High-Impact Coaching for Organizational Change

John L. Bennett and Mary Wayne Bush

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Organizational change is being accelerated and enabled by many factors: globalization, technology advances, complex multinational organizations, more frequent partnering across national borders and company boundaries, just to mention a few. In a recent study by IBM Corporation (Thompson, Bear, Dennis, Vickers, London, & Morrison, 2009) on “making change work,” the authors claim that “change is the new normal.” Companies no longer have the luxury of expecting day-to-day operations to maintain a static or predictable pattern that is occasionally interrupted by short bursts of change. “To prosper, leaders will need to abandon such outdated notions of change. In reality, the new normal is continuous change—not the absence of change” (p. 6). According to the Corporate Leadership Council (2003a), most organizations acknowledge change as a continuous process that impacts the way companies manage change. “It is no longer appropriate to consider organizational change as a project or event with a clearly defined beginning or end” (p. 1). Change is now constant.

If constant change is indeed the new normal in organizational life, then the challenge is to manage it, learn from it, and leverage it as an opportunity for continuous improvement. In this article we propose that executive coaching is one way to do this – to ensure that change is managed and leveraged at the individual and group levels for the benefit of the entire organization. The authors share a methodology that can assist coaches in identifying who, what, and when to coach in order to create high-impact results during organizational change. Executive coaching will be shown as a valuable intervention for organizational change, which can range in scope from large scale (involving the whole company or multiple companies or industries) to deployments that involve only one department or leader.

In this article, the authors provide overviews of current thinking in both coaching and change, introduce Darryl Conner’s work on essential roles in organizational change, provide powerful questions that can be applied to each stage and role in the organizational change process, and conclude with examples to illustrate. As coaches become adept at identifying the stages of change and the roles of their clients, they can use powerful questions to enhance coaching’s value and effectiveness.

Coaching

Coaching has been identified as a key tool for executive development (Charan, 2008; Crane, 2001; Dotlich & Cairo, 1999; Freas, 2000; Levenson, 2009; Wasylyshyn, 2004) and has been cited as a signif-
icant way to produce both performance improvement and cultural change (Crane, 2001; Goldsmith, Lyons, & Freas, 2000; Guthrie, 1999; Hudson, 1999). It is used to address a multitude of issues, from performance and skill enhancement, to career development. Coaching can increase executives’ productivity and satisfaction, both personally and professionally, and help leaders identify new skills, as well as leverage existing talents and abilities. Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2002) found that executive coaching positively impacts leadership, increasing charismatic behavior and the ability to inspire and impact followers.

Articles on coaching have appeared in mainstream periodicals such as *Fortune*, the *New York Times* and *Harvard Business Review*, and the consensus of experts and clients alike is that coaching can positively affect an organization’s bottom line. While there is evidence that executive coaching has long been part of human resources development (Freas, 2000; Hudson, 1999), researchers point out that coaching is increasingly relevant as a support for executives in the current environment of rapid and continuous change (Hunt & Weintraub, 2007; Hurd, 2003; Skiffington & Zeus, 2001; Sztcinski, 2001). According to Hunt and Weintraub (2002, 2007), executive coaching is helpful in promoting both adaptive and behavioral learning. When effectively practiced, it promotes more transformational or developmental learning. Moen and Skaalvik (2008) found that coaching significantly affects psychological variables effecting performance. The results of a study conducted by the Corporate Leadership Council (2003) indicate that executive coaching helps improve management capabilities in experimenting with new approaches, shifting to an enabling style of managing, successfully dealing with difficult performance and team issues, and freeing up time for strategic thinking by more effective delegating.

Many models or approaches to coaching have emerged and are being applied with varying degrees of success. The labels and number of steps in approaches may vary and similar basic steps are involved. An exhaustive review of these approaches is out of the scope of this article, but these approaches can be integrated into a model (Bennett & Craig, 2005, p. 53; see Figure 1) that includes the following steps applied to coaching for change:

1. Identify the current situation or environment;
2. Identify need or desire for a different future state;
3. Explore possible actions to take or behaviors to modify to achieve the desired future state;
4. Agree on the focus of the action and other change; and
5. Summarize the session, agree on follow-up date and actions to be completed before the next coaching session.

