A Multidimensional Approach to Organizational Effectiveness

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This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2007, 5(2), 6-29. 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.
Joel Rothaizer and I had a disaster happen in working with a Chicago law firm. It has given me clarity regarding what has bothered me about what I call this wave of “second generation coaching.” I call it second generation because some of us working with effectiveness in organizations have been consulting, coaching, training, and addressing issues of human development long before the current “coaching movement.” Second generation coaching began largely as ‘life coaching’. What I’m looking at are the limitations of this evolution of life coaching into organizational coaching—an evolution that is gaining momentum.

Coaching has obviously become a major industry and the field of organizational coaching is growing rapidly. The assumption that coaching can be a solo intervention in organizations is essentially faulty and leads to situations like Joel and I experienced in Chicago. It is more accurate to view coaching as one important aspect of an integrated approach to addressing organizational effectiveness.

I will use terms such as systemic thinking, organizational context and organizational culture. It is no secret that there is and has been much debate about the meaning of each. It is not the scope or purpose of this article to resolve those issues nor to delve into any of them in depth. I am using them to illustrate what I perceive to be effective ways of describing part of the backdrop in which coaching in organizations takes place, a backdrop that most second wave coach training programs do not adequately acknowledge or address.

One critical topic I will focus on implicitly rather than explicitly in this article is the importance of all organizational effectiveness efforts having results-based roots. My assumption in all of my work is that it is the client’s responsibility to be (become) clear about their expectations for results. My role in that, where appropriate, is not only to facilitate that clarity, but also to assist them in exploring what is possible. I am also very aware, as a catalyst for success, that I (and anyone working with me) am also accountable for the value of what I am offering.

It is possible that what is being commonly called coaching by some may include elements of consulting and counseling/development (as well as training). Also, there are other artificial distinctions worth mentioning.
that are being made in many coach training programs and by many coaches. For example, it is not uncommon for coach training programs to emphasize the merits of coaching over the limitations of consulting, rather than emphasizing the importance of both.

The implication is that consultants impose their knowledge, skills, abilities, development and experience (or what I’ll call KSA/DE), while coaches facilitate the client’s awareness and synthesis of his or her own KSA/DE. The implication is that external content-specific expertise related to enhancing effectiveness is not only unnecessary in coaching, it is thought by some in the field to be inappropriate ‘leading’ of the person(s) being coached (PBC). While coach training programs focusing on working in organizations do indicate that coaching is not always an appropriate solution, very few would advocate the use of multiple interventions such as consulting, coaching, training, and counseling/human development.

**UNDERSTANDING CONTEXT**

Those being coached by individuals trained in this second wave of coaching are viewed from an individual perspective rather than a systemic one. This bias was inherent in the life coaching movement (perhaps coming from its human potential and psychotherapy roots) and has been carried over to organizational coach training programs. Professionals with a background in understanding organizations know the impact of context. Many “second generation” coaches do not have a systemic or contextual thinking base from which to view their work with clients.

Without this understanding of the impact of context, when an individual acts in a particular way, social science has demonstrated that we tend to attribute most of the reasons for that behavior to factors intrinsic to the individual (such as personality or habits). However, research consistently has demonstrated that extrinsic factors (context) have more to do with the behavior than do the internal ones. This faulty attribution is called the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). For example, when a coach is hired by an organization to assist an employee a key concept cannot be justifiably ignored: *The system or context within which that employee is working is very likely to be the major factor in determining whether or not the employee is successful at meeting his or her organizational (if not personal) goals.* Yet most “second wave” coaches are not trained in understanding, assessing or effectively impacting the organizational context.

In addition to being aware of the impact of context, it is also essential that those who are coaching know what separates an effective organizational culture from one that is not. They must have the consulting skills to assess the effectiveness of the specific context in which their clients are working. Coaches without this understanding and expertise will work with PBCs completely differently than their counterparts with a systemic background. They are likely to focus primarily on the PBCs and elements of their behavior and/or performance.

In contrast, coaches employing systemic thinking (including a background in organizational effectiveness) will be aware for example of how profoundly an organization’s culture, for example, can impact performance. They will know all parts of the system are interrelated and have the expertise to know what to assess.

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as well as the factors critical for individual or group success. They are also likely to have the consulting skills to facilitate resolution of impediments to success where relevant. For example, organizations lacking many of the essentials needed for employee retention and engagement will often have an inordinate amount of “problem” associates who appear to be unmotivated. In addition, the managers are likely to have little or no experience in how to lead those reporting to them in such a context.

Coaching any one of these individuals effectively requires much more than being an attentive listener who brings out the best in the client. It requires paying attention to much more than the PBC’s performance. Organizational assessment and development skills are essential. It requires, in this case, knowing how critical it is on multiple levels for organizations to have fully engaged employees and how to guide the organization to develop such a culture. Leadership development expertise will also be needed to work with the managers. Even if coaches without a systemic background know things aren’t optimal in the organization, they are not likely to view it as their role to address the culture. Not thinking systemically or understanding the impact of context will result in the coach and PBC having limited options to choose effective organizational strategies. Both are likely to address symptoms rather than root causes. As a result, they won’t be able to avoid pitfalls that may subvert success initially and/or over the longer term.

In general, without taking a multifaceted approach, the risk is that the client organization will become frustrated and blame the difficulties on a failed coaching process and the coach may not even be aware of it until it is too late.

I am not implying that the entire context has to be ‘fixed’ in order to provide a viable service to the individuals within it. I am saying that the coach must have the needed KSA/DE to understand the impact of context in general, and specifically be able, as a consultant, to facilitate addressing it where appropriate. Not having that background calls the value of the services rendered into question.

In addition, it is often important for coaches to consult with organizations by providing content specific expertise. A coach hired to work with a team will need to know what it takes for teams to be successful in general. The coach will also need to know what it takes for the team to succeed within the specific organization in which they are working. Without this knowledge, the coach will not be able to consult effectively with the leaders of the organization or with the team. The coach will not, for example, be able to accurately assess the dynamics of the team or the context in which the team is performing. Critical consideration will not be given to knowing which aspects of the organization’s culture are contributing to or detracting from their success. Finally, organizational effectiveness expertise and consulting skills are needed to assist the organization and the team in addressing any issue critical for success.

Another kind of content-specific expertise is sometimes needed for those coaching and consulting in organizations. To ensure employee involvement, it is common practice for organizations to assemble committees or teams to come up with suggested processes to deal with different aspects of the organization’s culture such as performance management. The topics of focus often require expertise not likely to be held by participants. Members are typically chosen based on their interest in the topic, rather than on them having the necessary KSA/DE. Therefore effectiveness of these groups is likely to depend on them having access to someone with the relevant expertise. Assigning a coach to such a group who lacks the content-specific expertise will result in the group being limited to trading
opinions. They will not be able to apply “best practices” or what is documented to be effective. If no one has the needed expertise, then even if members do research, they are not likely to have the background to distinguish between the optimal ideas and those that are less desirable or applicable. Members of the team who are most influential will probably determine the direction of the team rather than being led by topic-specific criteria.

