

# Natalie and John: A Narrative Perspective on the Past and Present Dilemmas and Opportunities Facing Organizational Coaching

William Bergquist

*[Note: An earlier version of this essay first appeared in a 2009 issue (No. One) of the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations]*

## SETTING THE STAGE

Natalie has been an organizational coach for the past eight years, having served for many years as Vice President of HR for a medium-sized high-tech firm in the Twin Cities. She met John at a Habitat for Humanities meeting several years ago. They struck up a casual friendship and actually worked together in building a home over several weekends. During a lunch break, John informed Natalie that he was serving as Vice President for Operations (COO) at a large hospital in Minneapolis. Natalie let John know that she was an organizational coach and often was working with high level leaders like John. She had great empathy for the challenges John is facing, having previously served herself in a C-suite role at an organization that was admittedly much smaller than John's hospital and in a different line of work. Natalie noted that John's job must be particularly difficult right now, given the crises in American health care. John offered a sigh and a quick turn of his eyes to the heavens above. Then they both went back to work on something they could accomplish that was quite tangible

- building a home for a deserving family in St. Paul.

Though Natalie had not given John a business card, nor attempted to solicit his business, she received a phone call several days later from John. He sounded very hesitant on the phone, indicating that he didn't want to intrude on Natalie's life. John revealed that he had gotten her business phone number from the Habitat office only after he had lied and told them that he needed to call about the coordination of work schedules for the house they were building. After exchanging some pleasantries, Natalie reassured John that his phone call was not at all intrusive. Then, John got down to business. He indicated that he wanted to hire Natalie as his coach and wondered if this were possible, given that they were working on Habitat together. John indicated that if it were necessary, he would drop off the Habitat project and begin work in several months on another Habitat project.

Before making a commitment to John, Natalie asked some questions regarding why he wanted a coach, what he would hope to accomplish with the coaching session, and how the payment for coaching services was to be structured. John indicated that he had been talking with his wife during the past month about work-related stress and, in particular, about the contradictory demands being made on him by the president and other vice presidents of his health care organization. His wife, Marnie, suggested that he consider hiring an organizational coach (Natalie herself worked in an organization that offers coaching services). John told Marnie about his chance encounter with Natalie and Marnie immediately encouraged John to give Natalie a call. John indicated that he hoped Natalie might assist

him in mapping out a strategy for building better relationships with the men and women whom he supervises. While his organization has never done much with coaching services, John believed that he could obtain funds to support the coaching services. He was pretty sure that Kurt, the President of his organization, would approve of this allocation of funds-being a strong advocate (at least on paper) for "developmental" services in his hospital.

Kurt did approve John's proposal and Natalie and John began working out the contractual obligations. They soon were working together for two hours once a week. John and Natalie initially met at John's office but given the frequent interruptions of these coaching sessions by members of John's staff, Natalie and John decided instead to meet in a conference room located in a nearby building that was owned by the hospital. The coaching sessions inevitably began with John's sigh and eyes cast toward heaven. Then something like "everything is a mess" would come out of John's mouth and the work would begin. There were many issues that John wished to confront during his coaching sessions with Natalie. After all, everything was a "mess." Many years ago, Don Schon (1983, 1987) wrote about the "messes" being confronted by contemporary professionals. These messes are multi-dimensional, requiring multi-disciplinary perspectives and multi-strategied approaches to the coaching process itself. As Natalie and John faced the initial task of deciding how to proceed and where to leap into the mess, they made several important decisions that reveal something about the contemporary state of this profession called coaching.

## **PERSONAL VS. ORGANIZATIONAL FOCUS**

First, do Natalie and John focus on the mess through the lens of John's personal life and issues? Do they attend to his stress and his inability to craft a life where the priorities of home and work are in balance? John believes that his wife, Marnie, encouraged him to find a coach because she feels that he is devoted too little time to their two pre-teen children and, frankly, to their own marital relationship. He works most weekends, always is writing or editing an email when the family sits down to watch a DVD, and hasn't been involved in a family vacation for more than three years. Marnie and John own a cottage on one of the lovely lakes in Minnesota but rarely spend any time there. This coaching relationship would also, of course, include exploration of the client's work life.

The interaction between Natalie and John goes something like this:

Natalie: You talk about the pull between your commitment to work and your commitment to your wife and family. Why is this a struggle for you? Why can't you leave your work at the office?

John: This is too big a job for me... You know, I'm the primary provider in my family. I worry about money. I really need a raise ... so have to work hard... Actually, I am a bit angry about Marnie. She could get a full-time job and a high paying job... She is very talented ... Yet, I'm relieved that she spends time at home with the kids... But this means that I spend less time with the kids. It's not really fair... But it is really about my job. My direct reports aren't doing their job. [Natalie makes a note to herself: or is it

John's inability to delegate?]. And Kurt doesn't do anything about my workload! [Natalie makes a note to herself: or is it John's inability to communicate upward and influence his boss?]