Twentieth century novelist and Nobel Prize Laureate, Naguib Mahfouz, stated, “You can tell a man is clever by his answers. You can tell a man is wise by his questions.” Coaching is based on a model that enables the coach to guide the client to self-discovery through powerful questions. “When clients discover answers for themselves, ownership increases and they are more likely to follow through on the planned actions” (Bennett & Craig, 2005, p. 52). In her book, *Smart Questions*, Dorothy Leeds (1987) notes that if you want someone to digest and remember something, they have to think of it themselves. The only way to you help someone accept an idea as their own is to ask them a question and let them give the answer back to you.

This concept of ownership through self-discovery is critical to the change process. Since individuals and groups do not typically resist change as much as they resist being changed, it is in “telling,” rather than “asking,” that the foundation for resistance and defensiveness is found. “Telling” pushes change on others. A more effective approach is for leaders and coaches to pose strategic questions and challenge others to pursue answers. Therefore, the inquiring leader and skilled coach will lead by asking questions. Effective coaches use questions to motivate and guide the efforts associated with change. Questions act as catalysts for new ideas and fresh approaches that support successful change and lead to more engagement and less resistance. Effective questions lead to effective actions (Marquardt, 2005).
While coaching is a process technology that impacts individuals and teams, this article focuses on engagements where coaches work with individuals as the leaders or agents for organizational change. The desired outcome is behavioral and/or cognitive change. In such engagements, our premise is that coaching is the intervention of choice, and that questions serve as a key, perhaps leading, tool for the coach.

Figure 1. Coaching model (adapted from Bennett & Craig, 2005)

The authors have identified five types of organization change including shifts in strategy, products or services, mergers and acquisitions, and process improvements.

Table 1. Types of organizational change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization Change</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Product/Market</td>
<td>• New product development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Adjacent market entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>• Assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Re-design/Re-structuring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Company</td>
<td>• Merger/Acquisition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Re-branding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audits/Findings</td>
<td>• Interview review or audit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Government or customer review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process Improvement</td>
<td>• Improve existing product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Root cause analysis/Diagnosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ERP implementation</td>
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</table>

While organizational change is now regarded as a constant in today’s businesses, most initiatives are not successful. According to a recent study, nearly 60 percent of projects failed to fully meet their objectives:
44 percent missed the budget or quality goal, while a full 15 percent either missed all goals or were stopped by management (Jorgensen, Owens, & Neus, 2009). According to the same study, “Most CEOs consider themselves and their organizations to be executing change poorly” (p. 9).

Most of the current models of organizational change have their roots in Kurt Lewin’s three-stage model where an organization prepares for change, implements the change, and then takes measures to stabilize (Cummings & Worley, 2004). However, in today’s more turbulent and uncertain organizational environments, Lewin’s model is not as useful. “Organizations increasingly recognize change as a continuous process. This has implications for the way that companies manage change. It is no longer appropriate to consider organizational change as a project or event, with a clearly defined beginning or end” (Corporate Leadership Council, 2003a, p. 1).

Just as many coaching models exist, many change management models also exist. Newer change models (Bridges, 1991; Cohen, 2005; Conner, 1992; Kanazawa & Miles, 2008; Kotter, 2007; Kotter & Cohen, 2002) emphasize communication and culture as key elements in making changes successful. Some may seem too simplistic for today’s turbulent and uncertain organizational environments. One six-step model that has been widely adopted by organizations was introduced by Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric. He advocated that leaders

1. Clearly express the reasons for change—articulate the “why” before getting to the “how”;
2. Establish the vision for the new state of affairs—outline what the change will achieve;
3. Provide strong leadership—support from the most senior organizational level is vital;
4. Mobilize the workforce—engage staff in the planning and definition of the new process;
5. Measure success—analyze outcomes using solid metrics;
6. Maintain consistency. (Corporate Leadership Council, 2003a, p. 3)

Another change model, known by the acronym ADKAR, was developed by ProSci Research in 2001 after working with more than 700 companies undergoing major change projects. ADKAR – an acronym for Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement – is a set of five elements that need to be addressed to ensure successful organizational change:

- Awareness of the need to change;
- Desire to participate and support the change;
- Knowledge of how to change;
- Ability to implement the change on a day-to-day basis;
- Reinforcement to keep the change in place (Hiatt, 2006).

The underlying assumption of ADKAR is that change is driven by two dimensions: the business dimension and the people dimension. This model can be used as both a diagnostic and a coaching tool to help organizations change. While not a “step-by-step” method, ADKAR addresses the key factors listed above. In his book about the model, Jeff Hiatt (2006) acknowledges that coaching is one of the “change management techniques that has the greatest influence on each element of the ADKAR model” (p. 44).