However, “second generation coaches” are taught not to lead the client. It is assumed that: (1) PBCs have the expertise inherently, (2) expertise is not an issue, or (3) researching solutions is the answer. The coach apparently just needs to facilitate the participants in setting the right conditions to do the task. This, however, is flawed thinking when it is applied to complex topics such as performance management. Specific knowledge and expertise is needed for optimal results and processes. Effective performance management systems can, for example, aid the organization’s leaders in setting direction for high performance that will be aligned with the organization’s overall goals and values. This is critical because a well-designed performance management process can result in engaged, excited stakeholders. A poorly designed process, on the other hand, can be one of the greatest de-motivators in an organization’s culture.

COACHING AND CONTEXT
Most coaches see themselves as only serving those individuals they are hired to coach (PBCs) rather than considering that the client organization (CO) hiring them is also their client. Even when the coaching process includes a CO sponsor, usually someone to whom the PBC reports, as well as interview data from a cross section of those with whom the PBC works, emphasis is usually placed on the removal of obstacles that stand in the way of the PBC’s success and not directly on the perceptions of the PBC’s impact on the organization.

Organizational coaches can also train COs to have unrealistic expectations regarding coaching. For example, unless it was made clear up front, it would not be unusual for the leaders of COs to see coaching as a panacea for changing the behavior and/or performance of those whom they perceive to be problems. They are then likely to be extremely disappointed and angry when those expectations are not met. They would also probably assume the coach is at fault or that coaching is not effective rather than assuming that coaching, while important, is not all that is needed to effectively address what is taking place.

If PBCs are not considered to be problems for their organization, then they are likely to be perceived as improving and/or achieving the goals set for coaching, at least for the duration of the coaching. This is true for at least two, if not three, reasons: first, because performance was average or above in the first place; and second, because they are participating in a coaching process that most likely involves individual, focused attention by the coach and representatives of the organization. Third, to the degree the process facilitates removing obstacles to their individual success, they are able to make a greater contribution, which is the main priority for most organizations and their associates. However, even if the PBC and CO are satisfied, how much more improvement could have taken place for both if the process had included a more multidimensional view of the situation—for example incorporating consulting, counseling/development, and training along with coaching?

I’ve noticed that Joel’s focus vacillates, depending on whether he perceives himself to be primarily coaching or consulting. His focus, when consulting, includes consideration of the context.
There is greater risk of dissatisfaction when the PBC's behavior and/or performance presents a significant problem for the organization. This is especially true when there is a considerable discrepancy between the perceived potential contributions of the PBC and the current difficulties. Second generation coaches will tend to approach such situations as if the primary issue is changing the PBC's behavior, rather than examining the contextual factors leading to the current difficulties. Therefore the coach is less likely to be successful. Simply applying the tools learned in their coach training programs is unlikely to be sufficient to address the complexities of the situation.

There are multiple factors needing attention to do justice to any situation involving systems and people. This becomes very evident in high profile situations where CO representatives perceive that a PBC is presenting significant problems for the organization. Just focusing on the PBC's progress, or lack of it, is too limited for at least two reasons. First, coaches who view themselves as primarily working with the PBC are likely to focus on their own perceptions of the PBC's behavior and performance rather than on ongoing monitoring of perceptions of relevant others within the CO. This is especially true if the coach perceives the PBC to be making progress consistent with the initial information gathering or agreements initially reached with the CO. Second, in just focusing on the PBC's progress, the coach is not addressing the multiple factors that are probably impacting performance and/or behavior.

For instance, consider a situation where a PBC, assessed as a stellar performer, is newly assigned to a high profile team with a history of not clearly defining roles and responsibilities, and whose members withhold information from each other because of poor resource allocation from the organization. Very soon the PBC is seen as a disappointment because she or he is consistently not meeting deadlines. The PBC's manager hires a coach to help improve the PBC's performance. Any positive results will be temporary at best if the coach focuses on the PBC's individual performance/behavior (the symptom), rather than the likely root cause of being a new team member of a team with complex issues resulting in the PBC not having a clear role or the critical information to do his or her job. The coaching is likely to produce an end result of frustration for the PBC, the CO and quite possibly the coach. Without a background in understanding organization and group dynamics, the root causes will not be evident.

Again, I am not implying that the only way to help the PBC is for the team to be operating effectively and for the organization to have successfully addressed the issue of resource allocation, although that would certainly be optimal. What I am saying is that this situation, like most everything that takes place in organizations, is multifaceted and needs to be addressed accordingly.

Knowing the impact of context and how to assess it, the coach can at least assist the PBC and CO representatives in seeing the situation accurately and in developing related plans and expectations. In this example of the team, seeing the situation accurately would give the organization representatives an opportunity to understand that anyone in this situation would be set up to stumble, if not fall. Work would need to be done on the context for even the best performers to succeed. Multiple factors are considered, assessed and addressed when the coach knows the importance of context.
MULTIFACETED STRATEGIES

In general, without taking a multifaceted approach, the risk is that the CO will become frustrated and blame the difficulties on a failed coaching process and the coach may not even be aware of it until it is too late. If coaches understood that both the PBC and the CO are their clients, then they would automatically monitor the CO's perception of the PBC's progress and the actual impact of the PBC on the organization. I want to make a subtle distinction clear. Most coaches who facilitate the development of agreements with the CO sponsor would see themselves as monitoring the perceptions of the CO. However, the focus is likely to be on the PBC's development and not the impact of the PBC on the CO. Normally this oversight has minimal consequence because the organization's needs were addressed by the development of the PBC. It becomes problematic, however, when the CO perceives itself to be negatively impacted. In such cases, the CO can view the process as incomplete and/or unsatisfactory.

It is also important to mention that the sponsor is representing his or her perceptions, which may be different from what the coach would find if s/he assessed the culture directly. This is important to consider for two reasons. First, it is essential that the sponsor's view be addressed regardless of its accuracy because perceptions must be managed. Second, the sponsor's perceptions may be biased (or reflect the bias of others in the organization) and it is important for the coach to be aware of these biases.

There has been organizational coaching in this second wave for some time. I'm making a distinction between different perspectives on organizational coaching. Let me offer another example. We know a man named Gabriel who brokers coaching to other organizations. He is part of this second wave of coaching and considers himself to be an “executive coach.” He has facilitated agreements with these COs where coaches gather data within the organization to assist PBCs in being more effective.

He typically becomes aware of the organization's needs through an interview process. Representatives of the CO provide feedback regarding the PBC's performance and the PBC's goals and plans. Gabriel is aware when a PBC is perceived as someone who has a negative impact on the organization. However, Gabriel considers this information to be primarily pertinent to improvement of the PBC's performance and not related to the overall performance of the CO. For Gabriel, the PBC is the client—not the CO. He generally does not think contextually, and is focused on the PBC's success more than the CO's perceptions of success.

Gabriel is also aware that organizations often ask for coaching because they want to change problem employees. His general mindset, and Joel's mindset in the particular case we'll soon be discussing, was on the optimal situation for the PBCs. I've noticed that Joel's focus vacillates, depending on whether he perceives himself to be primarily coaching or consulting. His focus, when consulting, includes consideration of the context. Like many who see themselves primarily as coaches, Gabriel and Joel (when serving in a coaching role) may not adequately focus on the lenses through which the CO representatives view coaching.

