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Interview with Agnes Mura

Interview Conducted by
John B. Lazar

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In this interview with a former international banker, now global executive coach, Lazar asks first how the financial sector is distinct from other endeavors. In looking at the attitudes and mindsets of the players in the industry and at the challenging context in which they currently operate, the discussion reveals some practical implications for coaches who are committed to helping this industry recover public trust and to supporting its professionals in learning the valuable lessons available in times of crisis.

John: Agnes, welcome. Thank you for choosing to be interviewed.

Agnes: My pleasure.

John: As a way of getting started and for those who don't already know you, would you give us a little bit of your background and some of the sensitivities that you bring to your work as an executive and a leadership coach?

Agnes: Perhaps I need to explain how I became an executive coach. It pulls together a couple of strands in my life and in my career. I escaped from Communist Romania in my late teens, with a tiny suitcase and - thanks to my family's priorities - a very good, multi-lingual education both of the head and of the heart. While I was lived in Western Europe, I was an academic and taught philosophy and languages. Then, when I came to the U.S., one of my key career moves was to spend ten years as an international banker and so to learn and appreciate that world of global business.

After ten years, there was a time when I looked at my life and where I wanted to spend the next phase of my life and that's when, after a lot of exploration, I discovered coaching and facilitation. I feel that choice pulled together the two strands of having a background in pedagogy as well as business experience. Did you want to know more about how I approach leadership coaching based on that? Is that where the question was going?

John: The first request was intended to give our readers an appreciation for the background from which you listen and speak as a leadership and executive coach. The second centered on what sensitivities, sensibilities or key distinctions you bring to your work.

Agnes: In the broadest sense, I tend to work with high achievers, people who are already quite successful. I think that's where the mutual attraction is. Within that work, I have a sensibility for

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transitions in life, having gone through so many myself. I've transitioned between political systems, between continents, between cultures, between languages, and even between several careers and occupations.

So I know viscerally what transitions feel like and what they provoke and bring out in people, the best and the worst. That's probably one signature sensibility that I bring to this and it applies, maybe more than anything, to cultural shifts. I use that term in the broadest of meanings, in terms of moving, for example, from a local or regional assignment to a global function, or from a staff to a line function, or the other way around. Or from a very bureaucratic corporate culture to a very innovative one. These shifts all imply cultural changes. Of course, the people who are going through the experience of becoming global executives, forming this new globally-minded class of professionals, are the ones most keenly aware of the challenges of all these transitions. Let's remember, nobody was born global so we all have to *become* global citizens if we want to play on that stage

If an executive was stuck in an elevator with a 20 year old firefighter, they would both come out of there transformed by the experience.

These transitions are probably one sort of sensibility that I bring to my work. The other one is my concept or visceral sense of what leadership is. My parents and then I grew up in totalitarian societies (fascism, then communism), where power was misused for ideological, but even more often, personal purposes. Therefore, I grew up with a great distrust of leadership. Does anyone remember that "Fuehrer" means, simply, "leader?" By contrast to that abuse of power, I later chose to connect leadership primarily to a huge sense of responsibility rather than to a sense of privilege. As a result, I speak a lot with my clients about the privilege that comes with being excessively talented or particularly gifted or particularly privileged in one's education. Whether a privilege is innate or acquired or derives from a title or position doesn't matter to me. Once one has it, I believe it brings with it a great deal of obligation and responsibility, so that's probably another fundamental principle in my work.

FINANCIERS AND CUSTOMERS: THE KNOWLEDGE GAP

John: I'd like to build on that and turn our attention to the work that you are doing in financial institutions. Including your past work as an international banker, but then also the work that you currently do as a coach and facilitator, what has struck you as distinctive about the coaching that you do in a financial institution setting?

Agnes: Let me go back to when I was in the business myself. One of the striking experiences for us as bankers (and I guess all professionals who work at a higher level of proficiency experience this) was often the big knowledge gap between us and even our more sophisticated clients. There is something increasingly arcane and complex that I've seen grow and develop in that industry. This might also be true, for example, in the medical field or in technology. The gap between the user and the expert has grown exponentially, and I don't think we realized how swiftly that happened in finance. I think that as we helplessly swear at our computers, we are all aware that there is a technology gap between the people who are building those things and us as users, but I don't think we had quite the same sensitivity when it came to finance. But I distinctly remember when I was a banker that there were products and services we were designing that I was starting to have a difficult time understanding. I often thought about how much my clients have to rely on and trust in me as a professional with integrity, because there was no way they could really follow all the implications and risks.

