Perspectives on Our Work:
A Conversation about Executive Coaching
with a Commentary

By Mary Beth O'Neill, M.A. and William Bergquist, Ph.D..

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This article is based on a conversation that took place between Mary Beth O'Neill and Bill Bergquist in Seattle Washington during September 2004. Both O'Neill and Bergquist had participated on a panel of senior executive coaching professionals that was convened at the 2003 Annual Meeting of the International Coaching Federation (ICF) in Denver Colorado. The proceedings from this panel presentation were published in the fourth issue of IJCO *in 2004.*

Given the success of this first panel, Bergquist, O'Neill and their panel colleagues offered a second panel presentation at the 2004 Annual Meeting of ICF in Quebec City. The panelists also decided to conduct a series of interviews, in pairs or trios, that would enable them to further extend the rich dialogue that took place during the two panel presentations. Each of these interviews was recorded and transcripts were prepared. An abridged version of the two other interviews [was] published in the two remaining issues of the IJCO *in 2005 (along with proceedings from the Quebec City panel).*

In their joint interview, O'Neill and Bergquist talk about the nature of executive coaching, their own unique strategies for serving coaching clients, the relationship between organizational coaching and consulting, and the ways in which coaches should work with the problems that a client identifies.

DISTINCTIONS IN EXECUTIVE COACHING

Mary Beth: I know that you have a way of looking at distinctions and definitions of the various kinds of coaching. I think that would be a valuable way to start.

Bill: Sure. One of the distinctions I think we all generally agree to in this field concerns personal (life and career) coaching, on the one hand, and organizational coaching, on the other hand. Personal coaching is usually either paid for by the person receiving the coaching, by an organization in which they are now working (life or career coaching being considered an extra employee benefit), or by an organization in which they formerly worked. Typically, in the latter case, the person being coached has been downsized out of a job and the coaching is being offered as part of their severance package. The field of coaching in which you and I work goes by many names, though recently we seem to be using the general term, "organizational coaching" and talk about coaching within organizations. Usually, the organization pays for this type of coaching, often using funds that are otherwise allocated for organizational consultation, human resource development or strategic planning.

I would suggest that there are three fundamental strategies that are being used by those who do organizational coaching—though other practitioners would undoubtedly offer a different set of strategies. I call one of these three strategies: *Alignment Coaching*. This coaching strategy is primarily concerned with the fundamental values, perspectives, and personal aspirations of the person being coached. Alignment coaching serves as a foundation for something I call the *Organizational Coaching Pyramid*.

The second level of the pyramid concerns a strategy that I call *Executive Coaching*. I take a somewhat different stance with regard to the nature of Executive Coaching than many of my colleagues. I think of Executive Coaching not in terms of role, but rather in terms of function. For me, the term "executive" doesn't refer to someone at the top of an organization. Rather, I use the term "executive" to denote a specific function, namely decision-making. Thus, I might do Executive Coaching with someone in mid-management (who has to make many decisions) or with a lawyer or architect who also has to make difficult decisions. As an Executive

Coach I assist people who have to make difficult decisions under conditions of complexity, unpredictability, and turbulence.

I would place a coaching strategy that I call *Performance Coaching* at the top of the pyramid. Performance coaching is all about behavior. As a Performance Coach I help people to take effective action, once they've made a decision [Executive Coaching] that is aligned with their fundamental values and aspirations [Alignment Coaching].

I think one of the challenges of Executive Coaching concerns its position in the middle of the pyramid. I find that Executive Coaching often tends to overlap either with Performance Coaching or with Alignment Coaching. I readily move with the person I'm coaching from decisions to action and back to decisions, or explore deeper values while assisting with the decision-making process. Thus, we can't readily differentiate between these three coaching strategies, though each has its own advocates and its own traditions. As you know in psychology, we have a strong behaviorist tradition, and we have a longer-term tradition of studies in cognition (thinking) and affect (emotions)—the key building blocks of any decision-making process. We have an even longer tradition of exploring deeply seated spiritual values and personal value systems (though this tradition was often neglected during most of the 20th Century). So I see precedence for all three coaching strategies.

For me, the term "executive" doesn't refer to someone at the top of an organization. Rather, I use the term "executive" to denote a specific function, namely decision-making.

Mary Beth: And do you see yourself as doing those three different kinds of coaching?

Bill: Yes. I tend to start at the level of Executive Coaching, but I move both directions from this middle level of the Organizational Coaching pyramid.

Mary Beth: Do your clients come to you each needing one of these kinds of coaching, or do you find that really, every client you have, you're doing all three?

Bill: Eventually I think I'm doing all three. The challenge, of course, is that we're trying to show that we can make a difference when we try to convince people that they should have Organizational Coaching. The problem is that Performance Coaching has more visible outcomes than either Executive or Alignment Coaching. So the people that are most likely to hire us, or fund our coaching program, often want Performance Coaching. Unfortunately, in many instances I think the issue isn't at the level of performance, it's at the decision level, or even at a more fundamental level of personal aspirations and values.

Mary Beth: A leader may not be performing well, but the issue is a deeper issue, is that what you're saying?

Bill: Yes. Now how about with you, what are your own distinctions, or what is the kind of framework you use when you talk about Executive Coaching, and train people, and write about it?

Mary Beth: Well it's interesting when you say Alignment Coaching, because I do something that I think of as Alignment Coaching but I define it differently. Almost every contract – well into the 90 percentile of the contracts I have with leaders – is what I think of as Alignment Coaching, but defined as helping a leader align

their team to a common purpose. Now some of that Alignment Coaching might actually include what you call Alignment Coaching, which is helping the leader get clear themselves where they're headed. But the point where I'm most often meeting them is when they really don't know how to mobilize their team – who are leaders themselves.

Bill: So you also coach the team, in some sense.

Mary Beth: That's right. The core of my work now is what I call *Live Team Coaching*, which is working with a leader and their direct reports as they work on real business issues, My passion is to combine leader development with organizational results. I constantly work to bind those two together, to integrate them with each other.

Unfortunately, in many instances I think the issue isn't at the level of performance, it's at the decision level, or even at a more fundamental level of personal aspirations and values.

What makes it distinctly coaching is that unlike a process consultant, I'm not facilitating the group. Because part of what I'm wanting to coach to is the leader's ability to facilitate their own group. It's not giving feedback in the moment. It's giving suggestions in the moment, to break that trance.

Bill: This is very interesting. You are basing your coaching on behavior that you have actually observed. You're observing your coaching client in real-time interaction with their colleagues. Then, having done this piece of what I would call Performance Coaching, you are moving in many ways toward Alignment Coaching through your observations of how they actually act.

Mary Beth: Both are happening at the same time: it's clear that what's on the table is mobilization around a common goal so there needs to be that commitment. But the way that shows up is how people are behaving in the room with each other.