The initial search on the part of Natalie and John to find a focus for their coaching dialogue is not unusual. In many instances, personal life is mentioned early on by a coaching client-given that they often do not have any other setting in which to talk about these issues. Conversely, work life may also be the central focus of a coach's work-not only because the coach is being paid by the client's organization and the coaching is engaged during work hours (and in the work place), but also because the coaching client has gained much of his or her meaning-in-life from work and because the other domains in life seem to be profoundly impacted by what occurs on the job. Unfortunately, the training and past experiences of many professional coaches- particularly those who identify themselves as "life coaches" or, more broadly, "personal coaches" - do not prepare them for this organizational work. They encourage their clients to follow their bliss but are often not themselves quite sure about the nature of organizational bliss and how one might follow it in an organizational setting.

Somewhere around the early 1990s, the field of professional coaching began to split apart - for good or ill. Many of the early practitioners of professional coaching came out of a personal growth background. They had conducted encounter or sensitivity training groups, been involved with est-oriented facilitation, done career counseling, or served as a marital counselor or therapist. These experienced practitioners saw professional coaching as a new way to "package" what they were already delivering or as a way to move beyond the intensive, small group format (which yielded impressive but short-term impact). They saw sustained work with a "client" on a one-on-one basis as a perfect venue for unrestricted exploration of issues in their client's life, whether these issues are about marriage, friendships, finances, emotional life or even spirituality.

There is a second group of professional coaches. They represent a second perspective following the "split." Like Natalie, these coaches tend to come out of HR backgrounds or are organizational consultants. Many of these men and women have been marketing themselves as "organization development" consultants. Like the personal coaches, they find the field of professional coaching to be quite tempting both as a new way to package the services they were already offering and as a way to work more closely with individual clients in the challenging task of implementing a new organizational initiative. The problem is - as Natalie soon discovered- the client is hurting at an individual level. Someone like John wants help in reducing their personal stress. Almost twenty years ago, David Morris (1991) provided us with an insightful analysis regarding the nature and meaning of pain. He observed that prior to the discovery of analgesics (painkillers), patients had to live with pain and therefore had to assign some meaning to the pain (for example, a sign from God that one must lead a more virtuous life or a sign that something is indeed wrong with my leg and I have to have it taken care of by a doctor). Once the pain-killers became available (early 20<sup>th</sup> Century), patients wanted, first and foremost, an absence of pain. 'While the physician wanted to use the pain as a way to discover what was injured or diseased, the patient wanted the pain to go away.

A similar dilemma exists in the world of psychotherapy-the client comes to see a "shrink" so that she will hurt less, less depressed, less anxious, much happier). Maybe a drug will do the trick. If not, then let's do short-term, symptom-oriented psychotherapy. To what extent are professional coaches caught in the same dilemma: do I help my client reduce his stress or do I encourage him to address the sources of this stress - which may initially actually increase stress for my client? John may initially have to work even harder and spend even more weekends at the office or at his home computer in order to resolve some of the problems he is confronting. How will Marnie feel if John's work/life balance is initially even more tilted toward work?

After two sessions that focus on John's work/life balance, John wants to confront several of the immediate organizational problems that are helping to create the stress and are pushing him to work overtime. These problems include the inability of his subordinates to take on full responsibility for the tasks they are assigned (meaning that John himself ends up doing the work) and the failure of his President, Kurt, to remain consistent in his expectations regarding priorities for John's department. Are we pushing decreased costs and efficiency or increased quality of service with a significant reduction in administrative errors? John also is quite frustrated with the role he plays at the hospital (in relationship to Kurt). It seems that Kurt is something of a "visionary" and, as a result, John must be the "practical" one. Furthermore, Kurt often goes visionary precisely at the point when the hospital is faced with a crisis that needs to be resolved in short order. While Kurt points to and talks endlessly about "the bigger picture" and taking a "long view," John is saddled with solving the immediate problems that seem to land on his desk every day. He poses the issue to Natalie as follows:

John: "Why can't I sometimes be the one who offers a dream? Why does Kurt always have to be the one with the big idea . . . an idea, frankly, that often is impractical? I am tired of being the one who always has to say "we don't have the money" or, how can we convince our docs to go along with this plan?"

Natalie: Does Kurt know that you feel this way?

John: Yeh, I guess so ... or at least he should know how I feel, given that I am always stuck in this role of being the "can't do" man.

Natalie: Does it make sense for you to talk with Kurt about your frustrations and concerns? He might not be aware of the depth of your feelings and the desire you have to play something other than the "can't do" role.

John: You're probably right... I think I will set up a meeting and talk to Kurt about this stuff. Probably a good idea... though I sure don't like having to bring this stuff up. It feels like I am just bitching about things. I probably should come into my meeting with Kurt with some suggestions for change, rather than just complaining.

Natalie: Sounds like a good idea. I look forward to hearing about how your meeting with Kurt goes.

John and Natalie are obviously addressing one of the key organizational challenges facing John at the present time. While these organizational issues impact on John's personal life, they must be addressed at an organizational rather than personal level.

### **NEUTRAL VS. NORMATIVE**

There is a second dilemma faced by contemporary coaches. It is one that John and Natalie now face. We can witness this dilemma by picking up a piece of Natalie's and John's coaching conversation. This interaction occurred at the start of their third session (on Friday morning):

Natalie: So, catch me up on what you have done since the last time we met. You were going to talk with Kurt.

