

Executive Coaching and Change Management Paradoxes

Paradoxes in Executive coaching, leadership, and change management

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Do not read this sentence.

Kin to the above opening sentence of this article, paradoxes are illogical double binds. One indeed has to read the above sentence to become aware that one should not read it. Many similar paradoxical statements have a linguistic structure that rests in perceived contradiction with the content it proposes. "Be spontaneous", for instance, is a linguistic imperative that paradoxically orders a subject to ignore the order. Indeed, how can one really be spontaneous when following an order to be so? What does one need to do to appear to be spontaneous? This imperative example illustrates that it is impossible to coherently or congruently submit to paradoxical imperatives or equivalent paradoxical requests.

When people attempt to obey a paradoxical imperative or answer a paradoxical request, they often find themselves stuck within a form of fundamental contradiction. Damned if you do and damned if you don't. Consequently, when one is caught in a paradoxical situation, one usually feels a form of confusion that may ultimately lead to paralysis. To give a few common examples, consider the following phrases:

- 'I'd really like you to buy me flowers without my asking'.
- "Never say never."
- "Setting limits is out of bounds."
- "You need to get a firm hold on your control issues"
- "It would really make me happy if you did exactly what you pleased".
- "Be responsible."
- "I'm learning to be myself".
- Etc.

At one point or another, we have all faced some variations of these and other logical or relational paradoxes, and at other times we all have unwittingly fallen into the trap of establishing or uttering them to others.

More complex than simple imperatives or requests, more binding than simple contradictions, paradoxical situations will often cause surprise, misunderstandings, confusion or even despair. Similar to the theme developed in the bestseller "Catch 22", paradoxes are unfortunately very common in everyday personal and professional lives. They have been around for centuries.

Going back to Greek mythology for example, Hermes is the patron of communication and travelers. Paradoxically, he also represents cunning abilities, being the god of theft and lies. That makes him the patron of thieves who rob travelers and of orators and peddlers who don't always speak the truth. Guide to the souls of the dead, Hermes is also the only god able to visit both heaven and hell and return safely. He is considered to be the god of transformation, protector of alchemists during the middle Ages, and the god of health, patron of medicine. Hermes was Mercury for the Romans, generally referred to as the messenger god. Unsurprisingly, paradoxes are attributed to Hermes who also inspired the oracle of Delphi, known to speak in riddles. No doubt, this illustrates how communication and paradoxes have long been related.

One can even argue that any communication is paradoxical by nature. Communication may create relationship and allow for interfacing, but whenever any communication informs, it also hides as much as it shares, if not more, by simple omission. Communicating on any chosen subject is indeed a choice that gives selected information much more importance than unlimited other potential input. Our selection as to what we choose to communicate and what we choose to ignore or keep silent is at best totally arbitrary. Consequently, all communication very simply lies, both by exaggeration and by omission.

We can conclude that simply because the nature of communication is paradoxical, paradoxes are inherent to any situation that involves communication. This leads to the focal point of this article, centered on the presence of paradoxes in coaching. When practicing executive coaching, personal life coaching, professional coaching or team coaching with a systemic perspective, coaches will indeed rapidly become conscious that:

- They are regularly facing clients that may be stuck in wide a variety of personal and professional paradoxes,
- They are regularly and unwittingly participating in numerous paradoxes inherent to the coaching profession.
- They can regularly also use a number of paradoxical strategies and tools to successfully accompany their clients while these solve their problems or achieve their ambitions.

Perceiving paradoxes, dealing with paradoxes and using paradoxical approaches are all inherent elements of any systemic approach, and that includes systemic coaching.

Consequently, systemic coaches do not necessarily try to avoid or eliminate the existence of paradoxes from their lives or from their relationships with clients. Systemic coaching actually embraces paradoxes, assumes complexity and accepts confusion and all forms of temporary chaos. All these are useful and necessary elements of life and creative transformation. Consequently, learning to live with paradoxes and use paradoxical situations is a necessary coaching skill. It is central when helping clients achieve greater understanding, when accompanying changes in perspective and when witnessing their discovery of fundamentally new solutions.

The text below proposes to explore three perspectives or dimensions in which paradoxes are often present in coaching.

- First, it is necessary to admit to the numerous implicit paradoxes that can be found within the coaching profession itself.

Coaching is indeed very a paradoxical art. It is often perceived to be quite baffling by all its implicit contradictions. A reflection on the many paradoxes inherent to the coaching profession will serve as an introduction to this article.

- The second section of this text presents a number of reflections on the paradoxical dimensions of some major recurring leadership, management and executive themes.

Be sure that beyond executive coaching, some of these paradoxical themes are implicit to some basic or existential questions that pertain to human and professional life in general. This section will include such paradoxical issues as those inherent to time management, to motivation, to empowerment, to decision-making, etc. These can be considered as existential themes and so are often encountered in executive coaching, life coaching, team or organization coaching, etc.

- Further on, the third section of this article will present a number of paradoxical strategies and tools that can be used by those systemic coaches who wish to accompany clients by embracing complexity and work with the more synchronic dimensions of systemic coaching.

The latter part of this article will therefore offer practical options to those have a strong affinity with systemic coaching and who wish to tap into the powerful effectiveness of working with and beyond limits suggested by apparent paradoxes.

THE INHERENT SYSTEMIC PARADOXES OF COACHING

Coaching professionals often declare that they do not have any specific intentions concerning the content of client goals or results. In order to fully respect client autonomy and responsibility this fundamentally receptive and non-directive coach posture is indeed foundational to any true professional life coaching or executive coaching process. This essential coaching posture ensures the true respect of client original autonomy, identity, goals and ambitions. To be sure, affirmations concerning this essential coach posture very often assert it as one of the central and most original definitions of the coaching profession.

Suppose, however, that we were to take this assertion to its paradoxical limit. What if a specific client's objective was not to develop any form of autonomy nor assume any form of personal responsibility? How can a coach accompany, for example, a client that would want to develop a profound acceptance of their capacity to stay or become totally dependent on others? What can a coach do with a client who would want to design efficient strategies and action plans to successfully implement personal and professional relationships based on dependency to their environment? This hypothesis may sound extremely unlikely, but the question can help underline some of the fundamental paradoxes of coaching, that on coaching's underlying values.

The WASP Paradox of Coaching

It is important for coaches to be aware that the coaching profession fundamentally rests within a specific Western frame of reference. This occidental paradigm assumes that developing client independence, personal freedom, autonomy and individual responsibility are obvious client aspirations and priorities, and assumes these are intercultural and apply worldwide. Indeed, a specific number of personal and professional objectives are believed to be what life coaching and executive coaching clients fundamentally want to develop. Should clients not accept these prerequisites at some point or another in the course of their coaching process, those persons or systems will invariably be considered as inappropriate for coaching.

The foundational coaching value favoring personal autonomy can be considered to be a major western culture bias implicit to the profession. Indeed, we first need to own that this and other profoundly WASP or White, Anglo Saxon and Protestant values are implicit to the context and definitions of the coaching profession. This in itself is not really news. The existence of the WASP value system as a foundation to coaching is just in blatant paradoxical contradiction to the statement that coaching does not have any intention on client goals or ambitions.

- **Caution:** The paradoxical truth is that many coaches do not attempt to bend or influence client goals so long as these clients accept to adapt to the fundamental goals of coaching that foster the development of client individual autonomy and responsibility.

Within the coaching value system, all individual or collective client demands that will attempt to minimize personal autonomy and subordinate it to

scientific statistics, to luck or to chance, subdue it to the presence of deities, first relate it to the priorities of collectivist political environments, ultimately submit it to the responsibility of family and tribal or other social systems need to be considered as profoundly inappropriate for true professional coaching.