There's a way of thinking about alignment, and mobilizing people, which I use and the colleagues I work with use, a sequencing of the work that can really help leaders and their teams. For example, it's important that first people are clear about what the main task or vision is, before they start really looking at their commitment to it. In the work world people are often struggling with commitment before they're even clear what the work is. So I have a way of guiding leaders to work in a sequence that works with how humans organize themselves anyway, rather than go at cross-purposes to that. All the while I focus on whether the leader and team use effective behavior to get where they want to go.

Bill: The thing I find most interesting about your approach is its relationship to the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön—who write about the difference between espoused theories and theories in use. In your case, it seems that when you're working with leaders and observing them in action, you're able to frame some very tough questions. You're in a position to suggest that the way in which your client is engaged with his or her colleagues doesn't seem to be in alignment with, or seems to be different from what your client has already identified as their fundamental values or purposes. Is that right? You seem to create the opportunity to really engage the discrepancy that Agryris and Schön identify between what we say and what we do as leaders.

Mary Beth: It's an engagement around the discrepancy but not in the sense of giving them feedback *about* their behavior – e.g., "It doesn't seem as though

your espoused theory is what's taking place." I do more on-the-spot suggestions and questions which confront their discrepancy by giving them a chance in-the-moment to do something that gets them back in sync with where they say they want to go. This is the beauty of *Live-Team Coaching*, it is making a suggestion or asking a question that allows the leader and team to self-correct on the spot. For example, people often are in a commitment discussion, when no one's really clear as to what the commitment really is. Ask a simple question, like, "Can you find a way to tell Joe what it is he just said – he may or may not know that you're clear about what he said." A simple suggestion like that is a way of breaking the trance that people have of just diving into "Are you with me?" commitment questions without being clear with each other.

Bill: I love the notion of trance. That's a wonderful way to think about it. You are doing something here that is really quite different. There's a decision that Executive Coaches have to make with regard to working inside or outside the organization. Many Executive Coaches are mostly in the business of working one-on-one with someone outside the work setting. Typically, they ask the person they are coaching to reflect on their own practices. Many Executive Coaches conduct their coaching primarily through one-on-one telephone calls. These coaches may actually never see their client engaged with the team they lead (or work in). They never see their client engaged in trying to solve an actual problem. Your approach provides a very important branching point. It seems (at least in some of the cases) that your initial work or much of your subsequent work with them is as a member of a live team in the real moment. I think this is an important distinction.

It's not giving feedback in the moment. It's giving suggestions in the moment, to break that trance.

Mary Beth: The advantage is that people get to learn kinesthetically, and if you want to break an old pattern and start something new, breaking that trance right in the moment is the way that it's most likely to be sustained.

ORGANIZATION-WIDE LENS

Bill: Both of us come out of a very strong background in Organizational Development, and I think your work with the team is very much in keeping with classic Organization Development strategies. It sounds like one of the things you're doing here is revealing yourself as a consultant as well as a coach. This blending of perspectives is also evident in the systemic way you're approaching your client. It sounds like you're being a consultant along with being a coach. Is that a fair assessment?

In the work world people are often struggling with commitment before they're even clear what the work is.

Mary Beth: Guilty as charged.

Bill: So a distinctive part of your practice is to do a lot of your work in-person with your client. You're not sitting on a lounge chair somewhere up in the Grand Tetons talking on the telephone with people you may never have met. You're actually right there in the room working with them. Am I making too big an assumption? Do you typically work with clients in person or on the phone?

Mary Beth: The core of my work is face-to-face, either one-to-one or with leaders and their teams together. Many of my clients are long distance so I do some follow-up executive coaching on the phone.

Bill: Now that we've established something about how you work with your

clients, can we turn to the broader issue of coaching strategies? Can you talk a bit more about how you use systemic thinking as a consultant and coach?

Mary Beth: There is a way to think systemically even when I'm talking to a leader one-to-one. When I'm with a single leader I'm thinking of their system, I'm bringing their system into the room. One way to do that is to bring the co-created behaviors between the leader and their team into the room through conversation. Behaviors, very specific behaviors, are a coach's friend. A leader can talk about "Yeah, I did that alignment process." But a coach needs to ask, "Ok, and tell me what is it that you actually *did*, what is it that you actually *said*?" Gradually the system starts to come forth, and it's clear that through the leader's impatience, or their unclear comments, they got themselves into a morass with the group, and they weren't as patient or as clear as they thought they were.

I do more on-the-spot suggestions and questions which confront their discrepancy by giving them a chance in-the-moment to do something that gets them back in sync with where they say they want to go.

Bill: One way I would think about the process you just described is in terms of who owns the problem. Several consultants have used a metaphor "the monkey on someone's shoulder" when describing the shifting ownership for a problem. It seems to me the monkey is often moving back and forth in Consulting—even Organizational Development Consulting. If you're helping to facilitate the group, or giving Feedback Process Consultation to the group, at least on an interim basis, you're often accepting the monkey (ownership of the problem).

When I do effective Executive Coaching I rarely assume ownership for the problem. The monkey remains on my client's shoulders. You seem to be suggesting a similar strategy. You're saying that you're not in the business of facilitating the group. Your client is facilitating the group. You're not in the business of giving feedback,. They really are in many ways understanding and becoming clear about the discrepancies themselves. I think it's a classic case where the monkey is staying on your client's shoulder. In many cases we may actually be talking about big monkeys—even gorillas—that are staying on the shoulder of the person you're coaching or on the shoulder of the team you're coaching.

When I'm with a single leader I'm thinking of their system, I'm bringing their system into the room.

Mary Beth: Yes. And in terms of the larger issue of how I see the field of Executive Coaching and Consulting, one of my aspirations is to help those two approaches become more seamless, because they both have tools that the other can use.

Bill: Just to add to what you were talking about, the other distinction I make within the field of Executive Coaching is between a process I call Reflective Coaching, a second process I call Instrumented Coaching, and a third process I call Observational Coaching. *Reflective Coaching* is where I work one-on-one with someone who has to make difficult decisions, helping them surface their assumptions—working through issues inside their own head, if you will, and heart. *Instrumented Coaching* is where I begin to bring in certain questionnaires or surveys. I use either normative instruments, such as most 360° feedback instruments, or descriptive instruments, such as the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator. The instrument offers a bit more "ventilation" than Reflective Coaching, because my client confronts not only her own self-assessment, but also the assessments made by other people (as well as assessments regarding the culture in which my client is working).

The third Executive Coaching process, *Observational Coaching*, takes place when you're actually working with people on the spot and observing their behavior first-hand. This provides the maximum amount of "ventilation." It seems to me that you do Observational Coaching, Mary Beth. You begin with this process rather than use it later on after engaging the other two Executive Coaching processes. Your emphasis on Observational Coaching seems very appropriate. I often say that a coach and client ultimately must move toward Observational Coaching, because that's really where the payoff is.

Let me just ask one more question before we move on. It's often very hard to get the client's buy-in for direct observation. It's much easier to get someone to agree to one-on-one telephone calls. What's the secret? How do you get executives to say "Sure, come on in and watch us?" That's a difficult challenge for a lot of people in this field, in their own marketing, confronting the initial resistance. How do you get people to say "Sure, come on in?"