John: I did talk with Kurt about my workload last week. He said he would get back to me.

Natalie: And did he?

John: I prepared a new job description that outlines all of the projects I have been assigned. I sent it to Kurt on Monday. His only response by email was . . . it is really frustrating ... his only response was: "we need to get you more training in project management." And "maybe your coach can help you with this." ... Then he finished the email by writing ". And remember you are not alone. We all have to do some work at home." . . . That was it. No understanding of what I am going through. I was about to go into his office and throw a copy of my new job description and my letter of resignation at his big, grinning face!

What does Natalie do at this point? Where does the problem reside? Is she being at all helpful to John or is she nothing more than providing an excuse for Kurt to dismiss John's legitimate complaints? Furthermore, John was going to address the issue of being in the "can't do" role, yet he apparently shifted the focus of his interaction with Kurt. He decided to talk about workload - which might be less personally loaded for him than a conversation about Kurt's visionary orientation - and the impact of this orientation on John's more grounded ("can't do") role in the organization.

There is a tension between pain-reduction and problem-solving in the contemporary field of professional coaching. This tension plays out through something called "cooling-the-mark" in the professional of coaching (and in many other human service fields as well). Goffman (1952) introduced this concept in describing the manipulative ways in which legitimate grievances are often stifled and painful conflict is avoided. At a carnival, the customer (called the "mark") is encouraged to play rigged arcade games (such as knocking over the milk bottles). If a "mark" becomes upset because the milk bottles he is hitting with the baseballs don't tip over, then a second customer will come up to the booth, also attempting to hit and tip over the bottles. After appearing to be equally as "frustrated" with the failure to tip the bottles (and win the prize) the second customer invites the first (the "mark") to go off

and join him for a beer or cup of coffee. This second customer is actually hired by the carnival to "cool off" the mark, thereby helping the carnival owners avoid any confrontation with the local police.

To what extent do professional coaches enter the business of "cooling off the mark" when they begin working with clients inside organizations? Is this particularly the case if coaching is being offered as part of an outplacement package for employees who have been victims of downsizing, outsourcing or reorganization? Pain is reduced and the "mark" is appeased - but what about the legitimate grievance and deep-rooted organizational problems that need to be addressed? The social-critical school of organizational analysis (for example, Foucault, 1965; Sennett, 1981) poses just such a question. This school is often identified with the neo-Marxist perspectives of many European theorists—such as Foucault, Adorno, and Horkheimer—as well as a few North American analysts—such as Sanford, Lasch and Sennett.

While this "Continental" school is rarely found to be influential in the work being done by most organizational (or personal) coaches, the questions that it generates are certainly consequential and should be addressed at least tangentially by Natalie and John. Professional coaches and their clients should consider how the client's organization and its leaders can avoid the organizational convulsions that often lead to very painful job loss and life displacements? There is no need to "cool the mark" if the organization's leaders are making thoughtful decisions based on principles of equity and fairness. An organization can address the immediate concerns and stresses experienced by organizational "marks" through personal coaching (related to career counseling and life planning)—but what about these broader, organizational issues? Are the right men and women being served by the coaches?

Should Natalie be working with Kurt, the seemingly ambivalent President of John's hospital, rather than working directly with John? Is Kurt really the unrealistic visionary that John describes? Does he escape from important organizational issues by going visionary and requiring John to remain grounded? Perhaps the issue resides at an even higher level. Should Natalie be working with the hospital's Board of Directors? Should she encourage the Board to come to a clear decision regarding the priorities to be assigned to not only profit and quality, but also the welfare of their hospital's employees? How might the visioning processes of the hospital be more broadly shared - so that Kurt isn't the only one who can "blue-sky" the conversations about current and potential crises?

Is such a shift in perspective appropriate? Natalie was brought in to help John, not change the world (or at least the operations of the hospital). In taking such actions, Natalie could move into the role of advocate—and this could expose Natalie's social-political biases. Is this really appropriate for an organizational (or personal) coach? Several decades ago, Warner Burke (1987) made a strong case that the field of organization development is not neutral but is very much a "normative" field of human service, with definite and highly influential values regarding collaboration, openness and related matters. This normative foundation can, in turn, be traced back to the writing (and active engagement in society) of that titan of American pragmatism and liberalism, John Dewey (1922), and to the highly influential work of a European immigrant and social psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1997). In more recent years, these values can be traced back to the origins of organization development theory and practice in

the engagements of people throughout North America in sensitivity training (T-Groups) and related team- and community-building activities. The roots of organization development can also be found in the soil of social activism and, more specifically, in the struggles against racial, religious and gender biases that began in the 1930s and remained prominent in the civil rights and women's rights movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## INDIVIDUAL VS. SYSTEM