I'm not saying that's unique to finance but I remember distinctly the taste of that insight in my mouth, so to speak, while I was still working as a banker. The bank for which I was working had become famous for its early work in derivatives. These were very sophisticated structured financial instruments. When you take that insight into the coaching relationship, you notice how connected or disconnected individual executives seem to be from the marketplace. They are sometimes disconnected from the marketplace's needs or sensitivities or abilities to grapple with what is being offered. This is one thread for me.

I think another thread is the profile of the individual performers. The sorts of individuals that the industry attracts tend to be the more technical personality, the more analytical personality. I found that when I became an executive coach this group very quickly represented the largest part of my practice. The analytical people either in a technology company or in accounting firms and financial institutions became big users of coaching--perhaps because of their (usually unknown) need to develop greater emotional intelligence [EI]. They were selected and rewarded, not for their emotional intelligence but for analytical intelligence, for their IQ. So EI became a big theme in my coaching.

It also struck me that in many finance environments fun and pleasure and creativity were often unacceptable; there was something intrinsically serious and sort of self-important about the commercial banker, for example. I've often had to work with people on simply lightening up. And it might be because the industry grew up as very conservative. If you think even about its buildings, with columned facades meant to inspire credibility, this is almost in the DNA of the people who were working there.

Here's the paradox: the areas where fun and creativity, almost boundless creativity, crept in were actually in investment banking and in structured finance, where deal-making and structured financial instruments were the focus. That's where people are much more creative. But because of the arcane and sophisticated nature of their work, they become a bit isolated and arrogant, compared to other sections of the financial institutions. There are certain sections, certain functions which make so much money that they are often more respected, admired and untouchable than others, and investment banking, for example, is one of those. These are the people who do mergers and acquisitions (M&As) and issue stock. They do these very sophisticated things. It's kind of funny because the investment bankers hardly ever attend the leadership development programs I run in financial institutions. They're too busy and too important to work on or contribute to group functions of that nature. Time — for them — is money, and lots of it.

I'm sure that if you were listening to government officials' conversations and if you were listening inside banking organizations, it would be very much an 'us versus them' perspective most of the time, no matter what it looks like on television.

John: It seems almost a sacrifice to take the time away from what's really important for them, to be reflecting on management or leadership issues.

Agnes: We all know they work under incredible time pressures and their lives are completely insane. What we need to think of in the coaching context is what this sort of pressure and stress does – both to the person's overall health and to their nervous system with all its coping mechanisms. These can engender possible derailing, unproductive behaviors.

THE FAÇADE OF FINANCE

John: There's something you said earlier when you were talking about the typical financial institution edifice, its architectural form. You used the term façade. It made me wonder to what extent there has been this (idealized) view of what finance was as an institution – impressive in the front room but something else going on in the back room. And similarly with the people within the system: was what they discussed with each other different from what they presented to their external customers?

Agnes: In the best of scenarios, that was often done with a sense of, 'Oh, they wouldn't understand.' There wasn't ill intent. It was more 'How do we dumb it down? How do we simplify it so they could even understand?'

John: And what might be a less generous interpretation?

Agnes: I don't know to what extent we fully realize as a public that financial institutions are sales-driven. They have to produce substantial profits. Therefore, the provider can take advantage of the knowledge gap between the client and provider (as in any industry).

There is less transparency and obviousness now. I mean, there was a simpler time when people knew enough or there were enough people who knew how an engine worked to look over a mechanic's shoulder. Nowadays, most people can't, because so much of a car's inner workings are computerized.

John: Yes, it's virtually impossible to supervise the specialist.

Agnes: I think that we're facing in this industry something that we will probably face again when we're dealing with healthcare: there isn't a lot of transparency; there is a gigantic knowledge gap. Financial and commercial interests therefore have a temptingly wide array of options and ways in which that gap can be exploited. This opens huge opportunities for reflective coaching, in terms of helping executives manage the everyday polarity between profitability and customer orientation.

