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Organizations: A Summary of Findings,
Discussions and Significance
An Edited Extract from UK Master's Thesis*

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Research into Impact of Coaching in Organizations: A Summary of Findings, Discussions and Significance

Andre Wai, M.Sc.

[An Edited Extract from UK Master's Thesis]

The past twenty years have seen an explosion of new thinking about how adults develop, what organizations need to do to adapt to rapid change, how the change process itself is ongoing and cyclical, and that learning can be lifelong. We know now, in ways that were unknown just a few years ago, that adults have the potential to learn and make dramatic changes throughout their life span. By looking at what we currently know, what we observe, and what the research suggests, we have a rich domain for interpretation and exploration. As part of the requirement for my Master's degree program, I conducted a qualitative study into how coaching has impacted organisations in China; I found that the results were consistent with other research findings around the world. Here is a summary of my findings, discussions, and perceived significance of the benefits for other coaches around the world.

The coaching process affected individual lives by helping people to know themselves better, learn how to manage themselves better, how to relate more productively with others, and how to think about and address work situations. The process itself, being in a coaching relationship, had an impact. The overall effect of coaching might be summarized as "it surfaces my potential a great deal and I am functioning better as a person."

Findings and Discussions

As the research findings reflected, the importance of the coaching relationship stood out as the key enabler for change. The work of Carl Rogers (1961, 1969) more than any other kept springing to mind. Rogers emphasized that the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain perceived attitudinal qualities in the personal relationship between the coach (facilitator) and the coachee. These include the facilitator's authentic acceptance, trustworthiness, and empathy. When these qualities are present, change can occur.

The research shows that while individuals who have been coached learn specific things about themselves and concrete ideas for making changes, the value of just having someone who listens deeply is one of the most valued parts of the process. The way that coaching is different from therapy, most significantly, it does not look backward, nor attempt simply to find insights about past causes for current behavior. That does not change the fact however that coaching can have a profound therapeutic effect. The relationship between the coachee (learner) and coach is key.

The acknowledgment of the significance of being heard

was expressed in almost every interview. One interviewee noted that "maybe the most valuable part [of the coaching process] is saying this stuff out loud to another person" and for another, "what stands out most is the dialogue aspect." As Bohm (1996) has pointed out in his work on dialogue, "saying things out loud" serves a critical purpose. It enables us to bring out our internal unconscious thoughts, and in doing so, to see how these thoughts have formed our reality. One interviewee noted, "once you say it, it's out there." Through dialogue, we get feedback on our thought that can enable us to see our own blind spots and "blocks". The mere process of open dialog creates a shared meaning that allows for action (Bohm, 1996, p.17).

What was said in the interviews brought to mind a quote from Rogers that I came across during my research.

....when a person realizes he has been deeply heard...it is as though he were saying, "Thank God, somebody heard me. Someone knows what it's like to be me."he is released from his loneliness, he has become a human being again. There are many, many people living in private dungeons today, people who give no evidence of it whatever on the outside, where you have to listen very sharply to hear the faint messages from the dungeon. [Rogers, 1969, p. 224]

The metaphor of dungeon may be extreme, but otherwise reflects the kind of relief and comfort that exists in a good coaching relationship. The coaching relationship, when there is real trust, empathy and validation, creates a space for inner knowing to arise.

One interviewee talked about how important it was just “having her here, knowing that she would take seriously everything I say.” Several people used the term “sounding board” and talked about the value of saying things out loud to another person. Another joked that having such a supportive relationship was so great that we should all be assigned a coach at birth.

The research supports the theories of relational psychology. The relationship- differentiation model of development suggests that the skills we need for effective relationship need to be learned and developed in relationship. The emphasis that relational psychology brings to the process of human development is exactly what the people I interviewed reported as being some of the greatest benefits of the coaching process. That is, they learned to be more empathic with their colleagues and direct reports; to “stop the action” and take time to listen deeply to others and find out where they are coming from before deciding on a course of action; to develop a tolerance for ambiguity and more than one way of looking at things; to question their assumptions and understand their own role in situations; even how to listen deeply to and honor themselves.

The study strongly suggests that Belenky’s (1997) prescription for helping women find their own authentic voices could be a prescription for an effective coaching relationship. In the process of being listened to and valued, the self starts coming back into the process of knowing. We learned to listen to what our senses tell us, and to express ourselves more honestly. One of the interviewees, referring to the effect of coaching, talked about the importance of “having someone who is skilled in thinking with you.” Participants in the study referred in various ways to the importance of the elements of the relational approach (p. 229):

Connection over separation.

Understanding and acceptance over assessment.

Collaboration over debate.

