

## Leadership Coaching as Design Conversation

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### Abstract

This paper seeks to bridge and integrate the disciplined and rigorous practice of *Design Conversation* with the professional practice of coaching within the organisational setting. Argument is made that coaching is uniquely positioned to serve as a tool and process for facilitating genuine and effective dialogue at the organisational level. It explores current literature, understanding and issues in the areas of organisational learning, systems research, dialogue practice in organisations, and coaching as a professional practice. In conclusion, the article suggests that a design conversation of vested stakeholders is needed to further explore and synthesize the integration of dialogue, conversation, and leadership coaching.

Key words: leadership, coaching, design conversation, dialogue, organisations

### Introduction

The design conversation, as proposed by Banathy (1996, 2000) integrates both generative and strategic dialogue for the process of evolutionary and idealised human systems design. The design conversation, integrating two differentiated forms of dialogue among stakeholders of a system, does not so much seek to improve current conditions, but to envision ideal futures and design future systems. Design, unlike planning, is the creation of something new. It could be compared to the work of the architect who designs a future building, rather than the planning and implementation of building conducted by the contractor. The process of future design is unencumbered by the limits of existing systems, and when the design process is integrated with knowledge and understanding of systems thinking, future systems can be designed that remain viable over time, demonstrating the capacity for ongoing evolution within their environments. This new capacity for organisations, indeed all human systems, to effectively design their own futures is more than a nice idea, it is becoming a required capacity to deal with rapid changes in our larger social, economic and societal environments.

In earlier times, when social evolution was rather slow and gradual, adequate time was available for our various systems to keep up with changes and maintain a balanced state with their societal environments. The mechanisms for attaining such a balanced state were adjustment and adaptation. [...] Today, however, we are faced with a change in the nature of change. We are faced with constantly emerging new realities and massive transformations that call for changing and transforming the whole system (Banathy, 1994).

In the USA the International Systems Institute (ISI) has been using the design conversation for over 20 years, with most fellows focusing on large societal change or transformation

within education systems. Dialogue and conversation as practiced and understood from the systems perspective has been used at the organisational level by such scholars as Alexander Christakis, using the CogniScope™ methodology (1996, 2001), and more popularly by application of principles outlined in Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline* (1990) approach, but fundamental resources for building dialogue skills at the organizational level seems largely unaddressed. A search of the terms organization and dialogue (in article text—not even limiting the terms to article abstracts) through EBSCO Premier, Business Source Elite and Proquest revealed only 6 relevant results.

Exploring the potential and use of dialogue and the design conversation in business environments addresses several relevant questions:

- Is the design conversation process and methodology useful in a traditional business organizational environment to reframe the concept of leadership coaching?
- How can design conversation, practiced as a coaching methodology, best serve traditional organisations?
- What are the obstacles to design conversation and dialogue in traditional organisations and in a coaching relationship?

Fundamental to the process of the design conversation as practiced by ISI and proposed by Banathy is that the philosophy people must be empowered to design their own systems. There are strong values for shared leadership and democratic methods in the ISI conversations. These fundamental values raise additional issues when considering the use of dialogue and the design conversation at an organizational level. This paper explores some of these issues. First, an exploration into the nature and role of leadership enables a bridge to be built to the concept of shared leadership. With a call for committed accountability, shared leadership and responsibility by all organizational stakeholders regardless of title or position, exploration is then made to define what leadership competencies might be important in today's rapidly changing organizational environments. Once the competencies are explored, the question arises, "how can individuals and groups gain these leadership skills and knowledge?"

The profession of coaching as a learning process is compared and evaluated with traditional training or consulting efforts and argued to be congruent with Banathy's ethical position that no 'outside expert' should presume to design systems for others; that stakeholders are experts of their own systems (Appendix I). Coaching competencies are then explored, along with a deeper inquiry into the process of dialogue, the design conversation and the coach's role as facilitator of these dialogues. Finally, discrepancies between 'theories in use' and 'theories in practice' (Argyris, 1991) at an organizational level are explored from a psychological perspective so that obstacles to the dialogue process at the individual and organizational level can be brought to awareness and dealt with effectively.

### **A Systems View of Leadership**

The late singer and songwriter John Denver once related a story to his audience told to him by a friend. "I'm an agitator," his friend said, "You can throw dirty clothes in a washing machine, add soap and add water, but unless you agitate them, they won't come clean."

Ludwig Von Bertalanffy (1968), author of *General System Theory* introduces a key principle of systems theory that seems to be widely ignored, even among the systems theorists. This principle states that open systems evolve themselves around “dominant” triggers that determine the behavior of a whole. “Ascending the evolutionary scale, increasing centralization appears; behavior is not a resultant of partial mechanisms of equal rank, but dominated and unified by the highest centers of the nervous system” (p. 70). Contemporary social systems scholars seem to exclude this principle in their work, even those whose focus is through a systems perspective. Perhaps it is the English translation of his theory that causes this exclusion. After all, most of the progressive social scholars and organizational theorists embrace a more holarchical rather than hierarchical perspective for modeling organizational behavior.

