Postmodernism and the World of Organizational Coaching

[Excerpt from *coachbook: A Guide to Organizational Coach Strategies and Practices*, written by William Bergquist and Agnes Mura.]

The Twenty-First Century has brought with it not only the prospects of advancement in technology and human welfare, but also organizational challenges associated with complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. (Bergquist and Mura, 2005) Men and women who serve in leadership roles are most likely to face these exceptional challenges. This doesn't necessarily mean that these women and men are situated at the top of the organization. In many cases, these men and women are asked to convene a task force, provide timely advice, mentor a new hire, or initiate a project. They might not even think of themselves as "leaders." In fact, these men and women may not even be formally invited to accept a leadership role. They may simply be in the right place, at the right time, to influence the organization of which they are members.

It may not be coincidental that the field called organizational coaching emerged at the same time (during the 1990s) as many organizational analysts began identifying and describing this postmodern world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence.(Vaill, 1989; Wheatley, 1992, Stacey, 1996) To the extent that organizational coaching is about enhancing the processes of performing, making decisions and discovering deeply felt values and aspirations within a world of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence, then this field is particularly timely and its future is bright.

We propose that any employee in an organization who must engage in work under the challenging conditions of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence—but particularly those in a formal or informal leadership role - can benefit from the assistance of a knowledgeable and skillful organizational coach. *Complexity* demands a level of cognitive functioning that often leaves us, as Robert Kegan (1994) suggests, "in over our heads." We must be able to understand and grapple with complex issues that are often nested inside other complex issues or are juxtaposed with other challenging issues. In complex settings we are faced with an additional challenge: we must simultaneously be able to think about our own thinking and take actions. We must be able to learn from our mistakes and successes, as well as be aware of the particular settings in which we learn and in which we don't learn (often called meta-learning)

We are even more challenged when faced with *uncertainty*. Under conditions of uncertainty, obviously, we can't predict what will happen next. However, there is an additional challenge: we are continually faced with new

information that comes from many different angles. We must continually accommodate to this new information while abandoning—at least temporarily—old assimilated models, assumptions, and social constructions of organizational reality (Berger and Luchman1967: Argyris and Schön, 1974; Argyris, 1989; Senge, 1990). Using Kurt Lewin's (1947) term: we are always unfreezing and never have a chance to settle in with our new learning and new accommodation.

Turbulence further compounds the challenge, given that we, as decision-makers, must live in a swirling "white water world" (Vaill, 1989) in which rapid change intermixes with patterned change, stagnation and chaos. Somehow in the midst of this turbulence—which is driven by ever-accelerating change—we must find our own personal (some would say "spiritual") core. We search for sanctuary from this turbulence and must always adjust to a world with new change-dynamics. At the end of the day, we can't even remember what happened to us at the start of the day—because we have had to make so many adjustments throughout the day!

We further propose that if we, as organizational coaches, can demonstrate in our daily work the value of the services we render as being directly aligned with, appreciative of, and effective in addressing the challenges of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence, then we can anticipate that the profession of organizational coaching will be sustained and become a mature discipline or inter-disciplinary domain. It will be a profession that plays a growing and increasingly important role in 21st Century organizational life. This book's purpose is to enable organizational coaches, internal and external, to deliver the highest efficacy to their dual clients: the organization and the person being coached.

Why 21st Century Leaders Seek Organizational Coaching

In their sometimes temporary and sometimes long-term leadership roles, 21st Century women and men face challenges of many different kinds, coming from many different sources. The system around them may have varying and often contradictory expectations regarding how this person is likely to *perform* as a leader, as well as how they would like this person to perform as a 21st Century leader. The leaders often find themselves making difficult *decisions* that impact not only on their lives, but also the lives of people about whom they care deeply. The leaders' fundamental *values* and the relationship between these values and those of their organization are always being called forth—and challenged. Are the leader's values and those of the organization aligned or does the leader repeatedly have to trade off what is most important in her life for that which the organization most values? Conversely, can the leader always consistently role model the noble values that make up the specific organizational culture in which he works?

In the flattened 21st Century organization, leaders often live in solitude, working in emotional *isolation* as performers, decision-makers, and people who must relate their own personal values with those of their organization. Even though these leaders may receive input from many sources, ultimately they alone must perform, make choices with unprecedented speed and align values and interests among dizzying numbers of stakeholders. These organizational responsibilities, often coupled with a need for confidentiality and support from equally over-extended peers and bosses, leave the leader with few, if any, outlets to share these burdens. We have noted with alarm that *burn out* occurs with great frequency among leaders at many different levels and in many different kinds of organizations—big and small, for profit and not for profit, high tech and low tech, manufacturing and service-oriented.

Our challenged leader might read an article about coaching or talk with a colleague about their successful use of a coach. Perhaps this will motivate the harried leader to contact a coach for help with her day-to-day work. She may use other words, but at the heart of the matter is a desire to break down the isolation. Increasingly, perceptive and strategic leaders and talent development professionals are learning to identify when a leader needs and deserves coaching. The coaching resources - external or internal – that are made available at that point hold the potential, if well prepared, of having a greater impact on the work life of the leader than any other single developmental activity that could be offered.

Certainly, sympathetic listening, a willingness to observe the leader in operation, and the skills needed to provide helpful feedback are essential in this situation, but these skills might not be at all sufficient. What does a planned, logical and sufficiently in-depth sequence of organizational coaching services look like if the leader is to be helped rather than harmed? This book will offer the reader a variety of suggestions regarding masterful organizational coaching strategies for today's leaders.

In many books these strategies are grouped under one heading, *executive coaching.* However, the term *executive* may not be appropriate, for the strategies we will describe and explore in this book encompass not only the coaching work with men and women who are in formal positions of leadership in an organization, but also the work with other members of an organization who seek out or find themselves in position of leadership under conditions of complexity, unpredictability and turbulence. Those who head committees on a local school board or who are Distinguished Engineers in a software company – with no direct authority over others—are leaders to whom people look up. A finance professional who takes the responsibility to raise attention about ethical conflicts is a leader, as is the supervisor who must inform a subordinate of his unsatisfactory performance. These people, along with formal titular leaders, must perform, make many decisions, and align values in meeting their civic or professional responsibilities.

Conclusions

This book describes ways in which each of these leaders, formal and informal, can best be supported by organizational coaching. We will use the terms *executive, administrator* or *manager* when describing work with those in formal leadership positions—but will in most instances use the much more broadly-defined term *leader* (or *client)*. Another implication of the term executive coaching as it is used in the literature is that it describes a *triangular* relationship. In that sense, we agree that all organizational coaching has to satisfy both the interests of the sponsoring organization and those of the individual being coached. Numerous return-on-investment (ROI) studies (for example, Schlosser, *et al*., 2007) are highlighting the impact of effective coaching on factors like performance, team climate, retention, innovation, strategic thinking and, ultimately, the financial bottom line.

Such organizational benefits are corollaries to the personal development and growth experienced by the individual leader being coached. The three interlocking gears on our book cover are a reminder of this—one of the greatest challenges and distinctions in organizational coaching: the triangular stakeholder configuration. The number of stakeholders involved can even grow in certain cases, when boards, communities or public bodies are involved in the successful outcome of a coaching assignment.