Consequently, to be appropriately coached, a client must first "freely" espouse the Western WASP frame of reference and its preference for individual autonomy. Taking this paradox into consideration, coaching may be just another very subtle western, Anglo Saxon propaganda scheme designed to spread individualist values and corresponding behaviors measured against personal results at the expense of other possibly older, wiser and more sustainable collective paradigms

In this light, it is not surprising to observe that worldwide the large majority of coaching contracts take place in one-on-one coach-client relationships rather than to systems, and cater to leaders and managers rather than to collective collaborative situations. This may explain the difficulties raised by a host of triangular contracts where collective interests collide head-on with personal challenges. Comparatively, a very small minority of coaching contracts truly forgets the focus on individuals in order to accompany collective settings, for the benefit of teams, groups or organizations. In effect, truly systemic coaching endeavors are the exception rather than the rule.

Often, in fact, the WASP coaching paradox is confirmed when implementing team coaching or organizational coaching. For many coaches for example, it is hardly conceivable that a coaching process can be implemented to accompany an organization that would want to limit empowerment, restrict individual initiative and curb the scope of personal autonomy in order to privilege collective systems such as teams and organizations. Indeed, whenever team coaching and organizational coaching is deployed in organizations, all the concerned players first need to very clearly announce that the main coaching process objective is to develop more empowerment, more individual responsibility, more personal autonomy, more pro-activity, wider delegation, etc.

The WASP Counter-Paradox of Coaching

The WASP Coaching Paradox in non-Western Environments

The paradox of coaching fields

Whenever registering to attend national and international professional conferences that cater to the needs of beginning and confirmed coaches, these will very often be asked if they are more interested with life coaching or corporate coaching, team coaching, existential coaching, executive coaching, organizational coaching, spiritual family coaching, etc. The list can be as long as the difference between some of the items can sometimes be difficult to perceive.

Whenever potential coaches decide to train to become proficient in the field, they will often be quite surprised by the number of coaching schools that claim to offer very different specialized training on exclusive tools, methodologies and procedures that promise their students a very successful future in relatively specialized coaching areas.

Whenever beginning coaches consider that they are ready to set up shop and find prospective clients, one of their first difficult decisions is to try and define their niche, or specialty, or marketing target. Should indeed, one specialize in sales coaching or career coaching, or retirement coaching, or coaching writers, actors, doctors or lawyers?

- **Caution:** Paradoxically, coaching is defined as a process that is not focused on the content of client's issue or ambition. In short, coaching accompanies people in succeeding whatever quest they may choose.

Allegedly indeed, coaching is not an expert approach. Professionals in the field repeat that statement as often as they would utter a religious mantra. That should mean that coaches would not develop significantly specialized strategies depending on the profile of their clients and the content of the issues and concerns they may initially put forth. If a prospective client happens to be a successful pharmaceutical company CEO, or an entrepreneurial mother, or a middle aged teen fully immersed in personal existential questions provoked a mid-life crisis, or a healing soul who just went through a major life-questioning health alert, coaching is always coaching. Ideally, indeed, coaches do not change anything depending on apparent client concerns.

- **Example:** In the above range of possible client issues, note that all of the issues could in fact concern one same client and should ideally be accompanied by the same coach.

In fact, no matter the possible range of issues a specific client may present to a coaching context, all of that client's issues often present resonating qualities and echoing patterns. Whenever facing one same client's family, professional, existential and physical concerns at one point in time, systemic coaches focus their attentive presence to accompany whatever underlying patterns of meaning and behaviors will be common to all these apparently different areas of expression.

So coaching is not focused on the content of the current concrete concerns through which clients may express their beliefs, ideals, ambitions, strategies behavioral patterns, successes and doubts. Coaches are focused on effectively accompanying clients while these dig deeper in their surface issues to discover their underlying themes and patterns. This process will invariably lead clients to face more fundamental life themes and synchronic patterns, issues, and forms. Clients are then accompanied to design the action plans that will help them come to terms with what they know they need to do with their own personal and professional futures.

To be sure, depending on a specific coach's personal and professional experience, adaptability, self-confidence, ability to trust intrinsic client potential to develop, etc. different personal choices may be defined. These may be formulated as a choice to work with some client profiles and not others, in some fields and not others, to accompany some types of issues and not others. These are personal or marketing choices. These personal choices, however, do not define or redefine coaching as a profession, as a specific professional posture, or as an accompanying process that does not intervene in the content of client issues and quests.

Unfortunately, the much publicized overwhelming range of fields, specialties, confidential tools and exclusive procedures attributed to coaching does not help the public at large understand that these in fact are not specific to coaching.

The Paradox of Selling Coaching

Another coaching paradox is implicit in the statement that coaches do not get too involved with the content of client issues nor get too involved with the content of the solutions clients may develop in the course of a coaching process. In coaching schools and professional organizations that offer professional coach exams and validation processes, it is even considered a fundamental coaching mistake when budding executive and life coaches get overly focused in the content of client issues, or when they inadvertently offer solutions to help clients achieve their goals and ambitions.

Indeed in coaching, all potential clients are considered to have their intrinsic intelligence and are recognized to know their own context far better than anyone else. Coaching clients are to be considered the most appropriate persons most capable of finding the most appropriate means and solutions to meet their goals and solve their problems. Professional coaches consequently need to learn how to limit themselves to be active witnesses to their client problem-solving and development quests. Furthermore, clients are probably the most motivated persons to solve the problems and achieve the goals they have defined. As stated in the WASP paradox of coaching, this frame of reference centered on enabling client power and responsibility is foundational in any coaching process.

This paradigm becomes obvious when one observes that master coaches practice minimalism to the point of becoming almost transparent in the coaching process. Their ideal is to let the client expand within as much of the available coaching space as possible. Indeed, it is often considered and measured that the better a coach becomes in developing their professional mastery, the less they seem to be doing anything at all to help their client proceed towards their successes.

On the other end of the spectrum, it is often observed that beginning coaches are so zealously contributing to their client progress that their overactive and directing behavior is considered to be a fault. Too much coach participation and verbal presence within the client dialogue first needs to be seriously limited in order to become a masterful professional coach. Consequently in masterful coaching, less intervention is more and more is less. This is so true that one of the most important dimensions of the learning process for a coach to become a true professional is the need to unlearn a host of actively helpful behaviors that would normally be considered useful or even necessary by any expert deploying energy to help solve a client issue or help achieve a client goal.

As a consequence, the coach-selling paradox will surface very early when beginning coaches first meet potential clients. This paradox will indeed appear whenever these attempt to sell coaching as a solution that can help clients solve their problems or achieve their goals. Consider the following questions:

- How can one both say that clients intrinsically have their own solutions, and that they need coaching in order to find their solutions?
- How can a coach push coaching in a sales pitch, when coaching essentially claims never to push anything onto their clients?

Many clients refuse to engage in a coaching process because they are confused by the paradoxical coaching proposal that claims that coaching does not propose any concrete solution, *and* that the solution for the client is partake in a coaching process.

- **Caution:** Clients may indeed intuitively feel an implicit paradox by which they are both offered coaching as a solution to their problems and being told that coaching offers no solutions to their problems. If coaching is a solution that offers no solutions, then why is a coach offering it as a very useful solution? This paradox is particularly obvious when it is compared to an expert approach that clearly offers solutions.

To a number of beginning professionals in the executive and life-coaching field, getting out of the coach-selling paradox is quite a mind bender. The same mental paralysis goes for numerous clients who do not understand what exactly is being offered to them. When someone is selling them a coaching process as a solution that offers no solutions, they are rightfully bewildered. And they feel even more insulted when they subtly perceive that they are brushed away by coaches as people who just aren't ready for coaching.

The Paradox of Selling Coaching Tools

This paradox may even gain in intensity when clients hear prospecting coaches partake in sales presentations of what they claim are very effective theories such as the GROW model, the Emotional intelligence approach, Solution Focused coaching, Process Communication and other complex diagnostic tools such as MBTI inventories and Process Communication tests.

Those strategies and tools are all presented as specific perspectives that rest on theoretical models that deliver coaching that paradoxically does not propose any specific perspective and that does not propose any particular tools. Why indeed sell any tool or any theory if coaching essentially gives all the coaching space to clients in order to offer them an arena in which they can test, experiment and grow, at their own pace and in their own way, in order to develop their own new perspectives?