So should we presume that Bertalanffy was a proponent of a top-down, control-driven hierarchical perspective for the design of our social systems? Not at all. First, Bertalanffy wrote his General Systems Theory in German. The word he uses in regards to these centralizing forces is “anstosskausalitat” which translates in English to ‘instigation causality’—or, that which is an impetus or cause of change. Bertalanffy was also a biologist, and was obviously very aware of the structure of natural and biological systems as one of being in holarchical order—integrated multiple levels—versus a hierarchical order, which is singular, linear (and thus rigid and inflexible). He places this ‘dominant influence’ of a system at the *center* of the system, and regards it as a trigger or motivator for action, rather than a ‘dominating’ role (even though this is the word used in the English translation of the theory), which presupposes a mechanistic or political power-based linear chain of command. Systems scholar Alexander Laszlo agrees, noting in a personal correspondence:

The point is ‘dominant’ does not mean ‘dominating.’ In the way von Bertalanffy is using it, I think we might like to think in terms of ‘predominant,’ such that the predominant role of certain people in a social system does not mean they necessarily have ‘dominating’ roles in that system. The former relate to issues of the significance and prevalence of the role, while the latter relates to issues of power imbalances (personal correspondence, April 2000)

This perspective necessitates some reconsideration of our traditional notions of leadership within our community and organizational settings. Shared responsibility and genuine and effective group participation may seem like strong ideals for small groups who strive for collaborative, shared leadership and ownership, but in a more traditional business organizational setting, arrangements designed with full equality are unlikely, and according to von Bertalanffy, would probably be ineffective. As von Bertalanffy notes, the more complex a system becomes, the more it evolves around highly influential ‘centers.’ In large, complex organisations, the task of ‘instigating’ action rests squarely on its leadership. One might ask whether it is realistic to hope for real, committed participation and shared responsibility by all the members of a large organization if the ‘power’ or influence still rests with its leadership. It all depends on how one defines the nature of leadership’s power or influence.

### *Shared Leadership*

“Our current notion of leadership,” Banathy (1996) wrote, “is associated with taking initiative, controlling, and knowing what is best for others” (p. 235). One of the resulting challenges of traditional leadership is that leaders believe it is their task to make their people ‘buy in’ to their vision. The problem with this understanding of leadership is that ownership remains with the leadership, preventing stakeholders throughout an organization to feel committed to participation in its success. Instead, leadership can be viewed as a more “influential, prevalent or predominant” stewardship role. Riane Eisler (1987, 2000) promoted the idea to move from ‘dominator’ models to ‘partnership’ models in our social structures. Instead of considering leadership as a role in which we have ‘power *over*’, we could understand leadership as a role where we have ‘power *to*’.

Margaret Wheatley (1999) described shared leadership as a commitment and accountability to results and tasks without concern about identifying and defining specific accountabilities and roles. She cites Jill Janov who proposed that leadership is a behavior rather than a role (p. 24). The concept of leadership as a *practice* rather than a *position* can help organisations embrace the need for leadership skills and competencies across all levels of the organizational system. Centralized leadership inspires, motivates and ‘instigates’ empowerment, commitment and participation at all levels of an organization. Leadership practice can be seen as a stewardship role, and “when we serve, we build capability in others by supporting their ownership and empowerment, their right to participate at every level of the system” (Banathy, 1996, p. 236). With this model of steward leadership, even large organisations can be designed to be *equitable* even though they couldn’t possibly strive for across-the-board *equality*.

In a healthy, authentic community intentionally designed within the environment of a large organizational setting, it is the central role of its leadership to express the values and purpose of the community, to nurture the emergence of vibrant, healthy cultures in which all members of the system feel committed to, part of, and accountable for the success of the whole. It is a much more daunting role than that of a traditional supervisor who reports to the general staff that management created a new vision statement at their last retreat and in essence relay, “Here it is. Adopt it for yourself.”

The International Systems Institute proposes that the design of sustainable and viable human systems must be conducted by the stakeholders of the system, and that all stakeholders participate authentically in a shared leadership of the organization or community (Appendix 1). In viewing the stewardship role of leadership as described above, it becomes clear that leadership capacity is not relegated to those who happen to fill supervisory or management roles within an organization or group. In order for shared participation and accountability to manifest throughout an organizational system, leadership competencies, knowledge, skills and qualities must be developed, empowered and practiced at all levels of the system, regardless of formal position or title.

### *Leadership Matters Locally and Globally*

The influence of the business organization on larger societal systems makes addressing the practice of leadership a worthwhile and important endeavour.

Initiatives relating to fundamental human rights and dignity, democracy, and the protection of our precious wild places and valuable natural resources represent noble and courageous efforts. But transformation and human evolution at a global scale must manifest comprehensively at all systemic levels. One environment with the potential to dramatically impact others on a global scale is the environment of business. From small home-based entrepreneurial micro-businesses (accounting for 60% of the new jobs in the US between 1990-1996), to multinational corporations, private and publicly held enterprises impact almost every human on the planet, as well as our political, economic and natural systems (Stalinski, 2003, p. 675).

