A third hypothesis crosses over to analysis of the forces that sustain and energize the pattern and point to the third phase of the pattern analysis (benefits of the pattern). Once a pattern is established, there are often unintended benefits associated with replication of the pattern and the benefactors are often not those for whom the pattern was initially established. For example, a pattern that is dysfunctional in terms of the client's formal role in the organization or dysfunctional with regard to the

formal operations of the organization may yield benefits for some (or even many) members of the organization who do not want to feel accountable for their own actions or for their own personal failures: "If I am ill (emotionally stressed out) (given too much work to do) (get no assistance) then how in the world can you expect me to do a good job!" "If the organization is messed up, then how can I ever be blamed for what has occurred . . . no one can operate in this crazy environment!" In family therapy that is based on a systems perspective, this dynamic is often labeled "secondary gain" and there often is an "identified patient" (usually a child) who is the focus of the treatment. Other members of the family gain from the identified patient's illness, emotional stress or acting out. A similar dynamic operates in the lives of the men and women we coach and in the organizations in which we coach and with which we consult.

In the analysis of sources for organizational patterns, we are confronted simultaneously with the question of what creates the variations in these patterns. We can turn to the same three culprits: expertise, primacy, and secondary gain. With regard to expertise, we find that the level of expertise in any organization is not uniform. Some people are good at one part of the operations, while other members of the organization are good at doing other jobs in the organization. This is often labeled "the division of labor" and has been identified by many social analysts (dating back to Durkheim) as the glue that keeps any system together (be it a family, organization or society). With differences in skill levels (and accompanying differences in priorities and perspectives) come the variations in organizational patterns. When an organization is very small, all members of the organization may be doing the same work and may hold the same perspectives; however, as the organization grows in size and age there is increasingly differentiation of functions (the division of labor)—the most important of these differentiations being between work that is specifically focused on the product or service being generated by the organization (*direct services*) and the work that is being done to hold the organization together *(integrative/indirect services*: administration, communications, finances, etc.). With this differentiation come variations from the uniform patterns that were created when the organization was small and young.

This leads us directly to the second source of variation: primacy. Even when the organization is very small and young there are usually tensions between different competing interests and perspectives. The tensions exist even if the organization is owned and operated by a single person: short-term financial gains versus long-term planning and financial gains, quality versus quantity, stability versus change (to name only three of many common tensions in newly-formed organizations). The seeds of variation are to be found at the very start. These variations might be very small at the start, but they are likely to become greater as the organization grows and as functions become increasingly differentiated and individual members of the organization and departments begin to become advocates for and sponsors of specific

perspectives and priorities. For example, the production and finance departments might be inclined to embrace stability, while the marketing and planning departments embrace change.

What about secondary gain (the third source of both patterns and variation)? We find that this is a substantial source of variations primarily because secondary gains often yield a secondary cost that is just as important as the gain. If members of an organization can dismiss their own accountability by pointing to the pattern of chaos and incompetence in the organization, then it is just as likely that they will find this chaos and incompetence to be very stressful and even toxic. In many ways, the secondary gains operate like Faust's compact with the Devil. The downside is considerable, especially after it becomes evident that the patterns are well-entrenched and the secondary gains are well-known (if never discussed). We begin at this point to see some slight variations in the established pattern as members of the organization seek to renegotiate their Faustian compact. They find that life in the organization is a little bit more tolerable if they do take some responsibility for their actions. If nothing else, the variations are likely to become more prevalent when the organization reaches a crisis state and when the secondary gains seem to dwindle away. This crisis state will often be generated by organizational growth, by the need for a major change in the organization, or by the transfer of leadership in the organization. The established patterns don't go away, but there will be more variations in the patterns as members of the organization attempt to deal with the growth, change or shift in leadership.

Given this pull toward variations in a basic pattern, we have to ask about the factors that enable the pattern to remain in place. How does the center hold when there are these powerful sources of variation and even the threat of organizational disintegration (if the variations become too powerful and determine too many of the dynamics operating in the organization)? I turn now to the factors that maintain the pattern in the face of these variations.