John: That's interesting. If you think about your work, not only within finance but across a broader spectrum of industries, what other kinds of observations can you make, such as the unique challenges related to the gap between user and expert, or rewarding intellect and IQ over social intelligence and connectivity?

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND NARRATIVES

Agnes: When I think about human beings in these circumstances, I also think about the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance. I don't think there are a lot of executives or bankers or analysts or mortgage specialists sitting in their offices suffering from a crisis of conscience because they feel there is such a values gap between them and their institution. That's not how human beings operate. We have a stunning ability to arrange and rationalize our thoughts in such a way as to make whatever is in our interest fit with the rest of our convictions. So I think one of the key skills of an executive coach who works in an industry that might have some problematic aspects is to be able to question the narrative–the yarn that the person spins about themselves and their institution. I don't mean to question it in any sort of leading way, but just to unpeel the onion and allow the person to see what goes on from a variety of perspectives.

In my work, I've had less to do with exploring the dissonant narrative relative to the relationship between an executive and his market or his clients, but much more relative to their working relationships, their team, their internal competitors, and their peers. Examples might be the narrative of desirable collaboration, when everybody is actually remunerated on a competitive, individual basis; or the narrative of the benefits of cross-selling other colleagues' products to one's own client for the good of the whole company, while one is under enormous pressure to maximize sales on one's own specific product or service and reach certain financial goals.

The same can be said about the dissonant narrative of teamwork. What teamwork can take place when there are no joint goals defined at all? This is one of my favorite facilitation shticks. When executives talk about the desirability of teamwork, all I have to ask is, "What is the common measureable joint goal that this team has to reach?" Often there isn't anything, there isn't a stitch of anything common that they have to reach in an interdependent fashion – other than the aggregate of their individual objectives. "Teamwork" is then just a flag that's waved that says, 'Please be nice to each other.' So the word *team* has been one of the most misused ones that I've enjoyed questioning and then reconstructing with my clients.

The siege mentality makes people more appreciative of receiving support than they did before.

John: How exactly do you approach these issues with your finance clients?

Agnes: Unearthing these layers is a good and fun part of what I enjoy early on in the coaching relationship. The other part that's fun, especially early on, is to use a number of assessments, personality behavioral preferences, etc., as most executive coaches do.

To use those assessments to enable people to discover how predisposed they were to arrive in this industry is always another fun moment for me. Occasionally we will run into people who are chafing at their careers. For example, like many humanities graduates, I was literally recruited off the street because I spoke six languages and had a reasonably good IQ. I loved the intellectual challenge and the learning in the first years, but I didn't have enough of an appetite for money, and if you don't have an appetite for money you're going to get extremely bored after a while. There are people, on the other hand, who not only don't get bored but are passionate about making money, for themselves and for others. That's the type of deep utilitarian preference that surfaces in a lot of assessments and is very important for people to know about themselves.

A particularly relevant transition is currently being confronted: many people are forced to leave the industry because of the extensive downsizings and consolidation. Coaches can add real value by helping people examine why they originally joined this industry and what personal preferences and needs were satisfied by their work there. Coaches can help their clients look for something that can be fulfilling in a new context. What I also notice nowadays (as we're taught in assessment training) is that preferences can change if you go through a crisis. In a couple of situations, I'm meeting people who are making very profound, personal shifts because they're so shocked and disappointed with what's happening in this particular cycle. They are going to the other extreme, re-orienting their purpose and vision, and even trying to work for nonprofits.

John: In the kind of situation you just described, is there a fundamental shift in values or simply in how existing values get expressed?

Agnes: I am just seeing some people re-examine what's important to them. Often, this re-examination coincides with an age, a phase in their lives when this sort of quest is timely from a developmental standpoint. When such an individual happens to be on the executive committee of a large institution, if they look away from their bank account long enough, they can have an enormous impact on an entire organization. While I don't want to be overly cynical, what seems to work against that new perspective is the very elastic sense of what is 'enough.' For many people this sense is very relative. You would think those who have reached an adequate level of financial security could start relaxing and looking around at how they can give back; however, this is not a universal trait. The altruistic motivation and a quest for purpose are a stronger preference in some people than in others.

