



## CHAPTER FOUR

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# ROOTS AND BOUNDARIES OF EXECUTIVE COACHING

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### **Develop through Coaching**

Executive coaching with clients from business, government, and non-profit workplaces is a young professional practice that is still forming its identity. Coaches and coaching practices are just now cataloging the benefits and limitations of the profession and working out the professional guidelines for the delicate boundary between the individual and the employer.

Executive coaching was born out of the leadership training movement, yet it shares the viewpoints of the adult development and human potential movements. The coach is a teacher, but the subject is the development of the whole person and, in turn, the development of the whole system.

### **Dilemma One: For the Individual and for the Organization**

Executive coaching, like most of psychotherapy, confers the privilege (and responsibility) of helping people develop on their own terms. Additionally, coaching operates within the constraint of contributing to business. There is a fine economic line to straddle in workplace coaching, as we must focus on the needs and wants of the individual while being accountable to the

health of the overall system. Because it is the organization that contracts with and compensates the coach, the organization needs to realize some form of benefit.

The benefits and necessary boundaries in executive coaching more closely match those normally found in client-centered psychotherapy than in familiar leadership training programs. As in athletic coaching, the primary responsibility of a leadership training intervention is to create a leadership team that performs as well as possible in the competitive marketplace. While the organization paying for the coaching intervention still expects the performance result, the executive's coaching goals are more personal and more diffuse. To make the best contribution to the overall success of the client's workplace, the coach focuses on the growth, well-being, and happiness of each client.

A typical workplace coaching program begins with the client's goals—within and without the workplace. Next is figuring out how to achieve them with this employer, if possible, and within the reality of the rest of the client's personal life. This is an area of personal futurist work. Working together, the coach helps the client construct a realistic and satisfying picture of the future, one that is rooted in the full panoply of the client's life story and the surrounding world.

What could possibly justify the corporation putting assets into such a project? Doesn't work like this belong at home, or in church, or in some "new age" self-improvement workshop? The only possible justification for the corporate expenditure in both time and money is that personal performance improvement turns into improved performance within the company. Fortunately, people perform better when they act in harmony with their authentic selves, and it is this realization that opens up a real opportunity for a win-win outcome.

Many companies have become wise enough to see their people as their prime resource. It is common practice to focus time and money on ways to help employees function more effectively. But we have begun to "hit the wall" in responding to the demands of the modern workplace for superhuman contributions from senior executives. Pushing people to ever greater effectiveness can result in unhealthy stress and disaffection and lead to burnout. Coaching takes into account a wider view of the support needs

of key people and adds further ingredients into the developmental mix. Improved effectiveness and lowered stress become part of a wider transformation of the person’s work life. The individual becomes more congruent by putting in to action goals and dreams and values, both in the world of work and beyond.

In our own practice, we see that the companies with the best performance do indeed support the development of the whole person. As people grow to become more creative and well-integrated, they are able to support the development of a better workplace. (See Figure 4.1.)

**FIGURE 4.1. CONGRUENT DEVELOPMENT**

<i>Company View</i>	<i>Successful Coaching View</i>	<i>Successful Outcome</i>
Reduce stress	Derived from values and personal goals	Work life and personal life become congruent
Remove dysfunctional behaviors	Increase behavioral options	Client tries new roles, behaviors, and tasks
Train in new skills and improve performance	Client takes on system-wide responsibility and influence	Leading/innovating from personal passion and widespread caring

Boosting the individual’s personal development, by coaching employees toward congruence and creativity, can accrue to the bottom-line health of the company as a whole. Fortunately, examples of personal growth contributing to corporate success abound.

One of our clients in a training function was suddenly thrown in over his head by a major change in responsibility. Instead of training middle managers in project management and supervisory skills, he rather suddenly found himself training executives in leadership, which demanded of him new skills in participatory design, working with senior leaders, and teamwork in a highly political context. Dealing with the senior management team required a broader repertoire of insights, stories, and wisdom.

In this case, as in so many others, the biggest developmental boost came not from the coaching our client received on workplace issues, but from his internal growth that spanned both the workplace and his private life.

