Contextual Coaching in Organizational Change

or

Seeing the Water We’re Swimming In!

Marilyn Taylor, Ph.D. and Julie Westeinde, MBA

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2004, 2(1), 4-14. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

Journal information:
www.ijco.info

Purchases:
www.pcpionline.com
Contextualizing Coaching in Organizational Change
Or Seeing the Water We’re Swimming In!
Marilyn Taylor, Ph.D. and Julie Westeinde, MBA

In this article, Taylor and Westeinde relate distinctive coaching approaches to an evolving landscape of demands for organizational change that continue to shape what we do as leadership coaches. Taking leadership (in contrast to custodial-oriented management) to be “the process of creating change to obtain results,” the authors review key perspectives on leadership and organizational change as they have evolved over the past century. Taylor and Westeinde suggest that the resulting range of interpretations of “organization change” and “leadership” that co-exist in the postmodern workplace requires a paradigmatic literacy in leadership coaching. Their intent is to make a small contribution in that direction.


Approaches to leadership have evolved through waves of change from the premodern patriarchy to the modernist hierarchical bureaucracy to postmodern, networked systems. We identify three paradigms of planned organizational change that emerged in chronological sequence. We have called them: (1) engineering the organization; (2) humanizing the organization; and (3) connecting the organization. We then elaborate a view of how these approaches to organization change have had radically different implications for the roles of leaders and ultimately for the coaching task.

While their emergence is consecutive, the existence of these different mental models of change leadership is also concurrent in our postmodern global reality. Organizational contexts are often “mixed mode” and, within a given organization, leaders and members often represent a simultaneous array of perspectives. For these reasons, we believe that executive or leadership coaches require a paradigmatic literacy—the ability to recognize underlying assumptions and perspectives and coach effectively those who hold them. Indeed, leadership coaching is now about enabling the fundamental shifts in perspective that leaders experience in negotiating their way along a continuum. This continuum extends from managing in hierarchical or modernist organizational cultures to leading in dynamic swirling organizational and inter-organizational innovations designed to keep pace with exponential change.

In offering this overview, our intent is provide a practical conceptual framework that fosters conscious choices concerning the selection of coaching approaches in relation to demands of organizational contexts on leaders.

Changes in Organizational Change
In a time of exponential change, we are more likely to become aware of the “water we’re swimming in” because we are consistently disturbed by it. During periods of relative calm we are more able to disregard our contexts. In Western civilization the 20th Century began in relative global stability and ended in a crescendo of turbulence and unpredictability. With 21st century eyes, we notice that organizations have both shaped and been shaped by enormously different cultural and technological contexts. We have now just celebrated the centenary of flight beginning with a short
twelve-second flight of the Kitty Hawk that has led us to the capability of reaching the other side of the planet within twelve hours. Our neighbors, colleagues and competitors are now global and culturally, politically, and economically diverse. Within this transforming environmental context, mental models of organizations and organizational change have shifted fundamentally.

_Mental Model 1:_ In an apparently stable environment, leaders could expect to gain control operating the organization as a smooth functioning machine with workers considered as replaceable parts.

_Mental Model 2:_ When workers' motivation and drive ebbed in a mechanistic environment, leaders, while still 'in control' were challenged to take into account more dynamic human factors and to understand the organization as a living entity, an organism.

_Mental Model 3:_ In an increasingly complex and turbulent environment, leaders are challenged to focus on dynamic organizational context and to consider the organization as a node in a interconnected network.

**"Engineering" the Organization**

The initial practice of change management was focused on making organizations smooth functioning and efficient machines. An innovation attributed largely to Frederick Taylor, scientific management was oriented to averting conflict and capricious decision-making that hampered productivity and diminished the quality of work life. By gathering and studying data, gaining agreement and implementing more effective work structures and procedures, organizations could function predictably and reliably. This fundamental assumption dominated organizational theory and practice throughout most of the 20th century, its latest manifestation being business process re-engineering.

From this perspective, change leaders create a pathway for custodial managers of an organization. It designed and run, based on scientific principles, would simply have to be maintained and occasionally repaired. Organizational change was an infrequent event. By mid century, an increasingly changing environment challenged the mechanistic model. Classical strategic planning that emerged in the 1950's can be seen as an attempt to deal with maintaining stability and control.