Clients are often puzzled when presented specific coach tools, intuitively understanding that under the guise of coaching, they are being sold the idea

that they need to learn a complex model to solve their issue, by a coach who pretends that they know all they need to know to solve their issue. So why should clients learn models to better solve their issues if they know all they need to know in order to solve their issues?

- **Caution:** The coach-selling paradox magically disappears when professional coaches gradually realize that coaching is not something they do to their clients, but that coaching has become the way they are with their clients.

Paradoxically, the best way to sell coaching is not to sell coaching but to immediately do coaching, or immediately be a coach with the present prospect, client or with whoever is prescribing a potential client. Consequently, when anyone asks a coach what coaching is or what a coach can do, the answer should invariably follow the following two steps:

- First state that coaching takes many forms, depending on client personal ambitions or goals,
- Then address the person by asking: "What, for instance, could be an ambition or goal that would motivate *you* to call on a coach?"

In effect, this strategic coaching response is the beginning of a coaching dialogue, and needs to be immediately followed with the appropriate coaching posture presence and tools, focused on creating the growing environment for the person who asked the question. In this dialogue, not once does the coach explain anything about coaching nor present any model. At once the coach treats their interviewer as a potential client who can start an internal dialogue in order to explore and discover their own answers.

In this way, and by developing variations of this strategy, experienced coaches very paradoxically sell coaching by never really mentioning coaching nor any other tool, during the initial prospect-client meetings. They just immediately create a coaching context with whoever is present, a prescriber, a prospect or a new opportune acquaintance. That strategy serves to immediately offer a growth environment by which both the prospect and the coach start to share the benefits of an active coaching context and rapidly experience what this context can help achieve. More precise administrative and contract concerns are only treated after the foundation of a coaching relationship is created. Why indeed talk about coaching when a coaching relationship can be immediately implemented?

The Paradox of Coach Focus on Client Objectives

The Paradox of Passivity Through Coaching

Again, the coaching profession often and rightfully asserts that their clients know what their issues are and intuitively know what to decide in order to successfully implement their own success strategies. In this perspective, one could conclude that if clients fundamentally know what they need to do, they either do not really need support through coaching or:

- They may not know how to implement their changes in terms of strategies or means, or
- They may feel uncomfortable with undertaking immediate action considering that the change is very difficult.

In this case, a lengthy coaching process could be an excellent way to temporize, postpone and justify inaction and passivity. Indeed, when one wants to put off necessary action, why not get a coach and work on the issue for a number of months? If this is the real function of coaching, it would reinforce the idea that quick, solution-focused coaching is not really appropriate for clients who fundamentally come to coaches in order to buy time. For temporizing clients, a coaching process needs to take more than ample time, in order to provide the expected leisure allowed by a long drawn-out relationship, spread out at least over a period of several months if not over a full year.

- **Caution:** Whenever an executive or leadership team wishes to postpone an obviously necessary corporate decision and its corresponding action plan, they generally design a lengthy preliminary study, or call on an internationally recognized external expert. Or a coach.

All these processes could well be perceived as excellent postponing strategies, or socially acceptable passive behaviors that basically allow for immediate inaction. "We're working on it, we called on a coach" is the excellent paradoxical and politically correct excuse when one wants to avoid taking immediate responsibility for action.

In this perspective, many huge consulting organizations have specialized in delivering very detailed and time consuming, comprehensive, invariably expensive preliminary studies. These usually provide their client organizations what they always knew they needed to decide and implement. This same postponing strategy could be perceived as an underlying and paradoxical function of life and executive coaching. If clients are fundamentally capable of solving their own issues and achieving their own goals, coaching fundamentally serves to postpone making these decisions and implementing the corresponding actions.

- **Example:** A desperate man wanted to call on coach to help him deal with a quagmire that allegedly made his life totally miserable with emotional complexity. Alternately living with his wife and his mistress, he presented himself as deeply guilt-ridden and emotionally confused.

He incidentally also said that he was seeing a therapist for the same reason, and that he was not really satisfied with any observable progress. He consequently also wanted to be coached so as to achieve quicker, more satisfactory results. Interestingly, however, the potential client never mentioned that his goal was to achieve or implement any form of decision to commit to one or the other personal relationship, and thereby simplify his private life.

One could also interpret that by calling on a coach while simultaneously consulting a therapist, the client was unconsciously looking to establish the

same type of relational triangle with the coach taking the role of his mistress. In the event that the coach accepted to take this client on, the latter would be in an excellent position to buy enough time to continue playing victim within the proverbial triangular relationships that he had no apparent intention to change. This example can quite well illustrate that if one has no motivation to immediately do what is obviously necessary, to get an external expert - why not a coach - is an excellent socially and politically correct way to put everything on hold and buy time.

Now, the fact that the “passivity-through-coaching-paradox” may exist is not necessarily a difficulty for systemic coaches. Quite often, counter-paradoxes can be strategically used to accelerate the way to client resolution and success. Systemic work can be focused on clarifying coaching contracts and can help clients move on much more rapidly to successfully achieve sustainable goals. One easy principle can be laid down, completely in keeping with the fundamental axioms of coaching: Clients are always a step ahead of the reason for which they announce a coaching need.

Examples:

- When clients say they need coaching to make a decision, they have already decided what they really want to do. They may just be uneasy about the consequences of their decision.
- When clients say they need coaching to design an action plan, they already know what they need to implement. They are just uneasy about some of the practical aspects such as finding some of the means.

Coaching clients are generally much more capable than they would like to admit to themselves. They generally know their issues. They often also know the solutions to their issues. They even know how to implement their best necessary solutions. But they often need a supportive witness in the form of a coach just to get the courage to admit everything they know, and to start moving.

- **Example:** A company owner and CEO called on a coach saying that he had a difficult decision to make concerning her role in her company. She felt that she was being dragged down into too many operational details and that this process was keeping her from truly developing her intrinsic potential. She wanted more personal time for her family, time to teach, time to become more strategic both within her company and with her private life.

She was hesitating between simply folding or selling her organization in order to immediately get back her freedom on the one hand, or totally committing her time to completely reorganize the company in order to make it much more autonomous, on the other. So she called on a coach to get support towards making her decision.

To this client's surprise, her coach first said that four one-hour sessions would be more than sufficient. The client was first dubious. When this was finally agreed, the coach then simply asked if he could share a personal perception. He then told the client that her decision obviously seemed to be already made and that she just seemed uncomfortable with the consequences she and her company employees may have to face.

With a knowing and liberating smile, the client almost immediately agreed. She felt relieved, understood and validated to move on. Within the first two coaching sessions, she efficiently designed a thorough plan to re-organize her company and present the change it to her staff. The new structure was conceived to liberate more than half her personal time. To show her determination, she also told her staff that if they didn't make the new system work within a month, she would sell the company. They made it work.

- **Caution:** If coaches truly believe that some of their clients are really smart and capable, how many hours and sessions of coaching do these clients really need in order to achieve their goals?

Conversely, how many coaches are convinced that a good coaching process needs to be spread over a good number of months and include a consequential number of meetings or sessions? More often than not, these coaches need to unroll their procedures, thereby helping the client buy time, before settling down to implement obvious action plans.

- **Caution:** One very experienced master coach once said that the two most effective coaching sessions were the first and the last. To this professional, all other intermediate coaching sessions could be considered superfluous.

For some coaches of course, the financial math doesn't add up. If effectively coaching a client only takes one or two sessions at most, how can a professional expect to make a living? It is more effective to sell at least ten to twenty coaching sessions per client to ensure minimum income. Right? Of course, these more traditional coaches do not understand that selling very effective, short coaching processes may give access to much higher levels of coaching clients, to whom time is the very expensive commodity. To be sure, the shorter and the more effective the coaching process, the more expensive it may be.

Of course, all the above considerations do not take into account fundamentally strategic coaching processes that may be structured around one meeting every three to six months, in order to accompany a person throughout a longer-term life or career-developmental process. Some clients, for example, may need to have a coach to accompany deeper quests, meeting with their coach once every six months, over a number of years. This fundamentally existential type of coaching raises a number of very different questions.