Our client had been making significant progress in reframing issues in his intimate relationships. He was practicing inclusion of his wife and children in making family decisions. He had come to see his children's bids for independence as positive signs of growth. He had come to see his wife's very different and somewhat softer management style as highly effective and appropriate in many of the situations he and his leadership training participants were facing at work. He had learned to use the power of gratitude to dissolve conflict. He had discovered that he didn't have to play the hero around the home in order to be loved and appreciated—that in fact playing the hero often demotivated and disempowered others.

When he brought these lessons back to his work with the leadership team, he found the lessons very relevant. With his help, several members of the leadership team developed a more participative style. Better leadership began to spread. "Gratitude is the attitude" became a company mantra. The reward- and succession-planning process began to focus less on the heroes who saved the company's bacon and more on those leaders whose people were most creative and effective. The result was a significantly more effective organization.

## **Dilemma Two: Way Up from Already Good**

The essence of executive coaching is in helping the client move "way up from already good." The people who come to executive coaches are highly functional, often star performers; yet they have room for growth. Growth often begins with dissatisfaction with what is. So, how do you mix the right degree of admiration for what the client can do with enough encouragement to help them see what needs to be changed?

Society often perceives therapists as working in the arena of the dysfunctional; therapists try to fix that which is not functioning. Such a view can lead to a belief that the client is "sick." But in coaching we are not therapists; we are peers working with admirable people who are often highly advanced in their understanding of themselves and how to get the most out of who they are. Our clients are certainly not sick; instead they are exceptional people eagerly striving to continually develop themselves—way up from already good. And the coach is there to facilitate and help.

Coaches aim to significantly increase the executive's intelligent control and responsibility. Our work helps to realize the expression of our clients' highest talents and bring to the surface their deepest strength of character. At the core of our work is a desire for clients to become more congruent, more true to self, and thus more engaged and effective in both their work and personal lives. Our task is not to add knowledge. We are not obsessed with fixing something that is wrong. So it is better to regard coaches more as providers of personalized positive training—where the product is a precise, tailor-made, fulfilling intervention.

### **Dilemma Three: Changing the Individual, Changing the System**

In addition to our background as executive coaches, trainers, consultants, psychotherapists, and entrepreneurs (a typical sort of résumé for coaches), we are also unabashed systems theorists. So, many ideas from systems theory permeate our work. Thus, we work from two perspectives in coaching: that of the individual client and that of workplace environment or business system. We see each client both as an individual and as a part of a particular context, immersed in a particular set of relationships. *Is our executive coaching client shaped by the character of his or her workplace, or is the organization shaped by the character of the executive?* Both perspectives are useful, and the interplay of individual and system is the dynamic the individual is struggling to resolve.

The next story shows how the need to deal with barriers that were in the way of our client's success caused us to expand the boundaries within which an executive coach normally operates. For our assignment to be successful, we found we had to bring in another person whose role was complementary to that of the coach—a facilitator with a distinctly different set of boundaries and operating procedures. One of us retained the role of primary coach, while the other acted as facilitator of the larger system. In large organizational transformations, it is often necessary to work at the micro or individual level and at the macro or system level at the same time.

Our client was the CEO of an unusually structured service organization. Several members of the board of directors had formerly held the CEO post in the organization, and all of them felt an unusually strong sense of involvement with the idealistic goals and fate of the business. Members of the board—and even other shareholders—

frequently meddled in the business, often bypassing the CEO by telling her staff what to do and how to do it. The CEO disliked their inappropriate meddling in the business, but she needed their support, their continuing investment, and ultimately their continued support.

We came to this coaching assignment through the president of the board, because he was dissatisfied with both the CEO's leadership and the structure of the organization. He was concerned that the organization was losing money. He also noted that the staff seemed to have low morale and a world view that he coined "down-trodden worker-victim."

He asked one of us to coach the CEO and see what could be done to improve her leadership style. He wanted her to encourage more employee participation, urge initiative, and develop a responsive entrepreneurial focus.

The CEO had been hired to control costs and turn around a business that had been losing money for several years. She had excellent financial and business management skills and a deep spiritual path that aligned with the idealistic nature of the business and its owners. She was most comfortable with the owners and directors, spending time with them at retreats and socially. Conversely, she had not spent much time with the staff outside of formal meetings.