In 2001, The State of the Future Report of the United Nations University's Millennium project identified 15 "global challenges" facing humanity's future. Each challenge included regional perspectives and reflections. In North America, a change in thinking, attention to culture and an emphasis on education and appropriate training for leadership were all identified. "North Americans need to move from cause-effect, single issue problem analysis to integrated, holistic visions and problem solving, using futures research, systems thinking, and technology assessment. [...] More courses in future-oriented studies should be established that stress relationships to decision-making [...]" (Glenn and Gordon, 2001, p 25). The report identified a "remarkable lack of training" among American politicians, but also cited the need for leadership at a global level, including the leaders of corporations, NGOs and other arenas to be provided appropriate training, especially in the area of decision-making in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. This training and education is needed to address complexity that is "growing beyond our abilities to analyze and make decisions" (Glenn and Gordon, 2001, p 25.).

The Millennium Project report underscores that new competencies for leadership are not just a matter of economic viability for organisations, but directly impact our collective global future. The relationship between organizational success and our global future is also articulated by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General for the UN Global Compact for Business. He states that "Thriving markets and human security go hand in hand; without one, we will not have the other" (<http://www.unglobalcompact.org>).

### **Developing Leadership Competencies**

#### *Criteria for defining leadership qualities and competencies*

The Millennium Project State of the Future Report calls for attention to futures research and systems thinking as competencies required for effective decision-making. Traditional business organisations stress job skill expertise, business acumen and other skills that enable leaders to maintain and enhance an organization's economic and financial viability within its market. Organizational development practitioners usually emphasize intra- and interpersonal skills as needed to effectively motivate and catalyse performance. Senge (1990), Albrecht (2003), Laszlo, K. (2000), Jay (2000), Banathy (1996, 2000), Flood (1999), Robb (2003), Stalinski (2001, 2003b) discuss the need for organisations and groups (and the individuals who participate within them) to develop learning competencies and shared intelligence.

Jim Collins, in his best-selling book, *Good to Great* (2001), identified five levels of leadership competency:

*Level 5 Executive:* Builds enduring greatness through a paradoxical blend of personal humility and professional will.

*Level 4: Effective Leader:* Catalyses a commitment to and vigorous pursuit of a clear and compelling vision, stimulating higher performance standards.

*Level 3: Competent Manager:* Organizes people and resources toward the effective and efficient pursuit of pre-determined objectives.

*Level 2: Contributing Team Member:* Contributes individual capabilities to the achievement of group objectives and works effectively with others in a group setting.

*Level 1: Highly Capable Individual:* Makes productive contributions through talent, knowledge, skills and good work habits. (Collins, 2001, p. 20).

Further, systems research and contemporary organizational development practice is highlighting the need to develop organisations that are more than simply financially sustainable. Albrecht (2003), Laszlo & Laszlo (1996), and Collins (2001) emphasize that long term viability of organizational systems depends on more than financial profitability. Laszlo and Laszlo (1996) identify 8 criteria for long term viability of human systems. They propose that such systems must be:

- Operationally viable
- Economically sustainable
- Technologically feasible
- Culturally appropriate
- Psychologically nurturing
- Socially acceptable
- Environmentally friendly
- Generationally sensitive

In order for leaders at all levels of an organizational system to design and develop organisations that meet all the requirements for systemic viability described by Laszlo et al., it is clear that a comprehensive approach to leadership development be provided to stakeholders at all levels of the organizational system. To summarize the core leadership competencies highlighted, a comprehensive leadership development process would address learning competencies in these areas (addressed in various places throughout this article):

*Systems Thinking:* Effective leaders have an understanding of the principles that determine whether an open system can thrive and evolve in rapidly changing environments.

*Inner Awareness:* Effective leaders are self-aware and emotionally mature.

*Other Awareness:* Effective leaders are aware of, and seek to enhance the skills, competencies, knowledge and emotional well-being of others. Further, effective leaders are aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the impact of culture on their organization.

*Organizational Awareness:* Effective leaders have the knowledge and skills needed to manage and guide both the complex human and process systems of organisations.

*Design Competence:* Effective leaders can design complex systems capable of ongoing evolution, unencumbered by the constraints of current systems.

*Learning & Intelligence:* Effective leaders are skilled learners. They are curious, open to new perspectives, and continually evaluate the usefulness of their learning. They are knowledgeable and skilled in the work and tasks of their organizational role, and are aware of the skills and knowledge used and needed for related roles and tasks.

*Authentic Participation:* Effective leaders are engaged, committed and willing to “step up to the plate” to take personal responsibility for their contribution to the organizational mission.