I've already weeded out those who really don't want the heat or the light of being observed.

Mary Beth: I've been really lucky because I've had such terrific clients to work with. Now part of this, I'm sure, is a mutual weeding-out process with regard to the people who wind up being my clients. I've already weeded out those who really don't want the heat or the light of being observed. By the time I show up in the room with them and their team we've done about two months of work together one-to-one behind the scenes, so that's one way of prepping them.

Bill: You seem to be engaged in what I would call Reflective Coaching with them even before you get into the room with them.

Mary Beth: They are really making an act of courage to allow themselves to undergo Live-Team Coaching. They have to have a pretty strong ego. Now I know that people complain about leaders at the top having strong egos. I personally think they need to have strong egos, meaning, they really have to have a strong sense of themselves, and comfort with themselves, and comfort with taking a stand that others don't always like. What is more important is that leaders have a sense of flexibility about themselves, and can have a sense of humor about themselves.

Part of what I'm doing in that two months of prep is gauging how able they are to take the immediate suggestions that I'm giving them in the moment. Can they self-correct, can they hold their own, are they not just swallowing what I'm saying, are they not defending against what I'm saying? And I'm imagining them in that context with their team members. If they take that act of courage of being in a live coaching context, and they're learning live, it's one of the best gifts they can give their team members. I have found that team members admire the visible step of publicly learning that their leader has taken, that they themselves are more ready to learn live.

No matter how trusting a client is with regard to your intentions, your competencies, or your perspectives, at some point it's a leap of faith. And this requires courage.

Bill: I greatly appreciate two of the points you are making. First, we always talk about the high level of trust a consultant needs before doing any organizational consulting or coaching. You're offering a very interesting alternative perspective: there's only so much trust that can be created during the early stages of consultation or coaching. At some point it comes down to courage not trust. No matter how

trusting a client is with regard to your intentions, your competencies, or your perspectives, at some point it's a leap of faith. And this requires courage. I think you offer an extraordinary and provocative perspective regarding trust and courage.

The second important point you're making concerns a fundamental assumption—what we psychologists call ego strength. If you can't make that assumption, then you need to ask whether or not this really is the time and place for Executive Coaching. Often the best work I can do with a coaching client is to advise him that he needs to seek out therapeutic assistance (a counselor, a therapist, whatever). I think this is critical. I should be able to share my own assumptions with my coaching client. Can I talk with them about my own strategies, and can I say, "well I'm lost here, what do you think I should do?" or "I've run out of questions, what do you think?" We must be able to be candid with our client. They should have sufficient ego strength to recognize that I (as their coach) am trying to think through what's going on here. This is a very important signal. If I can't openly share this information with my client then we might not be engaged in coaching—it might be shifting to informal therapy (which is neither appropriate nor ethical).

It seems to me that one of the problems we now face in this field is that many people in our society need some form of counseling. They're depressed. They're angry. They don't know what to do about their emotional struggles. Yet in our society going to a therapist is a sign of weakness. So they engage an Executive Coach, since in most places executive coaching is still viewed in a positive manner. I find people who come to an Executive Coach because it's a safer place, it's a more dignified thing to do, than going to a therapist. I think what you're saying is very important. Organizational coaches must begin with the assumption that their client has adequate ego strength, the capacity to be courageous, the capacity to open themselves up in front of other people. If that fundamental assumption doesn't hold up then I think we need to say: Executive Coaching isn't the answer . . . Can I assist you in finding someone who can help you at this point in your life?"

I think the best part of Executive Coaching is what I call a two-for-one deal for organizations – they're getting leaders who are developing themselves as leaders, and they're getting results.

Mary Beth: So what do you do in that situation, Bill, if you find someone on your doorstep who's in that place where, really, they're coming to you because it looks better to go to an Executive Coach?

Bill: I think of executive as the decision-making function—making difficult decisions. Obviously, one of the most difficult decisions has to do with people recognizing they need some other assistance. So I think some of the best Executive Coaching I do is helping someone make the decision about what kind of support they need. I remember working a few years ago with a man who started a high tech firm in Silicon Valley (California). At one point he hired a consultant to work with his company regarding transitions in ownership and venture capital. What was going to occur with regard to the demands of the venture capitalists for partial ownership of the company?

He also had a therapist. Coming from Israel, my coaching client was dealing with cultural issues and his own depression. He felt that he was losing control of his company—which corresponded with (and heightened) his sense of loss in other aspects of his life. He hired me as a coach in the midst of this difficult period in his life. One of the issues we engaged concerned his growing realization that some of the issues he was confronting were therapeutic in nature. I also helped him

realize that some of his issues could best be addressed by his consultant (rather than by me as his coach). He had all three Cs at the same time: counselor, coach, and consultant.

Mary Beth: And you saw that as synergistic?

Bill: Yes, I thought some of the best work I did was to help him recognize the value of the consultant. I helped him recognize ways in which he could use the consultant with regard to several issues he and I were discussing in our coaching sessions (especially with regard to his role in the organization). We also talked about ways in which the work he was doing with his therapist could help inform his work as the principle leader of his own organization.

Mary Beth: When he shows up on your doorstop you're thinking, *Well this man actually could be using his therapist better*. What's so nice about what you said is that you didn't deny him, you kept him on as a client, but it was the Executive Coaching part of your practice, which was helping him triage where he needed to do his work and with whom.

The skills and the models and theories of organizational development can really be useful to Executive Coaches...

Bill: Yes. And we might find that Executive Coaches will be used in the future as specialists in organizational triage. They will help clients identify the type of human service assistance they most need at a particular moment in time. As you know, I own a graduate school that trains and educates both clinical psychologists and organizational consultants. Many of them also get trained as Executive Coaches. The distinction between coaching, consulting and therapy is very important for them. I frequently have to deal with the issue of what are the differences among these three and how do they compliment one another. How do therapists become good Executive Coaches? How do consultants become good Executive Coaches? What transfers over to Executive Coaching? What areas don't transfer? In what ways do they have to be different in their approaches to each of the three Cs?

Mary Beth: So how would you answer those questions?

Bill: One piece of it is that in most therapeutic modalities, there is the beginning assumption of deficit: a person seeks therapy because, in some sense, there's something they *can't do*, or some issue with which they *can't grapple*. I think both you and I, in Executive Coaching, begin with the assumption that our client *can grapple* with something. We, as Executive Coaches, are helping to provide a safe setting. We're providing a setting where they're getting feedback, where they're able to actively engage, with your help, with their colleagues, with their subordinates. I think the appreciative approach I take helps them identify their strengths and their successes. How can these successes and strengths be used to confront the deficits they have? I begin in a very appreciative manner. I think that's quite

Because I am not a clinically-trained psychologist, I need to know when to refer. I definitely think executive coaches need to know the limits of our own interventions and profession.

different from most counseling and therapeutic modes. Frankly, I think it's also quite different from a lot of the work we do as consultants. I think we often begin, as consultants, with an assumption of some deficit.