The Paradox of Leadership Coaching

The Paradox of Change Management

Common sense would have it that the most effective way to implement change in organizations is to start with the organization's leader. To increase the effectiveness of such a process by enlarging it to a group, one will generally consider piloting change through a company's executive team. As a matter of fact, most of the time, note that top leadership takes the responsibility of change management, considering that the subject is of utmost

strategic importance. Consequently, separately or together, CEOs and the executive teams that represent the decision-making center of most organizations also generally pilot all significant organizational evolution. It is considered to be one of their major responsibilities.

Paradoxically, however, a systemic view on change management could indicate that this center of corporate decision-making may be the least competent entity to pilot organizational evolution and the most difficult place to start initiating any fundamental system change. Indeed, history seems to prove that to initiate any effective change in systems, anyone's best bet is to begin far from its control center, and if possible somewhere very near the concerned system's outer periphery.

- **Caution:** The function of a living cell's nucleus and more specifically of its DNA is to ensure stability and relatively controlled reproduction over generations. Consequently, the function of DNA is fundamentally homeostatic or conservative. The same can be said of most centralized functions of any system such as governments, heads of state, team leaders and parents in a family. Very paradoxically, that may in fact be exactly why they insist that they should be responsible to pilot change.

The first objective of any leadership is to maintain its leadership function for as long as possible. Preserving their decision-making power, securing their office and getting reelected or reinstated are most often their main priorities. Their next priority may oftentimes be to ensure that their offspring get a good head start to inherit their leadership post.

Several studies of major company executive teams seem to prove that most executive decisions seem to simply aim to increase the team members' wages, perks and comfort zone and secure their positions forever, albeit with sturdy parachutes, just in case. It has rarely been observed that governing bodies spontaneously implement any form of deep system change, unless they are put against the proverbial wall, highly pressured by their constituents or shareholders. Indeed, established autocrats and ruling parties just do not undertake fundamental revolutions.

- **Caution:** Paradoxically, the best way for an executive team and leader to control all possible organizational change is to announce that they in fact manage change. Being in charge of change management is obviously the best strategy to control and ultimately limit novelty. Any wish for change will then be addressed to the change-managing center that can rapidly implement strategies to stifle or postpone innovation for as long as possible.

Professional coaches need to face the fact that most centrally driven innovation programs have very rarely been smashing successes. When they do achieve their goal, it is most often at a highly unreasonable cost in energy, time and money. Innovation succeeds best when it is taken out of the hands of leaders, and when its incubation period is sufficiently protected from headquarters until it is too late for the managing center to resist implementation.

- **Example:** A corporation very confidentially searched for a coach to accompany one of their recently hired executives that manifested obvious difficulties fitting into the renowned company culture. It turned out that the person had been hired precisely for her capacity to think out of the box and provoke pertinent change, a skill that had been demonstrated during her whole, very successful@ career.

That company knew it had to find the means to initiate important changes, but as soon as those means were acquired and integrated into the system leadership, well something had to be done to stifle it.

Consequently, whenever consultants and coaches are asked by centralized HR or top executives to implement change in corporate systems, they are generally asked to start in the worst organizational departments, divisions or units, where everyone knows that a successful outcome is less than likely to succeed. Alternately, coaches and consultants may also be asked to first present or test their approach within the executive team itself. That team will then prove to be most capable of annulling, resisting or postponing any ambitious organizational transformation program. The usual excuse to divert energy from strategic changes is that other shorter-term and very important priorities have suddenly surfaced. Change programs have to be put on the back burner. Executive centers are indeed the most political arenas in any organization, and even the subtlest change in central power equilibriums is perceived as dangerous or unacceptable.

As mentioned above, to implement change in systems, a much more strategic, indirect or peripheral approach is generally much less time consuming, and much more effective. Revolutions have always started away from capital cities, much closer to system external boundaries, in enlightened provinces and creative peripheries. To succeed, viral approaches have always been indirect, originating from sources out of the reach of the controlling head. As a matter of fact, viruses take over the body long before aiming for the head.

Consequently, corporate shareholders have long accepted the fact that to implement rapid change in organizations, the first step is to change the established CEO, replacing him or her with a new and very different, determined external leader. That new CEO will usually be met with strong internal resistance and will need to change the large majority of the established executive team members. Following these replacements, radical changes will need to be implemented within less than one hundred days.

- **Caution:** A year after this refreshing transformation, however, chances are that the new management system is slowly starting to become conservative, focusing its energy on ensuring its long term stability and managing to secure its comfort.

At most, two years after this type of major organizational overhaul, one can expect that the top management will start paying lip service to change management.

The Paradox of Resistance to Change

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Dealing with the Paradoxes of Coaching

Now the existence of paradoxes in the coaching profession does not mean that there is no hope for organizational change through an organizational coaching approach. As in other paradoxical situations, a clear understanding of complexity management and a strategic or systemic approach can work wonders. To be effective, much as team change needs to involve the whole concerned team, organizational change needs to completely involve the larger organization, from the start. Sustainable cultural change in systems has never been the work of one person alone, be that person be the most decided leader. In the same way, sustainable change in organizations cannot be decided and implemented by its leadership team alone.

- **Caution:** Successful organizational change concerns coaching work on a collective organizational level, immediately including large groups of over fifty key players, working together to permanently redefine organizational interface patterns. Leaders and their executive teams need to be involved in this systemic transformational process to succeed, but great care needs to be given to make sure they do not stifle it as soon as it starts being successful.

Consequently, the coaching profession can indeed be perceived as resting on a number of fundamental paradoxes. These are not to be perceived as contradictions or hurdles. Paradoxes simply reveal that coaching needs to fit into a much larger, more systemic, sustainable and inclusive paradigm that embraces complexity. One clear element of complexity is that there often is as much - if not more - vested interest for leadership to limit change than there is for them to foster innovation. A clear understanding of the paradoxical positioning of professional coaching immediately opens doors to the need to embrace uncertainty, diversity, contradiction, tolerance and sometimes chaos in order to access the profoundly systemic nature of fundamentally transformational processes.

A clear perception of the above paradoxes inherent to the profession will also help coaches embrace their own personal and professional contradictions. That enlarged professional posture will allow professional systemic coaches to more appropriately accompany clients who are often no less confused within their deep contradictions, in their own quests. A systemic perspective of paradoxes will consequently provide coaches with the capacity to work with their own apparent complexity and accompany clients to find their own way through theirs.

When coaches fully accept or surrender to the paradoxical foundations of their own work, then they can open up to a whole different perspective of what to do and be as coaches. This will allow them to be able to embrace the other fundamental paradoxes inherent to the contexts in which many of their clients work and live. Some of these are introduced below.

SYSTEMIC ORGANIZATIONAL AND EXECUTIVE PARADOXES

As we present the list of paradoxes inherent to the coaching profession, it may become more and more obvious that specifically attributing some of these to the coaching profession may be only partially true, and sometimes unjust.

Indeed, coaches may sometimes sell coaching because that is what their clients expect if they were to initially meet. For a coach to temporarily adapt to some of their client paradoxical postponing strategies through a coaching process may in fact be an excellent first strategic step that will allow those same clients become aware that they already know what to do and how to do it.

In fact, whenever a relationship takes place between entities, one can often safely say that whatever characteristic or definition is attributed to one of the constitutive elements of the interface could also be attributed to all the other elements. In this way, a truly systemic approach would be much less affirmative in attributing paradoxical occurrences to the coaching profession itself or to the different environments in which they are privileged to unfold their skills.

Consequently the coach paradoxes presented in the text above and the organizational and executive paradoxes presented in the text below may well all equally concern both coach professionals and their chosen executive and organizational clients.

The Executive Paradox of Trust

The Executive Paradox of Time Management

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The Executive Paradox of Delegation and Empowerment

Delegation takes place in an organization when employees behave as if they were free. Indeed delegate originates from de legare, de-legature derived from set free or untie. The underlying principle is easy to comprehend: when freed from excessive constraints, employees take adapted, intelligent initiatives, assume appropriate responsibilities, and empower themselves to behave with proactive goal-focused efficiency. Autonomous people spontaneously analyze needs, make decisions, implement actions and inform their leaders and professional environment as to their progress towards designated goals.