The CEO was not pleased with her own performance or the performance of the organization. People were not responding well to rather obvious cost control necessities. She faced a growing dissatisfaction from her staff and often felt frustrated and lonely.

The board blamed the staff as lackadaisical or uncommitted. When the CEO was with the board, rather than protecting her staff and asking for help in developing them, she often reinforced the board's prejudices by complaining about her employees. As the employees sensed that the board and the CEO blamed them for the organization's problems, morale dropped to the point that the quality of customer service was seriously affected.

The CEO knew the coach had been sent in because things were not going well. At first she presented the situation to us as one of poor organizational design. She claimed to be receiving confused directions from the board. Both were undoubtedly true. She also felt let down by her employees—both in their general responsibility level and in their specific lack of support for her efforts on their behalf. And indeed, they were disillusioned of all management.

Gradually our client became trusting enough to talk less about external causes and more about the opportunities she had for learning and improvement. She learned that we could be on her side even when we saw gaps in her effectiveness. Our client clearly had the necessary analytical skills in business management, but came to see that she needed to work on deepening her engagement with employees. She started to see her potential role as their inspirational leader and defender.

With coaching support she began to create her own clear and inspiringly fresh picture of where the organization could be headed—a courageous idea given the strength of the board's involvement in every detail of the operation. Board members

would bypass her and go directly to individual employees and tell them what to do. Often, these instructions caused her employees to start well-meaning projects that sabotaged her strategic plans; they were at variance with her coherent vision and put unexpected and unbudgeted pressure on the whole organization.

She desperately needed a tactic to put a stop to this behavior by board members. So when faced with this situation in the future, she primed all her employees to say, "Good idea. I'll suggest it at the next management meeting." Although apparently a simple device, this method of maintaining control carried significant risks for the CEO. She was afraid to offend board members—a justified concern given the short tenures of those CEOs who had preceded her.

Two things became clear to us. First, the CEO had a lot to learn about implementing the kind of participative leadership that actually suited her deep commitment to her spiritual path. Second, the organizational dysfunction was largely the consequence of factors beyond her control. We discussed the option of her quitting. Here we put to good use part of the ethical boundaries inherent in client-centered therapy. What the client wishes to achieve in the areas of worldly success, emotional experience, and spiritual growth is up to the client. Our job is merely to help them to see that there may be more productive options for approaching their goals. The hiring organization must accept that if the client's best interest is to leave, the coach will not stand in the way.

The client decided that she could learn more by staying on the job and trying to handle the situation, rather than by leaving during a crisis. She knew her job would continue to be painful, but she felt she was growing new capabilities and acuity at a rapid pace.

As we pondered how to proceed, boundary conflicts arose. As the CEO's coach, we could no longer talk with the board chair about the CEO's fitness to serve. Our coaching conversations had created a privileged communication that superceded our role as organizational consultants to the board. Fortunately, our work took us in a direction in which the client's interests and the organization's interests coincided: finding a way to restore employee morale. If we focused the reborn employee energy on creating enough new business to establish profitability, the company's interests would also be served.

In this case, as in many situations in family therapy, coaching the client to change was inadequate to change the situation. We applied a basic boundary precept from fields as diverse as family therapy and organizational change: "Get the whole system in the room!"

Each member of the groups making up the system, including the owners and directors, needed to learn about the larger system, so they could channel their good intentions into effective action for the benefit of the whole. With coaching help, the CEO orchestrated a series of small- and large-group interventions that built understanding and respect between the groups and also established common visions and goals for the organization as a whole. She became the synthesizer of a challenging and unwieldy organization, improved the nature of the board's contributions, and grew to meet the challenges of effective leadership in a very difficult situation.

The best coaches we know have business consulting or organizational leadership experience, as well as experience in psychotherapy and human development. They move seamlessly between asking good questions about the business issues and delving into issues of the leadership style and the psychological impact of their client's actions on others.

Coaches in the workplace must serve the larger system while serving the individual who is presented for help. Family therapy has decades of experience walking this line between the individual, their family, and society. Practitioners have developed the skills to protect the freedom and dignity and personal development of the individual (even the fragile dignity of adolescents!), while supporting the other members in having better lives.