There is yet another level at which the dialogue is engaged between personal and organizational orientations to professional coaching. This concerns the focus on individual and group dynamics within organizations versus a broader systemic orientation. Even if Natalie and John have been focusing on the seemingly indifference or ambivalence of Kurt for several sessions, this is still an isolated, individualistic perspective. To what extent is Kurt correct when he writes in his email that everyone in the organization takes work home? Is the real problem one of organization-wide workloads or the lack of work/home boundaries? Are John's "problems" really symptomatic of organization-wide issues? To what extent is this president's ambivalence a manifestation of a broader ambivalence regarding profit and quality within this hospital. And to what extent, is this ambivalence manifest in very tangible ways - such as in the performance review standards and reward systems of the hospital. What about the complimentary roles being played by Kurt as big-picture visionary and John as practical problem-solver? Are they playing out these roles on behalf of the entire hospital system? Is the splitting that occurs in the often-frustrating (at least for John) relationship between Kurt and John a broader, systemic splitting? This kind of bifurcation is certainly commonly found in contemporary hospital systems. Hospitals must offer hope to their patients (and staff) while simultaneously being run as businesses.

While a few organizational coaches have come out of the Continental School and many organizationally oriented coaches have come out of the American School of organization development (often identified with the NTL Institute), others (especially elsewhere in the world) come out of the "British School" (often identified with the Tavistock Institute; Colman & Bexton, 1975). The British school not only emphasizes the unconscious (psychodynamic) life of organizations, but also the systemic nature of organizational dynamics. Thus, another choice point is identified: should Natalie and John explore organizational issues at John's hospital from an American perspective (with its emphasis on individual leadership behavior and group dynamics) or from a British perspective (with its emphasis on system dynamics)?

The conversation between Natalie and John might go something like this:

Natalie: You have tried to confront Kurt about your work- load and "can't do" role. Yet, nothing has happened. I would suggest that we step back for a minute and examine what's going on from a different perspective. Would that be agreeable?

John: Sure. What do you have in mind?

Natalie: Let's assume for a moment that it is easier for everyone on your management team - not just Kurt - for you to be the "can't do" person. As long as you play this role, then no one else has to be responsible for the group's "realism." They can all pass the buck to you. This also means that you have a lot of power. Everyone looks to you to stop the action.

John: But I don't want all that power....

Natalie: Are you sure that this power isn't a source of some gratification for you? Do you always come away from these meetings as a frustrated, angry man?

John: Well, I must say that I do like to have some control in these meetings so that they don't get out of hand and so that Kurt doesn't get his way as a dreaming idiot!

Natalie: I would suggest that we explore this issue of power a bit and see how it relates to your concerns about control in the group ...

If the conversation were to follow this course, then Natalie and John would be moving close to the boundary between coaching and psychotherapy. How might they explore John's apparent need for control and his antipathy for Kurt's visionary orientation without moving into an exploration of personal (even early life) issues in John's life? This is always one of the major dilemmas facing the use of British School techniques. While they encourage the analysis of system-wide dynamics (such as the tendency of all members of John's hospital management team to pull John to a "can't do" role), there is also the pull toward exploration of deeply personal dynamics. Leaders get pulled into confining roles (called "role suction"), in part because they wish at some level to play these roles and because they derive often unacknowledged gains from this role suction. Where is the boundary between coaching and psychotherapy?

## **HEAD VS. HEART**

A total of ten coaching sessions have taken place. John is pleased with the outcomes of these sessions. He has met several times with Kurt and has found more time with his wife and children. Kurt is willing to move beyond a "training" solution to John's problem and is willing to look at re-assignment of some project leadership. But what about John's relationship with the employees who report to him? Natalie and John now face another fundamental coaching issue. To what extent should they focus on interpersonal issues, rather than staying with John's work/life balance and his relationship with Kurt and his response to the divergent priorities offered by Kurt? This decision on the part of Natalie and John might relate not just to their own expectations regarding professional coaching services, but also to their own assumptions about the roles to be played by men and women in contemporary society. Kanter (! 977) wrote during the 1970s about the role played by secretaries in American corporate life. She noted that these women (and they were rarely men) often played the role of surrogate wife to their male (and they were rarely female) bosses. They served in a supportive staff role, often moving along

with their boss when he was promoted into a job of greater responsibility. (The secretary became part of the "chattel" accumulated by a male executive during his climb through the organization.)

The secretary was often the social-performance manager for her boss, reminding him of birthdays, anniversaries and other commemorations, as well as advising him on how to work with specific members of the organization; she was also a key "node" in the gossip network of the organization, finding out what was really happening elsewhere in the corporation. Most importantly, the secretary served as the "heart" to complement the rational and non-emotional attitude ("head") of her boss-- much as the traditional wife served as heart and social anchor for the family. Osherson (1986) suggests that under these conditions the husband becomes a disengaged and "wounded" member of the family.

To what extent has the professional coach taken over the role of secretary and even surrogate wife/spouse, providing guidance for a client as he or she navigates the treacherous waters of corporate life? How many coaching clients (especially male clients) look to their coach (especially female coaches) for the "heart" (emotional intelligence) that they lack or that they have never developed given the dominant "technical-rational" (Schon, 1983) climate of contemporary organizations? Has coaching emerged as a viable form of human service to replace the role once played by the secretary? Robert Bellah and his colleagues (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985) have suggested that the psychotherapist has taken over the role of priest and the confessional booth in contemporary America. Has the coach similarly replaced the socially-sensitive secretary--or perhaps has become a combination of socially-sensitive secretary and confessional priest? What role should Natalie play? As a woman, should she be particularly sensitive to the expectation that John may hold regarding the problems he is experiencing in working with his subordinates? Does he want her to become his heart - and how might Marnie feel if John begins to rely on Natalie for advice about how to work with other people (perhaps including his wife and friends)?

