



The International Journal of  
Coaching in Organizations

# IJCO

*Coaching for Connection in Complexity:  
Leaping the Cultural Chasm*

By Marilyn Taylor, Ph.D.

This article first appeared in the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2006, 4(1), 30-33. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at [john@ijco.info](mailto:john@ijco.info) for such permission.

*Journal information:*

[www.ijco.info](http://www.ijco.info)

*Purchases:*

[www.pcpionline.com](http://www.pcpionline.com)

2006

ISSN 1553-3735

© Copyright 2006 PCPI.  
All rights reserved worldwide.



Professional Coaching Publications, Inc.

# Coaching for Connection in Complexity: Leaping the Cultural Chasm

BY MARILYN TAYLOR, PH.D.

*Brian Pelchat describes complex social, leadership, intercultural and political challenges in the wider context of the natural environmental imperatives. He is situated as the head of a territorial government department, his employer being the most powerful player in a relatively new multi-organizational system charged with delivering specific decisions and policy that are acceptable to parties with widely diverse goals and values.*

This commentary explores Brian Pelchat's complex challenges—as a coach might invite Brian to reflect upon them. How he might consider ways in which he and other players might participate and deliberate collaboratively and effectively? The frame offered by the coach is a systems perspective, selected for two reasons. First, it can embrace the complexities Brian must engage simultaneously as he provides leadership. Second, a systems perspective is consonant with the ecological context and, most importantly, is likely to be most compatible, if not resonant, with the traditional aboriginal world view embraced by First Nations partners.

Brian's goals for coaching have not been stated in the case but, unlike a real coaching relationship, I will assume some that I might have assisted him to identify here. One is that he has a genuine interest in making a complex governing system work to the best interests of First Nations communities and the Yukon tourist industry. He hopes coaching will help him to achieve this. Another is that in order to accomplish that goal, he wants to develop his abilities and those of his staff to provide leadership most effectively in this unique and challenging context.

The starting point might be for Brian to reflect on and elaborate his awareness of his own place within the multi-organizational system as a non-aboriginal person in a strategic position in the most powerful organization within the system. In his case, Brian has indicated his awareness of the legacy of mistrust that is a consequence of misuse of power that his and other governments have visited upon First Nations peoples. The settlements provide political structures designed to 'right the wrongs' and prevent future inequities. While they are impressive, the racial memory remains.

So, the challenge of the agent of government in every undertaking is to earn credibility among aboriginal people, a task made difficult by history. The convoluted processes outlined in the case are consequences, in part, of the difficulty and importance of balancing and protecting aboriginal interests within the territorial governance system in which there is low trust. So Brian and his staff have both the opportunity and the challenge of embodying a different 'message' and of earning that credibility minute-by-minute. Success in this endeavor requires extraordinary consciousness of their own assumptions about 'the other' and themselves in relation to the other, including how they are perceived by 'the other'.

A reflective coaching strategy could catalyze Brian's awareness of his own assumptions so as to optimize his capacity for communication with First Nations players in the collaborative governance system regarding wildlife and the environment. Coaching or coaching skills training might also be effective for Brian in fostering similar refinements among his staff that interface with aboriginal members in their work. Though during part of my childhood I went to school with Indian and Métis children in Canada's north, I would be constrained as a coach in 'seeing' Brian's limiting assumptions in this context. Brian might therefore want one or several aboriginal persons to coach him and his staff in this regard.

An additional strategy<sup>1</sup> that might compliment coaching for intercultural communication quality is the creation of what a colleague of mine calls, "dialogical spaces". These are spaces where aboriginal and non-aboriginal players in the governance system can come together, without specific decisional and deliberative tasks, to create mutual understanding. In a highly contentious environment, the discourse is largely debate—advocating one's point of view and countering the other party or parties. Dialogue differs from debate in that the concern for getting to a decision is suspended in order to step back and explore the differences, apparent contradictions, conundrums and so on. The drive for decision keeps the discussion at 'the surface' focused generally on the elements and consequences of issues. It also creates intrapersonal and interpersonal tension and anxiety that draws participants into defensive postures (sometimes unconscious). These postures, in turn, reduce one's capacity to open up and listen deeply to the other. An analogy for the intent of dialogue is the "reveal codes" feature on a computer word processing program. These codes make visible the programming that controls text format.

