Why Does that Monkey Keep Returning?  
Musings of a Novice Executive Coach  
(Mostly in Government)  
By Jan C. Bouch

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2008, 6(1), 94-104. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

Journal information:  
www.ijco.info

Purchases:  
www.pcpionline.com
Weaving examination of a successful governmental coaching engagement and the musings of the author’s experience as coach, this article ultimately captures and examines some of the potential barriers and missed opportunities for coaching to be more widely used and integrated as a resource to government.

**INTRODUCTION**

My last role in an executive leadership position was different than previous roles I have held in organizations. Specifically, I was in constant meetings with my managers and supervisors—not unusual in that respect—but unusual in that I was (or so I thought) regularly coaching my employees, a new way of conducting business. Again, so I thought. Curious about the role of executive coaching and if I was “doing it” correctly, I conducted research to locate a program that could answer that question. That was in 2003 and my search led me to a weeklong executive coaching program. It was there that I first learned about “the monkey” (Oncken & Wass, 1999).

I now have a definite relationship with “my monkey”. We don’t see each other every day, but as I travel the continuum from novice to (hopefully) expert executive coach I’m beginning to appreciate the value of having a monkey and for our occasional meetings. The concept I am referring to concerns taking responsibility (the monkey) for something for which my coaching client is accountable. I was taught to be mindful of assuming too much and that my role as coach was not to tell them what to do or how to do it; rather, it was to use effective inquiry to allow my coaching colleague to engage in his/her own discovery.

**LEARNING THE DIFFERENCE**

That’s when I learned that I, in my executive role, was not doing coaching at all. In fact, there is a sentence from Marshall Goldsmith’s book *What Got You Here Won’t Get You There* that strikes
home for me when I held the illusion that I was providing good coaching for my employees: “The higher up you go, the more your suggestions become orders” (Goldsmith, 2007, p 4). Ouch!

Unfortunately that probably describes the outcomes of my early “coaching” sessions. What I thought was a well-motivated desire to help my staff develop their skills and abilities was, in fact, my skill in persuasion regarding the direction and actions that I hoped they would adopt. Think Goldsmith – suggestion and orders.

**Appreciating the Appreciative Approach**

Once enrolled in the coach training program I quickly learned that my definition of coaching did not follow the appreciative inquiry definition as described in the Cooperrider and Whitney book, *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change* (2005, p. 8):

> Appreciative Inquiry is the cooperative, co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the world around them. [A]I involves the art and practice of asking unconditionally positive questions that strengthen a system’s capacity to apprehend, anticipate, and heighten positive potential.

It has always been my interest and intention to help individual employees and ultimately the organization to perform optimally. I was so driven to that goal that what I thought was supportive and collaborative coaching was my “supportive” way of directing. Directing (of a person or their behavior) means going straight to the point; being frank (www.dictionary.com). My skill was that I was adept in masking my “directing” through a process of dialogue and collaboration. In hindsight, although I practiced facilitating dialogue, by the time I met with staff I had conducted a cursory review of the issue and developed (at least in my mind) a general strategy or direction to address the problem (be it person, personal or organizational) or project.

Now that I have exposed my prior ignorance about my leadership role and coaching, let me move on to my enlightened learning about the true process of appreciative and co-evolutionary inquiry. Attending the course on executive coaching was only the beginning of my journey. In addition to enrolling in a doctoral program in Organizational Psychology, I continue to study how I can best serve others as a coach.

**Knowing My Skills**

What I have learned so far is that I am good in the role as facilitative leader—using inquiry to develop individuals and to improve performance. This combination of using discovery, dream, design and destiny (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 16),
complemented my professional and educational knowledge. It has become a model that uses my greatest strengths and supports my passion and calling—helping others discover alternative ways of thinking and being, and providing hope through that exploration and its outcomes.

**MY COACHING CLIENT**

One application using this blended coaching model has been my work with a senior manager in a local governmental agency. My coaching colleague’s responsibilities are to oversee divisions that provide government benefits for underserved and underprivileged individuals. This person has great technical skills and throughout her career has relied on those skills to manage a diverse client and employee workforce. She mistakenly assumed that how she was managing (e.g., taking accountability for resource distribution, accuracy of reports) constituted leadership.

