The Janus Perspective:
Initial Reflections and Commentary
on a Case Study

By John Lazar, M.A., M.C.C.
INTRODUCTION

I believe that Sandra Hill and Joel Rothaizer have given the readers of this issue a gift with their rich case study. We have the opportunity to view a client engagement through their eyes, as reflected in their respective narratives, interpretations and conclusion. As a unique observer, each reader will engage with the material through her own lens. I want to share my perspective with you, shaped by my history as a performance consultant and executive coach of more than two decades. While there are many issues that could be raised and discussed, I am choosing to focus on several that, in my opinion, are at the heart of any organizational work we do as change agents. For me, the “Janus perspective” of the title refers to the dual orientations a coach or consultant must have in their work: knowing oneself and coming to recurrently know and make sense of the client world. In both cases, there will be implications and consequences associated with how well we do this.

KNOWING ONESELF

There are two aspects of knowing oneself that are relevant to the work we do: knowing our biases and knowing our current capabilities. Let’s look at each of them.

Knowing Our Biases, Assumptions and Expectations

As coaches working inside the context of our client’s (coachee’s) and customer’s (organization’s) agenda, we are called upon to make assessments about what we hear, ground them with evidence, and adjust our communications accordingly. Our biases and expectations (Livingston, 2001) can act as an error variable in our listening apparatus, adding noise to our system of understanding the client in context and potentially taking us off-course in our coaching dialog. When that happens, we miss pertinent information, fail to recognize patterns, misinterpret data, inappropriately privilege or weight certain data, make false attributions, and draw erroneous conclusions.

In the case study, Joel seemed to make explicit choices about what interpretations he would recognize and act on, and what interpretations he would ignore. However, that privileging of certain data and interpretations led to assumptions (for example, if the partners aren’t...
calling me, things must be going well) and logically consistent actions on his part
(for example, not standing for clear agreements about what the partners would be
responsible for doing) that reduced the overall likelihood for success.

Often, it is only by experiencing the negative impact of our ill-targeted actions
that we have a chance to step back. When we can be an observer of the observer
we are (Brothers, 2004; Sieler, 2003), we may be aware enough to choose to
adjust our orientation, attunement and mental models to fit the situation. When we are aware but choose not to
adjust accordingly for whatever reason, we invite a loss of rapport and breakdown in our ability to do effective work.

Knowing Our Current Capabilities
Our current capabilities set limits on what we personally can accomplish at a particular point in time. Our
capabilities are bounded by our intelligences (Gardner, 1983), shaped by our experiences and lessons learned from those experiences,
and reflect our underlying attitudes, knowledge, skills, competencies, even our talents grown to strengths (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Our capabilities enable
us to potentially play any of several context-appropriate roles while coaching: coach, educator/trainer, facilitator, consultant, etc. While our personality (who we are at the core) seems to be relatively fixed, we can expand and refine our
knowledge and skills base and our repertoire of coherent ways of being, thinking and acting.

This self-knowing can offer multiple lenses through which to view and make sense of the client, her actions and the organizational context in which they occur. Furthermore, it enables us to understand and appreciate the limits of our world without confusing our map for the larger territory it only partially represents. When we identify and openly acknowledge the situations in which our competencies diminish, we can make informed choices, determining and shaping the intervention options we choose. This recognition even helps to guide us when we recommend other professionals or invite others to team with us on behalf of the client.

KNOWING THE CLIENT’S WORLD
Through our capabilities, we engage our coaching client. But first, we discuss issues and needs with someone from the organization, be they someone from Human Resources, from the line organization, or a senior leader with decision-making authority. Whether we are external or internal coaches, these formative conversations usually set the stage for what will follow. Thus, how we handle them is critical in understanding context and setting expectations for the work to be done. I will focus on two pre-coaching elements that contribute to success.

Gathering Data/Assessing Needs
It all starts with having a statement of need. What are the current or anticipated gaps in business results (Marker, 2007)? It is, I believe, an all too common experience to start a project because of an executive’s request, someone’s good idea or an ‘obvious need’ but without an adequate needs assessment. Often our organizational clients are less clear and

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specific about this and we must probe for answers. Sometimes, the organization has conducted a formal needs assessment and has the problem and underlying issues identified. Sometimes, the data gathering is more informal and anecdotal, the situation less reliably described and analyzed. To the extent we (the coach) rely solely on an expression of interest or an organization’s suspect data as the basis for defining how to move forward, we put the project’s success at risk.