**ROLES IN THE CHANGE PROCESS**

It is important for coaches to understand the key roles that are important to drive and sustain change, help the client recognize who is operating in those roles (or if no one is), and identify his or her own place among the configuration. To illustrate coaching as a tool for change, consider a coaching scenario one of the authors experienced.
Joan is a member of an Organization Development & Learning (ODL) group in a large company in the United States. She has asked for coaching on her work with an organization trying to “re-brand” itself and change both its image and performance within the company. Joan is currently acting as their Change Facilitator, and one of her concerns is that the change process is not moving fast enough. In addition, she finds herself frustrated with the leader.

In one of Joan’s first meetings with her coach, they focus on identifying the different roles and responsibilities within the group’s change process, including Joan’s own role. Joan is able to do this easily until it comes to the distinctions between her and the group leader. At that point, Joan pauses and is clearly trying to decide what to say. She says, “There are a lot of these tasks that I think the leader should be doing, but he isn’t doing them. When I ask about them, or bring them up in our group meetings, he says that he didn’t know about it, or that it is my job as the Change Facilitator to manage the change. That’s OK when it is something I can drive or impact, but if it is something as basic as making a compelling case for change, or identifying key stakeholders, I think that is his work, because he is the one that knows the organization.”

To be most effective in the change process, Joan needed to understand more clearly that it was the leader’s responsibility to drive change, not hers. She was there to facilitate the process (literally, “to make easier”). However, as Joan noticed the leader not “stepping up” to drive the change, her own leadership instincts kicked in, and she found herself leading for him. As a result, the group started looking to Joan for guidance and leadership on the project. This shift led to further misunderstandings and project delays, since the true leader had all of the decision-making authority but was frequently unaware of what was going on.

Joan’s coaching sessions helped her clarify the nature and extent of her role with the group, which led to a second contracting conversation with the leader about what he would be responsible for and would commit to, to support the change process. Had they created these agreements at the outset of the engagement, the problems she was facing now may have been avoided. Through the coaching process, Joan realized part of her role as Change Facilitator was to keep the team members and leader in their own “swim lanes” rather than diving in with them.

In his book, *Managing at the Speed of Change*, Darryl Conner (1992) identifies four distinct roles critical the change process: Sponsors, Agents, Targets, and Advocates. (See Tables 2 and 3 on the following page.)

The essential differences in these roles are the levels of control each has over the change. In many cases, these roles are not formalized (i.e., named on an organization chart) during change implementations. However, it is important to help coaching clients recognize and identify who is acting in which role. At times, coaching clients are acting in multiple roles at the same time: an Agent for the organization change, a member of the Target population, and a Sponsor for his or her own group.

While each role is important, there is a phase in every change project where a specific role becomes critical to the success of the change. For example, without strong, clear sponsorship at the beginning, changes often languish due to lack of executive support, communication, and vision. The Sponsor initiates the change effort by giving it legitimacy and ensuring resources are available to support the effort. The Agent can then implement the vision as a strategy and plan, working with the Target group. Without a strong Agent acting at this point, the change project can stall due to lack of momentum, an unclear strategy, or action planning. The role of the Target group then becomes critical, since its members must understand what must change about the way they are operating or behaving. Due to their influence and numbers, Advocates play a crucial role in implementing and sustaining change.
### Table 2. The sponsor and agent roles of change (adapted from Conner, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility or Contribution</th>
<th>Critical Phases for Involvement</th>
<th>Potential Coaching Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Sponsor | • Sanctions or legitimizes the change  
• Considers potential changes and assesses the impact, risks and opportunities  
• Decides which changes will happen  
• Communicates new priorities to the organization  
• Provides reinforcement to enable the change to be made | • Creating the vision  
• Engaging others  
• Sustaining the change | • Developing an inspiring vision  
• Influencing through communication skills  
• Presenting ideas effectively  
• Networking  
• Making a compelling business case for the change  
• Identifying the right agent  
• Identifying key stakeholders for the change, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change  
• Rewarding and recognizing employees |
| Agent | • Executes the change—an individual or group  
• Diagnoses potential problems, develops a plan to deal with these issues, and deploys the change effectively | • Engaging others  
• Strategizing and planning  
• Sustaining the change | • Understanding and using the change process  
• Identifying key stakeholders for the change, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change  
• Creating the deployment strategy  
• Understanding the psychology of change—how people react, how to mitigate resistance  
• Creating a plan of action  
• Networking  
• Managing change projects  
• Identifying and reporting metrics  
• Identifying ways to sustain the change after the project is successful  
• Rewarding and recognizing employees |