**Investigation of Patterns and Variations: Maintenance**

Many hypotheses can be posed to account for the maintenance of organizational patterns, but these three can provide a starting point for the coach and client. What about the factors that tend to maintain a pattern?

*Inertia and the Procedural Brain*: I have just mentioned the secondary gains derived from a pattern. I can also mention the shear inertia to be found in the lives of clients and organizations. Change in behavior is never easy, especially if the behavior is strongly established in a repetitive act. We know now that there are two different systems operating in our brains. One system is called *expository* or *declarative*. This is the system that addresses new information and that requires new behaviors in response to this new

information. This is the system that leads to learning and experimentation. Our expository brains are operating when we are reading a book, learning how to drive a golf ball or learning how to drive a car.

The other system is called *procedural*. This system operates when we are engaged in some behavior (or thought process) that is routine in nature. When we have been driving a car for many years, we should not focus on our driving but should instead pay attention to the conditions surrounding the car we are driving (other cars, turns in the road, weather conditions). Our procedural brain will take care of the driving (steering, accelerating, minor braking). Similarly, when we have been golfing for many years, there is no need to focus on the way we are holding our club and when we are reading as adults we concentrate on the concepts being conveyed or story being told, not on the meaning of each individual word.

This procedural system has often been equated with habitual behavior. We have long known that habits are hard to break and we know now that the procedural brain and the habits that this brain maintains are very powerful. In their recent book, *Switch*,  Chip and Dan Heath describe this procedural system as an elephant that is being controlled (with minimal effect) by the rider (the expository brain). The rider of an elephant can use all of his or her energy in trying to control the elephant, but will often end up exhausted and minimally influential. The elephant will go where it wants to. It seems that the resistance to breaking up habitual behavior is based in large part on the requirement that we move our cortical operations from one system (procedural) to another (expository) – and this is very difficult. We will be deskilled for a period of time (often extended period of time) while we learn a new way of behaving and while we establish new habits that can eventually be turned over to our procedural brain. Thus, inertia in human behavior is based not in some superficial resistance to doing something new, but rather in a much more profound requirement that we shift from one operating system in the brain to a different operating system.

*Interlocking Subsystems*:  As suggested in the concept of secondary gain, it is often difficult to assess what the impact of a specific pattern is in any system. This unpredictability exists in large part because the subsystems are interlocking. Scott Page distinguishes between complicated systems and complex systems. Complicated systems are those with many parts (subsystems); complex systems are those with not only many parts, but also with parts that are all connected to one another. With these tightly interlocking subsystems in place, it is easy to see why patterns are sustained and why they are resistant to change: the patterns are reinforced by all of the interlocking subsystems in the organization.

In fact, we often find that there are several different patterns operating in the life of a client or in an organization and find that these patterns reinforce one another. For example, we might discover that one of our clients seems to move regularly through a cycle of emotional crisis and calm in his personal life. This emotional cycle might, in turn, compliment and be amplified by a cycle of economic crisis and clam

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in his organization, or by a comparable cycle in his family life. His emotional cycle might even be parallel to seasonal cycles operating in the part of the world where he lives. Each of these cycles keeps the other cycles operating and maintains powerful patterns in the life of our client or his organization. As coaches, we need to be aware of this maintenance function and help our client fully appreciate its power.

*The Change Curve*: Another dynamic operates in the lives of many clients and in the life of many organizations. This dynamic is based on the way in which we react individually and collectively to the changes that do occur in our lives and organizations. For many years, we have known that a change curve is commonly found when new ideas or practices are introduced. We now know that this change curve is closely related to the two factors I have already identified: inertia and interlocking subsystems. First, let me describe the change curve. Typically, when a new idea or practice is introduced there is an initial increase in productivity, energy, motivation, optimism and other desired outcomes. This initial uplift may be caused by the successful promotion of the change, by the willingness of everyone to try something new (since the old isn't working very well) or by boredom associated with always doing the same old thing. If nothing else, there is curiosity about how the new idea or process will operate—even if this curiosity is nothing more than morbid curiosity (the lure of an impending train wreck).