Her director, to his credit, created this coaching opportunity in support of her exploration and growth as a leader in the agency, and as a valued member of his senior leadership team. Through the application of appreciative inquiry and support from me in dealing with challenging personnel decisions and actions to be taken, my coaching colleague is making those difficult (and appropriate) decisions with confidence and trust in her decision-making. She is also taking risks and reaping the rewards of a renewed passion for her business, and in developing new and stronger relationships with other senior leaders within the agency. Most importantly, she is building the internal and external support needed to sustain these recently discovered and adapted behaviors when she and I complete our work together. By the time this article reaches print we will have started our process of completing our work and have extended the time between our meetings.

Back to the monkey and why it keeps returning. As mentioned above, this particular client was notorious for shouldering the entire responsibility of decisions that were, and rightfully should be, made by others. True, the ultimate responsibility does rest with her (the buck stops here) for those areas that she has been assigned to lead and manage. However, her practice was to absolve others by assuming too much responsibility and hence micromanaging—her ultimate dissuader of accountability and growth.

Just as my monkey plays a role in informing me, I gave my client her own monkey (stuffed, of course) to inform her when she was taking on, and ultimately taking away, responsibility and decision making better left to others in her department. She tells me she
will, on occasion, refer to her monkey and how it helps her to stay focused and balanced in her many roles.

**COACHING IN GOVERNMENT**

It was through my work with this particular client that I began pondering the question about why governmental entities don’t routinely employ executive coaches as a viable and vital resource for both increasing excellence and improving job performance. From my personal experience, I offer some thoughts on the subject.

Quite frankly, the topic of executive coaching has not been brought forward and widely discussed in most governmental agencies. Emphasis at the front end is generally focused on recruitment and hiring the “right person” without much thought given to successful integration, alignment and engagement, post hire. We want to get them, usually quickly, and rarely think about the conditions necessary for long-term success.

**Governmental Budgets**

Governmental budgets are another factor in that there is a constant tension between planning for the long-term needs and meeting the short-term budget realities. Today as we sit on the verge of a recession, the introduction of executive coaching in any governmental budget would raise the eyebrows of more than one budget analyst or legislator. Governmental budget analysts (and I suspect many private industry operating officers as well) view executive coaching as a luxury, not the essential it should be.

**Successive Leadership**

Today and in the not too distant future, many governmental agencies will be experiencing a mass exodus of talent, particularly at the senior executive level. According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), in next 10 years, 90% of federal senior executives will be eligible to retire (Ott, 2007). Although coaching could be an essential tool and resource to building successive leadership, it has not appeared in the governmental succession plans with which I have been familiar. Or if it has appeared as part of a plan, it often doesn’t extend beyond that, perhaps for some of the reasons noted above. Like training and education, I would suspect that in a tough budget period executive coaching would be at or near the top of the “chopping block.”

**Going to the Source**

All that said, I decided to take this issue straight to the person who hired me – an executive leader responsible for a number of governmental divisions that deal with sensitive and potentially
challenging issues and individuals. I asked him what led him to hire me as an executive coach. He said that other interventions weren’t working and he decided that it was time to examine what other tools might be available. He also said that time was an issue and that investment in these directors was limited and needed a fairly quick turnaround. One interesting observation he made is that the higher up someone is in any organization, he believes (and I concur) that there is a major assumption: these individuals don’t require interventions. Just because you are there, you came equipped with all the competencies and judgment needed to be a success. He also believes that the higher up someone is in the organization, the more embarrassing it is for him or her to confront his or her director. In hiring an executive coach, it might be easier for a client to address issues if those issues aren’t being addressed, directly, with the boss.

Judgment and Leadership
Noel Tichy and Warren Bennis in their book Judgment assert that experience is very important in developing judgment (Tichy & Bennis, 2007, p. 18). They define judgment as the essence of effective leadership; a contextually informed decision-making process (ibid., p. 21). And if judgment is a process, what better way to discover, dream, and design than through the collegial relationship with an executive coach?

Tichy and Bennis have identified three critical domains in which most important calls are found:

- Judgments about people
- Judgments about strategies
- Judgments in time of crisis

Leaders make the calls, but make these calls in relation to the world around them. A leader’s relationships are the sources of the information needed to make a successful call. In addition, Tichy and Bennis (2007, pp. 21-22) identified four different types of knowledge needed to do this:

- **Self-Knowledge**: How do you learn? Do you face reality? Do you watch and listen? Are you willing to improve?
- **Social Network Knowledge**: Do you know how to build a strong team? How do you teach your team to make better judgments?
- **Organizational Knowledge**: Do you know how to draw on the strengths of others throughout the organization? Can you create broad-scale processes for teaching them to make smart judgments?
- **Contextual Knowledge**: Do you know how to create smart interactions with the myriad other stakeholders? These could include customers, suppliers, government, stockholders, competitors and interest groups.
Government Context