Brian's case contains data that suggest there has been dialogue between or among cultures. (First Nations communities also have their differences.) The different meanings of wildlife among parties to the agreement have been set out in some detail in the case description. But there are also cultural assumptions regarding how people relate to each other, how decisions are made, how conflict is managed, how records are kept, how authority and responsibility are expressed and so on. There are likely to be sources of difficulty in any new system. In one that comprises more than one culture, it will be even more important to foster collective reflection and dialogue to get 'beneath debate' to the assumptions and perceptions that are holding the apparently incompatible and contrary positions in place. Ironically, while dialogue as an organizational intervention is a recent innovation in Western culture,<sup>2</sup> it has been a prominent feature of most traditional cultures in the aboriginal world.

For Brian, 'selling' the proposal for dialogue events to parties in the governance system would likely be a major challenge. The strongest opposition to this proposal is likely to be found in his own organization where budget approval for meeting expenses are justified on the basis of specific, immediate and decision-related objectives. There is a potentially beneficial result of Brian stewarding this proposal (besides its inherent value). Brian may witness what his aboriginal colleagues have often experienced in advocating culturally unfamiliar proposals to his organization. Interestingly, as an 'outsider', he would be encountering the depth of the chasm between his own instrumental culture, one oriented primarily to achieving ends, and the aboriginal world's relational culture, one oriented to being in 'right relation' according to custom. He would, in that sense, 'stepping across the other side' however momentarily. So the proposal for dialogue as well as the experience of dialogue may serve as means for discovery of those

deep paradigmatic differences that create the surface patterns of difficulty. Brian's experience in engaging his own organizational culture from another paradigmatic perspective could generate invaluable material, the use of which could be amplified by coaching.

Brian has presented the substance of issues and differences between aboriginal and non-aboriginal hunting and fishing practices. With a strengthened foundation of mutual understanding among the persons participating in the collaborative governance system, there may be the possibility of developing a "third position"—one that transcends the limits of the two current cultural perspectives to wildlife management. This trend has already begun as Brian reports what he has called the most significant result of the fish and wildlife management agreements: "Rather than each party independently managing fish and wildlife to the extent of its powers, they have informally agreed to work together to develop and deliver a single unified management plan for all fish and wildlife species within each First Nation's traditional territory."

The trend is also reflected in the parties' agreement that traditional and scientific knowledge should be integrated and used for mutual benefit as well as being beneficial to the habitat and its species—though this has yet to be accomplished. From a coaching standpoint, there might be opportunities for working with Brian and perhaps his staff to optimize their awareness of this direction as a choice in his work and for opportunities to foster this strategy. His comment about his own position on knowledge use suggests that integration is a priority; he may be interested in considering a third alternative which could be just one step beyond what he has stated as a preference. This approach may also address Brian's concern about the benefits to be derived from knowledge resources that are "free from politics".

The third alternative means defining the issue and goals beyond those that are espoused by both parties and creating something new. One possibility is that it is not only the human communities and their purposes that are frame the goals, but the whole ecology. For the aboriginal parties, this may not be too much of a stretch. Practices like an open systems approach as pioneered by Fred Emery and Eric Trist and recently evolved by Merrelyn Emery<sup>3</sup> directs our attention to the wider environment and the impacts that all parties commonly experience. This approach encourages us to focus on common interests and challenges from a wider perspective.

While there are a number of models of organizational strategic planning that consider and include societal benefit,<sup>4</sup> an open systems approach may be especially helpful to the whole wildlife governance system. It could focus the efforts of all parties forward and create structures, practices and a common viewpoint that permit transcending the apparent intractable impasses and less-than-ideal trade-offs. The approach would involve citizens and community members in ways that would build their connection to the challenges of wildlife governance and influence how it works. This approach could simultaneously address the 'squeeze' that the government councilors are in when recommendations are not upheld or when their decisions appear not to favor members of their constituents. Convolutional structures and processes that do not quite work can be an indication that there is a "simpler way"<sup>5</sup>. Adam Kahane<sup>6</sup> has illustrated (through his practices that combine scenario planning and dialogue) that even brutal adversaries are able to transcend their entrenched positions when it is possible to envision a more valuable future together. If creating a new alternative were pursued and accomplished, the Yukon

would be at the forefront in transcending the cultural chasm—a critical global challenge.