The performance of employees, in this view, is critical but predictable if each job was defined in detail and people carefully instructed to do the job. Since tasks are repetitive, learning is a "one time" proposition. The focus is on motivation: a carrot (for example, fair and adequate compensation) and stick (for example, threat of job loss) approach. The rationale and strategy behind proposed changes were thought to be unimportant for employees to understand; "tell" and, perhaps, "sell" were expected to be sufficient.

External support to leaders was appropriately the expert consultant—an "organizational engineer" to advise on the construction of effective organization structures and procedures. The organizational functions and requirements were cascaded down through the ranks of employees to those doing the work.

**Humanizing the Organization**

Mid-century challenges to the mechanistic model came, in some cases, from knowledge gained through WWII. Art Kleiner summarized the explosion of organizational change initiatives that occurred in the three decades after WWII (1950's to 1970's) as part of the movement to recover "the value of human relationships..."
leadership training and development, and teambuilding linked to the redesign of organizational structures and procedures that were to take into account the human factors. Personnel services, including employee assistance programs, and human resource departments emerged as formal units to deal with “the people side” of organizations.

Ironically, many of these initiatives, whether services, training or solving organizational problems, originated from “those at the top for those below.” The underlying assumptions were organismic, contrasting with mechanistic notions, but remained within the epistemology of modernism. It was assumed that there are answers “out there.” If not known now, these answers are knowable through application of scientific methods. This theory of knowledge maintained organizational leaders and consultants as experts responsible for determining solutions and directions. However, employees’ needs for personal fulfillment and ‘self-actualization’, also include the need for enhanced responsibility and exercise of influence. By definition, this could not be “taken care of” by more influential others.

The second theme in humanizing the organization became that of promoting participation in decision-making among employees. Consultants and theorists such as Douglas McGregor and Lewin’s protégés such as, Kenne Benne and Leland Bradford at the National Training Laboratories (later called the NTL Institute), generated research and knowledge about these organizational practices that revealed humanizing organizations was integral to planning the business process. Employees needed to be involved; technical advances would only be valuable if they were meaningful to those who implement them, according to McGregor. The first form of employee participation in decision-making about

The spotlight shifted to social and psychological aspects of organizational life. Leading thinkers like Herzberg and Abraham Maslow highlighted the human needs obscured by a mechanistic view of the workplace: social and achievement recognition, self-esteem, personal fulfillment. Physical and safety needs are necessary but not sufficient. Lewin and his colleagues demonstrated the power of the human group in changing attitudes, beliefs and, ultimately, behaviour. They also discovered the power of second order learning and change—that is, awareness and redesign of the social processes that generate social products (a key theme we will return to later).

During the 1950’s, these insights were transferred from social and educational laboratory settings to the workplace in what came to be known as organization development (“OD”) or “organizational planning and management development.”

and community”, “…that human spirit.”

There are two related themes. The first concerns the significance of human needs in the workforce, beyond material compensation, and the impact of social dynamics in groups and organizations on organizational productivity. Frederick Herzberg’s two-factor theory of motivation exemplified this shift in thinking. Scientific management approaches had invested in what Herzberg called “hygiene factors” (adequate compensation, appropriate supervision, decent working conditions, etc.) to motivate employees. Managers came to recognize that motivation issues were not disappearing; employees were not inspired by being replaceable parts of a “machine,” exchanging their “piece work” for a steady income. What were the implications of the fact that employees are human beings? What does this mean for fostering productivity?
the business process came from those at the top in what we will call "participative change management."

Supports to leaders were external and internal organizational consultants who gathered data from employees about identified organizational problems and worked largely with leaders to develop and implement solutions. Consultants ranged in their activity from providing expert advice about how problems should be solved to that of providing expertise in guiding the process of inquiry and decision through which leader could evolve and implement solutions.

The changes in organizational change were to this point driven predominantly from the top and were oriented primarily to change within the organization. The exception to this statement was the robust field of strategic planning. Advocates for planning, however, struggled to connect people within organizations to emerging relevant environmental trends. They have encountered the same difficulties as the OD practitioners in motivating and gaining commitment from those people throughout the organization who have to deliver the change.

