Coaching, A Systemic Profession

Why systemic Coaches are Not "Expert" Consultants

THE SYSTEMIC CONTEXT FOR THE COACHING PROFESSION

Notice that coaching has spread as a new profession in just under twenty years. From sports to business to family life and to existential and spiritual concerns, it is now actively supportive of almost all fields of personal and professional life. Considering its worldwide spread into many different realms, in such a short time span, and considering the fact that the profession is still in its early developmental stages, coaching can today be considered much more than a passing fad. It is nothing less than a lasting social and political statement.

Notice also that during those same last fifteen years, we have been living what can both be described as a "post industrial" *and* a "post humanist" era. Indeed today, our modern personal and collective concerns are neither primarily focused on the production and consumption of *products* nor principally concerned with enjoying more and more *services* centered on individual well-being and comfort. In the last fifteen years, the information revolution has been radically jolted our global social and professional context. It has also completely revisited communication by provoking a new capacity for immediate and global circulation of information. To a rapidly growing number of individuals, groups and organizations, the almost brutal intrusion of information technology into our lives is at the origin of a sudden and global growth of human consciousness. This relatively recent development is the most obvious cause *and* result of "globalization".

This worldwide technological and social revolution is accompanied by more than a billion individuals connected to internet. Their number is not only increasing by fifteen to twenty percent per year, but their average "connection time" and speed is increasing at an even faster rate. Available information on practically everything that is going on worldwide bypasses television and printed media and can instantly be at everyone's fingertips.

A completely new and still relatively undefined global social and political *context* is in the process of unfolding under our eyes. It rests on our new capacity for numeric if not "quantum" global information circulation that erases distances and permits, almost obliges, immediate connection through what was previously perceived as almost insurmountable time and distances barriers. The Berlin wall tumbles, the iron curtain rusts and dissolves, the "third world" represented by Africa, Asia and Latin America are knocking at our doors. We are daily confronted with fundamentally different values and behaviors, often radically opposed to the ones we only recently considered were « universal ».

Consequently, note that coaching appears concomitantly with world-wide globalization and new information age. Indeed, within a new technological, social and political context accompanied by an instant communication network and the explosion of the limits of our human awareness, *it so happens* that the profession of coaching appears and rapidly develops. *As if by chance*, coaching is primarily concerned with the accompaniment of person to person "conversation" and yearns to facilitate the "emergence of shared meaning". *As if by accident*, this profession is focused on the development of personal and collective dialogue within a resolutely "systemic" frame of reference tailored to take into account all our pertinent interfaces with our environment.

Of course, this last affirmation concerning the "systemic" dimension of coaching merits some explanation. A "systemic" approach is a conceptual frame of reference which explicitly takes into account the general influence of the environment on an entity such as a person, a family, a team, or an organization. A « systemic approach » therefore rests on a point of view which obstinately considers an apparently "independent" or "autonomous" entity as an integral and inseparable part of the "whole" or general environment within which it evolves. No man is an island. No more than anything else.

As a matter of fact, consider that today, all the theoretical approaches which concern human activity are developing in a "systemic" context by taking into account the complexity of *all* the interfaces any field entertains with the global environment. More and more, macro-economics, macro-climatology, macro-politics, macro-ecology, holistic medicine, etc. necessarily rest on integrated, inclusive or holistic theories and tools that structurally take into account the global complexity of each field, if not of the inter-connectivity of all fields.

Consequently, all modern sciences and professions must develop within a frame of reference resting on complexity, which integrating diverse applications of systems thinking, of cybernetics, of quantum mechanics as these are studied and developed by such researchers as Schroedinger, Bohm, Pauli, Dirac, etc. The same seems to be intimately true for coaching.

We do not wish to develop in this article profound nor complex theoretical and philosophical theories that are no doubt quite far from the normal day to day coaching profession. More simply, we wish to position the coaching profession within this new century's context and underline the field's convergence with what is becoming everyone's more profound political, social, personal and professional concerns.