### **The Leadership Coach**

Traditionally, job skills training has been the method of choice in developing competencies required for individuals to perform well within their organizational roles. Such training has evolved to include ‘soft skills’ training in addition to more traditional “hard” skills training. Training from a traditional and even contemporary perspective involves the transfer of knowledge from a teacher or trainer to training participants or ‘students’. Even training designed around adult learning styles maintains this foundational *transfer of learning* model. Whether implemented in a training room, a classroom, or in on-line environments through e-learning technologies, training and development continues to play an important role in helping workers learn new information, and gain broader conceptual understanding of their work roles and needs. However, whether such training interventions results in increased performance, especially where ‘soft skills’ are concerned, is difficult to assess.

Often training does not result in enhanced performance. One issue in this lack of transfer of training is that, in general, training programs do not explicitly impart metacognitive skills to trainees. Yet metacognitive skills – the ability to think about one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours – are essential factors in mastering new skills (Grant, 2002, p.12).

Boyatsis & Burrus (1995) discussed the traditional roles of training, development and Human Performance Improvement within organizational settings, and bemoaned the problems of commercialisation of ‘cookie-cutter’ training programs: Distinctions are often made between the fields of HRM, HRD, OB, OD, OT, MD, CD, PD, and T/D (i.e., human resource management, human resource development, organizational behavior, organizational development, organizational transformation, management development, career development, professional development, and training and development, respectively). This provides fodder for academic debate and disaggregates the HRM function’s activities (p. 2-3).

Besides traditional training, organisations often seek the advice and guidance of external consultants to help with the development of their organization and the key stakeholders who are responsible for its ongoing success. Like training, the consulting solution creates an emphasis on the need for an organization or individual to learn *from* a perceived expert; that the expert, not the stakeholders, has the knowledge and skills needed to enable development. Both the training and the consulting paradigms conflict with the fundamental philosophy of social systems design: that only a system’s stakeholders have the right and

the responsibility for the design of their own systems; that it is unethical to design systems for someone else (Appendix I). Grant (2001) also described this differentiation:

At one end of the orthogonal dimension is a client-centred approach, which is primarily associated with asking questions that facilitate client self-discovery and self-directed learning, as compared with an expert-centred approach, which is primarily associated with directive advice giving. (Grant, 2001, p. 14)

The practice of coaching, on the other hand, is uniquely positioned to provide the kind of learning resources and processes needed to effectively develop leadership competencies. Coaching practice has enjoyed a boom in the organizational sphere in recent years (Grant, 2002, 2003, Seamons, 2003) and yet descriptions of coaching practice vary greatly. Seamons (2003) noted that the original meaning of coach can be traced to the concept of a horse drawn carriage or coach and that essentially, a coach conveys “a valued person from where he or she was to where he or she wants to be” (p. 6). Additionally, current scholarship in the field of coaching is careful to note differentiation between a variety of coaching practices such as executive coaching, life coaching, career coaching, skill coaching, etc., and differentiating such coaching practices to other forms of development such as mentoring, therapy, consulting and training. (Seamons, 2003; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003).

In differentiating coaching from other “expert-centred” models, Grant has articulated:-

In summary, the core constructs of coaching include: a collaborative, egalitarian rather than authoritarian relationship between coach and coachee; a focus on constructing solutions not analysing problems; the assumption that clients are capable and not dysfunctional; an emphasis on collaborative goal setting between the coach and coachee; and the recognition that although the coach has expertise in facilitating learning through coaching, they do not necessarily need domain-specific expertise in the coachee’s chosen area of learning. Further, to expedite goal attainment the coaching process should be a systematic goal-directed process, and to facilitate sustained change it should be directed at fostering the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee. (Grant, 2001, p. 9)

Grant’s differentiation of coaching as a collaborative and egalitarian relationship, rather than an expert-novice dynamic suggests that coaching is uniquely positioned as a practice to provide leadership development competencies in ways that remain in alignment with the ethics and values of social systems design. Such a coach could be considered a “design professional” as defined by Banathy (1996), who described the role of such professionals as being able to “develop resources and create arrangements and opportunities by which a designing community can learn how to engage in the design of their system” (Banathy, 1996, p. 244).

#### *Leadership Coach vs. Executive Coach or Life Coach*

Almost all of the coaching literature differentiates executive coaching from life coaching, describing executive coaching as including “a key contributor who has a power position in the organization” (ICF in Seamons, 2003) and emphasizing organizational performance

and development as well as leadership development. Life coaching, in contrast, usually focuses on life goals and personal development that may or may not include the individual's role within an organization (Seamons, 2003; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003). For the practice of coaching to become useful as a tool and process to develop specific leadership qualities and competencies, neither of these specific coaching definitions is exclusively sufficient. Instead, a third differentiation of Leadership Coaching is proposed here with the following focus emphasized: *The focus of Leadership Coaching is to engage individuals or groups in learning arrangements that enable them to develop leadership competencies, skills and knowledge.*

This definition allows that such participants may include stakeholders at all levels of an organizational system, and that such leadership skills and competencies are not necessarily exclusive of personal goals and aspirations. Such coaching with a focus on leadership development could potentially help provide the skills, knowledge and competencies for individuals at all levels of an organization to effectively and authentically participate in the ongoing design and development of the organisations and systems in which they work and live.