Connecting the Organization
A third perspective, that of the organization as an open system within a constantly changing environment, focused attention on change both within and outside the organization. This perspective is gaining credibility as turbulence has become a predominant and global reality. "Living systems coped with turbulence by generating their own order from the bottom up" as Kleiner noted.11 So, simultaneously with a wider attention, comes enormous pressure on organizations to reconfigure authority and responsibility through participative approaches to organization and the empowerment of employees. Lewin, Lippitt and White had long since published their landmark study revealing the strengths of democratic leadership over authoritarian and laissez-faire approaches: it fostered capable initiative.12

The capabilities of adults in teams to self-organize and effectively participate increasing productivity was further underlined in the operation of self-directed military units during WWII and a host of very different workplaces in England, Norway and Australia. Eric Trist and Fred Emery13 pioneered the sociotechnical systems (STS) approach that evolved into open systems theory. In North America, Ron Lippitt created a "preferred futuring" process that has now been updated and published by his son, Larry Lippitt.14

Within the last two decades, an explosion of whole systems change processes have spun out of these earlier models (see Holman and Devane15) and are being used widely in the world. Marvin Weisbord16 notes that organizational change has changed from "experts solve problems" (Taylorism), to "everybody solves problems" (participative management), to experts designing whole systems (STS), to "everyone improves whole systems" (large systems change processes). What is important, we think, is that these are not methodologies so much as they are perspectives (altered assumptions and beliefs) about organizational change.

Any approach, however participative and widely scoped, can become a set method that is "run" by experts. The critical shifts are cultural. They involve the development of habits of mind, collective and technical advances would only be valuable if they were meaningful to those terms perspective that radically reconfigures our ideas about leadership and participation. We understand "organization", "mission", and "goals" to be iterative and dynamic, and the requirement of good
choices is contextual in nature.

Nowhere is this shift of mind more in demand than in the connections between organizations and other relevant systems in their environments—suppliers, customers, local and global partners. The term being used is: “boundaryless” organization. “This is an organization with flexibility and permeability across hierarchical boundaries, interdepartmental boundaries (silos), external boundaries and geographical barriers.”17 We might call this a shift to “network management.”

Implicit in this wider scope of attention, intention and action is the demand to engage multiple perspectives among culturally (professional, organizational, regional, national) diverse players. Ashkenas and his associates18 call for “busting boundaries” through attentive and dialogue processes and learning to translate the results of dialogue in action. “Ongoing dialogue and action require organizations to change their basic supporting infrastructures to reinforce and encourage cross boundary collaboration.”19 They call on leaders to create ambiguity proactively and, in doing so, to foster comfort with “the boundaryless journey.”

There is a corollary to the trend toward key working relationships in organizational life that transcends organizational boundaries: the rise of communities of practice as a foundation for learning and continuing professional development. Professionals coalesce for learning and collaboration on the basis of common practice interests and values, regardless of institutionalized professional associations and the like.

A contextual perspective requires a shift from top down leadership to leadership as partnership. It also highlights the fundamental interconnectedness of things. It is an inherently emergent ecological perspective. As such, the organizing structures and sustaining relationships are not ‘forms’ and formalities, but values and intentions. We think this is the leading edge of the emerging “organization” in a postmodern era.20

Changes in the Nature Of Coaching in Organizations

Organizational life and culture is the context for the demands on and quality of coaching to organizational leaders. We want to sketch a parallel direction in the evolving practice of leadership coaching that we think offers a useful perspective within which to understand our practice. Table 1 (page 11) overviews the themes we will explore.

As we have seen, organizational life was transformed over the past century through waves of change from the premodern patriarchy to the modernist hierarchical bureaucracy to postmodern, networked system. While leaders impact organizational forms, so, too, do organizational forms hold what Robert Kegan21 calls a “hidden curriculum” for people in them. The demands of the classic modernist organization, at first, seems to have drawn forward a premodern perspective—what Kegan calls “third order consciousness” (“socialization”)—in which “…we become truly part of society (rather than its ward or charge) when society has become truly part of us.”

Expert consultants and leaders in scientific management transfer knowledge about what needs to be done to make the organization work efficiently. This knowledge is applied by leaders and workers (each in their well-defined roles) to their respective tasks. The type of learning required is first order22 or single loop learning.23 Knowledge and skills are acquired that may be needed to transact the technical work. Single loop learning is primarily applied to modernist forms of organiza-
tional change.