In family systems jargon, the client who arrives for help is referred to as the “identified patient,” that is, identified by the family or group as needing help; the term implies that the entire family is the group to be helped, whether directly or indirectly through the identified patient. In many instances, whatever failings brought the identified patient into therapy can be looked at as a symptom of the group, rather than of the individual, whose behavior is, for better or worse, a response to the situation or even a backhanded attempt to change it.

For the coaching profession, the reminder of shared responsibility must be sterner: there is no identified *patient*—just good people, doing their best, encountering their growth needs, and trying to contribute in a system that somehow is not bringing out all they could be.

### **Dilemma Four: Integrating Work and the Rest of Life**

Today's organizations can no longer be run by the tough workaholic individualists of yesterday's executive pantheon. Workaholics, for instance, have not usually learned the gentler skills needed to motivate people to work across boundaries. Rapid change and the takeover of many routine tasks by computers has left a workplace in which much of what people do is innovate, integrate, motivate, and care. We desperately need executives who can liberate and lead people. Rather than being threatened by their best subordinates, leaders must be role models who relish liberated people bringing their full commitment and abilities into a more collaborative and democratic work-

place. By having success and happiness in their lives as a whole, executives are better equipped to help their employees develop their own wholeness.

One classic example of a development opportunity and challenge for the coach is to be found in the high achiever—a young executive whose strengths suggest grooming for very senior leadership. This highly productive and talented person is often hampered by weaknesses in personal communication style or human relationship skills. The corporation would like to see such weaknesses surgically removed and necessary relationship skills grafted on.

These individuals are often described as “driven.” They are determined to do whatever is necessary to contribute and to succeed, regardless of personal cost. It is believed that with the right evaluations, training, or mentoring they will be motivated to make whatever changes are necessary to be a more mature manager and human being. The obvious approach is to teach them skills such as communication and to develop their sensitivity to others. But this approach may run into a brick wall. The fact is that they are driven, already controlling themselves—often with elaborate sets of rules and beliefs about what kind of behaviors will win them approval. Even when conceptually well-grounded, more rules on how to behave may not produce a warmer, more empathetic, and broadly creative manager.

Often in these cases, the executive is expressing readiness for a deeper change. After a rapid series of promotions and outward successes he or she may say, “Is this all there is to it?” Hear this as the beginning of a perceptual shift from “How do I change myself to win the next rung on the ladder?” to “How do I get in touch with my deeper self and express the power of my values and my whole self in my work?”

When a client is reaching out for deeper meaning, an opportunity exists to release more of the “true self” that has been papered over by the demands of the “false self,” which was created to please others. Our true selves, in fact, have the built-in compassion and ability to see others, and so will naturally guide us toward developing better human relationship skills. When our words and music go together, when we can bring our hearts and heads and values to work, when we can be ourselves in all aspects of our lives, then we are congruent. (For more on this framework, read Alice Miller’s *The Drama of the Gifted Child*.)

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## The Cost of Not Coaching

One of our clients, the vice president of human resources at a large computer company, told us a story about George, one of their most effective intrapreneurs. George had launched an impressive string of successful new products. Both his technical and his business judgment were excellent. He was marked at an early age for succession to very senior management positions and became their youngest vice president.

As George took on responsibility as part of the team guiding the entire company, his eager beaver “just do it” personality became a liability. He was impatient with consensual processes and sometimes tactless in his defense of good ideas. Of course, this was just the flip side of the intrapreneurial personality that made him so valuable.

A mutual frustration developed. George was frustrated by what he saw as the agonizingly slow pace and lack of courage displayed by the leadership team. The rest of the team was frustrated by George’s impulsiveness and emotionalism when he did not get his way. By mutual agreement, George left to pursue other opportunities.

The vice president of human resources put it this way:

“It is clear to me now that if George had had a coach then, he would be a very senior member of our leadership team today. A coach could have helped him see how to be more effective by presenting himself in a way that didn’t rub other members of the team the wrong way. And we could use his impeccable business judgment and strategic vision working for us instead of the start-ups that have made him and his new investors very rich.”

As this story demonstrates, the cost of not coaching promising talent can be immense.