Respecting and allowing time for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience.

Encouragement for finding their own ways of working, rather than imposing expectations and arbitrary requirements.

This phenomenon of finding a new sense of self and a new voice was inspiring. To the many definitions of coaching I would add the following: “a process for bringing out the inner wisdom in an individual.”

Interviewees emphasized the important effect of feedback during the coaching process. There was often a wide-eyed expression on the faces of interviewees as they commented that they had “no idea” of the ways in which their actions affected others. While they may have had a sense of things not being right, it was the concrete feedback that really provided the wake-up call. “It’s made me more effective because I have a greater understanding of how I impact other people.”

Interviewees’ comment on feedback meshed with my experience: feedback in organizations has become a lost art. It requires a certain amount of interpersonal skill, and an environment where feedback is expected, accepted and valued as a tool for individual and organizational learning and performance improvement. We don’t like to give even constructive feedback. (It feels like conflict, may stir up feelings, and you never know what reaction you might get.) Unfortunately, feedback is often avoided like the plague until the situation reaches a crisis point. Interviewees noted emphatically how valuable it was to get specific, timely feedback, and how much they learned about themselves and their effect on others in the process. The feedback during the coaching process came in three ways: from the coach’s observations, from 360 interviews conducted by the coach and fed back to the interviewee, and as directly solicited from other people.

The interviewees whose coaches had done extensive 360 interviews and/or observed them in actual work situations, commented that it was one of the most valuable parts of the process, because it gave very concrete descriptions of how they showed up in the organization. A great example was the person who contrasted the general information she had gotten from a 360 evaluation survey, versus the very concrete feedback that her coach had gleaned from 360 interviews: “I mean, a 360 evaluation says ‘you need to listen more’ - what does that mean?” She didn’t know exactly what it was she was doing, or what the effect was on others, until she got the specific feedback that her coach had collected.

A number of the interviewees drew in more feedback by actively engaging their work associates in their change effort. Several commented that they let everyone know they were being coached, and what behaviors specifically they were trying to change. They explained that they were going to be trying new things, and asked for ongoing feedback on how they were doing. One interviewee noted that doing this had two very positive impacts. First, her group appreciated that she was working on things. This created a perceptual and attitudinal change. Secondly, they could give her specific feedback in the areas they knew she was working on. For these interviewees, acknowledging that they

were trying to change and needed help to do that, freed them up to experiment, practice, and learn from experience. It also actively encouraged them to provide feedback. One interviewer wryly acknowledged the benefit of this feedback – “What people end up telling you what you’ve done is always different from what you think you did.”

The other important part of the feedback was the feedback loop created by the opportunity to practice new behaviors. Key to adult learning theory is this emphasis on experiential learning, and learning in the context of real and immediate issues of concern to the learner. In order to practice in a way that we can really change the behavior, it takes an environment that is safe enough to try out new things, and feedback on how it went, time to reflect, and then do it again. The importance of practice also meshes with the findings in brain research. Repetitive behavior is required to lay down the new neural pathways necessary to replace old habits with new behaviors.

The research themes blended remarkably with the main components of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Goleman, Boyatzis, McKee, 2001). Specifically the themes “I am more self-aware and self-accepting,” “I understand how my actions impact others,” “I have ways to direct and manage my actions constructively,” “I have new ways to think about and approach situations,” and “I have been able to make a positive difference in how the organization works.” These map almost exactly with the emotional intelligence components of Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness and Relationship management.

The coaching process impacted each of these components. Interviewees placed particular emphasis on self-awareness that came from understanding how they showed up to other people – “I understand how my actions impact others.” With that awareness came the ability to self-manage better in situations that may have triggered an automatic response before. This is reflected in comments like “I manage myself in a way that makes me more effective.” and “I understand how my reactions feed dysfunction.” Being able to “look at what infuses a situation” is social awareness. The acquisition of relationship management skills might be summed up by the interviewee who noted she had learned “you always have the opportunity to change, you can’t expect the other person to change.”

It was striking how many interviewees commented on the fact that they had become more reflective. They had learned to examine their assumptions and to see situations in a new light. What they experienced was the “perspective transformation,” as described by Mezirow (1981) and others. Perspective changes are

transformational because the person’s view of reality, along with its attendant possibilities and opportunities, is fundamentally changed, providing an impetus for changed behavior. Interviewees were able to change their perspective because they learned how to stand back and from a situation and “stop and think,” reflect on what was going on, and bring new learning to bear on addressing the situation. They learned to ask “What’s the other person’s interest in this?...What is really the issue here?” The self-described hard-charging types in particular described this as a major transformation in their operating style.