The dialogue between Natalie and John might go something like this if Natalie doesn't intend to fall into the male/female role trap (another form of "role suction"):

John: What do you think I should do about Stanley? He is constantly coming to me with his problems . . . always about not being able to get along with the "dynamic duo" (Beverly and Ted).

Natalie: Rather than offering you some advice . . . let me ask you about how you have successfully dealt with this issue in the past. Didn't you tell me last month that you were able to redirect Stanley back to the "dynamic duo" and suggested ways in which he could manage their outbursts during meetings? Couldn't this same strategy be used in this instance?

In this instance, Natalie made use of an appreciative approach in her coaching, encouraging John to identify strategies that he had already employed in his interpersonal relationships. Rather than becoming John's "heart," Natalie helped him identify his own "heart." as John's coach, Natalie effectively integrated head and heart when she encouraged John to "appreciate" his own emotional intelligence that had been acquired during many years of management and leadership.

## **ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT LEARNING**

Through their working relationship, Natalie and John have had to address (usually in an indirect manner) yet another level of coaching strategies. They have made tacit decisions about not only the approach to be taken in framing the challenges being faced by John, but also the specific strategies to be used in helping John confront these challenges. These decisions, in turn, are based at least in part on a set of assumptions about how John might best learn about and adopt alternative ways of reasoning, evaluating and behaving in this organization. These assumptions about learning are, in turn, influenced by the alternative perspectives already identified (personal vs. organizational, neutral vs. normative, individual vs. systemic, and head vs. heart).

There is a long history of educational and training initiatives that undergird much of contemporary professional coaching - and Natalie and John should take into consideration the assumptions about learning that are fundamental to these initiatives. Much of the field of professional coaching (particularly organization-based coaching) is closely linked to the field of management and leadership development. Not only do many of the men and women being coached in organizations come from middle and upper levels of management and define themselves (or are defined by others) as "leaders." There also is a widely held belief (and some informal evidence) indicating that leadership developmental programs are enhanced when coupled with coaching (Bergquist, 2004). The learning that occurs in the development programs is more likely to be retained and more likely to be applied when a program participant is coached during the program (if sessions are distributed over time) or following the program (if sessions are offered in an intensive format).

It is assumed not only that management and leadership can be taught, but also that certain common principles and strategies can be identified and applied in many different organizational settings. While there is good reason to believe that management and leadership are context-sensitive and while there is wide dispute about the nature and dynamics of effective management and leadership, the assumption is widely held that developmental programs can be effective - and organizational coaching programs often thrive in settings where this assumption flourishes and where ongoing professional development is alive and well.

One of the foundations of this assumption about professional development was challenged many years ago by Kurt Lewin (who I have already identified as one of the sources of inspiration for many organizational coaches). Lewin and his colleagues (Lippitt, Watson & Westley, 1958) proposed that significant learning and development only occurs after a person has been "unfrozen" - when their sense of self and their rational frame of reference for the world has been challenged. A follower of Lewin and his student, Leon Festinger (1957), identified this as "cognitive dissonance". If Lewin is accurate, then management and leadership development programs should be preceded by 01 initiated with some event that unfreezes program participants. In recent years, we see the emergence of 360° feedback systems as just such a tool for unfreezing. Unfortunately, in many instances, this tool for learning is misused, leading not to unfreezing, but rather to reinforced resistance to acquisition of the self-

knowledge and skills most needed by the recipient of this feedback. This is a point where organizational coaching comes in - not as a tool for follow-up from developmental programs, but as a tool for follow-up from the report back of 360° results. Descriptive instruments, such as the MBTI and DISC, can similarly be used in an effective manner - not as a source of learning, but rather as an unfreezing stimulus for the exploration of self and an incentive for acquisition of new skills.

What should Natalie and John do regarding their own assumptions about learning? Should John participate in a leadership development program while being coached by Natalie, or after their coaching sessions have terminated? Kurt suggested early on that John receive some project management training. Was this an appropriate suggestion (particularly if coupled with Natalie's coaching)? Perhaps John should receive 360° feedback from his boss, subordinates, peers and some "internal customers" at his hospital or complete a personality inventory (such as MBTI). This could extend the coaching engagement with Natalie by at least four or five sessions.

Natalie's work with John could then focus on the lessons learned by John in the leadership development program or on the disturbing (unanticipated, contradictory or thought-provoking) results from the feedback instrument or self-assessment inventory. Natalie should be knowledgeable about the content of these programs, assessment systems and inventories, if she is to be maximally effective; however, it is also important for both Natalie and John to realize that these learning-based initiatives are only the beginning. At its best, professional coaching is a learning-based tool that can extend development and the growth of self-insights and personal skills well beyond the bounds of a three-day workshop or the report out of results from an inventory about management or interpersonal style preferences.