John: Yes, I've certainly seen situations where people are completely oblivious to the conversation of 'how much is enough?' It's not even a question in their repertoire, so they aren't able to assess their lives based on that. They can't switch gears and shift directions accordingly.

Agnes: For some, enough is whatever you can get.

John: It's more about what the culture says, rather than any kind of self-reflective, "This is what's enough for me." One of the things that you mentioned was cognitive dissonance and the discrepancy between what seem to be individual and organizational values structures and what are tangible rewards. In your coaching, have you found that you not only work with individuals about how to address their particular issues but also how to have a larger influence on the organization in which they operate?

Agnes: One of the abilities I most admire in great coaches is the skill of widening their coachees' horizons, requesting that they think beyond, that they think about purpose, about what is really fulfilling. When I can go there, rather than be mired in problem-solving, I know I'm in the zone myself! It is out of those reflections that talented executives discover the true power of their role-modeling, of their story-telling, of visionary speech in an organization.

I think that as coaches we're facilitators and enablers, and we dream big for and with our clients. We often see the scope and reach of their leadership influence more broadly than they themselves can. Therefore an appreciative emphasis on their strengths, and an insistence on having them face their own power and influence is critical. When examining undesirable outcomes in an executive's life (including the impact they've had on staff or customers) if they begin looking for an extrinsic locus of control, I often ask, "Are you personally powerful or powerless… in this matter?"

In one organization, an EVP told me, "I am pretty powerless when it comes to the mindset of my credit officers. They have been successful for 15 - 20 years and have made a lot of money lending a certain way. To now reeducate them to operate differently is a huge challenge for me. I mean, that's not what I'm trained for." The same executive was saying, "They (my people) own the customers. I'm a little insecure because they could leave and take their customers with them. I don't feel like the powerful one in this equation. Our business depends on my good lenders." Coaching together, we did a lot of work on ways to paint a vision around the new lending practices as a vast and — in this environment — more sustainable professional development opportunity for his team, and they are getting very excited.

It's harder sometimes to get to the larger pattern if the coach falls into a helper/advisor mode because somebody is under duress or feels insecure about their job.

THINKING BIG THROUGH COACHING

John: What other approaches stimulate such people to think big?

Agnes: Any conversation that business people have with people who think differently or come from a different background or come from a different experience is extremely useful. Viewed that way, the coaching conversation can have a big impact. For example, if an executive was stuck in an elevator with a 20 year old firefighter, they would both come out of there transformed by the experience. That's why in leadership programs we sometimes create *immersion* experiences. We send people out into the field as mystery shoppers in their own company stores or to interview people or to get something done in their own companies, because they otherwise risk being so disconnected. They have no idea what's going on somewhere else. For example, banks typically pay too little attention (and money) to their front line – the tellers who meet their customer base. Magic happens when executives take that job on for a few hours. Anytime we can create conversations and experiences that are unfamiliar and uncomfortable, whether they occur with a coach or with someone else, that's beneficial.

John: I love seeing people being shocked into momentary awareness because of the discrepancy between their usual conversations and accompanying perspectives and a new or different conversation with its set of suppositions. People seem to pause momentarily and notice that they are identifying different dots, connecting them in new ways, and something different necessarily emerges.

Agnes: But what works against such openness at the moment is a sort of siege mentality in some of the larger financial institutions, especially if they had received TARP [Troubled Asset Relief Program] funds. What I mean by siege mentality is, 'We're being attacked. Under the guise of being helped, we're actually being threatened.' Just like the Sarbanes-Oxley Act that complicated so many CFOs' and CEOs' lives and the Board's degree of responsibility. There was such a wailing and a gnashing of teeth. Any additional scrutiny now is going to trigger people climbing onto their barricades and defending against the siege. So it's not simple; that's a very normal defensive reaction.

Do you ever wonder what you would do if you were the President's coach? How does he balance a conviction that people (industries) can and must fundamentally self-administer, self-correct and self-steward, with the controls that the public wants to see put in place?