As a result, the coach and the CO representatives can conspire unwittingly to focus on fixing or improving the performance of the PBC as if that was the major issue. In addition to wanting the PBC to succeed, the CO representatives are

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most interested in minimizing any negative impact on the organization. Without someone increasing their understanding of organizations and how they work, the CO representatives will take little, if any, responsibility for the impact of the context on the PBC’s performance or for altering the context, where necessary. This is not always because the CO representatives are unaware of the need to address the context. Sometimes, even when they are aware of a need for change, they are unable and unwilling. CO representatives are generally in need of consulting to assist them in seeing the choices and trade-offs to approach needed changes.

Gabriel and Joel can tend to inadequately address the context, for different reasons. Gabriel doesn’t have the background to understand it as fully as Joel. But Joel appears to have put aside aspects of his contextual understanding and awareness when he accepted a coaching assignment at the law firm. As a result, Joel didn’t ensure that the CO’s representatives understood the impact of the organization’s current context on the PBC’s performance, as well as what was required of them to facilitate the changes they were seeking.

**THE CASE STUDY**

With this preliminary discussion serving as background, I will now turn to the case study and attempt to identify the lessons to be learned from this unsuccessful coaching venture. My partner, Joel, who has been a therapist and is a consultant, trainer and coach, with a major emphasis on coaching and teaching others to be coaches, made some errors (albeit innocently) in dealing with the law firm that led to major consequences and also reflect exactly the concerns I’ve identified in this article. Joel’s work with the law firm also led me to articulate some factors critical for success in being a catalyst for organizational effectiveness.

The Chicago law firm is 100 years old. It is referred to in many textbooks. Young lawyers want this name on their resume. But what’s been happening of late is that the firm has been criticized externally for being overly conventional and unimaginative, living on the reputation that was built by partners who are either close to retirement or have long since retired, and not hiring comparable new talent to replace them. So the partners decided to hire a lawyer we’ll call Roberto. Roberto was seen as having truly exceptional talent, with exciting ideas and huge potential to put the firm “back on the map.”

Instead of taking the time to determine whether Roberto was truly appropriate for the firm, the partners hired him with little discussion. In large measure, they hired him sight-unseen because a trial lawyer who was one of the firm’s senior partners convinced his peers that Roberto, who had always worked independently and was well known for his brilliance in court, was exactly the kind of trial lawyer the firm needed to upgrade its image and recapture its flagging respect in the field. They didn’t say to themselves: “Yes he is charismatic and a genius, but can he work in a big firm where he is expected to manage people?” Instead, they hired him without any evaluation criteria other than his potential to contribute to the firm.

In this company, those on the partner track must be extremely talented as lawyers. They are also automatically expected to lead teams assigned to high profile cases and manage people (without any training). No provision is made for those who are talented as lawyers but not good candidates for leading people. The partners recognized Roberto’s extraordinary talent and conveniently became blind to...
whether or not he fit the other criteria for succeeding in the firm.

**Identifying the Problem**

Representatives of the Human Resources Department (HRD) quickly became exasperated with Roberto. His frustration tolerance was very low, and whenever he perceived that things weren’t going his way, he’d yell and scream. He rarely took appropriate responsibility, but instead blamed everything and everyone outside himself. He’d complain and tell the HRD that people weren’t supporting him or were talking behind his back. They told him it was important to work more effectively with others, but he seemed only to be able to see situations from a self-oriented perspective.

How did the senior partners react? They didn’t ever sit down with him and say, “Okay, you went from an entrepreneurial situation where you worked for yourself to this mega organization and now you need to lead teams on important cases, manage people, and cooperate with others.” They avoided confronting him because their firm was already getting favorable attention due to the novel ways Roberto was approaching some high profile, lucrative cases. The senior partners kept giving him some of the most coveted assignments in the firm, including one where he needed to lead a team of over 20 lawyers and other employees.

His peers became jealous of him because he had been given choice assignments without “earning” them. They were fed up with his histrionics and self-oriented behavior. Roberto had broken so many relationships that eventually many of the employees were hoping he wouldn’t succeed. He wasn’t a mean-spirited person. He was just in far over his head and hadn’t learned to work effectively with others or deal effectively with stress and frustration.

Sometimes when Roberto yelled at people he made comments that could lead to lawsuits. This finally got the attention of some senior partners who became scared. In the past, an employee who had felt abused had successfully sued the company. The lawsuit was covered by local and national press, and it had taken a while for that story to die down. They didn’t want a repeat performance. Yet, the senior partner who first advocated Roberto’s hiring didn’t want to risk alienating him because of his enormous potential in contributing to upgrading the firm’s outside reputation.

**Our Engagement with the Firm**

The senior trial law partners knew they needed to do something. The situation was ready to blow up. Some people in the firm were pushing for “change or else” in the situation with Roberto. Human Resources sought to find several possible coaches from whom Roberto could choose because the firm decided that coaching was the answer. My partner, Joel, was one of the possible coaches selected and Roberto chose him as his coach. Joel was recommended to Human Resources because he is an excellent coach. In addition, Joel has a therapeutic background and several of the partners suspected that Roberto had emotional problems (among many other problems).

The two partners met with Joel. But before I discuss that meeting, some background about our history with this firm would be useful. Previously we had a large consulting job with them in which we were asked to help them redesign and

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revitalize one of their offices. This was two years ago and it came to an end because we couldn’t get needed support from the senior partners. The senior partners had asked four lawyers to form a team and run the office. The lawyers were from different practice areas within the firm. The structure of the firm reinforced silos or discrete operations and even competition for resources, rather than teaming. It became clear what needed to happen in the culture, but the responsible senior partners weren’t willing to confront old ways of doing things with their peers.

It was also clear there was no stable decision making process among the senior partners. Their way of working together was highly political. Energy was devoted to amassing or retaining power and control rather than finding constructive ways of working together. Yet agreement to try something new was required for the consulting to be successful. We ended up coaching some associates for awhile as a result of that effort. The consulting part of the job ended because it was futile. We were also very clear that the potential of any coaching would be severely limited because the context wasn’t supportive of the PBCs. Also, there were no viable sponsors for the PBCs.

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Back to Joel’s first meeting with the two senior partners. Joel was prepared with a strategy. He was very clear that he did not want to coach in a situation where there was no support for Roberto, the PBC. He was aware of the pitfalls of the culture and was determined to ‘walk’ if these pitfalls were not addressed. He was very clear, and then very pleasantly surprised to find that the senior partners expressed the desire to do whatever he suggested to support this wildly charismatic, high potential lawyer. They also wanted help dealing with similar issues in other offices. In addition to valuing what Roberto could give to the firm, the more forward thinking partner was impressed with Joel’s suggestion that the firm needed to create a more flexible environment for people who didn’t fit “the mold.” Associates were required to manage others if they were to progress in the firm. The other senior partner made it clear that he just wanted to avoid the problems they were having with Roberto. During our previous time in this firm as consultants and coaches, he was one of the partners who refused to give the needed support.