Several interviewees noted that they had gotten different business tools and models through training over the years, but the value was in learning how to apply them, which they got through the coaching and feedback. Learning theory emphasizes that adults learn best when they can apply abstract concepts to an immediate situation of personal importance to the learner. Coaching provided the means for integrating tools and techniques, by giving the support and time to figure out how to apply them to real situations. As one person commented “so what good is it if I read all these books, but never have a sense from anyone else, you know, do I do this stuff?” Coaches also provided their own favorite models and techniques. Although these were noted as being extremely valuable, in no interview did any of these specific tools and models stand out as much as the process of practice and feedback.

The cascading effect described in the interviews mirrors the Goleman (2002) statement that emotional intelligence “moves like electricity along wires (p. 44).” The higher the organizational level, or the greater the influence level, the more dramatic this may be. On the other hand, the lessons of the new science would suggest that individual change at any level can have an enormous ripple effect. If a butterfly flapping its wings in Tokyo can affect the weather in New York, an individual contributor who has learned the personal and relationship skills as described in this study can have a similar effect in an organization. In fact, one of the interviewees noted that the cascading effect went up, two levels. Another was approached for some informal coaching by someone who had worked for her two years before, after word of the changes she had made spread through the grapevine.

The nature of the coaching process, meeting over a period of months, provides the time to learn through experience. Whatever the reason why a person entered coaching, virtually everyone commented that it broadened over time. The specific situation provided a context for individuals to learn how to approach a situation, tease apart what was happening, reflect on their role in it, check assumptions, and take the time to

consider the perspective of others involved. One interviewee described it as learning “a structured way of thinking about things, breaking things down piece by piece....and then also how it all fits together.”

Learning how to approach new situations in this way goes to the heart of creating a learning organization. Individuals who have acquired this skill are truly prepared to deal with change. It’s hard to overemphasize the importance of this part of the coaching process. The essence of adult education can be described as “learning how to learn.” The coaching process is more than just how to deal with immediate challenges and performance issues. Its greater benefit may be in using those issues as way to learn a process for dealing with future challenges as well. (See, for example, the discussion of double-loop and triple-loop learning in Hargrove (1995).)

The interplay between personal and organizational development was apparent. Interviewees noted, sometimes dramatically, the changes that coaching had created in their personal lives. For some it had made a huge difference in their relationship with their spouse. For others, they had seen positive changes with their children or friends.

The skills and behaviors learned in the workplace, such as improved communication skills, being better able to give and receive feedback, being more open to considering other points of view, establishing an open dialog, and improved problem-solving – these were all skills and behaviors that they were able to use at home as well.

There were no negative comments made about the coaching process or the effects of coaching. This was perhaps to be expected given that the overall effect was positive for all interviewees. When asked about what was the most difficult part of coaching, the answers were varied. One person had an initial issue with trust and concerns about confidentiality. Two people commented that it was “very time consuming” and hard to carve out the time to work out an improvement plan and then work to that plan. Others noted that it was just plain “tough work - hard resolving this stuff,” difficult getting feedback from a lot of people, and “just being very honest with myself about what I did well and didn’t do well.”

Significance

Organizations

Coaching can have a profound effect on improving individual effectiveness. In the past, much of what a good coach now does was performed, if at all, by one’s

manager. As discussed, today’s managers often do not have the skills, desire or time to do such work. In addition, they, and/or the organization of which they are a part, may not necessarily see employee development as one of management’s key responsibilities.

The learnings from this study have implications that organizations should consider in striving to become more effective.

- ❑ As noted, recent research has demonstrated a direct link between emotional intelligence in leaders and the effectiveness of their organizations. This research indicates that coaching is an extremely effective way for individuals to develop and hone emotional intelligence skills. It follows that individual coaching should be considered a key tool for leadership development.
- ❑ A helping relationship over time is key to effecting needed behavior changes. There are ways besides coaching to provide employees opportunities to experience a helping relationship. Mentoring programs, peer coaching, structured on the job training and good management practices are other ways to provide support for experiential learning.
- ❑ Two key benefits of coaching – “getting concrete feedback to make specific changes” and “understanding how my actions impact others” - can be provided by on an ongoing basis by one’s manager. Provide training and support for managers in developing these performance coaching skills and encourage their use. All levels of management need at least a basic awareness of employee development needs, the importance of these needs, and techniques for supporting individual growth. The lower on the management ladder that this is instilled, the better.
- ❑ Feedback is a necessary component of a learning individual, and critical to building a learning organization. Strive to instill the skill of giving and receiving feedback in each and every employee. Managers in particular should model what effective feedback looks and sounds like. It is a core component of performance coaching.
- ❑ The benefits of good coaching can “cascade” in all directions. A positive behavior change in one individual can have an ongoing positive effect throughout his or her sphere of influence and

beyond, with a potential return of investment far exceeding one individual's performance improvement. Coaching is not only for executives. The more that lower levels of the organization develop self-management and relationship skills, the sooner the organization reaps the benefit. By the time a person with issues has reached the upper levels of the company, the likelihood is that they have already cost the organization much more than an initial investment in addressing the issues would have cost. Prepare people to be a better team player, first level manager, or individual contributor.