#### *Competencies of the Leadership Coach*

Most coaches, OD professionals, scholars, practitioners and HPI trainers seem to focus their work *either* on the human systems (personal development, human potential, group psychodynamics, etc) *or* on the process systems (systems design, work skills training, quality improvement, process improvement). Instead, organizational leaders and the coaches and consultants who provide interventions and development, need to have a comprehensive understanding of *both* of these key ingredients to bottom-line organizational results in addition to ongoing, sustainable organizational viability (determined by more than simple bottom-line criteria). Inasmuch, coaching competencies would closely mirror leadership competencies in that coaches, as "design professionals" would need:

*Systems Thinking:* An effective leadership coach would have an understanding of the principles that determine whether an open system can thrive and evolve in rapidly changing environments.

*Inner Awareness:* An effective leadership coach would be self-aware and emotionally mature.

*Other Awareness:* An effective leadership coach would be aware of, and seek to enhance the skills, competencies, knowledge and emotional well-being of others. Further, an effective leadership coach would be aware of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the impact of culture on their coachee's organization.

*Organizational Awareness:* An effective leadership coach will have the knowledge and skills, either through education or experience, needed to understand both the complex human and process systems of organisations.

*Design Competence:* An effective leadership coach can facilitate their coachees' ability to design complex systems capable of ongoing evolution, unencumbered by the constraints of current systems.

*Learning & Intelligence:* An effective leadership coach is a skilled learner. He or she is curious, open to new perspectives, and continually evaluates the usefulness of their own

learning. He or she would be knowledgeable and skilled in the work and tasks of their role as a coach, and would also be aware of the skills and knowledge used and needed for their coachees' roles and tasks. Additionally, an effective leadership coach would facilitate evolutionary learning at the group level through dialogue practice.

*Dialogue:* Additionally, if coaching is practiced as a collaborative, egalitarian dialogue, coaches will need to develop theoretical and practical grounding in various dialogue methodologies.

One of the current issues of coaching practice by executive and life coaches is the training, development and education of coaches themselves. Several scholars (Boyatzis, 2002; Diedrich & Kilburg, 2001; Grant, 2001, 2002, 2003; Kilburg, 1996), and the International Coach Federation (2003, online) highlight different competencies from grounding in psychological or psychodynamic theory to competency through experience. Boyatzis (2002) argued that research results showing the emotional intelligence competencies of counselors demonstrated more impact on counseling effectiveness than the type or focus of intervention and concludes that the same findings could be extended into the arena of executive coaching, inferring that emotional self-awareness and empathy (within the cluster of emotional intelligence competencies) were of utmost significance in determining the effectiveness of counselors (and likewise, he argues, executive coaches).

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) ([www.coachfederation.org](http://www.coachfederation.org)) requires coaches to have set amount of professional, billed coaching hours plus coach-specific training in order to qualify for ICF certification. Dr. Grant addressed the ICF in November 2003 and called for a scientist-practitioner model of professional coaching founded in the behavioral sciences. This understanding then enables them to apply informed critical thought to the evaluation of their practice, drawing on and being informed by relevant academic literature to design and implement evidence-based interventions, evaluating client progress and adhering to ethical practice (Grant, 2003b, p. 2).

At the time of writing, few coach training programs are delivered at the university level. The professional coach certification program at Georgetown University and the Academy of Management at Babson College in the U.S., MA programs in Coaching and Mentoring at UK universities Oxford Brookes, Sheffield Hallam and Wolverhampton, and the Coaching Psychology program at the University of Sydney designed by Dr. Anthony Grant, are among only a few coach training programs grounded in university level academic theory (Stalinski, 2003a). On the other hand, the profusion of private, non-academic 'coach training' schools, especially in the United States, has helped fuel the growing popularity of coaching practice (Grant, 2003b). There is clearly a need for such coach training to be designed to include solid theoretical foundations in the behavioral sciences and/or psychological sciences (including group dynamics) as well as relevant grounding in systems thinking focusing on complex, evolutionary systems design. Likewise, such coach training would provide coaches with experiential practice and not mandate 'billable client hours' as a requirement to demonstrate coaching skills.

Movement towards a scientist-practitioner model requires that coach training programs explicitly address the theoretical and empirical foundations of coaching, and provide training in sound research methodologies, basic statistical and data analysis skills, and

foster informed critical thinking skills in student coaches. Such an approach would form the basis of an evidence-based coaching paradigm (Grant, 2003b, p.4). However, such training would be incomplete in this author's perspective if it is delivered as *only* grounded in the behavioral sciences without balanced emphasis on organizational and systems research.