Notice that the active roles of organizational leaders or managers have not been mentioned in the above definition of delegation. Delegation in systemic coaching is thereby defined from the bottom up, describing what freed people do. Delegation is not defined from the top down. Besides

getting out of the way, there is no need to list all that leaders need to do for others to assume their autonomy.

- **Example:** A CEO once asked to meet an executive coach. He had a very common problem. As he was a very dynamic and extremely controlling person, his exasperated executive team had strongly suggested that he get personal support to learn how to delegate.

In their first face to face meeting, the executive coach reformulated the CEO's motivation: _"So if I understand correctly, not only you have been totally responsible for everything in your organization, but now, on top of that, you are also going to be responsible to start changing it, in order to develop a more delegating management culture." The CEO suddenly seemed stunned, and stayed silent for a few minutes. Still stuck in the company's frame of reference, he could hardly understand the executive coach's comment.

What this CEO could not perceive is common within most leader-driven top-down organizational cultures. Indeed, when an organization has lived for years within the perspective that the leader is to be held responsible for everything, it follows that the leader needs to change that. These organizational cultures paradoxically also hold the firm belief that changing their top-down order of things must also rest on the leader's shoulders. For them, it follows that delegation is a leadership issue that must be handled by the leader.

The first executive coaching paradox in this common situation is that if leaders are to ensure that delegation does happen, they will continue to be held responsible for that change. Indeed, if leaders are held responsible for delegation, then they are still responsible, and therefore not delegating at all.

- **Caution:** The opposite position can just as well be argued. Leaders cannot be given the responsibility, or take the responsibility to delegate to employees. Their employees must instead learn to take their responsibilities away from the leader in order to provoke delegation, from the bottom up.

The delegation paradox reveals another one, however. As in the case of the above organization, when employees agree to ask their leader to delegate more, they are actually making their leader responsible for their own lack of initiatives. In effect, when employees ask for delegation from their leaders, they are actually giving their leaders the responsibility for their passive behavior. "Considering our controlling leader, we cannot take initiatives." That can be perceived as a very subtle and convenient for of upward delegation.

- **Caution:** Consequently, and paradoxically, the best way for employees to delegate upwards, to their leaders, is to ask the latter to delegate downwards, to their employees.

Delegation is kin to freedom, independence or liberty. If one does not want to assume one's freedom by taking it, sometimes by even fighting for it, then asking someone else for it can buy time and ensure comfort. Consequently, by passively asking someone else for their independence, some populations actually relinquish their liberty. This is what many employees do to their leaders, with the empowerment issue.

The executive coaching paradox of delegation is of the utmost importance in centralized environments and controlling organizations that have a model or heritage of strong centralized or autocratic leadership. The pervasive paradigm shared by all the members of these social systems is that leaders are responsible for practically all aspects of everyone's personal and professional lives, and that includes the responsibility to change this state of affairs. Paradoxically, that is kin to expecting a dictator to initiate a revolution.

The underlying comfortable and complementary passive attitude is that nobody else can change this state of affairs: only a top-down change can change a top-down system. Within this frame of reference, common employees and citizens firmly believe they cannot help change their leaders and have them become more participative. Paradoxically, these leaders also cannot change anything alone, when everyone expects them to be solely responsible for a major cultural change. One person will never be able to topple a thousand people's passivity. The system is stuck while everyone hopes for change. Now does that sound familiar?

In order to get out of the paradox, systemic coaches simply propose an inclusive context that can replace the either-or paradoxical perspective. The new question then becomes how to accompany leaders and their personnel together, in order to help them change their collective mindset? Delegation does not only giving employees more freedom. Delegation allows for more space for everyone, including for the leaders of top-down organizations, who are much too hands-on and need to become much more strategic.

- **Example:** The strategic executive coaching solution developed to accompany the above-cited CEO was to implement a collective system-oriented cultural change process within the immediate executive team and then including middle management echelons.

The first objective of this change process was to modify the quality of interfaces between the executive team members, including with their CEO. This allowed for a rapid increase of each individual's ability to take responsibilities and inform their local environment of all their personal and collective initiatives. This first team-coaching step was paradoxically focused on liberating the CEO. This type of contextual or cultural change first operated within the executive team of an organization is the first step towards implementing a cultural transformation within the larger system collectively lead by the executive team.

When executives within a system collectively take pertinent initiatives, assume responsibilities, and empower themselves to act appropriately, they collectively model new behavior for the rest of their organization. Then everyone begins to spontaneously analyze needs, make decisions, implement actions and inform their larger professional environment of their progress towards designated goals. Based on lower echelon risk taking and initiative this true delegation is made possible with executive coaching and executive team coaching. Unbinding the delegation paradox is very often the focus of systemic team coaching and systemic organization coaching. Of course, this is possible only in contexts where on all levels there exists sufficient motivation for change.

The Executive Paradox of Motivation

The Executive Paradox of Controls

The Executive Paradox of Decision-Making

PARADOXICAL COACHING TOOLS

The above text offered descriptions of coaching paradoxes and executive paradoxes has included illustrations of a number of possible coaching attitudes, strategies and tools. These systemic tools and strategies aim to embrace paradoxes, use them or play with them in order to permit positive client resolution, growth and development. Much in the same way as Alexander the Great brandished his sword to slice through the Gordian knot, the best strategy to deal with paradoxical quagmires is also to cut right through them. In some cases, creativity, humor and powerful coaching questions and interventions serve this exact purpose. Sometimes, counter paradoxes will surface and be appropriately served by the systemic coach. They strategies jolt, surprise and unbalance clients. Some paradoxical tools may seem incomprehensible or confusing to clients because in fact, they offer to completely change client perspectives. That is precisely what helps them expand, deploy, think and feel out of their box.

The examples in the text above illustrate, however, that there are no general cures or tools that can be systematically applied to all paradoxical situations. Nor are there standard tools that will provoke equally satisfying results in apparently similar client situations. There are only categories of systemic coach responses and strategic questions that may occasionally provide coaches and clients a sudden, unexpected shared change of perspective.

Consequently, the object of the following text is to humbly provide examples derived from true coaching situations, which could serve as leads as to how to begin to formulate specific paradoxical responses to other client situations. At the risk of some repetition, a few more strategies and some categories of tools are listed below.

Prescribe the symptom

Paradoxical Time Management Permissions

Many coaches have the same time management issues as their clients. During coaching sessions and sequences, they are consequently often prone to feeling emotions and repeating behaviors related to their own patterns concerning time pressure. They may feel the obligation to help clients achieve measurable results in the course of a coaching session or sequence. Such time management pressure and related imperatives felt by practical coaches are generally passed on to their clients. In turn, these will feel obligated to speed up in order to produce for their coaches. They may develop action plans when they are in fact not clear about what they want. They even may tell their coaches that they are satisfied with coaching outcomes when in fact they are not. Shared coach and client time pressure does not help coaching clients at all. On a systemic level, the coach-induced time pressure felt by their clients will often also be intimately linked to the client issue at hand, reproducing the pressure felt by clients within their issue, within their work or home environment.

- **Example:** In her professional work environment, a client feels under intense time pressure to produce more and faster. She wishes to work on this time issue with her coach. In the course of the coaching work, the coach unknowingly and paradoxically reproduces the pattern by efficiently running the client pace and focus on results. The efficient session succeeds in producing an extensive list of action plans

During this coaching session, the coach is actually participating in the reproduction of the client's pressurized professional context and issue. Under pressure at work, she finds herself under pressure with her coach.

- Should this be a conscious coach strategy, and should the client really be committed to reducing pressure at work, there is a good chance she will start to resist to the equivalent coach pressure. The session can then become a playful arena for the client to experiment with new behaviors.
- If, however, the coach and client were unknowingly re-enacting the client work issue during the coaching session, this would just serve to reinforce the negative context, while superficially achieving a list of actions to stand for results. In this case the coaching results and relationship may come to a much less satisfactory outcome.