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## Tools and Limits for Coaching

Although coaching is not psychotherapy, psychological counselors have learned many lessons that can be of great help to coaches. The progressive

branches of psychotherapy have long been working on tools for bringing the whole person, with their heart, into their life and work. They have moved from fixing what is wrong to bringing out the extraordinary. “Whole people” bring a kind of magic into the systems they are leading. A challenge for the profession of coaching is to continue to find better ways to inspire personal development and to improve performance in individuals, and thus their organizations, while respecting the individual’s freedom and right to direct and control his or her own destiny.

Coaches without extensive training in psychotherapy may not be prepared to intervene in a client’s deep personality issues, nor is the workplace necessarily the proper venue to do so. Coaches help people to see how they can be more effective and to have the courage to go through the practice period when new behaviors are awkward. They are not delivering deep therapy, nor are they offering friendship or romance. Coaches must be vigilant in limiting work with the client to appropriate coaching objectives and interventions. The coaching profession is particularly in need of professional guidelines and limits to stay within the bounds of appropriate workplace support, while still addressing the client’s personal development. The discussions we hold to create and improve these guidelines will open inquiries into how our work promotes and embodies basic civil rights in the workplace, for instance, and how each member of an organization can combine more democratic ways of working with collaborative responsibility.

### **Collaborative Change Model**

The most important contribution of the psychotherapy model to coaching is the fact that people can cause their own positive change, in their inner worlds as well as outer worlds, and often can do better with a little help. George Kelly, a great teacher of clinical psychology and personality theory, talks about psychotherapy as a collaborative venture that begins with finding where the individual’s quest has bogged down and getting it going again. Given the rather short time frames and greater space between meetings that often characterize some phases in executive coaching, it is fortunate that people do most of the work themselves.

## Secure Base for Change

Because it can reach a deep level of a person's being, good executive coaching, like psychotherapy, begins with creating a safe space in which the client can begin to direct the change process. This involves a discovery of his or her own goals and better ways to achieve them.

It is unfortunate but true that coaches are sometimes brought in as a last resort, just before a high-potential employee is regretfully fired. This is a particularly difficult situation, because it does not fit the "making the better the best they can be" paradigm that defines coaching. If there is any hint that the employee is on the way out, we carefully check that we are not being called in as part of an attrition process, as this is definitely outside our scope of work. Sometimes we need to educate our client's boss. The boss must understand that we will never reveal to them what we learn in sessions, no matter how useful our knowledge might be in any decision to retain or fire.

In one such case, the client's employment was so near the edge that we refused to begin without a guarantee that the client had at least six months to show improved performance. In this climate of comparative security, at least free to learn and grow, the client opened himself to a wide feedback request that included thoughtful write-ups and conversations with former staff as well as current employees. He began making changes, learning to delegate more fully and to listen before offering his solutions.

Our client's explanation for his freedom to grow and change was the supportive character of all the interventions and help he received. He knew from the beginning that the coach was on his side, and he and the coach made a point of seeing that his key colleagues supported his new actions and initiatives. In this safe context, he first succeeded in his existing job and then in moving on to what he really wanted to do.

## Let Others Possess Their Experience

For clients to let go of their current patterns of behavior, someone needs to confirm the truth of their perceptions and feelings. Someone must acknowledge what it looks and feels like from the client's perspective. Only when they feel heard can clients stop defending their viewpoints for long

enough to see the larger picture in which their situations are embedded. Only when the truths inherent in the client's current perception are fully acknowledged can the client relax enough to see alternative viewpoints and alternative courses of action.

A clear example of this phenomenon is the executive of color who needs confirmation that discrimination exists in order to let go of excessive concern about it and get on with succeeding despite the existence of unfair obstacles. Someone needs to acknowledge the client's discomfort or humiliation so he or she can get beyond feelings and improve the situation. Often the first task of the coach is confirmation of the client's experience and predicament. This shared understanding of the client's painful experience is the first step toward creating a safe base from which to explore new options.

As helping professionals, we need to outgrow a deep, natural compulsion to fiddle with others' experiences. Coaching—in common with good psychotherapy or good parenting—must have at its foundation a trust in the client's experience, a willingness to witness it and accept it rather than change it.