#### *Individual and Group Coaching*

While Banathy (1996) described design professionals in terms of working with communities or organisations as wholes, it is not contradictory to place such a definition of design professional on professional coaches, who traditionally work one-on-one with individual coachees. Seamons (2003) noted that "group coaching is a concept which means the same as team building, but using the popularity of the coaching model. Where a consultant might have been deployed to develop an entire team together, he or she might now be a team or group coach" (p. 9). Devero (2001, abstract), in a presentation to the Society for the Advancement of Management proposed that:

Coaching, which is designed to address specific areas of organizational paradigm, such as company-wide fears, expectations, limitations, resentments or beliefs, can alter the paradigm itself. This alteration of the paradigm creates new opportunities for action, goals, teams and leadership – ultimately leading to profoundly different results. The expectations of the organization for itself rise concomitantly with the new results, expanding the cultural range of goal setting and accomplishment. Systematic and repetitive application of public coaching sessions lead to ever-increasing levels of honesty, introspection and coachability for the entire organization, leading to an actively learning organization that can positively receive and assimilate feedback, and so continue to break through its own levels of productivity. (Devero, 2001)

In considering the role of the leadership coach as proposed here, it is clear that coaching as practice is not relegated to one-on-one dialogue between a coach and an individual, but that coaching practice can be employed at the group, team or organizational level.

#### **Coaching as Design Conversation**

##### *Dialogue*

Dialogue, as a communication practice that can be differentiated from adversarial forms of communication such as discussion and debate, was brought to popular practice by physicist David Bohm. According to Bohm and Peat (1987) sharp distinctions should be made between dialogue and discussion. In discussions the objective is to present one's view in order to convince the other. With some luck, this process may result in some sort of compromise, "but it does not give rise to anything creative" (p. 241). At worst, this sort of back-and-forth discourse leads to conflict or even avoidance of the issue. Dialogue, in contrast, is rooted in the Greek word *dialogos*, literally meaning "through (dia) the word (logos)" (Bohm and Peat, 1987; Pattakos in Banathy, 1996). Pattakos, notes Banathy, further suggests that various interpretations and translations of *logos* suggest a much richer, deeper meaning than "the word" or "the meaning of the word." *Logos*, according to Pattakos carries significant spiritual implications, that it can connote "a manifestation of

spirit or soul” giving the concept of dialogue a much more meaningful and significant definition. This deeper understanding can be conceptualised then as a spirit that connects the members of a dialogue, creating a collective mindset or ‘collective learning.’ (Pattakos, in Banathy, p. 216).

Cayer (1997) compared and contrasted Bohmian dialogue and the action science approach first introduced by Argyris & Schön (1974, 1978). Cayer argued that dialogue is most popularly utilized at the organizational level to promote organizational effectiveness and proposed that dialogue could be used to address comprehensive societal transformation. Even with its emphasis on societal transformation, the article is useful as a foundational understanding of the contributions of David Bohm’s popular dialogue process and the action science approach introduced by Argyris & Schön.

Isaacs (1999) underscored this collaborative, rather than adversarial, understanding of dialogue by noting that true dialogue has a “center” rather than “sides.” Lopez-Garay (2001) discussed the fundamental concepts of dialogue and civilization. His definition of “civilization” could readily be applied at the organizational level, although his article focused on geopolitical societies: “Civilization is considered to be a group of peoples, which through an extended period of time have developed a common *culture*” (p. 15). Like Bohm, Lopez-Garay differentiated dialogue with forms of adversarial communications. He clearly distinguished the objective of negotiation or polemics as resulting in either/or, “win/lose” or compromise solutions. In contrast, dialogue is “a cooperative search for truth” (2001, p.16). He also contrasted dialogue with “narrative” which has a historical, rather than future orientation.

*The Design Conversation: Generative & Strategic Dialogue.*

The design conversation as proposed by Banathy (1996) and used within the context of the International Systems Institute integrates both generative and strategic dialogue. Its purpose encompasses not only *how* to create our social systems, but defines those strategies based on a clear, comprehensive vision of the purpose and values of the system. The strategy then is measured and tested against its ability to reflect and demonstrate the implementation of those values. Generative dialogue could be understood in terms of exploring the “why” and the “what” that dialogue participants and organizational stakeholders seek to design. These are generative questions in that they focus on the future of the system. The strategic dialogue could be understood in terms of exploring the “how”, “who” and “when.”

The root meaning of conversation, Banathy wrote, is “to turn to one another.” (p. 219). Systems scholar Alexander Christakis shared with members of the ISI research community during the 2000 annual conference at Asilomar that the Greek word for conversation is *syzitisis*, which means “to search together.” Through such conversation, a *demosophia* emerges within a group, which is experienced as the “wisdom of the people.” Such understandings of the nature of conversation as an integration of generative and strategic dialogue, gives rich context to its meaning and purpose. Indeed, Banathy noted the purpose of giving appropriate time and energy to the generative dialogue within a conversation is to create a shared worldview and shared meaning within and among the group (p. 218).