John: It seems to me that our tendency is to dummy down things and oversimplify anticipated impacts and the complexity of situations. I know you wrote a book with Bill Bergquist about some of these issues [see *Ten Themes and Variations for Postmodern Leaders and Their Coaches*].

CHALLENGE IN THE AMERICAN BANKING SYSTEM

John: I'd like to follow up on what you called the siege mentality of bankers because of TARP. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what impact that's had – both on your approach to coaching managers and executives and on the trajectory of learning for your clients?

Agnes: It's been very interesting. In the so-called bailout, the government actors feel that they're doing the banks a favor and the banks feel that they're actually just being imposed upon. The discourse in TARP banks is not appreciative; they can't wait to get out from under the regulations, public perceptions and conditions that are associated with the TARP loans. Frankly, they are chafing under the associated financial costs (these are not free loans, and the taxpayer will ultimately make a profit). So for the two parties in this particular rescue (or so-called rescue), nobody feels appreciative. As such, the Fed and the banks are hunkering down and being critical of the other.

I'm sure that if you were listening to government officials' conversations (maybe at the Fed or the FCC [Federal Commerce Commission]) and if you were listening inside banking organizations at the dialog, it would be very much an 'us versus them' perspective most of the time, no matter what it looks like on television.

As part of this dance, financial institutions are making credit extremely tight right now. They are going to the other extreme from their somewhat loose lending practices when credit was very available (and profitable), and everyone was on this 'Let's make credit broadly accessible' bandwagon. So now chief credit officers are overreacting and tightening, sometimes beyond what appears reasonable to the customer.

Let's bring this down to the individual executive. As in other industries, financial institutions have pared down staff-wise. There have been many layers of layoffs – so everybody is working extremely hard. There's also the additional stress of not being allowed to make any mistakes. In other words, anything that looks like a bad loan or anything where repayment is at risk increases the pressure.

I'm seeing a variety of reactions, depending on where in the institution one is coaching. If you're working in the actual business-generating units, the stress is enormous. 'How do we make more money with less risk?' This stance is diametrically opposed to what we saw before, when it could be stated as 'Make as much money as you can and keep the risk justifiable.' People cancel coaching sessions in those business units where it's all about business development. They postpone these sessions; have very little time for them; prefer to do them by phone. Even in accounting firms, the same thing is happening. 'Let's stay on the business generating front as much as we can' and people are working very, very long days.

There have also been many personnel reductions among employees who provide support services. These employees are working very hard. For example, in all the IT-related and technology-related functions, those people are under extremely close scrutiny to deliver cost savings; longer term plans are questioned and put on hold. How do people individually respond? This is really where resilience in the executives being coached is tested and it depends a lot on the life experience that people have had.

The greatest resilience shows up in those who have gone through several ups and downs before, adapted and kept their perspective. However, those professionals or managers who've had smooth sailing and have been largely successful most of their life are having the hardest time right now. I've seen two scenarios: either people personalize the current difficulties and think that they have now failed; or, depending on temperament and personality, they go into denial and find a way to externalize the blame to the system, to somebody else in the organization, or to the larger economic conditions.

And neither is completely right. With both of those scenarios, the coaching has to be about maturation and learning. For senior executives, by the time they get to the top of their organizations, they tend to have had a greater variety of ups and downs and even downright failures. For the younger crowd (30 to 40 year olds), there are more people who haven't experienced a lot of hardship and might end up at either of those two extremes. So for people who find themselves at either extreme, it's a matter of asking, "How can this be part of your maturation process? How can this be a career enrichment opportunity? How can this be about your personal development, about understanding human nature, especially the nature of groups, crowds, and the large trends that sweep whole teams, whole divisions and whole organizations?" Sometimes, our conversations also go in the direction of "Are you made for this? Is this the territory in which you want to continue climbing? Are you up to it? And is this what you bargained for?"

I never cease to marvel how often, given a little guidance and space to reflect, people mobilize something deep in themselves and show up strong in the face of adversity. In a couple of current cases, by the eight or tenth week of coaching, I felt I was almost dealing with a different, larger, human being. This is what I work for!

Our discussions in the coaching sessions will have very little to do with macroeconomic issues; it will have a lot to do with "How do I survive under the current circumstances, by getting the best out of a team that is half the size it was a year ago?"