In the above type of situation, a paradoxical coaching approach would be for the coach to be very silent, laid back, and offer the client as much space and time as possible. Whenever the work slows down, the coach can validate and offer the client to truly take her time. The benefits of this counter-intuitive or paradoxical strategy will often be perceived in the longer term evolution of the coaching relationship, and in the way the client will learn to take more time for herself.

By proposing time-pressured clients to slow down and take their time when they are in fact doing it will have a boomerang effect. It will help coaches let go of their own internal time pressure instead of passing it on to the client.

When, however, very slow clients are told they can take their time, they paradoxically often choose to assume their own responsibility for their pacing, and may just take that opportunity to speed up. Formulating paradoxical time management permissions can also be an excellent strategy when coaching clients on medium and longer-term deadlines.

- **Example:** A client was rather unsure that he wanted to implement an important change in his personal life. He lengthily weighed numerous pros and cons and hesitated, seemingly waiting for a prod on the part of his coach. After letting him proceed for awhile, his coach offered the impression that the situation did not seem to call for any immediate decision, and stated that it seemed the client could put off acting on his issue for possibly, another year or two.

The client reaction was immediate: Oh no! I cannot wait for so long! I have to move quickly! From then on, the coaching process accelerated with the client first setting a deadline for action, then defining what he would do, and finally shortening his deadline again in order to act on her issue much sooner than initially expected.

In this coaching process, the tipping point took place when the coach very clearly indicated that taking any responsibility to push the client towards taking action or setting a deadline was just not an option. This was done by paradoxically giving the client more than ample space and time to postpone acting on the issue almost indefinitely. This left the client facing himself and his own commitment to getting his own affairs in order, without waiting for outside pressure.

In this case, the paradoxical intervention helped the client wake up with renewed energy. Again, note that voicing this strategy also has a boomerang effect on the coach. It reminds him or her, with the client as a witness, to just really let go on all temptations to take responsibility for client deadlines and results.

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Paradoxical Permissions Concerning Emotions

Counter-Paradoxical Support

Another paradoxical mind-bending coaching strategy consists in simply offering a supportive yes answer when clients ask themselves or ask their coaches closed alternative questions. These invariably offer an alternative within which clients demonstrate difficulty in making a satisfactory choice. Consider the following coaching situation:

- **Example:** Client issue: _ “I really don’t know if I should immediately meet with my boss to confront the situation and solve the problem, or if I should just wait a little longer for the situation to settle down and hope that the problem will resolve itself naturally.” Coach answer: _ “Yes”.

This type of unexpected positive response to a situation that calls for an answer that would support either of two options is quite counter-intuitive and may immediately cause client confusion and call for clarification. The client could rightfully immediately ask: _ “You are saying yes to which option?”

Linguistically, the positive coach response can indeed be understood at a number of different levels. The answer could just simply mean that yes I’m listening to you. Or yes, the question is well put. Or yes, this is a difficult choice. Or yes, I believe that the latter option is the obvious good one. Or yes, you have to answer this question for yourself. Or yes, neither option seems to be completely satisfactory. Etc.

In effect, the coach positive attitude and response does not answer to any specific direction. It is just a very general positive manifestation of coach listening, neutrally expressing open and non-directive presence to the client’s closed and binary questioning. In effect, the coach is just offering contrast by facing a closed client context with a totally open coaching stance. The resulting client confusion may paradoxically provoke a liberating change of perspective, offering the client an opening towards two new and different options: either to stay within the original either/or context OR to choose to move to a larger frame of reference where everything else may be possible.

This type of paradoxical supportive reaction may often help clients take some distance from either-or mental patterns and envision that there is no point in making a choice within an alternative when both options are felt to be unsatisfactory. Indeed many either-or client situations may be focused on surface issues that may just serve to help them avoid more much important underlying life questions. In the above situation, for example, the real question may be related to facing the longer-term quality of the relationship established between the client and her boss, or between the client and others in general.

Note that systematically demonstrating positive support is a known coach attitude. All communication tools that help coaches demonstrate and verbalize such a can-do approach to reinforce client work and achieve success will obviously be considered very useful. Also note that such a supportive attitude and corresponding communication tools can become even more powerful when used in a paradoxical context.

- **Example:** At the beginning of a coaching session, a very down client shares the pain of facing a very difficult personal life crisis situation. After listening for a while, the coach chooses to contrast with the client tone of voice and mind-set by frankly saying “This all sounds really wonderful!”.

Should the coaching relationship be well established, the client mind-set will rapidly change. The client will rapidly understand the proposed change of perspective and work on finding all the opportunities that may be offered by the apparent crisis. Rarely are major life changes initially perceived as positive growth opportunities. And rarely do we achieve negative outcomes when we truly choose to embrace these life changing growth opportunities. Should the coaching relationship still need to develop towards a stronger partnership, however the above client will probably react more defensively and ask “What is so wonderful?”.

Both of these reactions are actually very positive, illustrating exactly where the client frame of reference stands with relation to the issue. Is the client is still regretfully looking back at the past or is the client ready to look forward to build the future? The important point is for the coach to be very clear as to where he or she chooses to stand while accompanying this client work process.

This illustrates that the art and philosophy of coaching is in fact focused on allowing positive and constructive, future-oriented and practical client development. Using positive reinforcement to accompany any situation is consequently basic coaching 101. Positive reinforcement is only perceived to be paradoxical when clients expect coaches to join them in their negative perspective on what they insist should be defined as problems. What should be considered totally paradoxical is that many clients want to be reinforced in their perception that what looks like huge opportunities are actually to be taken as very negative experiences.

- **Example:** A coaching client was very sadly mourning the loss of a spouse. The systemic coach could paradoxically ask:
- What is the extraordinary present your spouse has given you, by passing away?
- What are five politically incorrect reasons do you and your deceased spouse both have, to really rejoice?
- Suppose that passing away is making space for the living to grow larger and stronger. What do you want to do with this new space you have just inherited?
- Etc.

The above questions are just illustrations to convey the message that in systemic coaching, no situation is positive or negative in itself. All life and death situations have the positive or negative emotional charge attributed by clients, often in keeping with their social and cultural context. These arbitrarily positive or negative emotional charges can either be reinforced or be transformed by more all-inclusive systemic coaches.

- **Caution:** Espousing a much larger systemic frame of reference, everything in life and death can be perceived as both positive and negative. This really depends on chosen perspectives.

Consequently, with a systemic point of view, a positive reaction to any negatively described situation is therefore not at all paradoxical. This could lead us towards the conclusion that perceived professional and personal paradoxes are actually simple indicators that our vision is tinted in black or white, good and bad, positive and negative. This is a very partial or limited vision of reality. Getting out of paradoxes may just consist in jumping to a meta-level of perception, embracing the larger context within which apparent paradoxes are defined. This systemic strategy will be developed further below.

PARADOXICAL SYNCHRONIC COACHING STRATEGIES

Considering our normal day-to-day perception, let us again remind and underline that systemic coaching is essentially a paradoxical art. Consequently, the most important paradoxical coaching strategy is inherent to the coaching relationship itself. This coaching strategy can very simply be resumed in the fundamentally humble, underdog, or low power position or posture assumed by the professional coach.

It is indeed regularly stipulated that coaches cannot ever know anything more than their clients about the details of their situation, about the nature of their ambitions or goals nor about the scope of their potentials. In effect, coaches are to consider themselves as fundamentally ignorant and powerless as far as the content of client issues is concerned. Even when considering the coaching process itself, coaches are to position themselves as completely dependent on their client's willingness to work for themselves in order to discover their own ambitions, to solve their own issues, to achieve their own goals, to develop their own beings.

Paradoxically this low, apparently powerless or unassuming coaching posture is precisely what provides coaches with an enormous and extremely effective capacity to accompany clients towards achieving their own extraordinary successes.

- **Caution:** In effect, by demonstrating humility and owning their lack of competency in directly dealing with the content of client issues, coaches paradoxically set the stage that will enable them to successfully accompany clients with very powerful paradoxical process tools.