In coaching, as in therapy, the act of confirmation returns control to the client. When we create a safe relationship in which the client can discuss and take ownership of his or her experience, we create an open system. As clients come to understand that they are not imagining their suffering—and that it is in fact reasonable to be discontented in their current situation—they gain the certainty they need to make changes in themselves and their situation. Here are some maxims we use to remember this kind of client respect:

- Never diminish clients—help them to grow.
- Don't invalidate their view of reality—help them to expand it.
- Be wary of telling the client what to think—ask good questions that leave room for self-respect.

## **Optimal Challenge**

Development for young and old is enhanced by the appropriate level of challenge and contradiction, especially in a relatively safe and supportive

context such as a good coach and good company can foster. Sometimes the client situation has plenty of challenge and “optimal frustration” to spur the learning without much help from the coach. Other times the coach must inject some artful challenge, a bit riskier intervention for the coach than just confirming the client’s view of the world.

With an optimal level of challenge, clients will widen their perspectives, leave their comfort zones, learn new things, try new things, listen with open minds, admit and learn from mistakes and successes alike, become more comfortable with change, learn to be more open, and become authentic. Clients can gradually see the opportunities and ingest learnings from the challenge, a big step toward taking effective action.

### Who Is Setting the Goals?

The client—not the coach, not the boss—controls the goals for the change process. One of our mentors, Robert Kegan, stated this best in his book *The Evolving Self*: “Among the many things from which a practitioner’s clients need protection is the practitioner’s hopes for the client’s future, however benign and sympathetic these hopes may be.” This is a harsh specific in the general rule that we strive to recognize and honor our clients’ distinctness. It is the client’s own hopes and goals that provide the ongoing boundaries around our collaborative endeavor.

It is difficult to protect our clients from our hopes for them, when we hope so much for the people we want to help. It is inconvenient when we have been given specific areas of improvement from an outside evaluation of the client. Nonetheless, to paraphrase Robert Kegan, In a world where people will increasingly put themselves in the hands of “coaches,” it is the coaches above all who must understand that much of human personality is none of their business.

### The Involuntary Client

A truism in psychotherapy, and in fact in any creative learning endeavor, is that the client has to want to be there and engage fully in the process. When an employee is “offered” a coach to correct deficiencies, perhaps after a

negative appraisal, it is a question whether the coaching is really voluntary. Yet, it is possible to engage a client who did not desire coaching by keeping his or her interests foremost in mind, and then gradually yet vigilantly returning autonomy and control to him or her.

## **Check Client and Company Intent**

As mentioned above, before we coaches start an assignment, we need to know whether coaching is merely a procedural step in a process leading to an almost inevitable firing. In some cases, management wants the emotional protection of knowing they “did everything possible” before letting someone go, or even to take testimony from us to support a firing on which they have already decided. This work we always refuse. We need to know the company’s full intent and how much support they can give to the client. Then we can decide if coaching is appropriate and if the situation is safe enough for it to be successful.

In our coaching we also try to identify the individual’s needs, wants, and underlying values to compare with those of the organization. It may feel bold at first to examine the fit of the coaching client and his or her particular workplace role, as though it would be disloyal to the company, but it serves to highlight the voluntary nature of the employee/employer relationship. Does the client have a good basis for commitment, the seed of contributions, to their work and their workplace? Is the fit with the workplace strong enough for a creative and productive interaction? Does the client want to stay for the long term, or at least try to stay for awhile? In our coaching, we often do a light evaluation on this issue in introductory conversations with the coaching client and the party who hired us, if different, before we agree to launch into a larger block of coaching.

## **Properties in the Relationships, Not Just the People**

A major contribution of psychotherapy to coaching is adding to our meager language of relationships. The philosopher Bertrand Russell reminded us not to confuse the language of objects with that of relationships. Object language dominates much of science (including psychology) and traditional

business thinking. For instance, “Jane is a manager” is *object* language, giving a property of a person or thing. “Jane and Joe are colleagues” is *relational* language, telling us nothing about the people considered separately, but telling us about something that exists between the people.