John: In the scenario that you're talking about, do the sense of crisis and perhaps the siege mentality have an impact on what your clients are able to learn, how quickly they learn, and how well they learn it?

Agnes: There are still good, established coaching assignments we all deliver with somebody extremely talented who is picking up more responsibility; who is confronting a derailing threat or has some edges to smooth over; or who has a new personal skill to learn, such as networking or global leadership versus a more direct, hands-on kind of leadership. But now and more than ever, coaches are preparing people as they confront myriad transitions and new and profoundly unfamiliar challenges. The siege mentality makes people more appreciative of receiving support than they did before. If they don't make time for coaching, they're sorry they didn't and they're very apologetic about it. If they can and do make time, they appreciate that because they're under siege. Everybody feels under threat; nobody is completely secure. There's a greater sense of appreciation that here is a resource they can use for their own evolution, development… and as a sanctuary.

There is a little bit more of what I would facetiously call a self-orientation in the coaching sessions, a recognition that 'this is a time to survive. What can we produce in this session that will equip me to perform significantly and visibly better? What will enable me to be noticed positively or at least be sure that I'm not negatively noticed?' So there's also more of this short-term, 'Please help me look good' direction to our work, it seems.

John: What are the risks in that?

Agnes: Upon reflection, what this can do is tempt the coach to stay very short-term oriented and somewhat tactical with their client. After all, if we're in survival mode, then we all become problem solvers, helpers and saviors. It may be a little harder, even for an experienced coach, to stay appropriately detached and work on the larger transformation that the individual needs to go through in order to mature in their profession.

John: Is it necessarily an either/or?

Agnes: No, it never is. At the beginning of every coaching relationship, I announce that in each session there are going to be some things we work on that are tactical, short-term, and related to what happened in the last week or two, and there are going to be larger patterns that we'll also address. What I'm suggesting, though, is that it's harder sometimes to get to the larger pattern if the coach falls into a helper/advisor mode because somebody is under duress or feels insecure about their job.

John: Certainly, it's easy to fall into operating inside their frame of reference as a fellow problem solver, rather than outside, posing questions that provoke critical thinking.

Agnes: That's true because the discussions are not going to resemble, even remotely, what you and I have been talking about. Our discussions in the coaching sessions will have very little to do with the larger economic cycle or whether the bank got TARP or is repaying their TARP or not. It will have very little to do with these macroeconomic issues; it will have a lot to do with asking, thinking about and answering questions like 'How do I survive under the current circumstances, by getting the best out of a team that is half the size it was a year ago? By perfecting some skills that have now become necessary that I didn't have before? Even by reeducating my entire sales force (since, for example, the lenders are in essence sales forces) so how do I reeducate my lenders to think differently?'

John: It's interesting because inside that short-term scenario is a larger transformational question and opportunity, but it's a very thin edge to be moving along.

In the U.S., if a banker loses his job, one out of five is more likely to think of an entrepreneurial alternative or a fundamental reorientation to their life. That's not as common in Europe.

THE INTERNATIONAL FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

John: I'd like to switch gears. I know that you do work not only in North America but also overseas. I'm wondering what differences you've found in working with client organizations in those different locales that might, for example, be connected to cultural differences?

Agnes: I'm sure there are. For example, I was working last year with one of the large mortgage lending institutions in Germany which ended up smack in the middle of all the CMO/CDO [Collateralized Mortgage Obligations/Collateralized Debt Obligations] crisis. In general, what struck me about it was how similar their business reactions were to those of our financial institutions. When it comes to how people operated, I don't want to generalize to all of Europe. In Germany, there is certainly a great deal more secrecy and hierarchy; people were much more circumspect about who knew what and who should know what. Whereas in America, everything seems to be known by almost everyone; at least it feels that way by comparison.

Western Europe is probably much more guarded and hierarchical than we are, with all the implications about the felt need for even greater security because they don't have all the data. Otherwise, the reactions are very similar: the same blame game, the same firing of the people at the top, the same reductions in staffing.