This initial uplift is usually short-lived. Productivity, energy, motivation and optimism soon drop off and the change curve plummets. There are three fundamental reasons for the typically drop: (1) the change requires the acquisition of new skills, knowledge, attitudes and these come slowly (the movement of cortical functions from the procedural to the expository brain), (2) the change will necessarily impact on other subsystems which are not yet ready to adjust and change themselves, and (3) the change has been sold without sufficient recognition that there will be this drop off (leading to a sense of betrayal, increased cynicism and pervasive pessimism). At some point the change curve hits bottom. The drop off is greater if the skill, knowledge and attitude requirements are great, if many interlocking subsystems are impacted, and if the change has been dramatically oversold (carefree change that improves everything). In many cases, as the change curve plummets, another change is introduced. This change produces yet another downward heading change curve and yet another change. We often find that a crisis-of-crises takes place and the client or organization is in deep trouble.

If the client or organization can plan ahead when introducing the change, can anticipate the length and depth of the downturn, and can provide a buffer for the downturn in the change curve, then there is likely to be an upturn (assuming the idea or process is appropriate and meets an important need). If there is not appropriate planning, then the launch will fail and the old pattern will be re-established – often even more strongly reinforced than it was before. Ironically, by returning to the old pattern, a client or organization is

introducing yet another change (the change back to no-change). This will often lead to increased dysfunction and (ironically) an even greater devotion to the old ways of doing things. When we have tried a new golf-stroke and failed, then the old habits are likely to be engaged once again. Similarly, a new way of managing conflict in an organization will be dropped in favor of the old established pattern following a failure to contain the new openness associated with this innovative conflict-management strategy. The old pattern of conflict-avoidance or conflict-escalation will return "with a vengeance."

What about variations in organizational patterns? How are they maintained, once triggered by the emergence of diverse expertise, slight difference in the initial (primary) conditions of the organization, and ambivalence regarding the gains to be derived in a secondary manner from the patterns? The key factor in understanding the maintenance of the variations is to be found in the complexity created by those factors that initially created the patterns—and the variations. As they mature and grow larger, organizations become not only increasingly a source of specialization, they also become increasingly complex. They are not just complicated (with many specialized parts), they are complex (with each of these parts begin fully dependent on and interwoven with the other parts). There is not just one change curve operating—rather there are multiple change curves and each one influences the size and character of each of the other change curves.

Much of the early work on organizational dynamics treated organizations as machines with specific isolated parts that had to be somehow connected and coordinated through a set of managerial processes. Without the coordination function, the organization would fall apart. That is the primary reason why the integrative services (administration, communication, finances, etc.) that I mentioned above tend to occupy an increasingly large proportion of the resources in an organization—often commanding more than 50% of the resources in large and old organizations (including governmental organizations, corporations, religious institutions and health care systems).

We now know that complex systems tend to be self-organizing and that the interlocking subsystems I mentioned above hold the key to organizational integration. While integrative services are still needed – management will not go away—it has become increasingly clear among those who study complex systems that there is highly-influential glue that holds systems together irrespective of the formal integrative functions being offered in the system. This glue in many ways operates like the gravity (along with the recently identified dark matter) which holds our planet, our solar system, our galaxy and even our entire universe together.

This is the good news with regard to pattern maintenance. The bad news is that complex self-organizing systems tend to be quite "tippy." A minor shift in one component of the system will flip all or a specific

sector of the system into a new phase or pattern. This is what Taleb is writing about in *The Black Swan*: specific elements of a complex system, such as the US Stock Market or the Internet, can readily flip and rapidly produce remarkable variations. For instance, a specific book can suddenly go "viral" in terms of its visibility and sales with a few words and recommendations placed in the right place and at the right time on the Internet. Ironically, The Black Swan itself went viral for Taleb as a result of a few exposures and then extensive word-of-mouth endorsements via the Internet, leading to television and cable appearances by Taleb.