Coaching can assist Brian to think about the possibilities for leadership that are open to him in this setting. Performance coaching can assist him to optimize the quality of what he is doing—his action choices and his transactions.<sup>7</sup> Reflective coaching can catalyze his awareness of assumptions and choices—his own and those of others—in this multicultural governance system. The cultural chasm in this case holds a further possibility—that is to dive deep to the level where the chasm begins, finding the seamless base where interests and experience of the diverse parties meet. This may be the ‘big picture’ that opens Brian and other persons in the system to their fundamental beliefs, values and purposes. This is the work of alignment coaching. (These levels of coaching are described in an article appearing in the first issue of this journal.<sup>8</sup>) The bad news is that Brian’s challenge is considerable; the good news is that breakthroughs here would constitute a tremendous leap forward as a model for all of us.

---

**Marilyn Taylor, Ph.D.**

**Email: [mmt99@attglobal.net](mailto:mmt99@attglobal.net); [Marilyn.2taylor@RoyalRoads.ca](mailto:Marilyn.2taylor@RoyalRoads.ca)**

Marilyn M. Taylor is recently appointed as Professor at Royal Roads University, Victoria, BC, serving in its School of Leadership Studies. She is co-founder of the Canadian Institute of Research and Education in Human Systems in Toronto and, prior to that, she was Professor at Concordia University in Montreal where she was a primary architect of its M.A. in Human Systems Intervention. Her recent publications include articles in organizational coaching and, related to this piece, she co-edited *Learning toward an Ecological Consciousness: Selected Transformative Practices* (2004) for Palgrave Macmillan. Marilyn is a board member of the International Consortium on Coaching in Organizations (ICCO) and an editorial board member of IJCO.

---

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bergquist, William, Merritt, Ken and Phillips, Steven. *Executive coaching: An appreciative approach* (2nd Ed.), Sacramento, CA: Pacific Sounding Press, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Over the past several decades the practice of dialogue has been adapted to organizational life and is becoming understood as a significant practice domain. Further reading on this could include: *David Bohm On dialogue*. London: Routledge, 1996; William Isaacs. *Dialogue: The art of thinking together*. New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1999; and Peter Senge et al. *Presence: An exploration of profound change in people, organizations and society*. New York: Currency/Doubleday, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Emery, Merrelyn. *Participative design for participative democracy*. Canberra, Australia: Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University, 1993.

<sup>4</sup> Kaufman, Roger. *Strategic planning plus: An organizational guide*. Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Wheatley, Margaret. *Leadership and the new science: Discovering order in a chaotic world*. San Francisco, Barrett-Koehler, 1999; and Wheatley, Margaret and Myron Kellner-Rogers. *A simpler way*. San Francisco: Barrett-Koehler, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Kahane, Adam. *Solving tough problems: An open way of talking, listening and creating new realities*. San Francisco; Barrett-Koehler. 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Bergquist, William. *Organizational coaching: Resource book 2005*. Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Lazar, John and Bergquist, William. “Alignment coaching: The missing element in business coaching.” *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2003, 1(1), 14-27. Lazar and Bergquist offers a distinction among performance coaching that assists people to improve what they are doing in a setting, executive coaching that enables people to be aware of how they are doing something and the options and choices they have, and alignment coaching that fosters awareness and sometimes reframing of why they are doing something—their deeper purposes.

## Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

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](http://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](mailto:officemanager@ijco.info). For advertising, marketing and operations inquiries, please refer them to John Lazar, IJCO Co-Executive Editor, at [john@ijco.info](mailto:john@ijco.info). Please submit unsolicited manuscripts for peer review consideration to the IJCO office manager at [officemanager@ijco.info](mailto:officemanager@ijco.info).

---

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

---

*Journal information:*  
**[www.ijco.info](http://www.ijco.info)**

*Purchases:*  
**[www.pcpionline.com](http://www.pcpionline.com)**

