Musings: Organizational Coaching and Coaching Culture

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Musings: Organizational Coaching and Coaching Culture

Mike Jay

In this provocative and reflective column, the author offers a perspective that challenges some of our “common sense” understandings of the larger context in which coaching in organizational settings occurs. Coaching culture is considered a very rare instance, though coaching is acknowledged as an essential and critical set of skills and values that can enable effective organizations.

First off, let me say these are two different things. Most of the time, I see organizations implement coaching as an initiative, often in concert with other initiatives. A lot of the research these days depicts a similar set of relationships as shown in the figure I’ve included below.

Figure 1. Organization improvement efforts

When does a coaching intervention or initiative become part of the organizational culture? This is really the key. But before I answer the question, let me add my opinion to the possible ideas about this organizational coaching jazz.

First off, organizational coaching does not occur when someone in the organization is coached. Contrary to popular belief, if
you are coaching people and they are in an organization, there is no organizational coaching program, which many people like to proclaim. Organizational coaching starts when the coaching becomes part of organizational work. I doubt enough has been said about the definition of organizational coaching.

If you enter this phrase in our friends at Google: “definition of organizational coaching,” you will not find a Google helping phrase that matches in the search suggestions. That is your first clue that organizational coaching is something that is essentially off the radar. When you search directly for “organizational coaching,” you end up with a maze of people who say they do it, but I couldn’t find a workable definition.

I won’t try to provide you with one, only suggest that before you start reviewing the subject, think a little about what organizational coaching is, not only a coaching culture.

In my own working ideas about organizational coaching, I believe that it is really difficult to coach an organization. When you think about the idea itself, what is an organization? A quick trip to Google will get you some ideas about what people think an organization is and does and all of that stuff. What you won’t find is that the organization is a person. Hmmmmmm.

I guess that’s why *IJCO The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations™*, for which this article is intended, talks about coaching in organizations and why organizational coaching is not defined anywhere I could find per se.

Can you coach an organization? Hmmmm. Probably not.

OK. With that idea forward, let me pontificate on this organizational coaching idea and a coaching culture. I think that a coaching culture, or culture of coaching, would almost drive anyone insane. To put things in perspective, I had founded a coaching school back in 1998 when there were only a couple dozen of them out there. One thing I started to notice was that the people who wanted to learn to be coached didn’t like being coached!

Yep, it’s true. In 2003, I ran a study on my own, invited 100 people into a coach training program, which included a coach and coaching of their choice. (By the way, we found that if you let people choose their coach, you eliminate most coaching issues.) Of the 100, only 34 chose to be coached, and less than a handful actually finished their coaching cycle. Wow! Let me see if I get this straight.

Coaches want to coach other people, but don’t want to be coached. Hmmmm. That is true in my experience as well, and has been born out over time with managers, leaders, and executives. How many times have I been hired to coach someone – and upon stating
to them I won’t coach that person without their manager and their manager once removed being involved – I get a strange response? I think there is your answer about coaching culture. This coaching stuff is hard.

Depending on what you call coaching, coaching acts like a virus, in most cases introduced into an organization because of some sort of issue, initiative, or wild and crazy idea of one of the executives with extra budget. Then off we go. As soon as people realize this coaching jazz is work and that it begins to leak into places where there are gray areas, undiscussables, and culture issues, look out. You’ll see more pushback as it reveals things about people they would prefer remain unseen.

People love to talk about coaching, coaching in organizations, and coaching cultures, but to be frank, it’s the scariest thing on the planet if you’re going to do “real” coaching in an organization. Political correctness reigns today, nobody wants to upset anybody, and everybody is really scared. Baring your souls, undressing your egos, and really getting at the roots of personal and organizational dysfunction (which always is revealed, no matter what you call coaching) is something few people today want to infect their organizations with. This is why you see less and less coaching being done as budgets get tight and we enter a period of complexity that no person can handle.

Now, of course there are some organizations that will do this work. I work for a couple around the world, but it’s still really tough work. Years ago, I wrote about CCO, Chief Coaching Officers, but you don’t see many; nothing in the press. Coaching has not been elevated strategically. It’s still an initiative tucked away in some other department. I doubt many coaching cultures even exist or, for that matter, are even tried.

I don’t even think (in fact, I’m positive) that the International Coach Federation (ICF), an organization to which I’ve belonged since 1995, has a coaching culture, at least not one that is discernable or definable, and certainly nothing that you would want to model. A loose configuration of spattering cats would more likely characterize this prestigious body of independents. I doubt anyone there has a clue about a coaching culture. That won’t make me many friends, but let the truth-telling begin.

With that little barb aside (controversy sells, you know, John!), how can you have a coaching culture if everyone is afraid to give their opinion for fear of retribution? Bingo. Organizational cultures today are hardly open enough to withstand much criticism, let alone candid and active debate about the truth. Although many claim to be about that, I’ve never encountered any of them practice this on any scale.
So as not to make this a diatribe but a musing, let me say this: The closest thing I've seen to a coaching culture is a culture that has implemented Requisite Organization (RO). RO becomes the closest thing to a coaching culture because in it, (one of) the managers’ roles is to coach their subordinates. It is defined in Elliott Jaques’ book, *Executive Leadership*. You can actually read about the role of coaching in managerial leadership—another sticking point—with regards to the differences between management and leadership. Jaques claims none, that they are one and the same. Again, another revolutionary idea.

I believe that coaching is best left as a tool for managerial leadership. While it’s a really good idea to engage independent coaches to facilitate lots of things that the internal culture can’t, it’s key to integrate the skills of coaching (and the objectivity of coaching) into the normal patterns of organizational culture. Let’s face it, most of the organizations that we have today won’t survive much longer, not in the face of polycentrism, diversity, and globalization. At least they won’t survive in their current, closed, siloed, dysfunctional forms in the face of exponentially rising complexity.

But, of course, this is for another musing. Realistically, I’m not pessimistic about coaching in organizations, but I am pessimistic about coaching cultures. We don’t even have leadership cultures or management cultures, so why would we have coaching cultures yet?

Finally, as I close this set of ideas, I offer you this olive branch. Coaching in organizations will grow and prosper because it will be one of the solutions that is needed to offset rising complexity. The fact that all of us are *In Over Our Heads*, the title of a Robert Kegan book published in the late 90s, indicates that we can’t keep up with the demands of modern-day life. Coaching has to be in the toolkit of any person who wants to work in organizations today. Perhaps that is the first step to a culture of coaching.
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