All this optimism about coaching as a learning tool is based on the assumption that individuals can change organizations if they are knowledgeable, self-reflective and lifelong learners. But what about the pressure for continuity and the forces against change that exist in any system? What about the deeper roots of inequity in an organization? Can coaches teach courage or compassion? Can John learn enough "heart-knowledge" to match his development of "head-knowledge?" Should Natalie "teach" John something that he might not want to learn? Is it appropriate for Natalie to have her own learning "agenda" for John? These questions will inevitably linger for both Natalie and John as they continue the coaching process - and these questions certainly linger in the field of professional coaching.

## **FAD VS. FOUNDATION**

Natalie and John have successfully completed twelve sessions of organizational coaching, making use of not only reflective strategies, but also several instruments (one a 360° feedback instrument and the other a personality inventory). John's organization has supported his coaching up to this point, but now the Vice President of HR (with the informal support of the president, Kurt) is asking for some evidence that the coaching engagement has been productive. As a result of this push toward accountability, Natalie and John have been led to greater reflection on their own coaching project. What initially brought John to Natalie? Why did his organization initially support his coaching engagement and why has the HR VP now asked for evidence?

John noted that his wife first recommended that he get a coach. Natalie noted that she chose several years ago to become a coach. While John and Natalie will undoubtedly focus on their own immediate coaching issues, they might also reflect on the reasons for their work together. Would either of them have even considered coaching to be a legitimate profession ten years earlier? Where did the notion of professional coaching come from and why did it gain popularity during the late 1900s and early years of the present decade? Given this broader background, what expectations do John and Natalie hold as to the final outcomes of their work together? And what expectations were held by other leaders in John's organization regarding the desired (and expected) outcomes of John's coaching engagement?

If they are being honest with one another, John and Natalie would probably have to admit that both of them entered into their coaching engagement in part because coaching was "in" when they began working together. Most of us like to engage in activities that are "in" - that are accepted as "innovative" and "cutting edge" activities but are not "weird" or "inappropriate" (Rogers, 2003). Most of us, in other words, are vulnerable to certain "fads"- and professional coaching is by some accounts a "fad." Like biofeedback, encounter groups, management by objectives and quality circles, professional coaching has been hot for a few years and may fade into the mist-or at least garner less front-page coverage in the Wall Street Journal or less frequently be addressed in lead articles of business journals. Like other fads, professional coaching may be guilty-as-charged regarding over-promising, building on personal testimony rather than carefully documented evidence, and focusing more on marketing and advertising than on product improvement.

We also see the 'fad' orientation of professional coaching in the very word "coaching." This term was borrowed (without permission) from the field of sports coaching. Like the terms "team building" and "game plan" the term "coaching" comes with all the conceptual baggage and expectations about outcomes that are to be found in competitive sports. While the explicit statements about coaching may focus on collaboration and win/win, there are the implicit assumptions about competition, with one winner and one loser. If there is a winner and loser, then who will inevitably lose? A social-critical (Continental School) analysis would suggest that inequitable treatment is inevitable (the new golden rule: "those rule who have the gold"). The British School (Tavistock) can identify ways in which organizations cover over or distort the true stories about competition for scarce resources. Organizational coaching may be not only a fad, but also a fad that inevitably contributes to victimization and disempowerment.

Some evidence can be offered suggesting that professional coaching as a fad is now past its peak (reached earlier in this decade) and will soon fade from view (Maher & Pomerantz, 2007). Attendance at many international meetings on professional coaching is dropping off. The fees being charged are now leveling off. VPs of HR are now asking tough questions about the impact of coaching on overall organizational performance. Using the metaphor of the "Old West" - the gold has been tapped out and the prospectors have folded up their tents, packed their wagons and moved on to another purported vein of gold (fad). This being the case, then perhaps John should look elsewhere for assistance. And

Natalie should look for a more secure position inside an organization or shift to an alternative endeavor as an independent provider.

But what if professional coaching is not a fad? What if the foundation has been laid for the creation of a more permanent addition to the constellation of human service endeavors? The diffusion of innovation research (Rogers, 2003) suggests that professional coaching is no longer being used only by the innovators (who created the field) and early adopters (who will try anything at least once). It is now being engaged by the early majority. These are men and women who were initially skeptical about professional coaching. They want to see some evidence that it works and want to know where it works and what the expected outcomes might be. John is probably part of the early majority, at least with regards to professional coaching.

He was not the first on his block to try out coaching, nor has he engaged Natalie's services without some reservations. It might have been important for Natalie to enter into a dialogue with John near the start of their coaching engagement that focused on his expectations, as well as her experience and boundaries ("this is not therapy and I am not a consultant"). Perhaps John should have read several articles about professional coaching, including one or two that are critical of this endeavor. He might not only have been a more informed consumer of coaching services but might also have been better prepared to meet the newly emerging concerns of his HR Vice President.