It is context—the circumstances that surround a decision/judgment—that is significant to governmental leaders. In government, contextual knowledge is critical for leaders to read the motives and intentions of elected officials, to respond to constituency and client expectations, to adequately and swiftly assess and respond to emergencies, to constantly ensure direction and alignment of staff, to maintain transparency, to provide good stewardship of public funds and services, and to manage the rise and fall of budgets. To assume that competency comes with a seasoned and skilled professional transitioning to a leadership role is naïve at best.

Benefits

I asked the director who hired me about the key benefits of hiring an executive coach. He suggested that a belief in the key role to be played by talented leadership is fundamental. He estimated that 30-40% of how an organization performs is positively shaped by the creativity and innovation of its members. The client alluded to earlier in this article is a great example of how coaching can increase creativity and innovation. When leadership is poor at the top, it flows as such to the bottom.

Interestingly enough, this senior leader said that if he had not himself had a previous organizational experience with executive coaching, he may not have sought out an executive coach for his employees. He frankly believes that there are many people (in both public and private sectors) who are unaware of coaching as a resource. For him, personally, the bottom line is about client retention and money. Governments are functionally similar to private enterprise in that respect. That is, all governments must have the appropriate infrastructure to operate: budgets, employees, equipment, and buildings, to name a few business supports. Effective leadership resides in sound execution of decisions regarding business operations and on behalf of the agency or department’s purpose. That implementation is delivered by the organization’s people.

Return on Investment

We proceeded to tackle the difficult discussion of return on investment (ROI), especially managing and defending government budgets. Rightfully so, the public hates the idea of government waste. Governments are, in general, most concerned with filling vacant positions and allocated positions, often to ensure that budget analysts don’t assume the work can be accomplished through fewer employees. A much lower priority is assigned to retention and succession planning. I propose a model below that represents many governmental hiring and integration practices—the fish or cut bait approach:
I pushed this senior leader to think specifically about my first coaching client with his organization. Historically, this particular program manager (my client) had a disproportionate amount of personnel issues as compared with managers of other departments. Just that cost alone is huge. Previously, this coaching client and her division were not responding in a timely manner to benchmarks. Her old management style would be one of issuing remedial actions and punishment. Today she is not only meeting deadlines, she is able to turn over (and trust) her work groups to do their jobs. Her job satisfaction has increased and it is clear to her boss (the senior executive) that this individual’s management team feels and is acting differently. Team members now view their jobs in a more positive manner. My coaching client has been able to shift her organizational emphasis from one of benefits administration to one that models and facilitates self-sufficiency among those receiving benefits—the net result being that individuals leave the system earlier (in this case, that is a good outcome). When asked to project the benefit associated with this one client, the agency director said it would amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars over the next decade. His investment in contracting with me pales next to this benefit and outcome for the agency.

**Luxury or Essential?**
The real question here is why executive coaching in government is not more widely engaged and utilized? For many legislators and budget analysts, executive coaching will be viewed as a
self-indulgent luxury. In my interview with the agency director, he said that he would never submit a budget to his “board of directors” that included $150,000 to support executive coaching for his management team. He would be laughed out of the meeting. Due to that concern, he wouldn’t even consider doing it. I suspect he is not alone in this belief. Unfortunately, hesitancy to raise the issue of executive coaching as a viable request continues to keep the subject comfortably “at bay.” Couching executive coaching as a “performance issue” is generally easier to sell and can rest behind the cloak of “confidentiality.” What a shame, since this director shows a level of innovation in his approach to addressing serious performance or less than optimal performance issues. The model below represents his approach for effectively assessing underperforming or transitional leaders and informs the direction that he will take. I propose that this model, introduced at the point of remediation or promotion, strengthens and increases the likelihood of growing a high level employee into achieving success.

I first heard the term “envelope of good intentions” from this particular director. This is his rubric for determining strategy and direction with employees. He is clear that if his assessment leads him to conclude that an individual is not “within the envelope”, then executive coaching is not an option.