A part, or a segment ?

We first need to understand the simple difference between what we perceive as a part, a parcel or piece of a whole and what we consider is a segment or a fragment of that same ensemble. A part such as part of a cake or a car is intrinsically tied to the whole to which the word refers. The notion of a part reveals that in order to understand the share or part [1] to which the word refers, one must necessarily relate back to the whole or to the ensemble that existed before the partition or separation.

When we look at human reality with a really systemic frame of reference, we therefore need to have a perception which includes or integrates the whole environment as a complete and inseparable system, even if we choose to observe or deal with only one of its elements. Consequently, a truly systemic approach erases all forms of separations or boundaries. These are simply considered as illusionary limits drawn between an observed entity and its context. A systemic approach is by definition all inclusive.

On the other hand, when we approach the world with a more mechanistic frame of reference characteristic of the industrial era, we are often tempted if not driven to isolate or remove an element from its integrate environment so as to observe it as such, without accepting or including any influence or interference from the surrounding context.

That scientific or expert approach helps us better observe, understand and maybe even modify almost « in vitro » an element in complete independence, without allowing the latter to receive any outside influence, one way or the other. This approach automatically provokes a fragmented or objective point of view which pays little or no attention to the complex external interactions between the arbitrarily extracted object and its natural immediate environment if not its more general or global context. Consequently, a mechanistic or expert approach is all exclusive.

We forget, however, that an entity's interactions with its environment carry a wealth of complex meaning which helps understand its very existence. Consequently, if the said "scientific" approach is considered useful in our occidental frame of reference, it rests on a strategy which consists in fragmenting a whole or in extracting selected parts out of the surrounding context in order to attempt to understand what we suppose will be their intrinsic meaning. Unfortunately, evidence proves the hypothesis as fallacious. The more we segment, cut, and fragment, the more we loose meaning, and the more we impoverish our comprehension.

A fragment is indeed a segment of something of which we have broken all the meaningful bonds to the whole. Just like fragmenting a musical partition would impede our capacity to perceive its usefulness and its beauty. Consequently a fragmentary scientific approach is generally partial and sometimes even meaningless, as we could demonstrate below.

- **Example :** Imagine for an instant that to understand this paragraph, we first cut it up into distinct phrases, then into separate words, and finally into letters. To be efficient, we could then logically regroup similar letters in columns and why not reorganize them by taking into account their relative width and/or height. We could then attentively study these group of letters to acquire a certain expertise on each group's intrinsic qualities.

This caricature of a scientific approach clearly illustrates that the meaning of a part is immediately lost when we remove that element from its context. Beyond a given paragraph, the page on which it is written and the whole text to which the latter belongs, the meaning of letters and words only exist within their context. This meaning exists in the midst of a collective frame of reference, for instance the Anglo-Saxon culture which carries a relative community of mind attributed to an ensemble of signs organized in interrelated words. When segmented or taken out of context, words don't mean a thing.

Consequently, if a fragmentary approach can appear efficient to experts, it is also the frame of reference at the origin of most of today's obvious problems whether these be social, political, ecological, economic, etc. This fagmenting frame of reference explains how we are rushing head-on into a number of rather costly dead ends.

EXAMPLES :

- Global scientific research as it stands is specialized or segmented into autonomous fields, managed by competing research organizations and by opposing national policies, implemented by jealously independent departments often led by solitary researchers. We are not surprised that this state of affairs leads to a lack of truly ethical and really concretely probing results. Throwing more money into a research environment in which both the whole and all the interfaces cruelly lack "systemic management" leads to real waste, when the results are not clearly detrimental to our health.

- Unhampered technological development favoring highly specialized pharmaceutical, agricultural, industrial, chemical, nutritional, nuclear, etc. development, each within their own fragmented coherency is very concretely destroying the totally systemic social, economic, ecological and human environment it is paradoxically pretending to improve.