Most of the current emphasis on dialogue practice emphasizes the generative forms of dialogue: the creation of shared values and mental frameworks. It is this mutual exploration of meaning and values that help stakeholders build a sense of commitment and community within an organization. Banathy (1996) argued that failure to spend adequate time in this generative phase of dialogue risks under conceptualisation of the design results.

Laszlo and Laszlo (2003) propose 4 spirals in the development of “evolutionary competence”—the ability for individuals and human systems to become catalysts for positive change, rather than simply reacting to change, within their environments. They discuss the need for a generative dialogue that emphasizes evolutionary ethics: ethics with a future orientation. Dialogue, they say, is otherwise “just optimising what is, not working in stewardship of *what should be*” (p. 3). When we engage in conversation with each other, if we do so authentically and inclusively, we end up also conversing internally—with ourselves, as well as externally—with the more-than-human world of which we are a part (Laszlo, A. and Laszlo, K.C., 2003, p. 2.) Laszlo and Laszlo highlight the development of human activity systems into healthy, authentic communities as the foundation from which evolutionary learning communities can form. “Generative dialogue can be considered as the core transformative process for a group to become an authentic community” (p. 12). The Laszlos also heavily emphasize Banathy’s design conversation methodology in their approach. There are a variety of dialogue methodologies available which focus on these generative inquiries, such as World Café, Open Space™, roundtables and time-shares (Benking, Lenser & Stalinski, 2003).

Strategic dialogue, with its emphasis on how, when, where and who is usually approached from a traditional discussion or debate framework. Indeed, strategic discussions are often where conflicts emerge within organizational teams. With a fully conceptualised design, grounded in a clear sense of “why” and “what,” however, strategic dialogue can take place with minimal conflict simply by evaluating strategy against the design created during the generative dialogue. Alexander Christakis (1996, 2001) and his associates at CWA Ltd. have been using a computer-aided dialogue process to facilitate strategic dialogue with organisations for over 30 years. His research on the dialogue process has resulted in several principles of effective strategic dialogue, especially when dealing with large, messy, complex problem situations or design situations. The limits of the CogniScope™ computer-aided process is that it is not widely available, is expensive, and is useful mostly with large groups addressing very complex issues. However, CWA Ltd. introduces six principles of dialogue in an experiential “Dialogue Game” often used to introduce participants to the CogniScope™ process. The game is extremely useful even to small groups seeking some way of providing structure, rigor and discipline to the strategic dialogue process.

#### *Disciplined Inquiry*

Whether dialogue takes place between an organizational stakeholder and a coach, or with other stakeholders, what is clear is that the design conversation is indeed a rigorous, disciplined inquiry (Banathy, 1996). It requires participants to gain design competence and commit to the process of ongoing learning and evaluation.

The practice of dialogue offers a disciplined approach to collective communication. It penetrates the polite superficialities and the defences in which we armour ourselves. The act of reaching beyond the self to relate to others, the desire to understand others and the intent to build healthy and mutually supportive communities emerge from a profound human aspiration, a deep yearning. So we ask: If this aspiration and yearning are so widespread: Why is it that the practice of dialogue is not widespread? The answer to this question is that people, groups, organisations, and communities have not yet learned and do not know *how* to engage in the disciplined inquiry of dialogue. Dialogue calls upon knowledge and competence that impose a rigorous discipline on participants. Unfortunately, most people don't have easy access to comprehensive and appropriate learning resources to acquire competence in dialogue (Banathy, 2001, p. 1)

#### *Behavior & Experience as Dialogue*

These rich concepts of the nature of dialogue and conversation inspired the research team on the Design of Healthy & Authentic Community at the International Systems Institute to explore possibilities for design conversation that transcend the idea of 'searching together' beyond processes of verbal communication. For two years the team collaborated with the team on Evolutionary Learning Community, and included non-scholars and youth in their inquiry process. Understanding the importance of experience to bring meaning to conceptual, often abstract ideas, the combined teams engaged in various activities in addition to traditional, verbal communication. The teams integrated a variety of supportive experiential conversation "tools" such as co-created art, music, a trip to an equine sanctuary in the exploration of stewardship, and discussed other ways cultures expressed and experienced themselves, including food and meals, dance, and its relationship with the natural world. The contribution of Christakis' expansion on the definition of 'conversation' provides depth and breadth to the idea and its meaning, suggesting that groups can "engage in a conversation-guided process that will seek to experience and convey [a community's] evolving *demosophia* through consciously co-created cultural expression" (Stalinski, 2001b).

Schein (1992) emphasized that culture is largely an unconscious process of learning, driven more by non-verbalized "basic assumptions" than "espoused philosophies." Communication and learning go far beyond verbal exchanges of conceptual ideas and transfer of information. To define dialogue simply in terms of words exchanged without including what is communicated through behavior and emotional experience limits the usefulness of dialogue and dangerously ignores the many ways in which we communicate, of which language is often a small part. From the perspective of using dialogue as a means for consciously guiding evolution of human cultures, it is important to understand the hidden and unconscious aspects of culture as well. Inasmuch, Schein's perspective has much to offer the systems perspective proposing the need for conscious cultural evolution.