Argyris describes single loop learning as changing routine behaviour incrementally: “To give a simple analogy: A thermostat that automatically turns on the heat whenever the temperature in a room drops below 68 degrees is a good example of single-loop learning.”

Flood and Romm elaborated on the “means-end” thinking of single loop learning: “The general issue is, how should we operate to meet best those ends? Other definitions of ends are either not recognized or not valued. The consciousness of single loop learners is non-reflexive... task oriented, oriented exclusively to identifying the best means to meet their defined ends.”

Bergquist observes that “traditional coaching” in organizations is compatible with the demands for learning in a classical modernist bureaucracy. This type of coaching is supervisory in nature. These coaches “...begin with the assumption that [they] teach their clients how to do something that the clients are not now able to accomplish on their own. ...Coaches [are those] with sufficient expertise to not only identify the areas for improvement but also provide the instruction, direction and prompting needed to bring about these improvements.”

In the first issue of JJCO, Lazar and Bergquist elaborated a taxonomy of types of coaching that occurs in organizational settings. This “traditional” or “supervisory” coaching is a form for the first type of coaching, namely, “performance coaching” in which the focus is on development of the appropriate behavior. Performance coaching is about solving puzzles for which there are answers, clear definitions and measurable outcomes.

The shift in perspective to organizations as human sys-

tems brings with it the appreciation that there are fewer clearly defined answers and leading becomes a more complex challenge. Learning required for responding effectively in complex and dynamic realities is double loop learning, a focus on how. Argyris, continuing the analogy of the thermostat, compares double loop learning to the “smart thermostat”. “A thermostat that could ask, ‘Why am I set at 68 degrees?’ and then explore whether or not some other temperature might more economically achieve the goal of heating the room would be engaging in double-loop learning.”

Flood and Romm make the additional points that double loop learning involves interpretation. Interpretivism recognizes that definition of ends and means is problematic because there are many different viewpoints on ends and means. A new centre of learning is set that asks, are we doing the right things? This specific question in other words is, what should we do? ... Ends become accommodations or reconciliations between people. The means becomes a participative, open and free debate.

Lazar and Bergquist describe the second type of coaching as executive coaching. This is coaching focused on decision-making about complex challenges in organizational life, the development of a refined awareness of how we make decisions and intervene. We suggest that this approach to coaching is critical as a contributing intervention in supporting the humanizing of organizations. Leaders are challenged to relate to others in the organization as actively, creatively contributing human beings, not as objects with predictable responses. Strategic elements of executive coaching are: awareness of options, beliefs and as-
sumptions (reflective coaching); awareness of personal style and strengths (instrumented coaching); and insight into chosen actions and their effects (observational coaching). Here the coach is an experienced fellow traveler more than a source of expert advice. As with consultation, there is a switch from expert to process-oriented capabilities.

The quantum shift in the focus for learning from single to double loop learning implies an increasing intensity in the relationship between coaches or consultants and organizational leaders, and more profound demands for trust and credibility. While single-loop learning is about learning what we know we don’t know, double-loop learning often implies learning what we didn’t know we didn’t know. We are much more vulnerable:

Dealing with double-loop learning problems requires dealing with the defenses of human beings. Thus, situations in which participants give cues that they or others might feel embarrassed or threatened are likely to require double-loop learning. Problems that are undiscussable are likely to be double loop; and the undiscussability itself is most certainly a double-loop problem, as is the cover-up of the undiscussability. Problems that persist despite efforts to solve them are likely to have double-loop issues embedded in them.

The demands of executive coaching are distinctly different from those of performance coaching. Not only is there a requirement to have a refined awareness of social processes and patterns in events and relationship, but executive coaching credibility and reliability is contingent upon how we, as coaches, understand ourselves, as well, and are open to learning about ourselves. We must, ourselves, be double-loop learners.

We suggest that, as leadership and complex challenges requiring thoughtful decision, judgment and courageous action become distributed widely in organizations, this orientation to coaching for decision-making is significant. “Executive coaching” is not simply identifying the person being coaching in terms of their hierarchical organizational positions (as an “executive”).

A demanding self-observation learning stance on the how of leadership prepares the way for an even more penetrating examination of why we are leading and who are we to be leading. These examinations are prompted by challenges faced when engaging the different realities of a dynamic global context. Here we become aware of tacit choices, values, assumptions and purposes inherent in our actions. We engage with others who have made very different choices. The pace of change requires us to be oriented and mindful our actions within value frames, rather than stable structures, procedures, protocols, and codes of behaviour.