So, when the very powerful partner seemed to imply he was not only willing to help in this situation but wanted assistance with making some changes in the flexibility of the firm’s culture, Joel was very excited. It was also clear to Joel that although the partners were excited about Roberto’s potential to bring in substantial fame and income for the firm, they knew he could also potentially cost the firm a lot of money. Many people were already furious with Roberto and didn’t want him to succeed.

Joel and the partners agreed that they had come up with a brilliant plan. It included Joel coaching Roberto and getting someone in the firm to work closely with Roberto, somebody who was already a successful lawyer, did not have competing talents, and through his or her people skills could bring some grounding to the situation. The one red flag for Joel was that he had seen this organization put less talented lawyers in support roles before, because it was useful to the firm without being honest with these lawyers about how they were actually evaluated and what was being asked of them. No one had been willing to be honest about the limits inherent in this support role. This assignment of a supportive role to ambitious members of the firm inevitably led to resentment and anger on the part of the
lawyer who would be less in the limelight. This company, like many law firms, provides very little clarity about how to obtain the most coveted, powerful role (partner). It is clear to everyone that any role that precludes being a partner leads to less respect and fewer financial rewards in the firm.

Joel discussed some important criteria for choosing the team member who would engage in this supportive work. He left the partners and the Human Resources representatives with the agreement that they would be in regular contact and that any of them should contact Joel immediately if they had concerns about Roberto's progress. Joel sent the partners and the Human Resources representatives a summary of what had been decided in their time together, with the usual invitation to contact him if he had misrepresented anything that had been decided or left anything out.

Joel and I were very excited because an unsuccessful relationship with the client looked like it would turn around. It now looked as if the partners would not only participate in feedback for that coaching client, they were also willing to work on some of the pitfalls of the organization's culture. Joel and I both viewed this as an important possible opening with some of the most influential partners. It appeared they were willing to let the other partners know how important these changes were. This was monumental because in the past these partners had been unwilling to address any controversial issues with their peers.

Despite the summary, planning and discussion about the problem of assigning someone who might be in competition with Roberto, the partners chose Randall (someone who prided himself on also being a high potential lawyer in the firm). Randall started competing with Roberto for leadership of some of the high profile cases, rather than taking more of a support role and helping with the people issues. Randall, inwardly smoldering because of being put in what he perceived to be a dead end role, decided to retaliate.

At one point Roberto had worked hard on an approach to a particularly important case. Rather than following Roberto's lead as instructed, Randall changed the brief at the last minute to reflect his own ideas on the best approach, without telling Roberto. He did this in such a way that Roberto wouldn't be able to notice the changes until it was too late for a re-write. Other similar incidents occurred. While tension continued to build between them, Roberto didn't have the skills to successfully address the issues.

Joel did connect with the partners immediately when Roberto told him of the situation with Randall. But a key point here is that he heard of the situation with Randall through Roberto and not through his monitoring of the partner's perceptions. He coached Roberto to communicate what he needed to the partners and heard that they had responded positively.

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**Responding to the Challenge**
Joel had been a coach and consulting partner of mine for ten years. I had never realized how much his thinking was colored by this second wave of coaching, and how narrow it could become as a result of his perception of being in that role. Joel knew the situation with Roberto had been perceived as a huge problem for the CO and these powerful partners. In the first several weeks he was meeting with the client regularly, but he wasn't meeting with the two partners on a regular basis.
or having a regular way of gathering their perceptions. It appeared to Joel that Roberto, though sometimes very emotional and anxious, was making progress. Joel was assuming the partners would contact him if they saw it differently or if something had gone awry in their original plans. He also assumed this would be true of Human Resources.

It was important for Joel to meet very regularly with the partners from the outset, not just to see how Roberto was doing, but also to know how the partners were viewing the situation. He needed to know whether Roberto was still perceived to be causing problems or if he was making progress. Joel was accustomed to a process where he either gathers information himself from key stakeholders (in this case senior partners, peers, and team members) or assists his client in doing so. He also usually gathers assessment data from his client, and together they create a development plan that they present to the sponsor(s) for approval.

Because Roberto chose to not let it be known that he was being coached, it seemed Roberto would have to be the one to gather information. However, it became clear that he wasn’t ready to do that yet. Joel didn’t adequately consider the impact of that. Roberto also continued to be very emotional on the coaching calls, and was lacking in skills for having stakeholder discussions.

Drawing on his therapeutic background, Joel’s view was that he needed to help stabilize Roberto emotionally first while beginning to address his performance. This process would take time. Joel thought he knew how Roberto was doing through his experience with him in the coaching sessions. From the progress Roberto appeared to be making (and reported he was making) after just a few coaching sessions, Joel concluded that Roberto was becoming more stable. Roberto reported he even began taking responsibility for communicating his needs constructively to the partners rather than lamenting to others about his situation, and was attempting to implement some new leadership behaviors with those on his team.

Because Joel compartmentalized, he perceived himself to be a coach serving Roberto at the same time he planned the future work to be done with the partners on the context.

It had only been about seven weeks since coaching began and Joel did not think he needed to regularly call and check in with the two partners. He thought all was going according to the original coaching plans laid out in the first meeting together. He also didn’t think he needed to communicate his strategy of focusing on stabilizing Roberto emotionally because, in Joel’s view, Roberto was making needed progress. However, Joel didn’t have the information he generally gleaned from the coaching interview process because, as mentioned above, Roberto didn’t want people to know he was being coached.

Because Joel compartmentalized, he perceived himself to be a coach serving Roberto at the same time he planned the future work to be done with the partners on the context. He did talk initially with the partners about the inappropriateness of Roberto’s role, but nothing more was done about it and the coaching continued. Also, as a result of the information gained from the initial interviews with the partners and Human Resources, Joel did help raise Roberto’s awareness of the impact he was having on others (especially his team). He also suggested ways in which to work with them more effectively.

Joel didn’t see the organization as his client, as he would normally do when he viewed himself as a coach and consultant. Consequently he was not thinking about all the people in the organization who were or perceived themselves to be negatively influenced by the situation with Roberto. Joel was working with
Roberto. He wasn’t focused on the likely fallout from perceptions of those involved in unresolved issues and relationships with Roberto.

I already mentioned that during the initial planning meeting between Joel and the partners there was great excitement. Each of them expressed interest in continuing to dialogue on how to adjust the organizational culture to make it more amenable to talented individuals who didn’t fit into their current context.

A follow up meeting was scheduled by the HRD ostensibly for Joel and I to begin to work with the partners on the culture change. This was exciting because we knew that unless they were willing to adjust the organization’s culture, any work there would have very limited positive impact. It appears that the agreement to adjust the culture to address the diverse talents of associates was never intended to apply to Roberto. Curiously Joel had not considered this further. It was clear that Roberto was still expected to manage a high-powered team with no additional training. After adding Randall, the partners thought coaching would take care of any problems associated with Roberto.