- ❑ Training as an event can provide knowledge, but behavior change requires an ongoing process of practice and feedback. Whenever possible, provide follow-up to employee development training and coaching to help people internalize the learnings from the classroom. Training in key competencies and behaviors identified as necessary to perform a task or role has value only to the extent that the learner has the awareness of how to put the new knowledge into practice.
- ❑ The benefits of coaching described in this study were not merely about financially measurable performance results (what work got done), but in the ways that the interviewees were able to form better relationships, problem-solve and think better (how things got done). A caveat to a coaching investment may be the simple truth that the organization may not be able to directly attribute the benefit of coaching to immediate performance improvement. The benefit may show up in a "ripple" - to another project or person, or sometime down the road.
- ❑ Coaching does not provide benefits in a vacuum. The more the organization acknowledges the benefits of the coaching process as positive and promotes its use as a positive step toward employee development, the more individuals can be comfortable widening their network of feedback and support for change.
- ❑ Good coaching is about relationships. Be careful of taking a too formalized approach to coaching, or applying a one-size-fits-all model. A variety of approaches to meet individual needs and preferences may be most important.

Based on the research, it appears that what a person needs from coaching is as unique as their individual performance needs, supporting network, goals, life

stage, personality, work history.... and as simple as someone who listens, dialogs, supports, reflects, suggests, and enables the process of critical reflection. The relationship creates the environment for the learning and the eventual behavior change. It is this relaxing into oneself that then opens the door for the more tactical learning that follows.

This study did not look at the coaching process per se, but at the effect of having been coached. Nevertheless the findings have clear implications for coaches. Attempts to control or standardize the coaching process may be counter-productive. It is, at its core, a personal, helping relationship.

My prescription for an effective coaching process builds on Belenky's (1997) work, and is as follows. First, the emphasis is on establishing a helping relationship from inside the coachee's agenda. This relationship creates the sense of genuine connection that is often missing in organizations (and elsewhere), and from which the individual can experience the safety and trust necessary to risk making changes.

Second, the emphasis is on listening and seeking to understand the individual, with an attitude of acceptance rather than judgment. The fine line here is that while assessments such as 360s may be part of the coaching process, such assessments are used to promote self-understanding and not for judging or blaming.

Third, the coach enters into a collaborative relationship with the individual valuing his or her perspective. The expertise and experience of the coach is blended with the expertise and experience of the individual. The coach encourages the individual to take the time to reflect on his/her experience and suggests structures and models to help make sense of that experience. The emphasis is on "thinking with" rather than dictating courses of action. This helps the individual develop the ability to thoughtfully approach problems and develop appropriate courses of action in future situations.

Fourth, there is deep respect for the knowledge that emerges from firsthand experience in the course of the coaching process. The coach provides exercises and "homework" to give the individual opportunities to practice new behaviors in actual work situations. The coaching engagement is of sufficient duration to allow time for the individual to practice and integrate new behaviors.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the emphasis is on helping the individual identify and develop a capacity and style for ongoing problem solving and work performance that is congruent with his/her own inner voice. For a behavior change to be more than a

quick fix, it has to be deeply internalized. It must fit with the individual's personal goals and sense of purpose. A critical part of the coaching process is helping the individual find the path that creates organizational success while maintaining personal integrity.

Based on this approach, and the findings of this study, characteristics for organizational coaches include:

- ❑ A broad base of life and work experiences from which to draw.
- ❑ An understanding of adult development and learning.
- ❑ An appreciation of the realities and dynamics of an organizational environment.
- ❑ Ability to balance performance and life coaching, as needed.
- ❑ Personal congruence, modeling authentic thoughts and feelings.
- ❑ Trust in the unlimited potential and inner wisdom of human beings.
- ❑ Willingness to be a partner - not an expert - on the journey.

If one valuable "technique" stood out, it was that of doing 360 interviews. Do more of these. It seems impossible for someone to get too much constructive feedback.