THE INGREDIENTS OF SUCCESSFUL EXECUTIVE COACHING

Bill: Mary Beth, up to this point we've been talking in fairly general terms about

Executive Coaching and coaching strategies and approaches. What if we move to a more specific level and say, "When you're doing really effective Executive Coaching, what are the kinds of ingredients, what are the things that need to be in place for Executive Coaching to really succeed?"

Mary Beth: I have some strong biases in this area because I think there is a way Executive Coaches can let ourselves and our leaders off the hook unless we combine a couple of things. There's so much focus in Executive Coaching on the development of the leader, making sure the leader has an executive presence, that the leader can make good decisions, that the leader knows how to move in groups, that they know how to stay connected with people – that they have people skills. All of that needs to be included in Executive Coaching, but we can get into trouble if we don't connect that development to what the results are that the leader actually needs to get. I think the best part of Executive Coaching is what I call a two-for-one deal for organizations – they're getting leaders who are developing themselves as leaders, and they're getting results. Why I feel so strongly about this is that even though organizations, particularly North American organizations, are very focused on the bottom line and measuring results, these same organizations often do not connect their enhancement of people processes to those bottom line results. They have all kinds of systems to develop people, and all types of systems to get results, but the two systems never come together. This is where I think Executive Coaching can really make a huge contribution, bringing this belief and practice to allow leaders and organizations to accomplish both.

Most issues that leaders deal with are more than just simple detective work, or a rational, linear way of thinking.

Bill: What implications does this have for Executive Coaches?

Mary Beth: There are some essential skills that Executive Coaches need to have, and need to use in their practice. The first is knowledge of how organizations work. Now I think of that in two ways, one is – how do businesses operate, how do they work – how is Sales connected to Finance, and how is Finance connected to Planning, and then how is PR connected with Human Resources? Just what are all the different departments, and how are they interrelated to each other? How do financial statements work, literally the nuts and bolts of businesses and organizations. Executive Coaches need to know that, we need to have business sense.

Secondly, the skills and the models and theories of organizational development can really be useful to Executive Coaches, because there's a whole theory base out there in terms of how groups get organized, how they develop, how they grow, how they terminate, how they recycle. We need to be able to diagnose what's happening more than just intrapersonally. What's happening inside that leader, or interpersonally? There are problems that leaders deal with that are not just their interpersonal skill deficits. Symptoms will show up as interpersonal difficulties, but they actually have to do more with processes being broken. Executive Coaches need to have that theory base as well.

The image I often I think of for my work with leaders is horse-whispering.

Bill: As I've mentioned I train quite a few therapists who want to also become Executive Coaches. Of course they often say: "no one should be an Executive Coach unless they have trained in therapy." As you know there are several states in which clinical psychologists are trying to essentially control the term *Executive Coaching*. You're talking about having a strong business background,

understanding spreadsheets and all that. You're also talking about having a strong background in organizational psychology and organizational development. What do you say to the therapists who say, "Unless you understand something about the psychopathological cause of the narcissism in many leaders, or understanding something about drug abuse, or understanding something about stress-reduction, you have no business being an Executive Coach. You're playing with fire?" How do you deal with that kind of critique?

Mary Beth: I think they're correct in the sense that I need to know enough about psychology to recognize two things. First, I can recognize that my client's reactions go deeper than being situationally stuck on a work related problem. Secondly, because I am not a clinically-trained psychologist, I need to know when to refer. I definitely think executive coaches need to know the limits of our own interventions and profession.

For people to shift toward this notion of significance in a successful way, they need the support of their significant other. If they don't have that support, they often get stuck.

Bill: Now back to the piece about knowing the business, and knowing about how businesses operate. I do quite a bit of coaching with people in government, so I assume that means I should know something about government.

Mary Beth: Yes.

Bill: Or if I work in churches, with pastors, things like that.

Mary Beth: Agencies, yes.

Bill: What keeps you then from becoming a technical consultant, where you're using your expertise to offer advice to the person? It is tempting, I would assume, for you to become a technical consultant. What keeps you in the business of Executive Coaching, given that you have all this background regarding how businesses operate?

When people make those small shifts, and they see they can successfully do them, they experience profound changes. They become more able to enact their value systems with each other.

Mary Beth: Well another skill comes into play here, which balances the organizational knowledge. It's an understanding of the emotional challenges that leaders face when they're at work. Most leader-challenges don't have technical fixes, because if they had technical fixes, the books that you and I write would make us millionaires: people could just read the answers and implement them. All we would have to do is sell the books with the technical fix, and great, they've handled it. But most issues that leaders deal with are more than just simple detective work, or a rational, linear way of thinking. That's part of it, but a bigger part of it is that there's something about them that's getting in their way, that's keeping them from moving forward. We need to have some understanding of the blocks and the obstacles that get so in-the-face of a leader that they can't move forward. Either they don't know what to do –the situation is so ambiguous that they can't find their way out – or they know what to do, and they are avoiding doing it. And that's a whole area of helping a leader get back in touch with their own resilience, under times when they are anxious. The image I often I think of for my work with leaders is horse-whispering.

Bill: That's wonderful. Doesn't that come from a movie?

Mary Beth: Out of the movie and the book, *The Horse Whisperer*, where a horse

gets out of touch with their own ability to operate – particularly with humans – and they freak out. The horse whisperer is someone who offers enough containment for the horse that they can get in touch with the strengths and the relational abilities that they had before. I often think that I'm horse whispering leaders, because they're so anxious about a decision they have to make, or some path they have to take, that they're not in touch with their own resourcefulness.

You're not giving the feedback, you're creating the conditions for them to give each other feedback, which helps to decrease the dependency on the coach, or the consultant.

Bill: There's the other movie *Seabiscuit*. The same thing occurs. Here is a horse that was trained to run second, which was not aligned with what that horse was all about. The horse whisperer would have the job of saying: "Actually, you're quite good." You mentioned the word "container." I think the clinical perspective is helpful in this regard—especially object-relations theory. According to object relations theory, one of the major roles of the therapist is to provide the container, because with an appropriate container people can experience anxiety without being scared to death of this anxiety. As an Executive Coach, I'm often providing the container. There is something in the coaching relationship that creates a safe place, a sanctuary, a container for people.

One of the men with whom I work, for instance, is the head of a very large healthcare system. One of the activities in which we frequently engage is "zero-basing" our contract. I say, "Does it still make sense for me to coach you?" The last time I posed this question, he said, "My God, you're the only person I can really talk to." This is a man in his early 60s who is thinking about his own longevity. He often has been able to talk to his wife, who is also a physician, about these matters. But he no longer has anyone to talk to about these issues, because his wife is very emotionally committed to his early retirement. "I don't have anyone to talk to, and I need to talk to you." Now, Mary Beth, this is quite different from what you do. He doesn't feel that he can talk about these matters with people around him. However, to use your model, this is the beginning of conversation.

When people get high enough into the executive ranks, everybody, including themselves, expect that they are supposed to know it all really well the first time out. If people have those kinds of expectations of leaders, then the leaders do not have the space to learn well.