Request For Proposals
When asked what he thought were the major challenges in employing executive coaching in government, the agency director indicated that one of the major barriers is the public Request for Proposal (RFP) or prospective Request for Proposal process. Often a key factor in government RFPs is cost. The current process of granting approval for proposals is based on a set of criteria that rarely includes “fit” or “relationship” as one of them. Using restrictive measures in selecting providers may not allow for successful determination by the client and coach as to whether or not they want to, and are well suited to, be working together. How do you define “relationship criteria” in an RFP because this connection is a critical success factor? I’m not convinced that this can be accomplished with many governmental contracting processes without discouraging excellent executive coaches from even responding to the initial proposal requests.

There is a way to accomplish this although it requires individuals, such as this director, who can think with innovation and creativity and still recognize the realities of their environment. Narrow thinking is the death of creativity, innovation and, frankly, motivation.
Introducing Executive Coaching

Because my client was presented with a performance plan (areas of improvement), I asked the director how he approached the notion of executive coaching. He said that he introduced the idea and then gave my client the chance to digest both the performance plan and the option of working with a coach. Because of his commitment to investing the money to contract with an executive coach, this director was able to dispel the reaction that
he was “out to get her.” He also made sure that my coaching client knew she would meet with me initially and it was her determination if we were a “fit.” I asked him if he had to describe his senior manager today, what adjectives would he use? He stated that she is “confident, open, risk-taking”. I like to believe that her monkey is a part of her system of support and a check-in spot when she falls away from being solidly a person in control.

**Telling Others**
In wrapping up my interview with the senior executive I asked him what he would tell his peers about executive coaching. He said he would tell them that it is one of the most valuable resources available to them once you have worked past the basics – i.e., the envelope of good intentions, a desire to succeed, the right aptitude and temperament, and coaching as an appropriate, cost beneficial intervention choice. He would tell them that executive coaching is a great resource because tools are limited at higher levels in the organization. Again, he made clear that he would not employ an executive coach for a person he assessed did not fall in the “envelope of good intentions.”

**THE MONKEY RETURNS**
Let’s get back to my monkey and how it informs me daily. My coaching practice is growing and recently I engaged a seasoned executive coach to work with me as part of my commitment to my own growth. This is where my monkey fits back into my journey. In my growing understanding of sensitive issues in the coaching relationship, e.g., boundary management, ownership, to name a few, I find that I struggle to maintain appropriate boundaries and not assume ownership for client problems (or successes) and their personal and professional outcomes. I try to pay careful attention to my tendency to persuade or fall back into the “nice director” model in my work with my coaching clients.

Thankfully, my monkey will appear (metaphorically of course) and engage me in a process of reflective examination of the conditions or emotions leading me to a place that potentially compromises my role and my relationship with my coaching clients.

**How the Monkey Informs Me**
Heretofore, I truly held the belief that I was indeed a coach. I suppose in the context of educating and developing employees, I was. Embarking on this journey, however, I welcome being the novice and the chance to travel the continuum using the wisdom and skills of extraordinary coaches who have and continue to successfully navigate the complexity of individuals and the postmodern conditions of today’s organizations. My monkey makes me check my shoulder, encouraging me to notice whether anyone is willing to follow.
MY PERSPECTIVE

In conclusion, I’d offer these lessons from a novice executive coach:

1. Executive and performance coaching is the best job I have had so far.
2. Dialogue is not executive coaching. Dialogue is a valuable process for increasing understanding and gaining a variety of perspectives, and in some respects, providing groups with greater opportunity for discovery.
3. Executive coaching is both a process and a relationship. Research, creativity and understanding of the client’s current environment and conditions require a coach to come prepared and also to be able to adapt to the client’s changing circumstances or state.
4. Accepting one’s novice state provides the benefit of personal insight and openness to growth through these current coaching relationships. I trust as I travel this journey that I will gain the requisite knowledge, skills and abilities to move along the continuum from novice to expert (and then probably back to novice again as well… the context will probably change).
5. The monkey as advisor, conscience, cheerleader and keeper of my humility enables me to remain mindful when serving others as coach.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jan C. Bouch, BS, MHS

Phone: 707-225-7960
Email: jan.bouch@sbcglobal.net

Jan C. Bouch has been an organizational consultant and educator for the past ten years, bringing with her 20 years of management and administrative experience. She found her passion for executive coaching through her pursuit of a PsyD in Organizational Psychology through the Professional School of Psychology. After concluding this article she will be settling in to the task of writing her dissertation. Many of her consulting clients are in the government sector, as has been much of her professional experience. Being a government steward has been a calling from early on and one she doesn’t regret.
Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

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

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

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

Journal information: www.ijco.info

Purchases: www.pcpionline.com