Individuals

In my study it was often the case that many people are trapped in "private dungeons" at work. There are a myriad of reasons for this. But a key reason is that we are often conditioned to separate our "work selves" from our "real selves." Certainly the ability to do productive work may necessitate certain behavior shifts between home and work. But the sense that we have left our "real selves" (and this is a commonly used expression) somewhere else suggests a more profound abandonment. When we cut off parts of ourselves, we also abandon our own inner wisdom.

Changes in our work behavior can create change in our personal lives, and vice versa. It is a reinforcing system loop, for good or ill. As self-awareness increases, we become more aware not just of our role in work relationships, but in all relationships. The patterns of behavior we need to change in the workplace are probably also wreaking havoc in our personal lives.

The age of the interviewees ranged from 32-56, with an average age of 44. I think there are a couple of reasons why most coaching is for this age group. From an organizational perspective, the person has had time to attain a certain level of responsibility and influence in the organization. But from the perspective of adult development, middle age is also a time when life presents us with a wake-up call to change. This call may come from within, as an inner sense that one's life is somehow not working, or from an external source, such as feedback from managers, co-workers, friends and spouses, or as a combination of inner and outer messages. As one interviewee put it, "This is that same thing I keep getting hung up on - why do I keep ending up in the same place?"

Readiness to learn is a cornerstone for adult learning. The research seems to reinforce Jung's philosophy of adult development - that middle age and beyond is a time of great opportunity for finding new meaning in life, if we only take advantage of it.

As Jung (1971) pointed out a century ago, we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of the morning. Are there perhaps colleges for forty-year-olds which prepare them for their coming life and its demands as the ordinary colleges introduce our young people to a knowledge of the world (p.16)? This is the question that sparked my study of adult development, and ultimately my investigation of organizational coaching. Mid-life, when we often think we've learned it all, is exactly when we may learn our most challenging lessons. This is a good opportunity for beginning to reveal what we don't know what we don't know.

We could view the coaching process as this college for adults. In it, we learn the skills necessary to function better in the world. We become more self-aware. We become conscious of patterns of behavior that have been developing unconsciously over our whole lives. We think deliberately about the patterns we want to keep and those we want to change. We learn our true strengths, and acknowledge our weaknesses. We learn to question our assumptions, and reflect on our role in things. We wake up to how our actions impact others, and learn to look at things from another's point of view. We learn how to approach a difficult situation, tease it apart, work it through, and apply the learning to future situation.

With the pace of change and pressures of the workplace, we don't often get the opportunity to stop the action and look deeply at ourselves, what we are doing, and where we are going. When we start to question our performance gaps, we open the door to questioning our broader functioning in the world. This broadened

thinking was a theme in every interview, in one form or another.

The simple truth is that most work in organizations gets done through relationships. Yet in our traditional education, relationships skills are not in the curriculum. The need for a college for forty year olds is greater than ever. The curriculum is a process that facilitates learning for life. In this college I get assistance with an ongoing cycle of learning:

- ♦ Increased awareness as to where things aren't working.
- ♦ Feedback about how I'm perceived and my impact.
- ♦ Becoming conscious of my assumptions, beliefs and patterns of behavior.
- ♦ Determining ways I want to change and setting personal goals.
- ♦ Getting an infusion of ideas, models and new ways of looking at things.
- ♦ Taking action and practicing new behaviors.
- ♦ Reflection on progress and getting more feedback.
- ♦ Making adjustment and practicing some more.

My dream is that entering a learning process for greater self-knowledge at forty would be as widely anticipated and accepted as going to college after high school. The "professor" in this college just might be an organizational coach.

A recent article on the origins of findings in neurogenesis just appeared in *Smithsonian* magazine. This article reviews the research of Fernando Nottenohm whose studies of birds first opened eyes to the fact that the adult brain does change and develop new cells throughout life. In birds "the volume of the part of the... brain that controls song-making changes seasonally. It peaks in the spring...and shrinks in the summer. It then starts expanding again in the fall - a time to learn and rehearse new tunes."

Even though it is still not clear exactly what new neurons do in humans, it is a beautiful metaphor. The second half of life just may be a time to learn and practice new tunes.

I believe that coaching will be a key process for adult and organizational development and success in the

future. To what degree is the goal of organizational coaching in *performance improvement or individual development*? My firm belief is that the two are ultimately inseparable. The stages and phases and challenges of just being an adult cannot help but influence work performance, and success (or lack thereof) in work will likewise influence personal development. Where the emphasis is placed in any given coaching session so that both individual and organization benefit is the true art of effective coaching.

I started this research with great excitement about the potential of organizational coaching. Through the voices of the people I interviewed that enthusiasm has been greatly reinforced. Coaching at its best is truly a process of learning for life.

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