A conversation about Succession Planning. The systemic aspects of a man who has been a very powerful presence in this organization is profound. However, this is just the first step towards engaging other people in this planning process. He needs to first find a place where he can say, "I'm looking at what difference I make, how long I stay here, how long this job is going to be meaningful for me, how long I continue to be a value to this organization." And I am the only person, right now, that he will allow to witness this soul-searching conversation with himself.

Mary Beth: This would seem to illustrate the Alignment Coaching that you were talking about—because that's the whole value-based conversation. But I'm thinking you're also adding double-value above that too, when you acknowledge the difference between him talking to you and talking to his wife, who is a physician, because you have the therapeutic background to understand the whole human-dynamics change, but you also have the organizational background. That's the piece where, perhaps, another physician couldn't help him.

Bill: Yes, and the other part I suspect we're both in the business of, is the *shift from a concern for success to a concern for significance*. This shift tends to occur in midlife for many men and women. They begin to say: "What difference am I making?" This often involves a profound shift in life priorities. Several years ago

I heard a presentation by a married couple who always work together. One of them is a former business executive. The other has been trained as a therapist. They cited some research suggesting that for people to shift toward this notion of significance in a successful way, they need the support of their significant other. If they don't have that support, they often get stuck. As a result these two coaches always work with both the executive and his or her significant other.

Mary Beth: There is a shift toward community.

Bill: Being successful for the world, rather than just being successful in the world. For the Executive Coach, boundaries between personal issues and organizational issues often become blurred. As an Executive Coach, without becoming a therapist, we can create a place—a container—where people can talk about their own life, and what it's about. They can identify the meaning of their life and work to enhance this meaning, as they confront difficult decisions. Mary Beth, I suspect that the challenge for you concerns your commitment to coaching in person. I assume that a fair amount of your Executive Coaching is done in these live groups. It's quite a challenge for members of the group to share with one another—this is undoubtedly a powerful part of your coaching process. However, I suspect that it takes a fair amount of time to build adequate trust. It certainly takes the courage you were talking about earlier. And it takes resilience, which I know is something we want to talk about.

> *Humans have a way of co-creating patterns among themselves that are so strong that breaking them becomes a central developmental task. … The trances are the co-created dances that leaders get into with their teams.*

Mary Beth: Well, the beauty of live-action coaching is it's not everyone sitting around giving these huge confessions about what's happening inside. Instead they are making very small, *seemingly* small shifts in behavior from what they normally do. If you were watching the movie of that meeting, many people would be bored with it. But these seemingly small shifts of behavior sit on top of huge value systems. So when people make those small shifts, and they see they can successfully do them, they experience profound changes. They become more able to enact their value systems with each other. That's the beauty of the work too, that they don't have to reveal tons about themselves to be able to experience significant shifts that make a difference with the teams.

Bill: When you do that—as these shifts occur—do team members themselves receive the support of individual coaches or do you work with them together as a group? If they're going through a process that I assume makes a difference in their own personal alignment, then I assume there's Executive Coaching at the next level as well.

Mary Beth: Actually we don't assume that. We take it as it goes. When I say "we," I do live-team coaching work with a colleague. When we're doing the live-team coaching we divide them into pairs, where they're giving each other feedback and helping with that growth process, and then we're also available to go around and help them, because we do these debriefs and time-outs when we're also in the process. We don't want the dependence on the consultant to be too much, or else it'll look like a technical fix. Many times after I'll do a team-coaching process with the leader and their team, they'll automatically say, "Great, now everybody can have a live team coaching process in their groups." But I'm thinking maybe, maybe not. We need to be choiceful about how to do that. In the Alignment Coaching I'm doing—how to mobilize groups—much of that they can do themselves, with not

so much live-action anymore, but more bursts of support from coaching sessions that they have with me, or bursts of support at shorter live-team sessions. I don't want them to depend on me to make the change in their teams.

Bill: That's obviously a very important point—not fostering client dependency. A couple of minutes ago you said, "And I have them give each other feedback." So once again, you are encouraging them to rely on one another. You're not giving the feedback, you're creating the conditions for them to give each other feedback, which helps to decrease the dependency on the coach, or the consultant. I often suggest that Rasputin was the first Executive Coach! There's a lesson to be learned from this scoundrel. Rasputin had one big success and it ended up being a success for the wrong reasons. Everyone becomes dependent on him, of course. Sadly, there are too many horror stories of Executive Coaches who give a piece of advice that ends up being successful, but often for the wrong reason. And there's this massive dependency on the Executive Coach. I think that's something we all need to worry about in this profession. We must be very careful about client dependency, so that

What are the settings in which the pattern yields a positive outcome, rather than in a destructive outcome?

we don't become little Rasputins running around in our client's organizations. One other important thing about Rasputin: it was hard to kill him. I know of several cases where Executive Coaches are hard to eradicate. We don't die easily, we just keep coming back in various forms.

I think the strategy you use of not building client-dependency is a very important part of your work. If this field we're both in and both care about is to be successful, then it is essential that the concern about building client-dependency is utmost, in terms of our ethics, and our own values as organizational coaches. So I think the strategies you use are ones that help build client independence. Apparently, you don't hang in as the process moves down the organization. That would be a classic organization development effort. We would do team building at the top, and then team building at the next level, and the next level. This is often a way in which one builds client-dependency in organizational consulting work. You're saying that you're thoughtful about not building in this client dependency in your own work.

Mary Beth: Consultants and coaches don't sustain change, leaders sustain change with their teams. The leader and I will think through what is the best use of my resource, if there is one, because I also believe that a burst of coaching by itself is probably not a sustaining use of a resource. We'll look at things like, how urgent is this business-issue. If we can follow a normal developmental curve, then you need less support, because you have the time for self-correction. But, if it's a big turn around, or they're in a crisis situation, then they need more resources applied to them. Or if on that team, instead of automatically doing live-team coaching with all those groups, there may be one group that, if they had the resource applied to them, the whole group would perform at a higher level, quicker.

Bill: Before we conclude this section of our conversation, I would like to go back to your notion of *systemic*. It sounds like one of the things you do is help your clients get distance. You encourage them to look at life cycles of organizations through which they are moving. You suggest that they need different kinds of resources at different points. Thus, while you're not a technical consultant, there are ways in which you can be a historian or someone who provides a broad analysis, a provocative analysis. You can help your clients think outside the immediate moment and look into broader patterns. Is that right?

Mary Beth: I think of it as normalizing their experience. Here's another skill I get so excited about with Executive Coaching—we have to be ambidextrous, we have to have this kind of sharp organizational knowledge, and we have to be able to deal with adult learning: essentially, we have to enter into people's lives enough to help them learn something new. Another image I have is sort of that eddy in the river of a white water rafting trip. When you talk about containment, and that physician saying, "Well, you're the guy I can talk to." I often think that we're the eddy in the river.

Leaders are spending enough time in conversation with us, we are literally helping them make new neuron connections, in terms of learning a new behavior. That's where the container is useful to them, that's why it's helpful to be able to express their anxiety about the awkwardness of the learning. When people get high enough into the executive ranks, everybody, including themselves, expect that they are supposed to know it all really well the first time out. If people have those kinds of expectations of leaders, then the leaders do not have the space to learn well. So that's a function that Executive Coaching can provide.