As I noted above, these viral events follow what the complexity analysts call the "power law" –meaning that increases and decreases in size, sales, attention, etc. tend to be exponential rather than linear or curvilinear. A small shift can lead to a big change in one part of a system, thus producing stunning variations in the basic pattern of the system—and stunning changes in organizational subsystems. These power law dynamics, however, usually do not change the basic pattern in the organization. The Stock Market has not changed its basic mode of operation and the Internet still operates in the same dynamic manner (and is still not easily regulated by anyone). The variations do not change the basic pattern – but they are clearly evident and do not easily go away. These variations themselves tend to build their own internal maintenance, though they are usually much less stable than the basic patterns of the organization.

Taleb's Black Swan was a best-seller and remained on the list of high-profile books for many months— but it has been replaced by other viral best-selling books on business and the Internet. Nevertheless, the influence of this book (and other books that have gone viral on the Internet) remains in place. Like other variations, Taleb's Black Swan is now in the vocabulary of business and organizational consultants and coaches. The themes of Black Swan echo through the writings and engagements of succeeding practitioners (including myself). These echoes represent the maintenance of specific variations in one type of system (business consulting and coaching). Thus, maintenance is to be found in not only the patterns of the organization, but also in its many variations.

**Investigation of Patterns and Variations: Energy**

I come finally in the investigation of patterns and variations with our coaching and consulting clients to the source of energy. Patterns and variations are not just maintained. They do not just consume energy. They are the source of energy. When patterns are broken up and when variations are created there is often an initial loss of energy in the client or organization (part of the change curve dynamic). When variations are firmly established there is often a new burst of energy (at least among those participating in the variation). To understand the way in which patterns and variations produce and consume energy we have to examine (all too briefly) three factors.

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*Alignment:* First, energy has to do with alignment. Energy is generated and flows when there is alignment among the particles, components or participants in a system. We see this occurring dramatically in the formation of waves (be they oceanic waves or the waves formed by people standing up in a sports arena). We also see energy being generated when there is a shared focus in an organization. Many contemporary organizational theorists describe the power of alignment and indicate that the power inherent in transformational leadership is based in large part on the capacity of the leader to bring members of her organization to a shared focus regarding the mission and purposes of the organization. While this alignment can be a highly productive feature in an organization and in its leaders, it usually is based in, finds energy in and is reinforced by patterns of behavior manifest in the leader and in all subsystems of the organization. This source of energy in the patterns is welcomed if the alignment is positive, growth-producing and humane. It is not welcomed when the alignment is negative, destructive and inhumane—we need only remember the Nazi rallies in Nuremburg to remind us of the horrible energy generated by malicious alignment.

*Conversion*: Energy often is generated when one energy source is converted to another form of energy. In physics this relates to the second law of thermal dynamics. In the long history of our earth, this is the ultimate conversion of sunlight (via photosynthesis) into source of nutrition (biological energy) that sustains planetary life. In the life of our clients and the organizations our clients lead, this conversation takes place in a variety of ways which are often quite subtle. At one level, the conversion is from words (written or spoken) to actions. This conversion is truly remarkable, given that words consume little physical energy, whereas actions being taken based on the inspirational or directive nature of words often consume a great amount of energy. Often it doesn't even take words to convert intentions to actions— there need only be the expectations (unexpressed words) of specific actions for the conversion to occur. Patterns create expectations and expectations create repetitive actions which, in turn, reinforce patterns. We end up with a positive feedback loop through which expectations generate actions which generate even more deeply rooted expectations which lead to even more strongly engaged actions.

*Differentiation:* there is something more that we know about the source and flow of energy in our physical world. There are energy gradients all over the place. We are all aware of the differing energy gradients associated with the weather system. We have low pressure and high pressure areas and air tends to move (as wind) from high to low pressure regions. More generally, we find the movement of energy from higher to lower, from stronger to weaker, and from more complex to less complex. From one perspective we can state that our universe contains a certain amount of energy that has always been there from the moment of the big bang. From this perspective, all we have is the movement of energy that

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already exists or (as I noted in the previous section) the transformation of energy from one form (e.g. heat) to another form (e.g. motion).

