

An Interview with John Lazar: Institutions and Influences

Learning in Institutions: Professional Beginnings

Interview Conducted by Bill Carrier

Bill Carrier: Thank you for joining us to talk with The Future of Coaching about the institutions of coaching from your own extensive experience! To get started, would you share a little bit about your background in terms of coaching and institutions that you've been involved in as you got started as a coach?

John Lazar: Sure. I think part of the background, Bill, that's relevant is that my initial training was in psychology, including a Master's degree in clinical psych. My orientation even before I was doing what was called 'coaching' was in the helping professions and enabling people to be better. I changed careers in '83 from psychology—where I had been working with the severely and profoundly handicapped, as well as having a private psychotherapy practice—to solving human performance problems in organizations.

I found very quickly as I went out into work situations that what I was doing—augmenting process redesign, or training, or work re-engineering, any of that kind of stuff—was meant to enable and accelerate people's learning and performance improvement and was, in fact, coaching. In the late '70s, I studied with the founders of neuro-linguistic programming, Richard Bandler and John Grinder and their colleagues, as well as Virginia Satir for family therapy. They were providing some models for how to engage people that had a coaching component though they didn't necessarily talk about it that way.

In the early '80s to the early '90s, I was working with three gentlemen from Chile: Fernando Flores, Rafael Echeverria, and Julio Olalla. At various times, they had two different companies, Hermenet and Logonet, which were doing training and development with folks about communications, sales, and things like that. There was a coaching component there.

Then in the early '90s, after those three gentlemen had gone their own way with respect to their businesses, Julio started his own company called Newfield Network. I took my initial coach training with him, I think in '92. It was in the '80s, while I was doing work in organizational settings that I actually got the label from someone that what I was doing was coaching. Before that, I was doing what I was doing but didn't really have a name to hang it on. That became more important to me because I was good at it and because I had already been listening

deeply, had already been able to do at least some of the things that a coach does. It made a lot of sense for me to get trained formally, which I did.

Actually, I was at AT&T for some years, and they paid for my training in the Ontological Design Course (ODC) that I had with Julio, Fernando, and Rafael. They also paid for my training with Julio in Newfield.

The other pieces that I would mention, Bill, are that from 1993 to 2004, I was involved at Landmark Education Corporation. That was building on the work of Werner Erhard and, certainly, Fernando Flores, as well as the theorists on Speech-Act Theory, philosophy and other things about communication. That was a fertile ground for my own learning and development. The last seven years I was a master coach or a coach of coaches in the Team Management Leadership Program (TMLP).

It gave me an opportunity to stay actively engaged in some very rich conversations about what it means to be a team and what it means to make things happen together as a team. I got to coach the people who were coaching the teams and support their development because these are multi-year programs.

Contributing to Institutions: Professional Growth

Bill Carrier: You've done a really good job given a picture of how you got started and the middle portion of your coaching profession. You've been doing this for about as long as coaching has been around. How about a little bit of context to and what's been happening since 2004? We'll get into the details later but what other organizations have you been involved in?

John Lazar: In 2004, I completed my involvement with Landmark. I engaged in a conversation with the folks in Newfield about being a mentor coach in their coaching program. At Newfield, I found a spiritual as well as practical home, a community. It was an opportunity to be engaged in a conversation with like-minded and like-valued people. For three or four years, I worked as a mentor coach for Newfield. I then did the same kind of program coaching, I think in 2008, for Bob Dunham and his Institute for Generative Leadership. I knew Bob when he and I were both studying with Julio and Fernando and Rafael in Logonet and Hermetnet and their Ontological Design Course.

Bob had started something, a 2-year program, called Coaching Excellence in Organizations. I immediately saw that it spoke even more directly and powerfully to me in terms of the direction that I wanted my career to take, than the work that I had been doing with Julio. I enrolled in the CEO program and also became one of the program coaches in the program.

Several of us were concurrently taking the program and coaching others in the group on how to move through the CEO program.

I've been a program coach for CEO ever since, going on eight years. I completed the two years of the program. In fact, as participants we successfully lobbied to add a third year of the program. Bob listened to our arguments and did develop a third year for us all to take. You can consider the program as it currently stands to be a premier, graduate-level program for experienced coaches on how to coach even more effectively in organizational settings.