John could benefit from a "consumer report" on organizational coaching and could benefit from distributing this report to his HR VP. Unfortunately, very few documents seem to exist at the present time. Fortunately, rather impressive research is being conducted about coaching outcomes. This research is admittedly rather primitive at the present time (as is always the case with a new human service endeavor). This research, however, is well-intended, rather unbiased and conducted by credible sources (for example, Schlosser, Steinbrenner, Kumata & Hum, 2007'. witnessing the emergence of a discipline of coaching—or more accurately a multi-discipline or inter-discipline of coaching.

These foundation-laying activities include the creation of organizations that focus on something more than just the marketing of coaching services, building of coaching practices, or determination of who is a "legitimate" coach. These organizations (for example, the International Consortium of Coaching in Organizations) are assisting in the construction of a knowledge base, are furthering dialogues between coaches, the users of coaching services, and the teachers, trainers and researchers of coaching services.



*First Symposium Held by the International Consortium of Coaching in Organization: 2006, Sacramento, California*

We are also seeing the creation and maturation of coach training programs that build on specific and well-established theoretical bases. We are witnessing the establishment of coach-certification programs and even coaching-focused degree programs in universities and independent graduate schools. We may soon find that professional coaches, like those in other human service fields (such as psychotherapists, social workers and physical therapists), will have to obtain an advanced degree in professional coaching prior to obtaining a professional license or certification.

All of this speaks to the movement of coaching past fad and forward to foundation and profession. I recommend that Natalie stay in the field of professional coaching and perhaps even assist in its further maturation. She may want to get up to speed, however, on the research that does exist about coaching outcomes and learn a bit more about the ROI of coaching (for example, O'Neill, 2007). It seems that John made a smart decision and should trust in the coaching services to be offered by Natalie -- provided that both he and Natalie are clear about expectations and boundaries and that both help to build the case for John's use of coaching services.

## PROSPERITY VS. POSTMODERNISM

Let's take an even further step back from Natalie and John and briefly examine the societal forces that helped to forge this new fad or foundation for establishment of a multi or inter-disciplinary field. First, it is important to acknowledge that we have been living in an era of relative prosperity in North America, Europe and most of the other "developed" societies where professional coaching has been firmly established. Given this prosperity, professional coaching has often been conceived (even if not openly acknowledged) as an affordable luxury, whether paid for by the individual (personal coaching) or the organization (organizational coaching). Coaching for "developmental" purposes has usually been engaged by and approved for use by the upper tier of management and leadership in an organization. John could have initially engaged Natalie as a coach because he could afford to pay her for these services himself and because his wife supported his engagement of a coach; however, he did not pay for these services himself, but instead asked his organization to pay for these services. At the time, his organization had sufficient financial reserves to support these services. Today, things have changed—and he can no longer be certain that these services will be funded by his organization.

This has also been an era in which there was relatively low unemployment in most of the societies making use of coaching services. Organizations were in the business of retaining valued employees, and often presented coaching as a benefit (along with health care, retirement, training, reimbursed education, and so forth). There was no need to document the value of these coaching services for the organization if the primary reason for offering these services was to keep productive employees from looking elsewhere for a job. Many of the coaching services being offered to the middle tier of management over the past decade have been justified on the basis of retention. While John's coaching probably is best justified on developmental grounds, he might be able to get funding for the coaching of his "fast-track," high potential subordinates by suggesting this retention rationale.

Finally, in a society of not only prosperity but also litigation -- as is found in many "developed" countries - there is a third reason for the engagement of professional coaches. This human service activity is being engaged as a component of the organization's Human Resource Development program, and more specifically as a component of the organization's remediation program. Like the Employee Assistance Programs that were so popular during the 1990s (and remain an important component of most HR strategies), organizational coaching is sometimes used to "save" "problematic" employees or (if coaching does not work) to justify and serve as an early step in the employee termination process. Alternatively, professional coaching (particularly personal coaching) is offered following termination (whether for inadequate performance or because of reorganization and downsizing). In both cases, one must wonder about the extent to which this type of coaching is effective and if it is nothing more than "cooling of the mark" to avoid lawsuits by disgruntled ex-employees.

Beyond the economic and legal conditions of societies that engage coaching practices are the cultural and epistemological (knowledge-utilization) conditions that are often summed up in the term "postmodernism." Put simply, most of us living in the "developed" world are confronted with a postmodern condition that is typified by great complexity, extreme unpredictability and pervasive

turbulence (Bergquist & Mura, 2005; Olalla, 2004). Under conditions of great complexity, coaching clients can legitimately ask for assistance in "sorting out" and reasoning about the world in which they operate. Professional coaches are helping their clients cross the street at very busy intersections - so that their clients don't get "run-over" by the many real and psychological vehicles that are careening down the interlocking and intersecting highways that they must navigate.

Extreme unpredictability consists of something more than the simple inconsistencies and spontaneous moments of life. Rather, as Taleb (2007) notes in his highly influential thesis on black swans, the unpredictable events of our postmodern society have high impact (be this event the World Trade Center attacks or the election of an African American as U.S. president). Taleb also indicates that this black swan condition is nothing new. Almost all consequential events in history, according to Taleb, come from the unexpected. Black swan conditions require that coaching clients do contingency planning in both their personal lives and their lives as employees, managers and leaders of organizations. How do we live in a world that we can neither control nor predict? We can at least influence, even if we can't control. We can seek to understand, even if we can't predict. Successful coaches are often in the business of helping their clients become more influential and helping their clients better understand and even to anticipate the complex world in which they live and work.