Coaching, while powerful, isn’t the cure for all individual performer ills. We know that, most often, there are multiple causes for performance issues. Some (gaps in skills, knowledge and attitudes) reside within the individual performer and may be appropriate to coaching as an intervention choice. Others (missing or misaligned access to tools, information, incentives) occur in the performance environment and require other types of intervention. Like the good doctor, we must first examine and analyze before diagnosing, prescribing and treating.

My colleague and performance improvement guru Joe Harless noted that when a client initially tells you they want a specific intervention (like training or coaching) to fix a problem, your best response is to affirm your willingness to understand and resolve the problem (but without explicitly accepting the solution they have offered). Working in an organization is working in a complex system. Echoing the case study authors, it requires a systems perspective and a systemic approach to understand the organization (context) in which performers are performing and to identify the variables adversely influencing performance. Only in that way can you appreciate to what extent your coaching is likely to produce desired, sustainable change and impact. When an adequate needs assessment is conducted and results, interpretations and recommendations are reported and discussed with decision makers, we achieve shared understanding about the situation. They can make informed decisions about how to intervene and understand what the likely consequences will be.

The trade-off here, as everywhere, is between cost and accuracy. How much accuracy can the organization afford and in what timeframe? While experience suggests that front-end investment pays huge dividends later in shorter project cycle time, more targeted interventions and better results, organizations tend not to want to invest here. They tend to rush to solutions, mischaracterize and oversimplify their ‘understanding’ of the complex issue, reducing problems to puzzles (see Lazar & Bergquist, 2003, 2007). It seems that part of our job is to assure that we work from (at least minimally) sufficient data to diagnose and prescribe well, as a way of increasing the fit of intervention to root cause. This will impact how we contract, the next element.

**Contracting**

According to Peter Block (1981, p. 42), contracting is a conversational process to reach “an explicit agreement of what the consultant (coach) and client (organization) expect from each other and how they are going to work together… (l)It is designed… for clear communication about what is going to happen on a project.”

Beyond building a working relationship (rapport) with the person, the contracting process can articulate the scope of the issue, the client understanding of what’s contributing to the problem, the impact that issue is having on the organization, the urgency of solving the problem, what they have tried before that was unsuccessful,
and constraints on implementation. Other “sales conversation” items like budget range, decision process, decision makers, and decision criteria, proposed project solution, and an opportunity for the decision-maker to reverse his position might be included.

Now is the time to raise and explore relevant issues. This is when the ‘rules of the game’ are being established and agreed on. Under the best circumstances, outputs from this process can be a shared understanding of the situation: a high level definition of the problem, the scope and shape of the solution, its objectives and how they will be recognized, data gathering process (if any), evaluation planning and process (if any), the roles consultant and members of the organization will play, sequence of activities, milestones and related outputs. More often than not, aspects of the contract only will become clearer over time, as the project is implemented. In those cases, allowance needs to be made for further discussion and recalibration, whether or not the scope of the project has changed. Once contracting has concluded, the coach is already explicitly onboard as a player inside the defined game.

Confirming and documenting expectations about outcomes, roles and accountabilities, schedules, contingencies, and reporting relationships will reduce the likelihood of misunderstanding about these contracting issues. Once the project starts, the coach will have to manage two contexts: the relationship with the person(s) being coached and the relationship with the project’s sponsors and stakeholders. In addition, she will need to know about and account for the organizational context (Lazar, 2006).

At the end of a contracting phase, the decision-makers have declared how they wish to proceed with the project. They should be sufficiently educated and informed to make grounded assessments in support of their decision. Typically, that decision will have two components:

1. Project is defined as one phase (with implementation parameters already specified) or two phases (an assessment phase with recommended actions, and an implementation [design/develop/deliver/evaluate] phase to be determined).
2. Intervention type is coaching, consulting, or a hybrid (combination of the two). The timing of this component will be contingent on the definition of the first component.

In my view, the coach plays a major role in educating the client organization about the relevant issues to consider. The decision about how to proceed is the client’s. Whether or not the coach agrees with the decision, she either needs to authentically align with it or remove herself from the project.

**Delivering Interventions and the Possibility of Sustainable Results**

My commentary assumes that the coach or consultant is competent to plan and deliver a coaching, consulting, or hybrid intervention. In the latter case, intervention components (like coaching and training, or coaching and performance management) may be designed to work in a synergistic fashion (Lazar, 2005). However, there are, I believe, two additional intervention design factors to attend to. First, it is often the case that the client’s choice of intervention leaves performance-inhibiting factors untouched. What’s a change agent to do? I

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think that only with a systems perspective do we have a chance to recognize, and potentially design into our intervention, components that can reduce the adverse impact of those factors.