- A large number of governmental and military decisions proposed by experts, each very convincing in their own field, implemented by politicians who are surely each very competent in the elaboration of their exclusive ideologies invariably lead us to paradoxical perverse effects and other collateral damages. These results regularly motivate radical shifts in policy, which in turn actively keep us all just treading water, but truly going nowhere.

- Fragmenting and independent policies which rest on arbitrary historical national or regional boundaries would almost have us believe that

global climatic, economic and migratory phenomena will stop like magic at each of our countries protective gates kept by very diligent customs officers, as if what is going on globally will not sooner or later cross illusions of boundaries and dramatically hit everyone's immediate neighborhood.

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Consequently, the mainstream expert-driven political and economic frame of reference has proven completely unable to take into account the natural, climatic, political and social events that are accelerating at an alarming rate.

Concommitantly, the coaching profession appears and proposes a very different frame of reference. It is *definitely not* synonymous to an “expert” approach. This is stated loud and clear, and can obviously be very difficult to accept in the present “mechanistic” environment. The approach is resolutely "systemic".

With resolve, coaching offers an alternative to segmenting experts that are so incompetent in managing naural and human global interfaces, *even within their own fields of expertise*. Individual, team and organizational coaching techniques are fundamentally tailored to help reveal and develop the evolution and transformation of *shared meaning* people and groups yearn to give their personal and collective existence, by taking into account all their interfaces with their environment.

Consequently as a profession, coaching is resolutely, systemically, « in synch » with the fundamental issues of our times.

Consequently also, a coach is focused *on the client*. It is *clients* that a coach accompany, taking into account their *whole* complexity as a simple reflection of all their interfaces with their *whole* environment. Coaching does not rest on expertise, nor on arbitrary and illusionary mechanistic fragmenting segmentations of the world. This would consist in also perceiving the client as a fragmented person.

In the same way, individual, team and organizational coaching consists in accompanying an ensemble by taking into account the complexity of its internal and external interfaces within its whole environment. It is not concerned with taking a person or team out of its context to try and understand it « *in vitro* ». Nor does a coach proceed as a specialist by privileging one or another exclusive dimension and forget the shared meaning carried by all the interfaces a person or team has with its general context or environment.

Consequently coaching is a profession that offers a very needed systemic frame of reference in the context of our organizations whether they be private *and* public, regional *and* national, unions *and* not for profit (notice that “or” proposes to divide and segment). All too often, those collective ensembles are not only hierarchically fragmented but are also segmented in specialized « silos » where each entity independently works and evolves, when they are not blatantly fighting against their surrounding context.

Not only does coaching propose a fundamentally different frame of reference but it offers a paradigm that can reconcile humanity with itself and with its environment so as to help achieve ambitious objectives without destroying all forms of life on the way.

If it is obvious that a coach cannot be an « expert », it is the individual or collective client that can pretend to hold that position. Indeed the only person or group that can fully have access to understand the complexity and interdependence of all of their interfaces with their environment is the client system. For a coach, clients can be the only competent entity that can define both the complexity of their own paths and the way they choose to take it. That is why coaches voluntarily and professionally choose to put their competencies at the service of their client’s deepest quest.

Consequently, with its non fragmentary “systemic” frame of reference, coaching aims far beyond its obvious goals focused on improving client results by facilitating personal, group and organizational transformation. Fundamentally, coaching is a new profession which actively participates in the sustainable evolution of our global environment by accompanying the gradual elaboration of humanity’s shared meaning.

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[1] A “share” refers both to the idea of a piece of something one may have to take away and to the other parts (or shares) others may also receive from the same whole. Interestingly, “sharing” both means dividing into parts, and giving to others, such as when “sharing” an experience or a story, in which case everyone gets to have the “whole”.

SYSTEMIC COACHING AND CLIENT DIALOGUE

Coaching is simple. In fact, coaching is so simple that to make it a more serious occupation, one could be tempted to make it more complicated. This may be particularly true in occidental cultures that seem to prefer experts that wield exclusive terminologies and complicated methods and copyrighted tools. But coaching *simplicity* is what makes it an original and powerful approach, paradoxically so difficult to understand and implement.