### Table 3. The target and advocate roles of change (adapted from Conner, 1992)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Responsibility or Contribution</th>
<th>Critical Phases for Involvement</th>
<th>Potential Coaching Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Target | • Undergoes change—the individual or group that is the focus of the change effort  
• Understand the change and what is expected  
• Participates in the implementation process | • Engaging others  
• Taking action  
• Achieving measurable results  
• Sustaining the change | • Clarifying the point of the change and what it means to them as individuals or groups  
• Understanding the psychology of the change process  
• Identifying and reporting metrics  
• Identifying key areas in their own work and behavior that need to change in order for the project to be successful |
| Advocate | • Individual or group who wants to achieve a change, but lacks the power to sanction it | • Engaging others  
• Sustaining the change | • Identifying key stakeholders, both formal and informal leaders who will help drive the change  
• Understanding and applying the psychology of change—how people react, how to mitigate resistance  
• Facilitating the new actions and behaviors required  
• Sustaining the change |
The success of any organizational change ultimately rests on the willingness and ability of each person to make the change that is required. It only takes one person or group to derail the change effort for the whole organization if the individual or group is confused, unable, or unwilling to implement the change. One of the reasons that coaching is a powerful intervention for change is that coaching is a personalized way of supporting each individual’s experience and effectiveness during change.

Tables 2 and 3 contain a list of some key coaching topics related to each of the roles. For instance, you may find yourself coaching a Sponsor on developing and communicating her vision in a powerful, inspiring way. Or you may work with an Agent on strategy and action planning, or help him identify other key stakeholders who will be impacted by the change and need to be included in communication about it. And do not forget that, as a coach for individuals or groups involved in change, you are yourself an Advocate.

**Powerful questions and high-impact coaching**

The key to high-impact coaching is asking powerful questions about the appropriate roles at the appropriate phases of the change process. Therefore, the coach must understand the roles that contribute to the change process and the psychology of the change process itself.

Tables 4 and 5 provide examples of high-impact questions to support change. These illustrate the types of questions leaders and coaches can use to support each step in the change process for each of the four key roles in change.

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**Table 4. High-impact questions to support change – Articulating the vision, Engaging others, and Developing strategy/planning examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Sponsor</th>
<th>Advocate</th>
<th>Agent</th>
<th>Target</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Articulating the Vision</strong></td>
<td>• What do you wish to accomplish?</td>
<td>• What is needed that is different?</td>
<td>• What is the change you are leading?</td>
<td>• What are you being asked to change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• To what extent does the vision articulate what is in it for customers and employees?</td>
<td>• Is the appeal of the vision emotional as well as intellectual?</td>
<td>• Can you clearly see your role or function in this future vision?</td>
<td>• Can you clearly see your role or function in this future vision?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Engaging Others</strong></td>
<td>• Who needs to be involved to sustain this change initiative?</td>
<td>• How can you help the sponsor see the value in sponsoring it?</td>
<td>• Who needs to be involved?</td>
<td>• What support system do you have that will enable this change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How will you help others know you support this change?</td>
<td>• What are you asking the sponsor to do?</td>
<td>• Why will others consider this change important to them?</td>
<td>• How well will our employees and customers say we are currently doing on the issue we want to change?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How will you let others know what is needed of them?</td>
<td>• Who may resist or oppose this change, and why?</td>
<td>• Who may resist or oppose this change, and why?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Developing Strategy/Planning</strong></td>
<td>• What will you do to ensure competing priorities do not distract the organization from this change?</td>
<td>• What is your plan for demonstrating to the potential sponsor the importance of the change you seek?</td>
<td>• How will you implement the change?</td>
<td>• What are you willing to do?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How will you show the progress that is being made?</td>
<td>• How will you address risk?</td>
<td>• What barriers or resistance are you likely to face?</td>
<td>• What are you expected to do differently?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How will you demonstrate to the potential sponsor the importance of the change you seek?</td>
<td>• What is your plan for addressing resistance?</td>
<td>• How will you know that you are “on track”?</td>
<td>• How will you know that you are “on track”?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This article has shown that coaches can learn to be powerful partners for leaders who are initiating or undergoing changes themselves. While organizational change is a complex endeavor, it is here to stay, and coaching is the ideal intervention. The authors propose a model of High-Impact Coaching for Change that helps coaches ask powerful questions about each role and stage of change. Helping organization members manage change will soon become a coach’s market differentiator and a way for coaching to distinguish itself as a profession.

**REFERENCES**


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