We can say the same thing about the energizing of patterns in organizations. Much as energy moves from more complex to less complex physical systems and subsystems, so there is a tendency for energy to move from more complex (unpredictable, unique) subsystems to less complex (predictable, repetitive) subsystems. We see this in our own personal lives when there is the reduction of anxiety and "nervousness" at the point when things return to their "normal" way of operating. This same desire for predictability is to be found in any art form—resolution of tension in a play, movement from a dissonant chord to a consonant (resolved) chord in a musical composition, identification of the murderer in a mystery novel. We want everything to return to a peaceful state and are willing to find and expend a considerable amount of energy in finding this peaceful place.

The dynamic of differentiation and the flow of energy from an unresolved to a resolved state is found in many contemporary theories of human motivation. For many years, psychologists couldn't make sense of human play—a type of activity that seems pervasive in human society (leading Huizinger, in his insightful analysis, to declare that humans are *homo ludens* – the playful ones). Why do we engage in play? This seems to be an autotelec (self-energizing) activity. Some psychologists suggested an "arousal jag" that human beings find to be enjoyable: we get scared or excited and then find relief from this fear or excitement which is reinforcing. More recently, the research conducted by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi suggests that we live for the opportunity to experience "flow" which is to be found at the threshold between anxiety and overwhelm (on the one hand), and boredom and underwhelm (on the other hand).

Stated in terms of energy flow, the Csikszentmihalyi model points to the power inherent in the flow from high levels (anxiety and challenge) to low levels (boredom and predictability). Patterns are repeated, in other words, so that the unique and unresolved moves toward the expected and resolved. It is in this movement between higher and lower states that we find "flow"—thus (ironically) encouraging the establishment of stable patterns of behavior to which we can always return after our adventuresome journey into the new. Energy is generated by and sustained throughout this movement between differentiated states.

What about the relationship between energy and variations in the patterns of organizations? Variations often lead to misalignment and hence reduce energy in an organization. Variations can also disrupt energy conversation processes. However, variations are needed for the flow of energy from more differentiated to less differentiated subsystems. The system remains static (and energy-less) without these variations in levels of complexity. Furthermore, as I noted at the beginning of this essay with regard to the nature of

sonatas, the tensions between variations can itself produce considerable energy In musical terms the variations can attract and hold the attention of those listening to the music. This tension between variations might produce energy that takes the form of competition between the variations. Warfare of any kind always produces energy (and often casualties). The tension can also produce the energy of cooperation and the variations might ultimately complement one another in the organization.

There is yet another energizing feature. Variations often enter the picture and provide energy when we are being creative and innovative (playing) within an organizational system. Csikszentmihalyi's flow experience is often based in an attempt to do something that is not only challenging, but also different from what is usually done. Without the variations, work becomes boring. As Taleb notes, if systems tend to always operate in the same way for many years, then when the unanticipated event (Black Swan) does occur, the system is overwhelmed and unable to cope with the change. Csikszentmihalyi (and at an earlier time, Nevitt Sanford) proposes that when there is pervasive boredom or debilitating anxiety, learning does not occur and motivation is lacking to take any action (let alone try something new). It is in the act of exploring variations in a basic pattern that members of organizations find the threshold between boredom and anxiety (the threshold of "flow"). They are trying something new, but not something that is so new and different that it shatters the pattern and produces panic and overwhelm. Thus, we see that variations can both create and disrupt the flow of energy in any system—and certainly within organizations.

**Benefits of the Patterns and Variations**

What then are the benefits associated with patterns in the life of our client or in the life of the organization in which our coaching client works? What about the benefits associated with variations in the life of our client and in the life of their organization? Obviously, the answers to both questions reside, in part, in the analysis I have already offered regarding the sources of energy to be found in patterns and variations, as well as the analyses I have offered regarding the source(s) and maintenance of patterns and variations. Patterns are established to engage existing expertise in the life of a client or organization. We like being competent and successful, hence re-enacted patterns of behavior that work for us and establish habits that have been finely honed. We make some decisions and take some actions early on in our life that made sense at that early point and that we hope still make sense. We take comfort in seeing our world in the same old way and want to live in a world that is consistent and conforms to our deeply-seated assumptions and expectations. Our daily rituals and even the formal rituals that are performed in our religious institutions provide reassurance and renewed commitment. Life and life purposes are reaffirmed through our informal and formal patterned rituals. As Heath and Heath note in *Switch*, we (the rider on

the elephant—our procedural brain) finds a shift in routine to be very stressful. We are threatened by analysis-paralysis when we are faced with many options and with making adjustments to changing conditions—we would much rather stay with simple patterns and with the tried-and-true.