Here we are, we're providing significant containers, and, at the same time, in the same breath, we have to be hard-nosed business people. Another skill I think is necessary is to have the savvy to help leaders make the business connection around the learning that they are doing. What is the ROI, what is the return on investment of helping them learn these skills themselves, of their teams learning these group processes, and how do they connect to a business result? This is the question we need to put in front of them.

IDEAS ABOUT EXECUTIVE COACHING THAT HAVE AN IMPACT

Bill: Mary Beth, we probably need to bring this conversation to a close. We might want to end with one or two ideas that we convey or share with other people that seem to have a lingering impact. What are some of the most thoughtful and also most deeply felt ideas we have in our work? Coward that I am, why don't I have you answer that first, and then I'll try to answer it.

Mary Beth: The way I think about it is what is so compelling that I keep circling back to it, what do I find so powerful in the work that it keeps me engaged.

Bill: That's what chaos theorists call Strange Attractors. Great approach. What is it that keeps pulling us in?

Mary Beth: For me, this actually comes from the systemic thinking of Family Systems Theory. Ron Short, among others, found a way to bring some of that thinking to our field. I feel so captivated by those ideas. One central idea is that humans have a way of co-creating patterns among themselves that are so strong that breaking them becomes a central developmental task. And they're the very things that need to be broken through to enhance work relationships to get the work done. This is like the trance I was talking about earlier. The trances are the co-created dances that leaders get into with their teams.

The competency is not that you never get sucked into the pattern. The competency is how quickly you can recover from it. And those who are forever sucked into the pattern, never do learn anything new.

What I find so compelling about that is that there's lots of complicated thinking behind it. But talking to leaders about it, all I have to do is say, "Well, what's the dance that you're in, with your team?" and it's accessible to them. And yet what's not accessible is knowing how to shift it. Again, the power of live team coaching is

to watch a pattern emerge, then to work to shift the pattern, to help them gain the awareness that it's happening, and then to figure out what's a replacement pattern. You can't just stop a pattern, you've got to replace it with something else.

I think of it as the combination of being a detective, and figuring out the puzzle of what is the pattern that's arising. And yet it's completely nonlinear; and it's a-rational, and it's often unconscious. I think Executive Coaches are at a place where we're just one step removed from the pattern ourselves. We have a chance to maybe see it a little faster than they do. Helping them see that these patterns are co-created, helps the leader and team give themselves and each other a little grace, because so many times leaders are blaming teams and teams are blaming leaders.

I would assume that in live coaching, and the work you're doing with teams, there are both puzzles and problems.

It's that whole Pogo cartoon, "We've met the enemy, and it is us." We are the ones creating the pattern. When I'm inside my own pattern, I don't see it as co-created, I see it as, "You're doing this to me." Here's an example: I'm often running into leaders, even at high levels of an organization, where they so desperately want their own direct reports who are leaders to take more initiative than they're taking. They're constantly using the "empowerment" word, and their teams are not taking the initiative that the executive wants. Well, who's contributing to that? I mean, in some ways you could say it's a pretty sloppy empowerment on the leader's part. They're saying, "I empower you," and yet they're still holding a lot of the strings. They're being quite vague, as to what they're empowering them for.

The team's part of this co-created pattern is that there's a lot of passive flailing that goes on by the team members, for example, they're not seeking clarity for the kind of empowerment that the leader is giving them, and everyone's reading everyone else's minds. We help them to experience that pattern, realize their misery in that pattern, have them shift to a new pattern, and break out of the comfort zone that they have with something they don't like. That's what I find so compelling and fun. I often think of live team coaching as jazz improv—you never quite know when the pattern's going to rise, and finding the intervention that could potentially help them make the difference is what's so intellectually challenging, and emotionally challenging as well.

The tendency is for us as Executive Coaches to collude with our clients to make problems into puzzles. Because if it's a puzzle, it gets solved. We're successful and our client is successful.

Bill: I tend to take an appreciative perspective in helping clients to identify which patterns have worked for them—rather than trying to change these patterns. When is a specific pathway or pattern particularly effective? When is it dysfunctional? Can my client replicate and engage this pattern in a more positive manner? What are the settings in which the pattern yields a positive outcome, rather than in a destructive outcome? I don't know if that's different from what you were saying or a variant on it, but I absolutely agree with you, I think that pathway analysis, as an Executive Coach, is critical.

Mary Beth: You're saying: let's use some of the benefits of that pattern.

Bill: Right, it's hard to change it. Furthermore, those pathways and patterns of patterns become the culture of an organization. So the idea of people going around saying, "Let's change the culture of this organization," is often na_ve and counterproductive. I think the culture of an organization is rarely destructive. It's the way in which the culture is employed that can be destructive. There are

alternative ways to engage that culture. I think where you and I both agree is that pattern and pathway are very important. Furthermore, you're saying that the Executive Coach can help their clients identify this pattern. I love what you said about being only one step removed from this pattern ourselves, as organizational coaches. I agree that we can easily get sucked into this pattern.

Mary Beth: Absolutely, only momentarily are we one step removed from it.

Bill: And we're virtually useless if we get sucked in.

Mary Beth: I had a mentor who gave me really good advice around that. I went to him and said, "I am so sucked in with my client's system, I am so stuck, I'm just in the same pattern with my clients that they are with their own system." He told me, "You know, there's good news and bad news about patterns. The good news is you have a chance to shift them; the bad news is they keep coming around." And he added, "The other good news is that you now know what it's like to be in that system." And here's where there may be a comparison with your Appreciative approach. I think of it as other strengths that clients possess but don't know they can use. So another way of thinking about it is instead of stamping out a bad pattern, how can they start using some of their other strengths?

I think a way that I experience the mystery, the honor, actually, is to be with leaders who are learning how to bring both backbone and heart to their work, how to have stamina, how to learn to face difficulties and problems.

Bill: Yes. I would absolutely agree. How do they use their distinctive strength or competencies on behalf of a positive version of the pattern?

Mary Beth: And so competency—both for the coach, who gets sucked in, and for the leader and team who are sucked in – the competency is not that you never get sucked into the pattern. The competency is how quickly you can recover from it. And those who are forever sucked into the pattern, never do learn anything new. But if I can decrease the amount of time that I am unconsciously stuck, I think that's growing in the direction of competence.

Bill: I think the point where we can reflect on the pattern and how it's pulled us, is wonderful. That's some of the best work we can do. This suggests the value of the shadow coach—the person who coaches the coach. This person can be quite valuable as someone whom we can talk to about our coaching.

Mary Beth: Yes, absolutely.

Bill: I think you've made a very important point with regard to the power of the pattern. It can be a disaster when we are getting swept into the path of the pattern. However, the pull can also be of benefit—and offer us extraordinary strength—if we can reflect on it, saying, "Look I got caught up in it. And I'm only here five hours, and I have the feelings, I feel incompetent, I feel like an idiot. It must be hard being in that all the time."