Finally, we witness on a daily basis the world of pervasive turbulence (or "white water" as Peter Vaill (1989) describes it). Four subsystems operate in the white-water world. One subsystem is represented by fast flowing water - this is the world of rapid change. A second subsystem is represented by the whirlpools and eddies of the stream - this is the world of pattern change (the "seasons" or developmental stages that organizations move through). The third subsystem is represented by the stagnant parts of the stream - the parts that actually provide the nutrients for the stream (where dead leaves and other organic matter sink and slowly decay). The fourth subsystem consists of the chaotic conditions that reside between each of the other three subsystems. This is the world of chaos and complexity that has been so powerfully illustrated and applied to organizational systems by such authors as Margaret Wheatley (2006) and Ralph Stacy (1996). In this world of turbulence, the professional coach can provide support and encouragement. Peter Vaill even invites organizational leaders to consider that they are performing artists in a world of white water and suggests that survival in such an environment requires a solid spiritual core (what kayakers speak of as the balancing point in their vessel).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Our case study client, John, is facing complexity, unpredictability and turbulence in his own work life (and perhaps also in his personal life). He is working in a sector of society (health care) which is particularly complex, unpredictable and turbulent today (though many other sectors can claim a similar condition). Natalie's work with John is clearly aligned with the postmodern condition, yet is also strongly influenced by the other dilemmas, polarities and opportunities associated with professional coaching over the past twenty years.

Clearly, the ways in which both Natalie and John approach their coaching engagement is founded in dilemmas and drivers that can be traced back in many instances to the philosophical and political debates of antiquity: the individual vs. the group or state, the use of interpersonal and group skills to defuse dissent, the nature of profound learning, and, ultimately, the head versus the heart. From this perspective we can't really say that professional coaching is something new under the sun. Such a conservative perspective regarding professional coaching is fully warranted - for we are dealing, after all, with the human psyche. And the human psyche hasn't changed much since we first stood up on two feet to look out over the African savannah.

On the other hand, one might suggest that professional coaching is something new and that it exists precisely because of the postmodern condition (Bergquist, 1993; 2008; Bergquist & Mura, 2005). Furthermore, the postmodern condition, even more than economic prosperity, may be responsible for the emergence and perhaps endurance of professional coaching. This new field might have been the right strategy, at the right time and place, for the right reasons. This analysis further suggests that professional coaching may have to change during the coming years as the time and place and reasons of our world also change. In another article in this issue of *IJCO*, I suggest ways in which these changes might occur and ways in which Natalie and John might wish to (or have to) change their coaching engagement in response to these conditions.

---

## REFERENCES

- Bellah, R., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W.M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S.M. (1985). *Habits of the heart*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Bergquist, W. (1993). *The postmodern organization*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bergquist, W. (2004). Organizational coaching: An invaluable complement to training and education programs. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2(1), 15-24.
- Bergquist, W. (2008). An interview with Julio Olalla: Conducted by William Bergquist. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 6(2), 6-33.
- Bergquist, W., & Mura, A. (2005) *Ten themes and variations for postmodern leaders and their coaches*. Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press.
- Burke, W (1987). *Organization development: A normative approach*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Colman, A., & Bexton, W (1975). *Group relations reader*. Anchorage, KY: Grex Press.

Dewey, J. (1922). Human nature and conduct. New York: Holt. Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Foucault, M. (1965). Madness and civilization. New York Random House. Goffman, E. (1952). "On cooling the mark out..." *Psychiatry*, 15, 451-463.

Kanter, R. (1977). Men and women of the corporation. New York: Basic Books.

Levin, K. (1997). Resolving social conflicts and field theory in social science. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Lippitt, R., Watson, J., & Westley, B. (1958). The dynamics of planned change. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Maher, S., & Pomerantz, S. (2007). The future of executive coaching: Analysis from a market life cycle perspective. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 5(1), 22-34.

Morris, D. (1991). The culture of pain. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Olalla, J. (2004). From knowledge to wisdom: Essays on the crisis in contemporary learning. Boulder, CO: Newfield Network, Inc.

O'Neill, M. (2007). An ROI method for executive coaching: Have the client convince the coach of the return on investment. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 5(1), 78-93.

Osherson, S. (1986). Finding our fathers. New York: Free Press. Rogers, E. (2003). Diffusion of innovations (5th ed.). New York: Free Press.

Schlosser, B., Steinbrenner, D., Kumata, E., & Hunt, J. (2007). The coaching impact study: Measuring the value of executive coaching. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 5(1), 140-161.

Schon, D. (1983). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action. New York: Basic Books.

Schon, D. (1987). Educating the reflective practitioner. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Sennett, R. (1981). Authority. New York: Random House.

Stacy, R. (1996). Complexity and creativity in organizations. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Taleb, N. (2007). The black swan. New York: Random House.

Vaill, P. (1989). *Managing as a performing art: New ideas for a world of chaotic change*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass.

Wheatley, M. (2006). *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.