A networking organization that operates beyond geographic and cultural familiarity requires us to examine our own “cultural reasoning” and our deepest purposes. We seek to establish common ground across fundamental differences in norms, values and beliefs. These challenges take us both widely beyond our local and cultural experience and simultaneously deeply within ourselves and “inside” the human experience.

Lazar and Bergquist identify a third type of coaching they call “alignment coaching” with four sub-varieties: “discerning one’s spiritual direction” (spiritual coaching); “examining fundamental frames of reference” (philosophical coaching); “identifying and acting on one’s values and ethics” (ethical coaching); and “identifying and acting upon broad life and career preference patterns” (life and career coaching). We believe this form of coaching is becoming more preeminent with the
Table One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Underlying Perspective</th>
<th>Change Orientation</th>
<th>Consultation Mode</th>
<th>Order of Learning</th>
<th>Coaching Emphasis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mechanism</td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>Expert on Organizational Structures and Procedures</td>
<td>Single Loop</td>
<td>Performance Coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organicism</td>
<td>Humanizing</td>
<td>Expert on Personnel or Options for Organizational Solutions and Organizational Change Processes</td>
<td>Single and/or Double Loop</td>
<td>Performance and Executive Coaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contextualism</td>
<td>Connecting</td>
<td>Expert on Organizational Redesign Processes, Dialogue and Inquiry Processes</td>
<td>Double Loop and/or Triple Loop</td>
<td>Executive Coaching and Alignment Coaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
shrinking of distances between the peoples of the world. We must fully appreciate our interdependencies with people of widely divergent philosophies and cosmologies and, indeed, the ecology of life on the planet within which we pursue organizational purposes as leaders.

Flood and Romm suggest that triple loop learning is about power and the consequences of power relations:39

Triple loop learning is about increasing the fullness and depth of learning about issues and dilemmas faced and ways of managing them. It wants to establish tolerance between all three centres of learning and preserve the diversity therein. It does this by bringing together the three questions from the three loops into one overall awareness: are we doing things right, and are we doing the right things, and is rightness buttressed by mightiness and/or mightiness buttressed by rightness?

Conclusion

From a systems perspective, our work as leadership coaches is meaningful and effective in relation to changing organizational contexts that, in turn, are constructed within wider cultural environments. Over the period of a century, Western culture has evolved through premodern, modern and postmodern eras that have generated three consecutively emerging mental models of organization. These models have, in turn, generated three fundamentally different change leadership challenges—engineering the organization, humanizing the organization, and connecting the organization.

As coaches, we require fluency in all of these mental models if we are to be attuned to and understand the leaders whom we coach. Our fluency is required also in order to enable these leaders to become fluent themselves in these different models. Leaders need this wisdom and the attendant insights as they foster change and negotiate their way through “mixed mode” organizations with colleagues, employees, partners, and stakeholders who represent multiple perspectives

Marilyn Taylor, Ph.D.
www.cirehs.ca

Marilyn Taylor is President of the Canadian Institute for Research and Education in Human Systems, a change leadership coach, author and editor of books and articles on transformational learning, leadership education and human systems change, Emeritus Professor of Concordia University (Montréal), and Adjunct Professor at the University of Toronto.

Julie Westeinde, MBA
www.breakthroughlearning.ca

Julie Westeinde is an Associate with Break Through Learning Associates in Ottawa, Canada. She is an accomplished change management consultant and coach to organizational leaders. She has provided coaching and consultation to business, public service and NGO’s in Canada and internationally.

References

2 For those who may be interested in a more intensive consideration of these different perspectives, Stephen Pepper elaborates mechanism, organismic and contextualism as three of four fundamental “world hypotheses” in World Hypotheses: A Study in


The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO) is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, www.pcpionline.com, to view and purchase our growing line of products.

If you have administrative questions, please refer them to our IJCO Office Manager, at officemanager@ijco.info. For advertising, marketing and operations inquiries, please refer them to John Lazar, IJCO Co-Executive Editor, at john@ijco.info. Please submit unsolicited manuscripts for peer review consideration to the IJCO office manager at officemanager@ijco.info.

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

Journal information: www.ijco.info
Purchases: www.pcpionline.com