Mary Beth: So what do you find compelling, Bill, in terms of your practice?

Bill: I think some of the best work I do, not only in my own coaching, but in coaching coaches, or shadowing coaches. This is the distinction I make between what I call puzzles, problems and mysteries. *Puzzles* are issues that have answers. They tend to be unidimensional. They are usually framed from a single disciplinary

perspective. This is a financial puzzle! This is a personnel puzzle!

Mary Beth: "Eureka, I found it" kind of a thing?

Bill: Yes. And you know when you're successful, and when you're a failure. Furthermore, puzzles tend to have a very strong internal locus of control—people tend to have a lot of control over puzzles. Some coaches focus primarily on puzzles. Performance Coaching is often about puzzles. But, there are also things called *problems*. This is what I learned in reading the work of Don Schön. He writes about "messes." Problems are messy issues that don't have simple answers. You're not even sure if you've solved it. Problems are multidisciplinary. What about pollution? Is pollution a financial issue? Is it a biochemical issue? Is pollution primarily a political issue? Messy problems can be viewed from many different perspectives. They often involve dilemmas. If I solve this problem in one way, then the problem will often reemerge in a different form. Problems are often nested. There is a puzzle or problem residing inside another puzzle or problem, which resides inside yet another puzzle or problem and so forth. Problems often also contain paradoxes—which are nested dilemmas that are very difficult for people to resolve.

I think this field we've been talking about— Executive Coaching—is a mystery. It's not clear who started it, it seems to be timely, it seems to be something that's being fashioned now out of a need that we're still trying to identify.

There is a third kind of issue: something called a *mystery*. These issues are awesome, and "awe-ful" (full-of-awe). The destruction of the World Trade Center and the death of so many people is a mystery. How do I deal with this magnitude of evil in the world? Mysteries also can be very positive. My new born grandchildren. They're extraordinary. How is it that these little kids entered the world? What is this about?

There is a critical difference between puzzles, problems and mysteries with regard to locus of control. Mysteries are primarily based in an external locus of control. What about my grandchildren? I have had something to say about my children, but my grandchildren, what a gift they are. It's not me, it's the legacy, it's something that's been carried over, and many other forces operated. The greatest challenge concerns problems. These coaching issues typically have both internal and external locus of control. Part of the problem about solving problems is that it's not clear where we can control it, and where we don't have control.

Mary Beth: I would assume that in live coaching, and the work you're doing with teams, there are both puzzles and problems. You help the team identity the issues over which they can really have some control. With these issues there is some accountability. It's worth staying up to 10 at night working on a problem with an internal locus of control. I assume that you also help teams identify the issues that really are outside their control – they can stay at work to 3 A.M., and still not really be able to control the resolution of this issue.

Bill: I think some of the best work I do as a coach is helping people discern the problem, hanging in with the problem, and helping them identify the issues over which they have control, and those over which they don't. I guess the final point I'd make is one of the concerns I have about our field. When there's a lot of money that comes into the field, and there's a big payoff for being an Executive Coach, then the tendency is for us as Executive Coaches to collude with our clients to make problems into puzzles. Because if it's a puzzle, it gets solved. We're successful and our client is successful.

Frankly, the best work we do as a coach may take time and the outcomes may not be tidy nor easily measured. I think the best work we do is helping our clients or colleagues recognize that they're facing the complexity, unpredictability and turbulence of a problem that doesn't readily yield simple answers. Problems that are hard to confront. Problems that are filled with dilemmas and paradoxes. You have repeatedly mentioned, Mary Beth, the central role to be played by organizational courage. To hang in with the problem. To recognize that you are there as a team to face this problem. As an organizational coach, you are unique in that you are talking about and working with a team. That's work that doesn't necessarily yield an immediate payoff. We may not get rewarded for immediate results, but I think long term that's what we're about, and I think that's what this field is about, helping people deal with problems.

Mary Beth: So it sounds like part of your contribution as an Executive Coach would be to help leaders make decisions about even how to name the issue they are facing.

Bill: Yes, an important part of problems is naming them.

Mary Beth: And then you want to call on us as Executive Coaches to a grander mission, which is not to reduce the problems of our clients. Don't make them so small as to define them as puzzles, because then we're doing a disservice to our client.

Bill: Yes, and to the field. This is what's wonderful about what you were talking about, in terms of a systemic analysis. As soon as you're talking about systemic perspectives, you're out of puzzles, into problems, I think. Often you are also into mysteries.

Mary Beth: That's what I was wondering, if you would put those two together. If it's possible to feel wonder about something that I actually also experience as a problem.

Bill: Yes, I think so. For me, sometimes at my school, I stand out in front. Classes are being conducted, and both teaching and learning are occurring. I realize that it's not fully in my control, but it is occurring, I'm not in every classroom, but there are people working on behalf of the mission of my institution. At that moment I fully realize that it is extraordinary when humans come together and fashion an enterprise that does something important and significant. That really is a mystery! How does it occur?

Mary Beth: I think a way that I experience the mystery, the honor, actually, is to be with leaders who are learning how to bring both backbone and heart to their work, how to have stamina, how to learn to face difficulties and problems. Well, I have to do exactly the same thing, I'm on a parallel journey with them. If I don't bring my backbone and heart, if I don't develop my own stamina, if I don't deal with my problems as problems, instead of puzzles, then I'm not doing my best work, I'm not being the best instrument that I can be with my clients. I love the fact that I and my clients are actually in very similar developmental processes. I've never called it a mystery but I've always been awed by it.

Bill: We need to bring this to a close, but I think this field we've been talking about—Executive Coaching—is a mystery. It's not clear who started it, it seems to

be timely, it seems to be something that's being fashioned now out of a need that we're still trying to identify. If I stand outside of my school, I see that something's going on there. I don't know about you, but sometimes I stand out in front of this field of ours—called Executive Coaching—and I say, "There's good work going on here." And it's a joy and privilege being part of it, like today, it's been lovely doing this with you. Thank you.

Mary Beth: Thank *you*.

Commentary On

Perspectives on Our Work: A Conversation about Executive Coaching

MARY BETH O'NEILL, M.A. AND WILLIAM BERGQUIST, PH.D.

Bill: It is always difficult to know what other people think about us – and, in particular, what they think are our strengths. One of the roles to be played by a coach (at least from an appreciative perspective) is to help one's client discover what other people perceive to be the client's strength. It is equally as difficult to discern why other people would consider one's writing to be of value to them. In reflecting back on this article and the interview we conducted with one another that serves as a foundation for this article, two factors stand out as being salient or (if we can be immodest) salutary.

This was the first in a series of articles prepared for IJCO that involve dialogues between two or more senior coaches. Hopefully, we set a precedent for these dialogues by being *candid* about our own work and the assumptions underlying our work and at the same time *appreciative* of one another's work. Unfortunately, organizational coaches are not that different from other folks in that we can easily feel competitive with one another and find ways (subtle or not so subtle) to let other people and our clients, in particular, know that our approach to coach is obviously the best and that other approaches are somehow not quite right, are inadequate, or at the very least are incomplete. The two of us tried to approach our dialogue from the perspective of mutual admiration and interest in learning from one another. Perhaps that is what readers of our article enjoyed about our dialogue.