The Meeting
We walked into the follow-up meeting and the partners almost immediately said, “We want to talk about Roberto. We see nothing happening with him.” They essentially said he had made no progress. “We are presuming you have been meeting with him,” they said sarcastically to Joel. Joel replied, “That’s what I can tell you, I have been meeting regularly with him.” Joel was implying the content of the sessions was confidential.

It became clear that two very recent events had left the partners quite upset. First, while courting a potentially lucrative and high profile new case, Roberto had failed to organize his team to make the best impression. He also left 22 people, including a key client, waiting for him in a meeting while he did something he considered to be more important. As a result, the client took the offer to a competing law firm in Chicago. Also, in a particularly frustrated moment, Roberto had vented directly at the partners, something he’d never previously done. Even worse, he did so in front of their peers, something that was highly embarrassing in this extremely political organization. Joel learned about both of these incidents for the first time during this meeting.

I was stunned by the partners’ negative reaction to the coaching. I blinded myself to the problems because Joel had talked of the consulting role the partners wanted us to play and of their agreement that the culture needed to change.
views himself to be working. He also naturally coaches when he is consulting. Apparently, however, when he views himself to be primarily a coach he pays attention to a much narrower context. I've just recently gained clarity about all this.

Initially when I was sitting there in this meeting with the partners and they were coming at us very aggressively, I was not clear about exactly what was taking place. I was surprised to learn of their extreme displeasure. Joel's initial emphasis on confidentiality was also surprising, for I knew that he had done much to assist Roberto. I just assumed he was communicating with the partners regularly. I couldn't figure out why the partners didn't know more about what Joel had been doing or why Joel was refusing to talk more about it at this time.

I didn't come back at them negatively, for that would have only inflamed the situation. Since the partners were complaining about Roberto not taking them seriously, in my limited understanding at the time, I assumed that it was important to help them understand that Roberto's inappropriate role and lack of accountability were critical issues. Unless Roberto knew he was being held accountable for being reasonable, he was likely to continue doing what he was doing.

I asked them if they had clearly communicated their objections to his behavior. They said they didn't want to be “parental” and were worried that they might lose him. Therefore, while they had voiced their objections after each incident, they had never really sat down with him to talk with him directly about the severity of their concerns. Also, they had not considered taking him out of his management role or giving him training for his position as a leader. To do so would have required disagreements with their peers as well as loss of immediate income and status.

The partners indicated that they had told Roberto that he needed to be a better leader, to control his temper and take more responsibility. At the same time, they continued to give him high profile cases. We noted that as long as Roberto got the best assignments, regardless of his behavior, he was unlikely to change. The partners found our statements to be outrageous. They said they were looking to Joel for guidance. They had done what he had advised and it hadn't worked.

They now viewed our comments about the inappropriateness of Roberto's role and accountability as an attempt to put the responsibility back on them for what Joel was hired and failed to do. Joel (and coaching) was supposed to have changed Roberto. Besides, they had told him that he was to change his behavior. They clearly didn't understand and/or accept our message. We made it clear that assigning an associate (any associate, appropriate role or not) the best perks in the organization regardless of the quality of his or her performance sends a double message at best and change would not be a likely result.

I was watching all this happen and beginning to understand their perspective. Meanwhile they were getting angrier by the moment and they made it clear that the coaching was done and that they would no longer be interested in our services, coaching or otherwise.

I understood that there had been an opportunity to save the situation if Joel would have said something like, “The details are confidential, but let me tell you the kinds
of things I’ve been doing with Roberto in coaching.” Also, if I had understood more of what had and hadn’t taken place in coaching, I could have told them I understood why they were dissatisfied. I could have worked with them to turn the situation into an ongoing plan right then, including meeting on a regular basis to address the situation within a supportive context.

Joel was shocked at the strength of the partners’ attack. When he told them he could provide them with no information about Roberto because of confidentiality, they grew even angrier. One of them became very aggressive. Later it became clear that they would not have been so upset had the two recent incidents with Roberto not just occurred, impacting the firm's reputation as well as their own personal reputations. However, it is also true that it was totally predictable that incidents such as these would take place.

**COACHING AND CONSULTING: AN ESSENTIAL INTEGRATION**

This painful incident cogently illustrates the narrowness of coaching as a lone intervention. Joel had clearly seen Roberto as his client and not the organization. He had worked with the partners of the CO as sponsors in assisting Roberto. However, he also accepted the fact that the context was not being adjusted to ensure Roberto’s success. This is a great example of the power of context in determining behavior and focus. Joel could have taken a multidimensional approach in this situation, given that he is so skilled and experienced at coaching, consulting, counseling and human development. And, to be fair, he did a limited amount of each.

However his primary focus was as a coach, working with Roberto. It is also interesting to note that his excitement at being able to work with the partners to adjust the culture would have been in a consulting role and he did not expect that to overlap his role as Roberto's coach. That one-dimensional compartmentalizing mindset led him to inadequately monitor the CO's perceptions of the situation.

I don’t view coaching and consulting to be as separate as they are often represented. The second wave of coaching has ignored an important fact: An effective coach needs to be able to consult and an effective consultant needs to be able to coach. There’s lots of information out there on the distinctions between the two—sometimes very biased. This situation with Roberto is a good example of an organization trying to make something happen that just didn’t fit reality. Roberto was wildly creative, talented and accustomed to working alone. He was given the firm’s most prized cases that happened to require working in groups. He was also someone who was demonstrating emotionally unstable behavior. He had never worked in a large organization before and had never had any kind of inclination towards or training in leadership.

We made it clear that assigning an associate the best perks in the organization regardless of the quality of his or her performance sends a double message at best and change would not be a likely result.

Leading teams is required in this organization’s culture. He was asked to lead a team that was troubled by the conflicting messages of the organization. It would have been challenging even for an experienced leader. In response to a strategy to “help” Roberto the partners or CO’s sponsors provided him with a support person who was extremely competitive and resentful of Roberto. To be fair to that person, anyone who was ambitious in that firm would have been likely to resent that support role. For Roberto, it was all a recipe for disaster.
It was evident that Joel got caught up in the organization’s efforts to do the unreasonable. For example, when he knew Roberto was emotionally unstable, he didn’t immediately communicate his concern to the CO representatives because of what he perceived as issues of confidentiality. He was coaching Roberto to ask for what he needed, rather than directly letting the partners know what was needed. He should have kept the issue of Roberto being in an inappropriate role more at the forefront (at least until Roberto was demonstrating more stability). The partners needed to know they would not know Roberto’s true potential until he was given more training and support.

I appreciate the fact that Joel was excited because for the first time there was an opening with this CO. Leaders of this organization finally appeared to be looking for help in changing their culture. He now knows he got caught by the challenge of consulting with them in the future to create a more flexible culture. By not letting the partners know their current culture and expectations for Roberto were unreasonable and unwise, Joel was making it easy for the partners to take little, if any, responsibility for Roberto’s success or failure. In fact, they basically held Joel and coaching responsible for curbing the problems they perceived Roberto to be causing.