In CEO, I've got a lovely group of fellow program coaches. Bill, you were a program coach at CEO, too, as I recall and that was wonderful! I get to be actively engaged in these leading-edge conversations and challenge myself as an observer and reflective practitioner in order to continue to raise the bar on who I can be and what I can provide.

Leading in Institutions: Professional Stewardship

Bill Carrier: We've talked a lot about the way you grew up and actually worked in the profession. I know that you've also been involved in a couple of organizations pretty fundamentally supporting the work of the profession of coaching itself.

John Lazar: That's true.

Bill Carrier: Please talk a little bit about what those are and tell us some more about them.

John Lazar: Sure. So a little bit of history first. At one point in time and for a number of years, there was an event that took place every year, typically in advance of the annual conference at the International Coach Federation. That event was called the Executive Coaching Summit. It was a by-invitation-only, 2 or 3-day event for seasoned executive coaches, and it was an opportunity to have serious and deep conversations about topics of interest to executive coach practitioners.

I got invited to that and I think the very first year that I attended was 2001 or 2002. The event was held in Chicago. There may have been between 15 and 20 of us.

One of the people that I met was a guy by the name of Bill Bergquist. Bill was a very well respected coach and entrepreneur. He had a coaching school that he owned out in Sacramento. He was extraordinarily well-read and well-written. He had written, I think at that

time, over 30, 35 books. He was just a renaissance guy.

The reason that he caught my attention was because he had presented a proposal to fellow members of this Executive Coaching Summit to create a coaching journal. At the time, there was very little being published in any kind of formal way about coaching and what was published was not done with much rigor. Bill put his proposal together and presented it—and it was not extraordinarily well-received at the time. Lukewarm, I think, would perhaps be stretching it.

I was curious about this proposal for publishing a journal but I was even more curious as to whether Bill might not be a person to write something with, to co-author an article with. Now, for me, part of what was going on at the time was I had recognized the importance of writing as an important expression for myself professionally and I was also seeing it as a way of increasing my visibility. So, I invited Bill out to dinner and we had a very pleasant dinner and conversation. We decided to write an article together and took six to nine months to write that. Along the way, I came back to him and I said, "Do you still have any interest in proposing a coaching journal? Because if you do, I would be interested in exploring that with you."

Out of that initial expression of shared care and concern, we ended up revamping Bill's proposal and presented it at the Executive Coaching Summit the next year, where it was enthusiastically accepted. In fact, there were a number of people who were there at the summit who became members of the editorial board and stayed on for a number of years. In 2003, we publish our first issue of *The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, or *IJCO*. We published for nine years until I shut it down, I think, in December of 2011.

So I think that's fair to say that *IJCO* was a direct offshoot of the conversations in the community of the Executive Coaching Summit. There was a second offshoot that also emerged a couple of years later, I think, out in San Francisco from another Executive Coaching Summit.

People observed that we were reinventing the wheel of the Summit each year because we were not an organization. We were simply a group of people that came together to make the event happen. There was a rather extensive discussion and declaration of exploring the possibility of creating an organization that could house these kinds of events so that practitioners could come together and create learning and development opportunities, to create something amazing.

Out of that set of discussions, the task force that was formed and the decisions and recommendations that were made emerged the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations, or ICCO. For the first year or year and a half I was acting executive director and,

subsequently, I was a board member. Ultimately, for a year and a half or so, I was president of the board of ICCO.

ICCO, though it wasn't around for all that long, did some truly amazing work, especially in the area of developing learning events that were very cutting edge, like our Symposia, the design of which I think is even still very cutting edge. The conversation at the Summit ended up creating a very excited but small group of followers and people who wanted to play and wanted to have ICCO be successful.

I would say that one of the things that is similar between the journal and ICCO is that marketing and sales were never strong skills of many who played a role. Perhaps part of the reason that both of those institutions failed to be sustainable was that we didn't have sufficient expertise to effectively engage in those conversations and create the appetite for what they were providing. We did receive very high marks from journal subscribers and those participants at ICCO events.