Our conversation revealed the need to move beyond a simplistic distinction between organizational consulting and organizational coaching.

There may have also been something in the specific content of the interview and article that readers found to be of particular value. Though it was not initially intended, our conversation revealed the need to move beyond a simplistic distinction between organizational consulting and organizational coaching. These strategies are often interwoven and must be treated in an even-handed manner. Just as we, as organizational coaches, often put down the work of our coaching colleagues by

over-simplifying their model and then criticizing it for being too simple, so we are inclined too often to over-simplify the processes of organizational consulting and then criticize these processes for being too simplistic. As the field of organizational coaching matures, it is critical that the interactions between practitioners in this emerging field and practitioners in closely related fields (such as organization development, career counseling, leadership and management development, life planning and business coaching) be thoughtful and appreciative—acknowledging and embracing the complexity and subtlety of each field.

Mary Beth: Many people in the coaching field have defined differences between coaching and consulting that I think are misplaced, for example, that consultants give advice and coaches do not. That distinction is actually a simplistic way to describe the difference between expert consulting and process consulting. The expert consultant is a *content* expert who collects and analyzes a variety of data from the client and then gives to the client a specific recommendation for an action plan relative to the content.

On the other hand, process consultants are experts in how to *structure a process* that allows the client to collect, analyze, and create action plans around their own data. This does not mean that the consultant never offers their own thoughts or advice; it is just that the client remains the expert of their own experience and content and considers the consultant's input as one of many sources to stimulate the client to action.

Within this distinction between expert and process consulting, I see executive coaching as a subset of process consulting. Both process consultants and executive coaches are experts, not in content, but in a process to assist the client where the client is in charge of creating and implementing their action plan. Within this shared territory, one distinction I make between consulting and coaching to teams is that *consultants will many times facilitate the team meetings while coaches keep the facilitator reigns in the hands of the client*.

Bill: I find your distinction to be quite compelling. Ever since we conducted our original interview, I have found myself pondering the issue of ways in which organizational coaching and organizational consulting are similar and interdependent and ways in which they are different and complementary. I agree with you that many of us in the field of organizational coaching have been much too superficial in drawing distinctions between these two endeavors. We must now engage in a much more penetrating analysis of how they interrelate. Actually, I'm pleased to be able to report that the next issue of *IJCO* will address this very issue and am delighted that you will be helping to prepare one of the commentaries related to the major case study being presented in this next issue.

Good coaches pay attention to how the system of the leader and the team co-develop and what organizational diagnostic models could best be applied to their client's situation.

At this point, I would like to test out my understanding of the distinction you are drawing between organizational consulting and organizational coaching. During my own career, I have often done process consultation or team building with a group. I would consider these to be organizational consultation interventions. Using your distinction, I would be serving as an organizational coach if I were to assist a team leader or members of a team to conduct their own process consultation or if I helped a team leader or team members to plan for and perhaps debrief a team building session that they themselves conducted with their own team. In addition, I would assume that I might operate not only as a coach, but

also as a consultant, in helping the leader or team members prepare for their team intervention (be it process consultation or team building), by helping them become increasingly aware of the dynamics operating in their team, as well as become increasingly clear about the challenges facing their team and desired outcomes from the work they will be doing with the team. Are the strategies I have identified aligned with your own concepts of the distinctions between and interrelationships among organizational coaching and organizational consulting?

Mary Beth: Getting at the core of it, I think that process consultants often structure the design and agenda of a team's meeting and then facilitate the team through that structure. When I do team coaching, the leader structures and designs their own meeting regarding their business or team building agenda. The leader or a member of the team facilitates the meeting and I actively coach the leader and the team during the meeting to stay on track with their goals (both business and work relationship goals). Before they go into the meeting, I act as their process consultant to give input on their design, for example, how it might be tweaked to incorporate current theory that involves how groups best develop. I also act as a coach who has process consultant skills when I structure and facilitate the beginning and ending of the coached meetings for the purpose of capturing as much of the coached learnings as possible for the participants, e.g., setting up learning partnerships for the team meeting beforehand and debriefing those learnings at the end of the meeting.

Consulting and coaching are complementary skills that reinforce each other for a more powerful intervention with the client. Good consultants know that they have to pay attention to the functioning of the leader and spend time developing the executive's leadership skills, or the process intervention will not be sustained. Good coaches pay attention to how the system of the leader and the team co-develop and what organizational diagnostic models could best be applied to their client's situation.

Bill, where have you continued to develop any of the ideas that were in our original article?

Bill: Thanks for asking. I am in the midst of completing a new edition of my book on coaching, in which I take the appreciative approach that I describe during the interview. This new edition (*Organizational Coaching: An Appreciative Perspective*) incorporates strategies for not only executive coaching, but also performance coaching and alignment coaching. I believe that any effective organizational coach must ultimately be able to make use of strategies and tools that influence their client's behavior (performance), decision-making processes (executive) and underlying values and aspirations (alignment).

What about your own work since our interview? What are you now working on?

Mary Beth: I want to first say that I'm glad to see that you have fully incorporated the distinctions in coaching that you articulate so clearly into your 2nd edition. I have expanded many of the ideas of my book, *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart* into a new 2nd edition. The changes relate to many of the areas covered in our first article. Regarding tying behavioral change to bottom line results, in the second edition I've added the Three Key Factors model to the contracting phase of executive coaching, along with an additional chapter on calculating the return on investment (ROI) of executive coaching. I place the live-action team coaching

within a larger sequence of the developmental phases of executive coaching. There are also more specific methods coaches can use to help clients identify and shift the co-created patterns they develop with their teams.

Bill: It looks like I have some more reading to do – and I thought at my age I didn't have to learn anything new!

Mary Beth: That's what I like and respect so much about you, Bill – your spirited curiosity that creatively continues to cultivate our professional field.

Bill: And what I like and respect about you, Mary Beth—you keep provoking my curiosity and desire to learn about the kind of systemic and masterful coaching that a few senior coaches like you provide. I'm optimistic about the future of this field, knowing that you continue to offer executive coaching services.

Mary Beth O'Neill, M.A.

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Mary Beth O'Neill is an executive coach, leadership consultant, author, and leader of the Executive Coach Training Seminar Series. She has worked with executives and their teams for 20 years. Her specialty is live team coaching which encourages individual initiative and leadership from a systemic perspective in order to achieve breakthrough business results. The second edition of her book, *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart*, will be published July 2007 by Jossey-Bass.

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Bill Bergquist conducts organizational coaching in various locations around the world, but spends much more time writing about coaching, organizational culture, and profound personal and organizational changes, and assisting The Professional School of Psychology, where he serves as president, in its transition to a unique tutorial model of graduate education. Bill also serves as co-executive editor of *IJCO* and as Dean of Symposia for the International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations (ICCO).

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