As I have indicated, part of the reason they were so angry is because they perceived themselves to have done everything that Joel had suggested. In fact, he had not been in regular contact with them and did not know what they were experiencing on an ongoing basis related to Roberto’s actions. The partners did ask what they could do to help, but their query was related to changing Roberto and not expanding the flexibility of the culture. They did suggest that he might be in the wrong position, but it was a superficial concern. They were really interested in the ways in which Roberto could contribute to the organization and lessening the flack they were getting about him. What Joel needed to do after the first or second coaching session was to let the Partners know that what they were asking of him was very questionable rather than coaching Roberto to do so. Even if Roberto was emotionally stable, he still lacked experience and training in leading other people.

A reexamination and possible redesign of the organization’s culture and structure, including the roles and responsibilities in this firm is much more complex than in most organizations. The partners would have had to deal with possible conflict amongst themselves. Without a viable decision making process, how would they resolve differences? What typically has happened is that the partners with the most influence determine the priorities for the organization. Given that they don’t understand the Fundamental Attribution Error, and tend to blame failure on poor leadership (or poor coaching) rather than on the need to address the context, the influence of each partner waxes and wanes.

Some coaches would argue that confidentiality is an issue in this case. However, a coach must be in regular communication with the CO representative(s) about what they perceive to be taking place with the PBC. This is true even when the coach perceives everything to be going well. This allows the coach to facilitate a balanced view of what is possible and continually establish who is responsible for what.

I don’t view coaching and consulting to be as separate as they are often represented. The second wave of coaching has ignored an important fact: An effective coach needs to be able to consult and an effective consultant needs to be able to coach.
There should be initial agreements about the goals of coaching including regular intervals for checking in with all relevant parties about perceptions of progress. A key point that needs to be considered in establishing the frequency of the intervals is the perceptions of the need for impact. Obviously, in the case of the law firm, the partners conveyed a sense of urgency right from the start.

If this ongoing two-way communication is not taking place, CO representatives will justifiably believe coaching can ‘fix’ the situation. They are likely to be irate if their expectations are not met. For Joel to say he couldn’t give the partners any information because the situation was confidential demonstrates that he fundamentally viewed his only client as the PBC. This is certainly not the case when he perceives himself to be a consultant. Joel’s somewhat closed, defensive response was also triggered by having an irate CO representative attack him verbally. Confidentiality is essential, but on the other hand coaches needs to view themselves as accountable to the CO as well as the PBC. It is wise to agree upon the type of information to be shared from the coaching process during the initial contracting phase.

Anyone who has tried to illuminate the problems within this system is quickly quashed, including internal employees and external consultants. Consequently there is no real stepping back to examine and redefine. There is a much bigger issue than just putting Roberto in an appropriate role. Coaches should not get caught up in trying to do something that is unreasonable just because they are excited about the fact that the organization has faith in them. It’s easy for consultants and coaches to get swept away by the challenge of working with a difficult situation.

It is very reasonable to assume the organization should do something for Roberto. But if the coach is colluding with the organization in the Fundamental Attribution Error, they will assume that Roberto’s problematic behavior or lack of expertise and experience should be able to be addressed individually. If the coach does happen to realize the context isn’t working for Roberto—but doesn’t have the background to understand how organizations function—s/he is likely to focus on helping CO representatives make it work for Roberto. At best, in this case, this would only be a temporary solution, because it isn’t congruent with organizational cultural expectations that all high profile lawyers in the firm have to be leaders of people as well.

You can see the lenses through which these partners were viewing the situation. They believed that Roberto could go a long way to mitigate some of the criticism of the firm for being stodgy and for not hiring new talent that practices in novel, creative, and unusually effective ways. He would help them begin to regain the reputation for being the outstanding international law firm they had always enjoyed and on which they had depended.

So, like the emperor’s new clothes, the situation is a lot more loaded than it may seem for the CO. My experience and concern is that many second wave coaches don’t or are not able to see through the eyes of those responsible for the culture. They’re only seeing through the eyes of assisting the PBC. It was confusing for me at first because Joel can and does see through the eyes of the CO, but I now

Even if Roberto was emotionally stable, he still lacked experience and training in leading other people.

Most organizations view accountability as punishment.
understand that when he views himself to be a coach, he has had limited seeing. Again, it is all about context!

**ACCOUNTABILITY INCLUDING EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**

Accountability is an important issue in this situation. In all my experience as a coach and consultant I have known very few people in organizations who truly understand the issue of accountability. Most organizations view accountability as punishment. The partners in the law firm said they didn’t want to have to act like parents in dealing with Roberto. They offered this rationale in response to us asking if they had been clear about their expectations and the consequences of continuing the behavior they perceived to be unreasonable. They wanted to avoid the conflict and confrontation they perceived to be synonymous with accountability. So, they put clarity and accountability on the back burner.

In fairness to the partners, most view accountability as synonymous with consequences. The role of engagement is missing in that narrow definition of accountability. Emphasizing accountability without facilitating employee engagement (of both their hearts and minds) is like poor parenting or punishment. Engaged employees are likely to be naturally accountable if they have clearly defined roles and expectations, the skills and resources to do their job, and perceive they are able to make a difference.

The partners were sincerely (uncharacteristically) perplexed. They had sat down with Roberto and said he had to work more effectively with his team and other employees, as well as curb his outbursts. “How was that not clear?” they asked. They assumed that because they had spoken he would respond accordingly. In addition to putting Roberto in a role for which he was unprepared, the partners made a mistake common to a ‘star’ mentality: an employee perceived to be extremely valuable to the organization was given the most coveted assignments and perks, regardless of performance, behavior, experience and expertise.

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The partners in this law firm are very bright men. But they were blind to their role in Roberto not taking their message seriously. The partners were accustomed to people jumping to comply with their requests. Of course, you don’t have to be in a powerful leadership position to get caught in the trap of thinking that if you speak, you have made an impact. The partners, like many others in organizations, are out of touch with the incongruity of voicing objections while continuing to hand out the most valued rewards. I wonder how many coaches without a background in understanding organizational dynamics understand this incongruity.

If the law firm had been more concerned (or at least as concerned) with making certain that Roberto could succeed and make a difference as with what he could do for the organization, the results would have been very different. They would have worked closely with Roberto and involved him in developing plans for his success. This was very different from hiring a coach to “fix” Roberto. There would have been a range of possibilities such as adjusting the flexibility of the culture to support a wide range of contributions and reviewing hiring practices to make certain prospective employees have the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities, development and experience to succeed in the organization.

In recent years, I’ve changed the message I deliver to my clients about accountability. I continue to communicate the importance of accountability, but I have added
emphasis on people having the resources and support they need to perceive that they are able to make a difference. I have learned that when these conditions are met, employees are engaged in developing solutions and there are very few situations where the punitive aspects of accountability have to be imposed. People, for the most part, become naturally accountable.

Instruments such as the Gallup Q12, (a distillation from an incredibly large amount of data of the 12 most important factors in facilitating employee engagement and overall productivity), are enormously helpful. It gets clients’ immediate attention and support. CO’s like its simplicity. They are comfortable using it because it is generally embraced enthusiastically—unlike their experience and/or fear of the confrontation and conflict involved with the concept of “holding people accountable.”