I'm thinking about one distinct difference. In the U.S., if a banker loses his job, one out of five is more likely to think of an entrepreneurial alternative or a fundamental reorientation to their life. That's not as common in Europe. The infrastructure for starting businesses or practices or something of your own is much more rudimentary there. The social pressure to define yourself through your professional activities and through your degree or your title in an institution is much, much greater.

I think that our population of managers and executives (in the U.S.) is much more fortunate to have options about managing their careers when crises hit. The requirements for what is expected in a job interview (in terms of your work experience) are much more flexible. We accept transferable skills more easily than in Europe. There, if you don't have a degree in something, you're not considered qualified. As a result, more fear is triggered and people are more willing to do anything that's needed to keep a job. Whereas I see that many intelligent, well-educated and hard working professionals who are losing jobs reinvent themselves in some way in the North American market.

John: It seems to me that in North America we are oblivious to exactly the difference that you're pointing to. We are blind and don't appreciate how the social structures and expectations here allow degrees of freedom that might not be available elsewhere.

Agnes: I personally have a longstanding client with a law degree, who was the head of HR for a number of large German banks. She became a friend because we worked together on so many projects. She lost her job, and she's never been without a job. She always seemed to be recruited from one place to the next, or a merger moved her from one institution to the other. She was chief of staff to the CEO on her last assignment. She lost that job and will not find another one at the moment without major compromises in level and compensation. In what seemed like an automatic response as a friend, I said, "Well, if you'd like to have a few conversations on how to start your own firm and take an entrepreneurial approach to your next phase of your life, I'm happy to help you." She was shocked because she hadn't thought of that at all. I don't know if I will have a "client" there or not, but I think she's thinking about it. I believe we do take for granted the flexibility, the opportunities in infrastructure, tax conditions, and the social acceptance of personal re-invention that exist in the U.S.

LEADERSHIP AND BEST PRACTICES

John: Here's the last question I want to pose. In an article that appeared in 2009 issue 2 of ***IJCO***™, June Delano quoted John Sullivan, the former Chief Talent Officer for Agilent Technologies, who was talking about differences between *average practice*, *best practice* and *next practice*. He made the observation or interpretation that traditional benchmarking, which focuses on adopting best practices, amounts to little more than adopting the soon-to-be obsolete practices of others. Let's use that as a platform. If you look at the work we do in leadership coaching, what do you see as best practices? And what do you speculate might be our next practices?

Agnes: Depending on what organization you look at, this could be a best practice or a next practice: Speaking up is definitely a much more respected and encouraged practice in some of the forward-looking divisions and business units with which I work. Leaders *say* they want to ensure that bad news is heard early, almost asking for whistle blowing. They praise speaking up as an act of courage and integrity. The truly visionary leaders of complex organizations know that the worst thing that can happen to them (and to everyone else) is that they be uninformed about what's going on.

Things change so rapidly in organizational environments right now that the coach can be an extra pair of eyes and ears for the executive. Not a mouth, but a pair of eyes and ears to see what's moving, what's going on.

By contrast, peer pressure makes people look the other way on a lot of things. Visionary leaders encourage people who admit mistakes, who find errors, and who point out undue risk or misalignments with values. For example, making promises to the market and to customers that the firm knows it probably can't keep is a values breach, if not an ethical breach. To point out that we're actually doing something different than our clients have been led to expect (by us) was anathema even ten years ago. What I consider to be a next practice is for managers to proactively ask people to take the risk of exposing internal problems and then making them heroes instead of killing the messenger. It will be interesting to see how such bad news bearers are actually received in the future, not only in financial institutions but even in government agencies. Will the next analyst who unearths a Bernie Madoff situation be heard next time?

John: What else?

Agnes: The practice of paying much more attention to voices out in the marketplace, even to the degree of letting them participate in shaping internal decisions and strategies. I'm not talking of focus groups, but of customers co-creating products and services. This means going beyond listening and moving on to partnering. Internally, the equivalent focus would be to listen to and involve the people whose boots are on the ground, to be sure one is in touch with those who are younger and different, closest to the clients or closest to the subject matter. Behaviorally, this means elevating the leader's curiosity and willingness to play, to interact, to collaborate, to learn from those younger and lower in rank, and to involve them in strategic decisions.