Furthermore, we gain indirectly from the patterns, using these patterns to explain (and excuse) our actions—with the repetition of behaviors forming the backbone of the culture that is created in our organization and the personality that is exhibited in ourselves. Patterns also enable us to use (and rely heavily on) our procedural brain without taxing our much more easily overwhelmed expository brain (the work of Jonah Lehrer provides ample evidence of this benefit). Patterns make life easier to live, given the interlocking nature of the systems in which we operate and the challenges associated with living through a series of change curves.

## Conclusions: Coaching and Anchors

I would suggest there is something more fundamental operating in the life of our coaching clients and the life of the organizations in which our clients work. There is a fundamental benefit derived from organizational patterns—and this benefit is associated with the need for personal and collective anchors in our postmodern world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. Anchors provide stability and orientation. We find that there are two kinds of anchors that operate in the nautical world —and in the world of personal and organizational patterns.

The first type of anchor is the so-called *bottom anchor*. This is the large and very heavy anchor that most of us non-nautical folks envision. The bottom anchor consists of a shaft with two arms and flukes at one end and a stoke mounted at the other end. This type of anchor digs into the floor of the sea once the boat begins to move and provides tension on the chains connecting the anchor to the boat. The second kind of anchor is called a *sea anchor* (also called a drift anchor or drogue). It typically is not as heavy as the bottom anchor and is often shaped like a parachute or cone with the larger end pointing in the direction of the boat's movement. The sea anchor helps to orient the boat into the wind and slows down (but doesn't prevent) the boat's drift. The sea anchor is used when the boat is far away from the shoreline and the sea floor is located many fathoms below.

I propose that both bottom and sea anchors operate in the maintenance of patterns in our personal lives and in the lives of our organizations. The diverse ways in which patterns are established, reinforced and provide energy in our lives and organizations tend to organize around several anchors. Some of these anchors are unyielding. They operate as bottom anchors and are firmly implanted in some personal, organizational (or even societal) sea floor. These bottom anchors may be based in a set of values, beliefs,

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hopes, fears, or even personal or collective myths.  Any disruption of this bottom anchor can be profoundly disturbing and can be a source of sheer panic (not the balance to be found in the "flow" experience). Other anchors operate like sea anchors. They can be moved in direction or orientation, and they may shift gradually with the tide or the wind. These are the organizational variations. We are challenged, but not profoundly threatened when invited to reflect on and consider changing the direction or orientation of these organizational sea anchors.

One of the critical roles to be played by a professional coach is that of discernment on behalf of the client: in this case, discerning the difference between bottom and sea anchors. It is rarely advisable to encourage one's coaching client to shift personal or organizational patterns that operate as bottom anchors without first identifying and working with those patterns that operate as sea anchors. I find that many coaches do not fully appreciate the difficulties inherent in the shift of patterns in the life of their client or their client's organization. For the coach, these patterns may seem to be arbitrary, outdated or even contradictory. The world is changing and the patterns must change along with this world. Patterns for the coach may all seem to be modifiable sea anchors. However, at the heart of the matter—and at the heart of this essay—is a full appreciation of the bottom anchors that play such an important role in the personal and organizational lives of our coaching clients (and ourselves). Without bottom anchors, our ships (personal lives and organizational lives) are adrift and always in danger of crashing on the rocks or being pulled out to sea without any hope of returning to a safe port. The art of coaching is all about assisting our clients to be successful captains of their own vessels in the midst of a stormy sea.

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