To be sure, in a Western environment previously glutted with a host of consulting, support and help professions resting on a very large number of intellectual models and psychological approaches, the unassuming or low position offered by coaches is precisely what makes the coaching profession a total novelty. Among all the support professions, coaching is the first and only one to paradoxically claim that it cannot begin to offer solutions because coaches simply do not know more than their clients. How unassuming can you get?

In the Western context, and more precisely in the white, Anglo Saxon world, this low and unassuming posture is as unconvincing as the Catholic proposal that the last shall be the first or that the meek shall inherit the earth. Considering the more dominant financial Protestant ethic and the present worldwide context dominated by economic manipulating schemes, top-down military imperatives and other centralizing power and control strategies, the proposed coaching posture is truly counter intuitive. It can indeed seem very surprising that during the turn of the last century, the coaching profession has proven to be one of the fastest growing service offered to individuals and systems.

The Paradoxical Underdog Coaching Posture

Systemic Coaching Ethical Interventions

Systemic Coaching Resonance Interventions

[Link to an ACSTH \(ICF-validated\) 8-Day systemic-coaching training program in EUROPE](https://www.metastysteme-coaching.fr/english/executive-coaching-and-change-management-paradoxes/)

Creatively Participating in Client Patterns

Systemic coaches can also apply a number of paradoxical strategies within the coach-client relationship. Of course, the first step is to always recognize that coaches and clients recreate within their very relationship the specific interfacing patterns that happen to be the ones that clients say they want to modify or stop.

- **Example:** Very directive clients, who claim they need or want to change their preferred bossy interactive patterns in their relationships with others, will probably be directive with their coach and/or choose a coach who has directivity issues.

Likewise, a controlling client will try to control the coaching relationship and/or choose a coach with controlling issues. A client with time issues will demonstrate these time issues in the coaching process by being late, postponing, being impatient, or whatever they always do, and/or will choose a coach who has similar time issues. Analytical coaches will attract clients who can be over analytical in their coaching sessions. The same goes for emotional coaches and clients, angry coaches and clients, rebellious coaches and clients, entrepreneurial, fearful, shy, confident, etc. coaches and clients.

- **Caution:** The resonance between coaches and clients is twofold. On the one hand, as illustrated above, similar coach and client profiles will tend to attract each other. On the other hand, their very precise interactive and relational patterns will fit in order to enact the client issue within the coaching relationship.

Consequently, very precise observed relational and interactive patterns that are enacted within the coach-client will provide both the coach and the client very precise indicators of what both are doing separately, elsewhere in their lives, with other people, within similar themes and issues. In this way, the coach client relationship can be considered to be a very detailed hologram of the type of relationships and the patterns of their issues each enact elsewhere in their separate lives.

In all these cases, clients will naturally attempt to subtly establish with their coaches the same type of positive or unsatisfactory, successful or unproductive relationships they create elsewhere. The coach may very naturally and unwittingly partner with the client in the shared process, also quite a familiar one for the coach. This could be considered as a way for clients to take their coaches as hostages in their negative processes. And it can be considered a way for coaches to accept being taken as hostages, or to take clients as hostages, in order to learn how to grow out of their own limiting personal patterns. Indeed, the coach and the client are both equally co-responsible for their common interaction, themes and processes. But a systemic coach could also step out of the resonating situation, at a pin's drop.

- **Example:** Consider a client who initiates a discussion by saying "I have a question that may be stupid, but.." or "I have an idea, but I'm not sure it's interesting" or "This may be a dumb comment, but.... The coach could accept the invitation to be taken hostage and save the client by saying "of course not, go ahead, etc." Instead, the coach could immediately interrupt by saying: "Don't ask it" or "Don't share it".

Such a sudden and totally unexpected response may at first seem paradoxical, especially if the shared social context would rule it out as rude. It immediately reveals, however, that the client may be in the habit of quickly and subtly hooking others by positioning themselves in a strategic low position, by disqualifying themselves, by eliciting from their coach (and general environment) a complementary nurturing or saving position, etc.. The coach and environment may also be subtly asked to take on a savior role while the client manipulates by playing victim.

Obviously the interpretations could very well be right or wrong and the behavior is not necessarily conscious for any one specific client. No matter the context, however, a quick paradoxical coaching reaction will generally provoke surprise and laughter. Assuming that the coaching relationship is strong enough to support this type of unexpected coach response, the client will often restart or reboot their communication from the beginning, this time by assuming their full share of responsibility.

The above example illustrates again that apparently paradoxical coaching strategies may be often considered as shocking or impolite or politically incorrect. This may well be the case. The way these responses step out of standardized or expected communication patterns, however, is what makes them identical to jokes and humor. Usually, indeed, discrepant humor is positioned either as illogical, or impolite, or politically incorrect, or just plainly shocking. The process, however, is that on the one hand, the coach is just not accepting whatever relational and interactive pattern is offered by the client, and on the other hand, the coach is simultaneously offering another lighter, more direct and transparent, creative albeit unusual communication mode.

This is what has made humor a very powerful and uncontrollable political tool in most countries ruled by tyrants, mediocracy or bureaucracy. Interestingly, the whole philosophy of coaching is also to help clients enlarge or reshuffle their perspectives in order to develop autonomy and find innovative solutions. Novelty often lies just outside of the straightjacket of routine relationships and interfaces with our daily environments. Humor and paradoxes disrupt our comfort in conformity. Consequently, paradoxical coaching strategies actually break politically correct and safe interaction rules to create confusion, shock, jolt, and offer an alternative route. That is why paradoxical interventions help liberate both the coach and the client.

Integrating Coach Perceptions, Sensations, Feeling, Emotions, Intuitions,

Integrating Coach Mistakes

Who is the Coach and Who is the Client?

Within a systemic perspective, it can often be argued that coaches learn more from their clients than their clients learn from them. This is not just a figure of speech. Note that for professional coaches to immediately, successfully and spontaneously provide each specific client with a timely, powerful, appropriate and paradoxical reaction, they need to develop a truly creative, liberated type of presence. Only this truly systemic attitude or posture will allow coaches to tap into a new very different synchronic state of awareness.

Consequently, growing into becoming a synchronicity-wise systemic professional is quite a long-term and challenging professional and personal development process. Much more than an intellectual endeavor, this growth process is based on very practically developing with their client, on the long term. Only the development contexts provided by clients will allow systemic coaches to grow their awareness based on intuitions, physical sensations, feelings or sentiments and emotions. Only at the outcome of this long-term client-driven development process will coaches have truly learned to react freely and authentically to the underlying themes and patterns common to coach-client shared issues. One could almost state that client development is merely a by-product of their coach's lifelong professional quest in their own personal development. And any coach's long-term professional development process is very practically enacted by each one of that coach's clients.

- **Examples:** Some directive clients rapidly attempt to run the coaching context and relationship and may even take control of segments of the coach's life. Some powerless clients very quickly put themselves in a position to be helped, nurtured, if not carried by their coach. Some evasive clients will attempt to repeat their lack of commitment to themselves and others in their coaching relationship, or arrange for the coach to feel just as powerless. Some rebellious clients will resist everything, and get angry on a regular basis, sometimes managing to embark their coach on their anger trip. Intellectual clients will want to out-think their coaches, and those who do not delegate will hardly give coaches any place to actively partner with them.

Obviously, in all these cases, clients are also subtly offering their coaches opportunities to step out of their own behavioral limits. They can be considered as growth opportunities for coaches to step out of their own personal habits and professional constraints. Passive clients may be there just to challenge over-nurturing coaches. Over-bearing clients may be there just to test their coach's capacity to become more assertive. Non-committing clients could just be testing their coach's capacity to set firm limits and establish respectful peer relationships.

All these client behavior themes and each of their corresponding specific patterns are totally normal ways for clients to establish their relationships with everyone they meet, and that includes their interactions with their coaches. Coaches also paradoxically seem to attract clients that fit into their own coach limits, patterns and issues. Paradoxically, while they both do what they do, coaches and clients also want to change that exact way in which they establish their relationships.