Problems arise when we are taken in by the myth that properties that in fact exist between people are properties of the individual considered separately. “John is my boss” can imply a lot about John and a lot about me that may or may not be true. For instance, “boss” may mean to me someone who has all the answers (or none) or someone I should defer to (or undercut). It is easy in any relationship to presume qualities in another that may or may not exist, rather than taking responsibility for finding out what the other person is really up to, and what I am contributing to the quality of the relationship. If things are not going well, I can always ask, without blame, “What am I co-creating in this relationship?” rather than, “What’s wrong with me?” or “What’s wrong with that other person?”

Although pathology and even evil are out there, it is both educational and effective to assume that the qualities of one’s relationships are mutually determined for both the coach and his or her clients. Strengthening this understanding for our clients can give them fresh perspectives and new opportunities.

## Open Listening

Every coach’s (in fact, every professional helper’s) most important task is to be a good listener, for the obvious reason that there is a gap to be bridged between the reality held by the client and what we hear through our inevitable filters. If we listen sensitively, we can begin to piece together how our client constructs him or herself and his or her world.

It is a wonder we communicate at all, given our different personal realities and the human proclivity for letting habit and prejudice filter our view of others. Establishing deep communication between two people with two distinct models of reality is a bit of a miracle, requiring that we expand the intersection of our minds, at the same time maintaining our inevitable separateness of self. To the extent we carry it off, communication is an evolutionary triumph. As coaches, we continually remind ourselves of the

power we can give to another by just listening, both directly (as our clients benefit from being heard) and as a model for them to use with others.

## Thinking the Best of Others

As professional helpers we must model responsibility for listening and learning about what is really going on with our clients, so that they will bring more wisdom to their own relationships. For instance, each of us, from time to time, will misconstrue another's actions as rejection. Many hurts and arguments begin this way. I may feel slighted when I enter a room and an important colleague doesn't look up. I can feel slighted and hurt, even though the other person is simply engrossed in a good novel or pondering his or her own problem of the moment. Differing expectations and assumptions of meaning are particularly difficult in cross-cultural relationships, a problem in our polyglot society and increasingly a problem in our mobile and global work world. Often our task is to lead our clients in finding a kinder understanding of others' behavior.

## Giving Meaning to the Facts

In the end, meanings determine the facts as much as vice versa. The core technique of coaching is creating a setting in which the client can change the meanings they and others put on the facts. Coaches conduct processes that encourage people to see more options for viewing reality and then discover which ways of seeing things will lead to a happier and more productive life.

George Kelly gave coaching a maxim of hope: "Whatever exists can be reconstrued." To the extent this is true, we have great opportunities for change, and a coach is able to help others create more constructive ways of construing the facts. However, lest this sound like "Think and grow rich," it is important to note that we are not alone in creating the meaning of our lives, for our lives are created in the spaces between us and others, as well as in our relationships to physical reality. Meaning, culture, our accomplishments, and even in some sense our talents, are co-created with others.

## Working at the Edge of Politics

Remembering the importance of each client's context or environment and understanding the quality of external conditions can humanize us and politicize us. Any coach knows this. Say a person is having trouble at work being the best he can be. Yes, it is his problem, and he has to improve his approach to it, but what is impinging on him? Health? Nutrition? Family stresses? Money problems? Poor sleep? A negative co-worker? An unhealthy office? We, like the client, can begin to see the world as unfair when we add to these the workplace culture issues that may devalue the client's style or talents. However, our assignment can only be to help change those things that can be changed. When whatever is unfair seems too big to be changed or endured, we must help the person either to become better at playing the game or to summon the courage to seek opportunity elsewhere.

## Helping Everyone Balance Status and Power

Managing status and power is another basic issue in coaching. Coaches must address both the perception and the reality of inequalities of status and power. One of our mentors, the family therapist Virginia Satir, brought these issues into her consulting practice. She pointed out the obvious, that we are all born small and fully dependent. From this unavoidable beginning, we are, in all cultures, vulnerable to establishing relationships of excessive and fixed dominance and submission. Satir taught her tens of thousands of students in the helping professions this: helping people change their relationships toward greater equality offers a direct way to reduce pain and suffering—no matter how seemingly psychological the suffering may be. Over the long term, people can outgrow their tendencies to expect and create relationships of dominance and submission.

It is ironic that people at every organizational level feel powerless before those in the levels above. Coaching can help clients to see that they are not as powerless as they feel. Then they can also let go of their own dominating behaviors.