To begin to explore the simplicity of coaching, I will share some thoughts on it’s *spirit.* It is the spirit of coaching that makes its originality, that differentiates it from other similar types of professions. This will remain true so long as coaching avoids the multiplicity of methods and tools that the profession could be tempted to develop, maybe just to underline differences between each coach, each coaching school, segmenting the market, as would advise a marketeer.

To position coaching simplicity and originality, it is first useful to understand the nature of a normal *dialogue* when it takes place without a coach. Only after a clear comprehension of the characteristics and the results of *dialogue* can the role of a coach be defined as a facilitator of that type of conversation.

« Dialogue » in general :

A dialogue between two or more individuals is a relatively fluid and constructive verbal interaction that is respectful of the *meaning* of the words provided by the participating actors. Etymologically, the word « dialogue » comes from the Greek « dia » which like "via" in Latin stands for through ». (Dia also sometimes means “separate” but *not* « two »). And «logos » means « word ».

According to David Bohm, the words in a dialogue are used as a vehicle to create meaning, if the dialogue is collective, the words will help to create shared meaning.

We can add or point out that a dialogue does not have any objective other than to share or facilitate the emergence of new shared meaning. New meaning gradually emerges from the shared words, and will be relatively common to the conversing partners. Consequently, a dialogue between people permits the progressive emergence or unfolding of a new community of meaning of which the content is generally unpredictable.

When a dialogue takes place between two or more people, the unfolding flow is co-created and carried by all conversing partners. At each step of the conversation, each person receives the thoughts of preceding contributors and then contributes to the progressive elaboration or emergence of *new, shared* meaning. Each person in dialogue attentively listens and then adds to the shared meaning, so as to create a new relatively collective conceptual production. Consequently, a dialogue is a resolutely emergent form of *ad hoc* interaction in as much as none of its participants have a predefined expectation or *a priori* as to its general direction or final destination.

Consequently, to be productive, a dialogue is a process to share meaning without any predefined objective as to the specific content of its production. The “final” result of a dialogue is all the more powerful and original if it is not central in the conscious expectations of the partners while they are in a dialogued conversation. This free and respectful sharing process permits the spontaneous, sometimes surprising and relatively shared elaboration or emergence of new points of view and original shared meanings, unexpected directions or collective solutions.

« Dialogue » with a coach :

When clients engage in a coaching process, the nature of the conversation is relatively different. The client talks while the coach attentively listens, first to give “expanding” space for client expression and whenever possible, *to* recognize or confirm the meaning elaborated and conveyed by the client.

Indeed, the primary role of a coach consists in leaving more than enough space and time for the client to think, feel, formulate ideas, elaborate or discover the complete expression of his or her concerns. Respectful and attentive listening by coaches provides a receptacle for clients to gradually elaborate or evolve the meaning they carry and need to unfold and confirm.

Much as in a personal dialogue, the meaning developed by coaching clients transforms itself and evolves to almost invariably reach a very different result from the ones these first expected. Facing attentive and silent coaches, clients “give form” or formulate meaning through verbalization. In that gradual soul-searching process, client meaning gradually appears and slowly, again and again evolves and remodels itself.

As long as necessary, the coach will neither “answer” nor intervene within client dialogue or conversation, but will rather keep quiet so as to leave the latter with a large receptacle to unload, model and remodel volunteered personal thoughts, feelings and motivations. This receptacle exists in the form of an attentive welcoming “vacuum” or silence. Within this receptacle will then progressively emerge the essential form and practical content clients wish to give to their personal and professional concerns

The coach’s silent and attentive presence offers a creative space or environment within which clients can progressively give a complete form to the deeper meaning of their unfolding reality. Consequently, the first and foremost coaching technique or tool is to offer silence within which their clients can define, redefine and discover personal meaning. As a result, if coaching provides a professional space that facilitates personal dialogue, it is first and foremost at the service of whatever meaning clients wish to develop, formulate or define, on their own.