Leading by instilling fear will produce a very different context for employees than leading by emphasizing engagement. Coaches need to know that the same PBC is likely to perform very differently in each of these contexts—regardless of the PBC’s skills, knowledge, or experience. The only exception to this would be for PBCs who are very highly developed. They would be more likely to perform consistently across contexts. These are highly exceptional individuals. Focusing on what creates the conditions for exceptional individuals to develop is beyond the scope of this article.

Without significant internal development, most people are externally driven. This has major implications for organizational coaching and certainly is a hallmark of much personal coaching. PBCs who are well developed as people are not only going to be much more satisfied with their lives in general but are much more likely to succeed in the constant change and less than optimal conditions that characterize many organizational settings. Facilitating the personal development of coaching clients will generally allow them more freedom to choose their actions as opposed to being driven by internal patterns of behavior. It will also probably result in larger range of options from which to choose (than those who are not so highly developed) within the organization because their contributions will be valued.

There are at least three clients when you work with organizations: the person being coached, the organization, and the people in it who are being impacted.

**WHO IS THE CLIENT?**

I want to go back to discussing the issue of who is the client. When we are working in or with a system, such as we do when we work with organizations, there is no such thing as a singular client. Both the CO and the PBC(s) need to be considered clients. Forgetting or not knowing that the CO is the client as well as the PBC leads to situations such as that which I have described above. As a result of this situation with the law firm, it is easier for me to articulate what I perceive to be the root of the problem. I have always known that second wave coaches do not typically have the background, knowledge, training and experience to view the situation differently. They don’t view the sponsor or CO representative they are dealing with as their client. In fact, there are at least three clients when you work with organizations: the person being coached, the organization, and the people in it who are being impacted. The organization is “represented” by the sponsor(s), who have their own agendas and perceptual filters. The most effective coach/consultants consistently monitor these different clients and integrate the complexities within this system.
A LIMITING DEFINITION OF COACHING

Even with brilliant goals and plans, positive results from coaching will be severely limited without a supportive context and effective CO representatives. A positive result of this second wave of coaching is that many organizations now see value in coaching. There is more of a partnership in those organizations between the CO representatives and those whom they hire to increase effectiveness.

However, results will be limited if those people they hire are coaching without consulting. Coaching is incomplete for all the reasons mentioned above. Without focus on the context, the results will be temporary and will create cynicism in organizations about the effectiveness of coaching in general. We are already seeing signs of this beyond the case study included in this article.

I do see that some organizations understand their responsibility to improve the culture in which they are asking employees to work. They then offer employees coaching to optimize their success in the improved system. Unfortunately this is an exception and there’s still a remarkable lack of understanding on the part of the organization’s leaders about the impact of the culture and the power (for example) of informal and formal rewards system on behavior and performance—as we saw in the case of Roberto. The fundamental attribution error is still very much the norm in organizations.

CONSULTING FOR ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

A common criticism of consulting in second wave coaching is that consultants tell people what to do. The kind of consulting I’m referring to involves an understanding of organizations and how they function in high performance. Consultants do need to have expertise in organizational effectiveness, and background and experience relevant to those whom they are serving. Applying expertise is different than imposing direction. Organizational Effectiveness consultants assist organizations in separating symptoms from root causes. They facilitate determining how to get the greatest potential impact from the energy spent in addressing issues impacting the organization. They are catalysts for client clarity. For example, one of the most common questions clients ask, as the partners did with Roberto, is why people persist in continuing behavior and/or performance after it was determined to be unacceptable? Most clients are not aware of how issues within the context are impacting the behavior they find objectionable.

The partners’ role as spokespersons for the law firm highlights the limitations of coaching as a sole intervention. These two partners’ views were not representative of those of the rest of the partners. The assessment process involved in effective consulting (combined with coaching) would have illuminated issues within the context that needed to be resolved before coaching Roberto could be successful. For example, in my estimation, part of the problem Joel had with the law firm was that the lenses through which he saw the situation were those of a coach and he reinforced this perspective in this organization. Therefore, the partners viewed Joel and the situation with Roberto only in the context of coaching. Joel did discuss doing some consulting with the partners about the inflexibility of the overall culture. However, he didn’t make it clear that coaching Roberto wouldn’t make sense unless they addressed the unreasonableness of his job assignment.

Joel also needed to make it clear that if they only adjusted expectations for Roberto
and did not address the problems in the overall culture, Roberto would still be perceived by others as getting preferential treatment. I don’t want to turn this into a discussion of the merits of consulting over coaching. Each can potentially be valuable and neither is complete in and of itself. A multifaceted approach is necessary to address the multiple factors impacting the coaching process.

Joel made a conscious decision not to focus too much on problems that were inherent in the law firm’s current culture because he didn’t want to jeopardize future possibilities. He made a decision to assist the partners with Roberto, a situation they considered to be quite volatile. He knew the partners were frustrated and reactive as a result of having to justify their support for Roberto with their peers, his peers and some customers. Joel also knew the partners could easily cut off contact. They were known for their erratic power plays. Joel and the partners had agreed, after developing the initial plans and agreements for Roberto, that the next visit would include both of us and address the problems faced by Roberto and everyone else entering the firm who didn’t “fit the mold.”

Roberto was still a “victim” of that culture. Regardless of any plans for future changes, he was still expected to succeed in a leadership position for which he was neither prepared nor interested. Clear agreements about the responsibility of the partners and the organization in general were not established. The partners acted as if coaching alone could make up for limitations in the culture and Joel reinforced this by not making it clear that some changes needed to take place before he would agree to even begin coaching Roberto. As a result, when the partners concluded that the problems with Roberto still persisted (unbeknownst to Joel) they indignantly blamed it on Joel and his poor coaching.

This situation is a clear illustration that the sponsor should not be the only source of information about what’s taking place. Because we were both consulting and coaching when we previously worked together in that organization, we understood the strengths and challenges of its culture at that time. Joel needed to update this assessment in his role as coach of Roberto. If organizational sponsors are the only source of information coaches have, their view of the situation is likely to be myopic.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Because organizations are so multi-faceted, it is often necessary to take a multi-disciplinary approach to working with them, including at least consulting and coaching. A well-trained organizational effectiveness practitioner is generally able to consult, coach and train. It is not likely that coaches trained more recently will have the background to fully understand organizations or assess and address the impact of the culture in which their clients are working.
Looking back on the experience is enlightening in many ways. I'm reminded of the quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes:

“I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my right arm for the simplicity on the other side of complexity”

I see ways in which the corporate coaching community has overly simplified the coaching process, on the wrong side of complexity. There are two early stages of over-simplification:

- **First stage:** The client is the person-being-coached (PBC), with little if any systemic awareness on the part of the coach. Here the coach essentially enters into a one-to-one relationship with the PBC, generally bringing skills that came from previous background or training in counseling, psychology, life coaching, social work, etc. Unfortunately this is still prevalent in the field, and fostered by most coach training programs.

- **Second stage:** The client is the person-being-coached (PBC), and the coach, often because of having been employed within a business setting or receiving specialized training, understands that the PBC is working within an organizational setting (external context) and brings that understanding to bear in a limited degree in coaching the client, while maintaining a one-to-one relationship.