To cite one personal example, in doing the initial data gathering with a client, we discovered that there were no current mechanisms to provide timely feedback to the customer service representatives about their sales performance. Informed by this and given that one of our coaching objectives included improved performance management practices, I could suggest the use of performance charts posted in each office, updated daily, with accompanying tables with individual sales performance data, and provide the resource that described how to do this (Greif, 1991). I view this as consulting content nested inside a coaching intervention.

Second, we also need to account for ‘sustainability factors’ in our intervention. When we do our job well, at the end of our intervention, the coaching client is left with expanded repertoires and capabilities, as well as new, complementary distinctions that influence how he views himself, others, and his relationship to the world. The client is (better) able to generate for herself the ‘learning to learn’ orientation, the courage to let go of old patterns for the sake of new, more effective ones, expanded capacity, and greater ability to recognize and self-correct.

Organizationally, there are positive impacts that can be logically inferred from the individual’s behavioral changes due to the intervention. And, to whatever extent possible, we have shifted the organization to better support the behavioral changes we have worked so hard to achieve (Broad, 2005). At the very least, this should include the manager of the person being coached (Schlosser, Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Hunt, 2006; Steinbrenner, Kumata, & Schlosser, 2007).

In completing work with another coaching client, I spent the last two sessions discussing what he could put in place to support his new habits of thinking, being and acting learned over the year we had worked together. We brainstormed, refined and evaluated options, and developed a list of distinctions for him to think about (with external cues so he didn’t have to remember them), behavioral practices to engage in, and conversations to have with targeted people in his environment. Such conversations were designed to orient and attune him to the changes he had committed to making, and to encourage him to provide feedforward (Goldsmith, 2005) about his on- or off-target behavior. He then created a plan with action items to complete. The principle of ‘Plan the work, work the plan’ continued to apply. I also spoke to his manager, the most influential person in his performance environment (Lazar & Bernardez, 2003), about how she could recognize and reinforce the desired emergent habits.

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Evaluating Effects of Our Interventions

As agents of change in an organization, we can expect our clients to challenge us with the question, “Was it worth it?” The answers to this seemingly simple question hinge on the standards the organization sets for success, what data have been collected, how credible the sources are, how conservative the methodology is, and what the data show. Kirkpatrick (1975) articulated four levels of evaluation: reaction, learning, behavior change and business impact. Phillips (2003) has refined this nomenclature, added a fifth level (return on investment, ROI), and developed and documented extensive methodology for how to implement
evaluation at any and all levels (Phillips, Phillips, Stone, & Burkett, 2007).

Planning for data collection is crucial when doing any level evaluation. Phillips recommends that discussions and agreements about broad program objectives, measures, data collection methods, data sources, timing of activities, and respective responsibilities be held and documented during the contracting phase and refined as needed later. Reaction and learning data should be collected during or by the end of the project (useful for identifying changes to make in process or for the next iteration); only after sufficient time has passed for behavioral changes to become routinized should that data and data for the attendant organizational impact be collected. In addition and as part of data analysis, the effects due to our interventions must be identified and isolated from effects attributed to other factors. It is the change agents’ responsibility to keep sponsors and stakeholders apprised of progress throughout the project (while maintaining confidentiality boundaries) so there are no surprises at the end. Evaluation is a conversation that starts before a project even begins, and its activities continue over the course of the intervention and beyond, until final reports have been drafted and shared with stakeholder groups.

**CONCLUSIONS**

I have used the Hill and Rothaizer article as a platform to discuss issues I have been thinking about, articulating, and attempting to successfully address for many years. I continue to learn about these areas, as important adjuncts to the practitioner work I do. I too am striving for the “simplicity on the other side of complexity.” I know that I have further work to do. I can’t wait.

**REFERENCES**


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**John Lazar, M.A., M.C.C.**

**Phone:** 708-771-9176  
**Email:** jblcoach@lazarconsulting.com  
**Website:** www.lazarconsulting.com

John Lazar has been a performance consultant and coach for over 24 years, including thirteen as an executive coach. He has a Master’s degree in clinical psychology and has been certified as an ICF Master Coach since 1999. He works with individual leaders and their work teams, altering their perspective, motivation and performance to produce emotionally intelligent leadership, breakthrough results and business success. In addition to business coaching, he consults on issues of leadership, management, communications, executive team alignment, culture-strategy fit, organizational change, performance improvement, and evaluation. John is co-founder and Co-Executive Editor of the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations* (IJCO, www.ijco.info). He is also a founding member and former Acting Executive Director of the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO, www.coachingconsortium.org).
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