## Limits of Individualism, Benefits of Service and Altruism

Coaching has this built-in liability: focus on the individual client can threaten the common good in the workplace. Rampant individualism without commitment to the common good, says Martin Seligman, produces widespread depression and meaninglessness: “Our society cannot tolerate for long these painful by-products of its obsession with self.” Our workplaces cannot tolerate too much obsession with self, or the depression and meaninglessness it engenders. Fortunately, workplaces with worthy missions provide the context for individuals to find purpose and meaning. It is the responsibility of the coach to help the client achieve personal meaning and more worthwhile purposes at work—and even in life. At the same time, the client can gradually take on the responsibility for raising the level of worthwhile purposes available to everyone in the workplace.

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## Conclusion

The profession of executive coaching is built on new concepts of human potential at work. The goal of coaching is not in fixing what is broken, but in discovering new talents and new ways to use old talents that lead to far greater effectiveness. The goal is to help people bring their whole selves to work because their authentic self, an integration of a wonderful collection of parts, has more capability than any part or acted out role.

More “fully human” people are necessary to realize the potential of the more democratic, more intrapreneurial learning organizations demanded by today’s rapidly changing marketplace. Indeed, the geometric increase in organizational productivity and innovation that is occurring today rests on the convergence of these two streams, organizational and human development: organizational innovations favoring freedom, teamwork, and shared mission are converging with modern ideas of adult development (freedom to “grow,” high-quality relationships, and worthwhile purposes). These more liberated organizations are the setting that maximizes the continuous learning and development of their members.

Executive coaching is both person-centered and system-centered. We are not training or “fixing” people, but freeing and focusing them to be their very best. Successful coaching achieves positive change for both the individual and the system.

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## About the Contributors

**Elizabeth Pinchot** is an executive coach, consultant and author with thirty years of experience. As founding and current president of Pinchot & Company, she has coached and trained senior executives in large organizations as diverse as the U.S. Forest Service, Canadian National Railroad, a large computer company, and the New York Stock Exchange. Elizabeth has coached entrepreneurs in startups, such as high-tech and social service companies in Moscow, Silicon Valley startups, and consulting companies, and has advised the executive directors and senior staff of many nonprofit companies in a consulting capacity. She has also chaired three boards of directors.

*The Intelligent Organization*, co-authored with Gifford Pinchot, shows how to liberate the full talents of employees through a self-organizing combination of free intraprise and organizational community.

In earlier years Elizabeth was a staff clinician in an out-patient clinic delivering psychological services to individuals, groups, and families. She also maintained a private practice of counseling individuals. Prior to forming Pinchot & Company, Elizabeth co-founded and ran several businesses, including a manufacturing business and a teacher training center, and was a founding staff member of the first computer-assisted education project, a joint venture of IBM and Stanford University.

Elizabeth attended Wellesley College, graduated from Stanford University in philosophy and psychology, received a master’s degree from the University of Oregon in education and child development and another from Goddard College in counseling psychology.

**Gifford Pinchot** is an author, speaker, coach, and consultant on innovation management and related topics. He has coached teams launching over

five hundred new products and services, entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs, and leaders of large firms wishing to create a better climate for innovation. His particular specialty is working the interface between difficult business problems and personal growth.

Gifford's best-selling book, *INTRAPRENEURING: Why You Don't Have to Leave the Corporation to Become an Entrepreneur*, has been published in fifteen languages. The word "intrapreneur," coined by Gifford to describe the intra-corporate entrepreneur, has been included in the *American Heritage Dictionary* and *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary*.

In his second book, *The Intelligent Organization*, co-authored with Elizabeth Pinchot, this vision is broadened to include a revolutionary way of organizing all work, from the most innovative to the most mundane. Gifford approaches the subject of innovation from personal experience, ranging from a role as CEO of a Silicon Valley software firm, a partner in a venture capital firm, and the licensing of two of his patents.

After graduating with honors from Harvard University in 1965 with an A.B. degree in economics, Gifford studied neurophysiology at Johns Hopkins University. In April 1999, he co-authored *Intrapreneuring in Action: A Handbook for Business Innovation*.