#### Obstacles

Certain obstacles to effective dialogue can best be understood with a solid conceptual understanding of the behavioral sciences and psychological theory. Such knowledge, especially when held by the design professional or coach, can quickly identify and address issues that might derail dialogue as they occur. These obstacles may include defensiveness, ineffective approaches to conflict management, the impact of enculturation and

unconscious habitual behavior, and the group psychodynamic processes, which might be understood in terms of the “organizational shadow” (Sievers, 1999). Lack of trust, safety and healthy, authentic participation prevent effective dialogue from taking place within any human system. Understanding and addressing these obstacles is the responsibility of the professional coach.

Where coaching practice could benefit from integrating more organizational and systems research, the organizational and systems research communities could benefit from a more effective integration of the behavioral sciences and psychological theory, including cognitive psychology, humanistic psychology, psychoanalytic theory, and group dynamics. Such integrated knowledge and competencies would enable coaches and other organizational development practitioners to address the common obstacles to development.

### *Integrating Perspectives*

As discussed earlier, all systems evolve around “instigating causalities” or highly influential centers. The same principle applies to human systems, and leadership is charged with the role of catalysing action and results at all levels of a system. The human factors of the personality, psychological and cognitive styles of leadership cannot be ignored when addressing ways in which groups and organisations can participate authentically in effective dialogue. Kaplan (1991) took a psychological perspective of the role of leaders within organizational systems, and specifically the issues and challenges that “driven managers”—which Kaplan referred to as leaders with “expansive” personalities—face for themselves and those they lead.

Kilburg (1995, 1997, 2001) specifically addressed a systems and psychodynamic perspective in organizational development and executive coaching practice, although his use of systems research seems limited to the principles of feedback loops, input, output and throughput of systems dynamics. He, like most other psychodynamically focused scholars, does not integrate an understanding of evolutionary systems design.

McWhinney (2003) provided in depth exploration of the foundation of discourse, dialogue and language use as reflective of our construction of reality is an extremely relevant variable to include in an exploration of the use of dialogue within organizational systems. One way or another, we convey intent, exchange data, and establish shared meaning. We acquiesce to the other’s demands, come to an agreeable harmony, or just leave issues unresolved. We do so through spoken and gestural languages, using the rules of grammar to separate our thoughts and organize them for our enunciations. Grammars standardize means for articulating intentions and knowledge into a communicable form. They are the rules by which we hang thoughts on a ‘clotheslines’ (2003 p. 5.)

Robb’s (2003) dissertation proposed an integration of Jungian psychology and systems theory which is well articulated and introduced powerful ideas and issues to the nature of group existence, culture, individual consciousness and double-loop learning. He then described how these various dimensions and issues impact an organization’s ability to enable its human “components” to engage in meaningful relationship and collective learning. Robb clearly articulated in his dissertation the role of the authentic and individuated individual within the group or collective setting. In order to build truly

resilient human systems, he proposed several interwoven concepts and practices, among them, to “regard the shared domain as an object for ongoing collective reflection and co-construction” (p. iii). In other words, a context for dialogue, which, he argued, must be addressed by actively supporting “both individual and human systems development as interpenetrating and interdependent phenomena” (p.iii). Robb eloquently presented an integrated systemic and psychodynamic understanding of the role of the individual as individual and as individual within community.

### **Conclusion & Summary**

Leadership coaching as a disciplined dialogue requires an integration of knowledge and conceptual understanding from the fields of organizational development, coaching, systems research and evolutionary systems design. While this paper has sought to bridge and integrate these domains of understanding, the design of coaching practice and professionalism calls for a design conversation of its own; a dialogue that would include stakeholders from a multiple of perspectives such as coaching clients, organizational leaders, organizational development practitioners, organizational scholars, psychologists and counselors who practice coaching, and those involved in training coaches. Such a design conversation could result in a comprehensive vision of ideal practice in the coaching profession.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **Propositions that Underlie Social Systems Design** *(International Systems Institute, Carmel, CA)*

It is the basic right of individuals, groups and communities to be involved in making decisions that affect them.

They can reclaim and exercise this right and forge their destiny only if they develop competence that empowers them to take part directly and authentically in the design of the systems and communities in which they live and work.

It is unethical to design social systems for someone else. In social systems, people who live in the system are the experts.

The role of the design professional is to develop resources and create arrangements and opportunities by which a designing community can learn how to engage in the design of their system.

A designing community is comprised of people who serve the system, who are served by it, and who are affected by it. They collectively are the designers and users of their design: they own the design. They are user-designers.

Designers of social systems are trustees for future generations. They must constantly ask: How will the system we design affect the unborn?

Collective design capability empowers us to practice authentic, truly participative democracy. It enables us to guide the activities that enrich the quality of our lives, add value to the systems in which we live, and organize our lives in the service of the common good.

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