I had several *JCO* roles. I managed art design, production and distribution, as well as subscription sales. Bill and I were co-executive editors and identified the theme for each issue. I also did the final copy editing of articles. I had a tremendous opportunity for the quarterly issues to work with the article authors. In the process, we took their article idea and turned into a finished product that was, in my view, really stunning.

Observing Institutional Impact: Professional Legacies

Bill Carrier: Would you mind talking about the impact of the journal and maybe of ICCO? Could you talk a little bit more about how those affected individual practitioners or the profession itself?

John Lazar: I can offer a point of view but want to be careful not to overstate what I think the impact was. Okay?

Bill Carrier: Of course.

John Lazar: From my view, the impact that we had was a two-fold. The journal, as Bill and I conceptualized it, was meant to be a bridge between theory and research, on the one hand, and application on the other. It wasn't a fully evidence-based journal that had classic research

design--you had a proposition and null hypothesis; you were trying to sort things out.

We required our authors to take a theory or to take a piece of research and then to build on it. What we intended to do and succeeded at, I think, was to encourage authors to expand on those models, theories and research in ways that would be relevant to practitioners as well as fellow researchers.

I think that has proven to be very effective. I think it was also effective in enabling people who chose to write articles for us. Bill and I were accountable for identifying the people who we would invite to write articles for us. We had the opportunity to work with them to help take their initial thoughts and form them into something really well-written, something that really had a story to tell, something that was, in fact, a contribution to our profession.

The reason I say that is because I received comments from a number of people with whom I worked. They expressed their gratitude, not only for the opportunity to write something for the journal, but also for the learning experience of working with me or Bill to get something into a final form. I think we helped crystallize ideas into things that were even more accessible and even more useful.

The journal never had a large readership. I don't think we ever had more than 500 or 1,000 subscribers. We had people who were purchasing articles off the website. I think perhaps a tribute to the impact of the journal is that more than three years after we stopped publishing—and while doing nothing to advertise about the journal—we still had people coming to the website buying articles, back issue, and things like that. They couldn't buy subscriptions anymore but they were making purchases of things that were relevant to them.

We also have, as I remember, at least one article that continues to be used by one of the business schools, I think Stanford, in one of their courses. That to me is, at least, a couple of data points around the impact of the journal.

I think one other thing is that over the years, Bill and I continued to improve the production values of the journal. In the last couple years we really had a handsome publication. We were able to not only increase the quality of the articles but also to increase the size of each issue. I think we went from 40 or 50 pages initially to more than 160 pages.

Bill Carrier: Thank you. I think one of the things you are saying here is that the journal—even though you closed it down in 2011—is still affecting the ability of coaches to do their work, that the journal actually had an impact in developing the thinking of professionals who wrote the articles.

John Lazar: Yes. Our issues always had a theme, and so the authors that we would invite to work with us were authors that could contribute around that theme. One of the issues that we had was on coaching and neuroscience and there was a David Rock and Jeffrey Schwartz article.

That particular article was the one picked up by Stanford Business School for one of their professors for one of the courses and it continues. I get something from the Copyright Clearing House every year with a request for so many copies of that particular article.

And that was only one of the five or six excellent neuroscience-related articles that appeared in that issue. As you know in recent years, the interest in neuroscience and how it connects to coaching, how it connects the leadership, has been an extraordinarily hot topic. We're finding and connecting dots and ways that are very interesting and very useful in my view.

Bill Carrier: So here's a moment in which neuroscience, one of the subjects that we are really dealing with today in coaching, got more visibility across our coaching profession, particularly with a small group of people who were really interested in forwarding the profession

Bill Carrier: For readers who are interested in finding articles or previous issues of IJCO, where can they still find them? Do they still have the opportunity to read IJCO?

John Lazar: Absolutely. We published 32 issues and 175 articles over the nine years that we were publishing. If anybody is interested, they can go to www.pcpionline.com, where you can see the back issues and articles that can be purchased, typically in PDF form. Back issues of the journal are available in PDF or in print form if they're still in print. Those can be ordered online.