John: Here's a follow up to this conversation: given the changes in the marketplace, do you think there are current best coaching practices that might become the next obsolete practices because they're no longer a good fit with what the environment demands?

Agnes: I was talking about leadership practices before. Here are my thoughts about coaching-related best practices or obsolete practices. Based solely on my own experience, across numerous senior assignments, I find that the frequency with which I check in with the system, the circle around my executive, has increased enormously.

I'm currently working with the CFO of one company. If I don't speak with the CEO every couple of weeks, she thinks that I'm "AWOL" [absent without leave]. If I don't check in with at least three of their multitudinous board members once a month, they consider that I'm insufficiently connected.

I welcome this: by having so much more contact with what's surrounding the individual I'm coaching, I can be infinitely more helpful. Things change so rapidly in organizational environments right now that the coach can be an extra pair of eyes and ears for the executive. Not a mouth, of course, but a pair of eyes and ears to see what's moving, what's going on. I think that's the most striking practice that's useful: to continue tearing down the wall of isolation around one-on-one coaching in an organization, while still guarding confidentiality.

John: For me, it connects with how crucial the client's performance environment is. When the coach has access to additional information and perspective beyond that which they themselves can provide, you can use that to temper your listening when you're working with the client.

Agnes: And it changes how we both relate to the stakeholders. In other words, when I'm out there as a coach calling stakeholders, I'm not speaking, I'm listening. Here's the common situation: We often start assignments by doing a number of interviews and personality assessments. In other words, we gather data. What sometimes happens is that the coach refers to that data a lot for the following six months. We take a great risk if we don't refresh or update that data every couple of months at least. The earth has continued to move in the meantime. And how else do we know if the adjustments the leader is making are (still) appropriate?

The same thing happens with assessments. We do assessments at the beginning, we understand some things about the client, and then we don't refer to them enough. Or we don't ask ourselves whether we should do another assessment because now there are new challenges in front of the person and we need to understand another aspect of their personality. I think one has to take stock of how to get the most out of these 3-6 month assignments and involve as many perspectives and data resources as possible, continually. Incidentally, assignments are often shorter, now. Though my standard has always been six months, now I'm doing a couple of four month assignments. So the urgency of really getting a great deal done in less time is even greater.

John: Are there any concluding reflections or remarks that you'd like to make?

CONCLUSION

Agnes: A phrase that has been attributed to Rahm Emmanuel is "a crisis is an awful thing to waste." The thing that could be saddest about the current downturn and the crisis that goes with it would be if the different actors didn't learn what they need to learn. By that, I mean senior executives as well as coaches. We have to come out operating differently. I think we all need to examine what intelligent adjustments we're making at the moment and whether they're sufficient. In fact, I would invite my colleagues to write me and ***IJCO***™ of their experiences in this regard.

John: Beyond the hope that people will learn, we need to keep our eyes and ears open for what impact is occurring and how we can continue to support that. Agnes, thank you so much for taking the time to share your experience and your reflections about the work you've been doing, both within and outside financial institutions.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Agnes Mura is president of *AMI – the Nexus between Business Culture and Results*, a Santa Monica, California, based coaching, facilitation and organizational behavior firm. Her coaching and leadership development work spans several continents and a wide range of industries, with an emphasis on growing globally-minded managers and executives. Her contributions appeared in the *2008 Pfeiffer Annual – Leadership Development*, and, after co-authoring *Ten Themes and Variations for Postmodern Leaders and their Coaches* in 2005, she is working on her second book with Dr. William Bergquist, a compendium of organizational coaching strategies and practices, due out this year. As a leading figure in the founding of Professional Coaches, Mentors and Advisors (PCMA) and the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO), she has demonstrated her passion and commitment to the continued growth and refinement of organizational coaching.

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John Lazar has been a performance consultant and coach for over 26 years, including sixteen years as an executive coach to CEOs, executives and senior managers. He works with individual leaders and their work teams, altering their perspective, motivation and performance to produce socially and emotionally intelligent leadership and management, breakthrough results and business success. Sample client organizations include Boeing, Deloitte, NASA, Northern Trust, U.S. Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and Suncor. John is currently Vice President of the Board of Directors of the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO). He is co-founder and Co-Executive Editor of ***IJCO The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations***™.

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