On a systemic or synchronic level, everything about the coach-client partnership is totally congruent and naturally coherent. Clients paradoxically do with their coaches what they say they want to stop doing in order to help coaches develop strategies to get out of their own relational habits and interactive patterns. Again, this is precisely why, to be effective, paradoxical coaches often need to be aware of how they are similar or complementary to their clients. Then, at a pin's drop, coaches need to paradoxically use creative counter-paradoxes.

[Link to an ACSTH \(ICF-validated\) 3-Day systemic-coaching supervision program in EUROPE](#)

Integrating Environmental Participation

Enlarging on the principle of synchronic underlying pattern resonances, it is very useful for coaches to enlarge their awareness to include whatever the larger environment may have to offer. Indeed, synchronic pattern resonances are not limited to a closed circle that would just include the coach, the client, and their respective themes, issues and processes. Experimented systemic coaches are aware that their work with clients actively participate, fold into and unfold from a much larger environmental or universal field of patterns and themes. Taking this reality into account, it becomes very useful for coaches to take all environmental occurrences as possible significant elements of participation that can ultimately feed awareness and enlarge client perspectives.

- **Example:** Halfway in the course of an evening phone coaching session concerning a client working on a very important professional project, the intense conversation was suddenly disrupted by an urgency provoked the client's offspring. The client had to take a full ten minutes to deal with the issue, and then returned to resume her conversation.

Upon her return, the client formulated excuses to the coach with obvious anger in her voice. After letting her settle, the coach gently asked if she could offer a perception. Once the client acquiesced, the coach proposed that this interruption could in fact be a very interesting indicator that may also offer significant information concerning her issue. The question followed: "What major unexpected interruption occurred in the middle of your professional project? And if I understand correctly, that interruption wasted some of your precious project time and left you quite angered and disrupted." In fact, the pattern fit to a tee. This helped the client realize she had underestimated her employees' needs while she intensely focused on a project from which they felt excluded.

This example again illustrates that the integration of synchronic occurrences can be a very powerful tool for systemic coaches. More precisely, however, it illustrates that elements originating from an apparently unknowing environmental context can suddenly significantly intervene within a coaching process adding value in the form of information, meaning, and understanding.

Before, during and after coaching sessions, experienced systemic coaches are intimately aware of significant environmental occurrences that often seem to appear by chance to reveal important pattern characteristics in the theme of their client work and in form of the coach-client interaction. Of course, these are perceived as chance occurrences when observed with a classical cause and effect frame of reference. A whole new set of potentials

are made available, however, when coaches take the risk to operate with a more inclusive systemic perspective resting on a more global a-causal and synchronic paradigm.

To facilitate emerging information that could originate from environmental participation, it is often useful for systemic coaches to avoid all temptations to insist to have regular process, session or sequence procedures. Experienced systemic coaches that wish to develop their capacity to welcome significant synchronic participation are continuously open to working in a wide variety of ways, for very different lengths of time, in totally different locations and using different modes of communication. Routine and procedures tends to lower awareness and eliminate the possibility for emerging phenomena. It is much more useful for systemic coaches to partner with clients to allow for constant reconfigurations of all their shared coaching processes.

At the very least, witnessing how the coaching process and relationship adapts to different environments will always offer both the coach and the client a much larger amount of new insights as to the client frame of reference, behaviors, strategies, beliefs system, values, etc.

- **Example:** When a coach arrived in a CEO client office, the latter announced that an unexpected urgent meeting across town imposed that the coaching session be cancelled. The coach asked if the client was driving there, and then offered to accompany him and coach him on the way to his unexpected crisis meeting.

This unexpected trip with the client in the drivers seat gave the coach much more information about the client's strategies and behaviors under stress. All were very spontaneously displayed: his attitudes, his emotions, his type of interactions with the environment, his space and time management, etc. The twenty-minute trip was more informative to the coach than any of the previous two-hour sessions that were safely organized between the well-poised four walls of the CEO's office.

All clients and coaches grow and develop while interfacing with a much larger environment. All their issues, ambitions, goals, projects and endeavors come alive in an interaction with the surrounding universe. In this light and in order to allow the universe to participate in coaching sessions, it may be quite coherent to coach with open doors, in collective settings, in cafés and hotel lounges, in the park or at the airport. In all these different settings an more, systemic coaches will always marvel at the universe's capacity to volunteer very useful information. It will invariably be pertinent to the coach and client common quest.

Creative Counter Paradoxical Coaching Questions

Through an extensive use of paradoxical reflections, this text has attempted to offer a few original insights as to how to a practical systemic and synchronic frame of reference can offer to make coaching even more powerful profession. Many of the proposed strategies and tools have been presented as procedural techniques. This approach has been chosen to make the proposed approach as simple and as practical as possible for coaches who wish to rapidly begin experimenting in the field. Ultimately, however, the preferred professional truly systemic coaching approach is to let go of formal tools and continuously adopt, and then forget, the original ones that invariably choose to emerge in the course of coaching relationships, sessions and sequences.

- **Examples:** Consider a client hesitating what to choose among a number of options to solve a particularly difficult and emotional relationship issue.

The paradoxical coaching question could be "What type of solution could be the exact opposite of all your apparently different options?" or "All your options seem to have a common denominator that doesn't suit you. What is the appropriate denominator that you haven't considered, which you want to test?" or "The opposing options you are considering all seem to point in one same direction, so what is the useful direction you are not considering as an option?"

This is a list illustrating very confusing types of paradoxical questions. It is rather classical. Variations of each may be used to create chaos whenever very logical clients are stuck within an either-or situation, not wanting to choose either one of the very limiting opposing options. When this happens, clients have often carefully elaborated a logical dead end, and keep describing their quagmire, hoping to pull the coach into the limits of their sterile search.

When a systemic coach asks such a paradoxical question and creating mental confusion, chances are that the client will give the coach a blank or puzzled look and tell the coach "I don't understand". "Good!... Carry on, and you will." or "obviously!.... And?" or "of course, we don't!... So?" could be one the paradoxical and smiling coach answers, offering no other explanation. Client confusion is indeed useful, especially if their ideal is to constantly have control of everything and everyone by elaborating simple either-or quagmires.

All the above strategies concern the coach and client relationship. They offer original if not outlandish ways to interact with established clients. Some paradoxical questioning can also be given to whatever client issue is at hand, especially when clients become particularly stuck in their problem-solving processes.

- **Example:** Consider a mother and family going through a very difficult transitional period. During a coaching sequence, the mother shared that her younger daughter would spend her afternoons and weekends alone, tucked in her bed with the lights off. The mother, brothers and sisters had all tried to entice her out of that apparently regressive behavior, to no avail. The mother was desperate as what to do. The coach said "so you have all tried to do everything to get her out, to no avail, how can you do the opposite of all you've tried, but in a way that works?"

Of course the mother was first puzzled by the question, and expected the coach to spell it out. The coach just said that trying to pull her out obviously

didn't work, so what about testing an opposite strategy? After some thinking out of her motherly box, the client decided to ask her daughter if she could join her in her bed. She then proceeded to share napping afternoons with her daughter, everyday, for several hours. Two afternoons later, the daughter simply changed her behavior and started playing with her friends and siblings, as if nothing had ever happened.

This example of a client-homework paradoxical strategy consists in understanding that clients are often insisting on using the same strategies in the obvious direction in which they want results. If that direct strategy has proven to be completely counterproductive to achieving the results they want to achieve, then it makes no sense to insist deploying energy in that same direction. It would indeed seem useful to do the exact opposite, or what may at first seem as counter productive. If you can't fight it, join it.

Actually a naturally inclusive systemic coach would offer that you can never fight anything, unless you want to breed the conditions to continue more fighting.

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Concluding quote from Gary Zukav Physicist
The dancing Wu Li Masters, Bantam Books, 1979, page 310

"Reality" is what we take to be true. What we take to be true is what we believe. What we believe is based upon our perceptions. What we perceive depends upon what we look for. What we look for depends on what we think. What we think depends on what we perceive. What we perceive determines what we believe. What we believe determines what we take to be true. What we take to be true is our reality.

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[Humor: A gross example of a paradoxical strategy, using the client problem as a cure](#)