Bill Carrier: You had also talked about being involved in ICCO. Could you tell us a little bit more about what ICCO was, what it did?

John Lazar: ICCO was an organization that was meant to be a support organization for practitioners to explore and deepen their understanding of certain conversations or certain areas of professional endeavor and to do that in a group setting. I'm probably stating that badly but that's at least a short-hand on it.

The way ICCO did that was through its events. The group of coaches at the Executive Coaching Summit saw that if what we wanted to do was hold events, we would likely need an organization as an appropriate legal structure. The Executive Coaching Summit was an annual event, but one without a permanent “home.” We were looking for an organization that could provide continuity, house a Summit or other kinds of events. ICCO was what emerged as the consensus amongst, I think, the 80 or 90 practitioners who were in California at the Summit event that year.

Once we formed ICCO, then it became a question of what were the critical issues? What did we want to do about them? And what was the offering that we wanted to make available to the larger community? Obviously, like with anything, there were cost issues and logistics issues, and so forth. We had other questions, such as whether we wanted to keep it connected with the ICF Conference or not? How long would our event be? What was an appropriate price point, given the people were already spending money to attend the conference?

Ultimately, what we decided came out of some wonderful discussions that were held up at Bill's school of psychology in Sacramento. It was a design for something that we call the symposium, which was a 2- or 3-day event that always had a theme, speakers and different ways of engaging with a topic area. It was meant to be innovative, provocative, and to leave people-enlivened and expansive as a result of having attended. We ran those symposia for six or seven years, maybe longer, and invariably got rave reviews.

They were designed to be intimate events. It wasn't like thousands and thousands of attendants, not even hundreds. It was meant to be an event with 25, 30, 40 people.

What we what we lacked in size, we gained in intimacy, richness, depth, connection, and relatedness. In that regard, those events were—and perhaps to this day, continue to be—unique in what they provided at an intellectual and practical level on the one hand and in relational, spiritual, and heart space ways on the other.

Bill Carrier: You probably remember I even attended one of those events.

John Lazar: I do. If you don't mind my asking, so what was your experience of having attended that event? What seemed to work? What didn't? What do you remember? What stands out for you?

Bill Carrier: The community. It was a small event, probably 30 people in San Antonio. I was struck by being involved with a group of peers on the subject of our profession, peers who cared

deeply about serving others and helping other coaches learn more about how to serve others effectively and more specifically within organizations.

John Lazar: Right. It was in the name: ICCO, The International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations. It was really about what happens in organizational settings and the kinds of issues that are relevant there.

Bill Carrier: I'll add here that being in a small group meant that I got to make some friendships and create relationships with people who do what I do, coaching in organizations, so we had this basis of understanding. I found it very intellectually stimulating. We were talking about things that mattered to our profession of executive coaching. I'd like to slip that question back to you and ask what you found to be the impact on individuals and the profession?

John Lazar: My sense is that there were a couple things: Because of the intimacy of the events we were facilitating; there was a building of relationships and bridges. I think you commented on that. You had relationships taken to a new level. Like what happens from the terms of new conversations, new possibilities opened.

I also think that by the explicit, provocative nature of these events and the kinds of conversations that we were having and facilitating, we pushed the envelope. We were pushing the envelope for people to stretch beyond their habitual ways of thinking about things, to think beyond their pat answers to a particular question or their pat responses to a particular way of framing and making sense of those questions.

There was something very Socratic in the ways that we were trying to engage people for the sake of their own learning and development and, therefore, what they would be able to bring back to their organizational settings. We got feedback periodically about how, out of the conversations that we had, a new perspective or a new distinction was gained. People did take that back and try something out that they wouldn't have otherwise. The bow of the ship moves a little bit in a desired direction. Does that answer your question, Bill?

Bill Carrier: Very much so.

Considering the Profession and the Future: Influencing Professional Beginnings

John Lazar: I think people always have the opportunity to take a look at how they want to develop themselves in their chosen profession, given what their cares are. Beyond that, there's this piece people ask themselves about "what else might I do? How can I contribute?" There are obviously lots and lots of different ways that one can contribute. One of those is to stake out an area of interest, then see where you can add to the conversation, enrich the conversation, engage others in new and constructive ways around that area.