The **third stage** of over-simplification is the one that I see as prevalent even among many experienced coaches. It’s the trap in which I fell with regard to this case study:

- The client is the person-being-coached (PBC), and the coach understands that the PBC is working within an organizational system (external context), and sees the benefit of working with that system, in order to best help the client.

- There’s active engagement with a coaching sponsor, generally the PBC’s manager. We clarify goals and expectations, set metrics and ensure that the coaching aligns with organizational expectations. We have occasional meetings with the sponsor to help ensure the success of our clients, the PBCs.

- We carefully define confidentiality to maximize our ability to work with our client, the PBC. For example, “Your job as a sponsor/organization is to set accountability for my client, and to know how you’ll be measuring success. My only job is to report on whether my PBC is taking part in coaching, and whether I think coaching is having a positive impact. If you would like any information on how coaching is going, please ask my client, not me. Besides our initial interview, I’d like all conversations with you (the sponsor) to be a three-way meeting that includes my client. If you ask me how coaching is going, I’ll remind you to please ask my client, not me.”

It’s a cognitive shift to see that, as long we’re working within an organizational context, we always have at least two clients, the individual client (person being
coached) and the organizational client, and we need to keep our eye on the agendas and needs of each. In this case I engaged the sponsor in beginning to make changes within the system that could support the development and success of my individual client. But I never made it sufficiently clear that it was unrealistic to expect my client to be successful unless the context first shifted, and the sponsors (because of their power and authority in this organization) would have more impact, for better or for worse, than I ever could as a coach. We didn’t sit down and explicitly design a context that could enable my client to be successful, with his lack of leadership skill and at his current level of development, including changing his role. I allowed the sponsors to maintain the misperception that lack of significant progress was a reflection of poor coaching, rather than being due, in part, to someone who, internally and externally, was in over his head because they had not yet sufficiently addressed his context. Doing so I would have been engaged in both a coaching and consulting role. [As an aside, when I began teaching business coaching I was shocked at the artificial distinctions made between coaching and consulting. They were all straw-man arguments, essentially distinctions between great coaching and lousy consulting ("coaches bring out your inner wisdom while consultants tell you what to do"). I teach that all masterful coaches consult, and all masterful consultants coach.]

Also, when it became clear that his behavior was causing problems within the organization, and that we wouldn’t be creating a development plan as quickly as usual, I didn’t immediately engage in discussions with the sponsors to recalibrate expectations. This would have been a discussion where I let the organization know what I was seeing (someone who needed major foundational work, and with whom progress was likely to be slower). I would have asked what immediate changes needed to occur while we were working on longer-term goals. I also would have made it clear that we (the sponsors and I) needed to work collaboratively to make it more likely that those immediate changes would take place, rather than having them expect me to “get his behavior in line.” For example, I would have suggested that Roberto being offered the most interesting cases be contingent on his exhibiting certain behaviors. I also would have set up a much more active process of getting information from the organizational sponsors, as well as the HR representative, to incorporate into the coaching. My failure to do so in the first few weeks of coaching set the stage for the issues that followed.

I now communicate directly with both my individual client and client organization about the complexities within my coaching role, including that they’re both my clients, and that my intention is to serve both their needs.

Both my individual and client organizations have expectations. I’ll keep a focus on calibrating expectations for both.

LESSONS LEARNED

- It’s important to always be aware that I have at least two clients, the individual client and the client organization.
- I now communicate directly with both my individual client and client organization about the complexities within my coaching role, including that they’re both my clients, and that my intention is to serve both their needs. This includes clarifying confidentiality, which can and will vary depending on the complexity and severity of a situation. It also includes a shared understanding that my role is both as coach and consultant within the system.
- I’ll ensure that there is a process for gathering ongoing data from the sponsor and perhaps other relevant stakeholders, separate from formal three-way
meetings. This might take the form of a weekly email invitation to provide any relevant information. I’ve begun this process with several executive coaching clients. With clients in more critical situations I’d have a more active process, scheduled as appropriate.

- The weekly email invitation also asks whether the information can be shared with my individual client. In the past I wouldn’t have wanted the organizational sponsor to share information with me that could not be shared with my individual client. In the past I had a model that, while very “clean” and precise in its clarity around confidentiality, didn’t honor the complexities of working within an organizational system. At times sponsors provide information that’s very helpful in the coaching process but that for various reasons is not to be shared with my individual client. I have a current situation where information was rightly shared in confidence that was very important for me to know.

- Both my individual and client organizations have expectations. I’ll keep a focus on calibrating expectations for both. For this case study, I would have let my individual client know that I was having discussions with the client organization about what was realistic to expect, and also to ascertain what behaviors needed to change short-term. As mentioned, I would also have been working with the sponsors to have them understand that they could expect little if any benefit from coaching without significant changes in my client’s context.

LIMITATIONS OF THE “CURRENT COACHING CULTURE”

I continue to see ways in which the current coaching culture has at best a very limited systemic perspective. Most training for organizational coaching focuses on skills for working with individuals rather than providing equal emphasis on understanding organizational systems, their impact, and how to work effectively within them. There’s an absurd bias about coaching over consulting, rather than seeing that effective executive coaches need to be skilled at doing both, or at least that organizations can benefit from both sorts of interventions.

There are values that seem to have been imported directly from personal coaching that don’t make sense within the organizational context.

Some recent examples:

- Unless I specifically invite coaches to ask questions that clarify the context, most all of their questions focus on the individual client (e.g., exploring strengths, fears, values, beliefs, assumptions, vision and purpose) rather than on the context (e.g., clarity of roles, goals, and having the resources needed to be effective).

- I’ve taken part in discussions among very experienced internal coaches who want to make changes in their organizations. I hear them focusing more on how they can make an individual difference rather than on shifting the context (performance environment) to support the needed changes. It’s the same problem I see with approaches like QBQ (Question Behind the Question). It’s better to take personal responsibility than to blame or complain, but taking personal responsibility within a misaligned context is unlikely to lead to sustainable change. Even these very experienced coaches don’t step back and examine the system in which they’re working.

- I know a business coach who was recently fired from a position that involved coaching multiple teams within an organization. When we examined the situation it became clear that he was set up in an untenable situation. His
role was unclear, and his power and authority didn’t match that for which he was held accountable. I saw part of the responsibility as belonging to the coach training program from which he’d graduated, which supported the illusion that individual and team coaching skills are sufficient to succeed within an organizational context.

- I hear concern from experienced business coaches that even fully accredited coaching schools operate on the assumption that their life coaching models easily translate into the business world.

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Dr. Rothaizer serves as President of Clear Impact Consulting Group, Inc. is an executive coach and organizational consultant with extensive training and over 30 years experience in understanding the functioning of both organizations and the people within them. With offices in Boulder, Colorado and Edmonton, Alberta, his focus is on leadership development, executive coaching and team/organizational effectiveness. He assists leaders in finding styles that are more successful, authentic, and energizing. He is an acknowledged Enneagram expert and has been designated by the International Coach Federation as a Master Certified Coach.
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