Only later and if needed, by subtly adopting other carefully chosen and respectfully proposed coaching techniques will coaches help their clients move forward a little further. Consequently, other coaching tools and competencies will also serve the complementary purpose of giving clients occasions to confront themselves with questioning and stimulating growth options.

To offer these occasions for growth and exploration, a coach can ask questions that are chosen for the sole purpose to help clients reframe themselves to further explore or develop their own meaning or purpose. Through questions and other reformulating and communication techniques, a coach helps clients uncover or discover for themselves what they hold as their deepest beliefs, attitudes, motivations and ambitions.

To help clients meander on their own personal search for meaning, a coach may also *occasionally* and sparingly participate more actively in the elaboration of client dialogue, but never by giving any importance to his or her own personal contributions. These must be volunteered at the sole service of enlarging each client’s self-defined progress.

Consequently, in the midst of this search and development process at the sole service of emerging client meaning, there can never be a conscious or unconscious attempt for a coach to influence or direct the dialogue. Any response, attempt to redirect the dialogue or to convince the client would risk transforming the latter’s personal dialogue into a discussion with the coach.

- **BEWARE**: The word « discussion » is indeed synonymous to “agitation”. It particularly concerns an arguing relationship where each displays efforts to impose a personal point of view or to convince the other or the environment. Discussions increase the risk for poor listening, and can provoke a real loss in the development of client meaning. This would result in the exact opposite of a dialogue or a coaching process.

Consequently, much unlike an expert who is paid to have, to sell, if not to impose “productive” answers, a coach is specifically trained in skills to professionally accompany individual and collective client dialogue so as to permit the spontaneous apparition or emergence of their own solutions.

- **EXAMPLE :** Coached clients can quite often gradually work to achieve a conclusion they consider luminous and which completely suit their needs, and which escapes the coach's comprehension.

A coach’s need to really comprehend the client’s problem is often irrelevant to the success of the coaching process. This reveals that a client can be quite performing in reaching their objectives even when they are searching for meaning and resolution in realms that are completely strange to their coach’s areas of competency.

Client dialogue permits « re-centering » and « realignment ».

When formulated to a coach, client dialogue becomes a personal form of verbal meditation, structured by words which gradually creates and conveys new meaning and new perceptions of reality. When clients verbally express their personal and professional concerns within a personal dialogue, they gradually become conscious of their own complexity, their own human dimension, their own depth of soul. Step by step they give their own frame of reference a new form if not a new coherence. Ultimately, the emergence of this new personal paradigm or world view will allow each client to reposition the effectiveness of their own actions within their everyday activity.

That is how coaching clients gradually develop conscience and awareness and tune into their senses. They discover deeper aspirations and motivations. As they deploy or unfold their accompanied personal dialogue, they discover and implement a finer capacity to discern, a keener intuition. Little by little they discover themselves a much deeper and quicker competency to listen and understand others, a more ample capacity to transmit, a more powerful motivation to act, a larger and more comprehensive vision of their own potential. In short, through their accompanied dialogue, coaching clients gradually operate their own transformation and deploy their own development.

Over the past twenty years, it has become obvious that through a skill set which mainly rests on “accompanied dialogue”, coaching is an original and performing technique to develop human and more complex collective or “system” potential.

We can also take note that the detailed *content* of client concerns in coaching can be relatively irrelevant to any given coach. Whether the client is focused on personal issues, sports, economic development, health, or other themes does not really matter much to the coaching process. Whichever can be the relatively passing focus of client concerns, it is the “accompanied dialogue” process that is important and that will help clients gradually develop power, breadth and transform. This client transformation will almost naturally carry consequences in all the facets of their personal and professional lives.

This reinforces the affirmation that in coaching there are no different domains of expertise. The only real realm of expertise of coaching is in the coach’s professional capacity to accompany the development of the individual or collective client’s general breadth through the unfolding process of their own personal dialogue.

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