I feel extraordinarily privileged and grateful for the opportunity over the years to go to work with the people that we worked with as authors and to support them, not only supporting us but supporting the field, raising important questions, and offering points of view that would be constructively provocative.

These were beginnings to me—meaningful steps moving things forward and explicitly looking to build, extend, and strengthen community.

Bill Carrier: You've talked about some of these small steps as someone who's been deeply involved in some of these organizations and institutions. Let's talk for just a few moments as we close up shop about what you see as next steps. What are the organizations that are taking these ideas to the next level? What's missing or what do we need an organization to do from your perspective?

John Lazar: It's a good question. Here are a couple of initial responses. Certainly the International Coach Federation is a player as the largest global coaching institution. They've got a role to play and it remains to be seen to what extent they're going to step up to playing that role on behalf of not only their constituents, which are their coaches around the world, but also in terms of the larger profession as it emerges as a profession, and as well as those that coaching intends to serve.

I know that you and Bill Bergquist are involved in The Library of Professional Coaching and it seems to me from afar that the Library can be playing a role in terms of availability, access, and dissemination of information relevant to different kinds of coaching-related questions.

The NeuroLeadership Institute comes to mind as an organization that certainly does an extremely good job around its marketing and sales—and I think it's also growing in terms of how it's bringing together research and theory. It is providing some grounding for the kinds of understanding that can be developed about what we do behaviorally and how that translates

into what's happening neurologically.

WBECs is an organization that in the past several years has played a role in expanding the coaching conversation and extending the availability of those kinds of conversations to people around the world at a reasonable price point.

Marshall Goldsmith, one of the leading executive coaches in the world, is doing what he's doing through his organization and taking all of his materials and making all available to the public at no charge. I think Bob Dunham and his Institute for Generative Leadership is doing some really leading edge work around how we understand organizations, what's constitutive of them, and in what ways we can intervene elegantly, effectively and powerfully to make a difference.

The International Society for Performance Improvement or ISPI has been around for more than 50 years. They take a data-driven, evidence-based approach to solving human performance problems in organizations. In my experience, their Europe/Middle East/Africa (EMEA) Conference has been a lovely forum for bringing up coaching and coaching related topics to an international group of practitioners and decision makers. I find that my approach to doing coaching work has been heavily and positively influenced by their models. While I'm passionate about coaching, I consider myself a performance technologist who has coaching as an essential set of tools in my tool kit.

Two other institutions come to mind. One is the Institute of Coaching in Boston that you know about and their annual conference on leadership and health care, which I think is a really fantastic conference. Being a member of that organization has a lot of benefits associated with it. Then, finally, is the International Leadership Association (ILA), which is, I think, housed in Barcelona. They're an organization that brings together leaders and decision makers even more than practitioners to talk about leadership-related issues in organizations.

It was only last year that, for the first time, ILA collaborated with the Institute of Coaching to hold an event related to executive coaching that occurred in Barcelona. I'm anticipating in coming years that ILA is going to have some things to say and that coaching is going to have a broader presence and significance in those conversations and the kinds of work that they do.

Bill Carrier: What a neat way to wrap up our conversation and bring it full circle. You talked about how, early on, the institutions were helping shape what you were learning and doing in coaching. Then we talked about how you've helped found and lead organizations that were shaping coaching. Now, you've been talking a little bit about some of the organizations that are influencing what you as a leader are doing today and in the future.

John Lazar: And obviously that the list of things that I give you is based on the observer that I am and the things that are important to me. I'm sure if you were to talk to other folks you would get other answers in terms of what are the influencers as we look ahead. It's an okay starting point.

Bill Carrier: You've been exceptionally generous with your time. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

John Lazar: Simply that I appreciate the work that you and Bill are doing with the library. I very much appreciate the occasional invitations that I get to participate and contribute. I continue to be a big fan of, as well as colleague and friend of, Bill's and of yours. I'm delighted to have this opportunity to engage with you about topics of mutual interest. Thank you.

Bill Carrier: Thank you, John. We are grateful for your support and collaboration.