Coaching in Systems, and Systemic Coaching

Different Systemic Coaching Contexts

To get a first understanding of systemic approaches in life coaching, executive coaching, team coaching and organizational coaching, it is useful to perceive the main contexts in which coaching was originally practiced as a profession in the sports environment. In as much as coaching comes from sports, the professions includes the same main application contexts, and then a little more.

First imagine a coach accompanying a high level sports champion on a personal or individual quest, such as in tennis, archery or golf, and then imagine another coach accompanying a team of players, such as in basket-ball, soccer or rugby. Both these coaches are in the same profession, but the scope of their professional fields are radically different. The first coach accompanies the development of a sole person's sports competency while the second is accompanying that of a collective entity: a team. It is obvious that these two coaches are focused on very different types of coaching contexts. They may consequently need to have very different and complementary perspectives or frames of reference.

In organizations and in life coaching on a more private level, the same difference of coaching contexts also explain very different types of coach competencies and approaches. Some organizational coaches are much more focused on coaching individuals, such as CEOs, executives, managers, experts, etc. Other coaches are focused on collective systems such as partners, teams, networks, groups, organizations, etc. In private life also, some coaches specialize on personal or individual processes, and others are more focused on working with couples, families, groups and other collective systems. To be fair, let us also underline that numerous coaches have developed competencies to work in both these dimensions.

- **Beware:** In the coaching world, some executive coaches have declared that team coaching or organizational coaching "doesn't exist". This could well confirm their consciousness that coaching collective systems is a context that calls for a completely different skill set, in which they lack competencies. We could also imagine that some of the competencies necessary for individual coaching could be completely ignored by coaches who have always specialized in team or organizational coaching.

At any rate, both in professional coaching and life coaching, it is useful to explore the fundamental differences between those two coaching fields, focused on individuals or focused on teams. The coach who accompanies an individual executive or life coaching client is focused on developing a *person's* performance as it could be measured by the evolution of personal results. The coach who accompanies a team or family to have it develop its *collective* competencies and performance, as measured by the evolution of the *team's* or family's collective results.

Consequently, we could imagine that a team can call on a coach to develop its collective competencies and results, and that simultaneously, each of the team members could also call on other coaches, each to develop their individual performances.

- **Beware:** Indeed, it this type of situation, it is often advised not to call on the same coach to work both levels: individual and team, or personal and family in life coaching. The coach could find himself or herself in double bind situation, sometimes working to help achieve an individual's personal needs and ambitions that could be contradictory to realizing the team's or the family's collective goals.

In sports much like in organizations, it seems obvious that if personal performance results from the development of *personal competencies*, collective performance is more often the result of better *transversal collaboration* between the individual competencies of the team members. A basketball team will become a middle and long term winner if its members learn to totally cooperate when implementing collective strategies in order to optimize the interfacing of complementary individual competencies. This would be much more successful than if each of the team members made solitary efforts to each make the best use of their individual strengths. In short, if personal performance rests on developing individual strengths, team performance rests on the professional interfacing of these individual strengths. Considering that systemic coaching is much more concerned with interfaces than with personalities or entities, one could quickly conclude that coaching teams is obviously systemic coaching.

Although the absolute necessity to interface professionally is not always perceived in organizations, the same is obviously true in a corporate context. The development of professional interfaces between the members of any corporate team will generally increase collective results. This may sometimes happen at the expense of *temporarily limiting the individual performance of some of the team members.* Much like in team sports, success depends more on team member capacity to pass each other the ball in an opportune way than on each member's individual or solitary capacity to play brilliantly, each solely counting on personal competencies.

- **Beware:** We would like to underline here that when systemic coaches are concerned with *professional interfaces*, the focus is not on the quality of relationships but on the quality of collaboration centered on a defined collective achievement.

Consequently, systemic team coaching work focused on developing collective results cannot be limited to coaching the quality of relationships between team members. Systemic team coaching is also if not principally concerned with increasing of added value that can be developed through the higher quality interfacing of operational processes. This is the focus that can best improve sustainable collective results.

- **Example:** a basketball team, increasing the speed at which the players can pass the the ball so that it does not linger in the hands of any one player more than a second will invariably increase the team capacity to win more games, everything else remaining equal. This is work to improve team interfacing. Whether the team players have better relationships or not does not have the same effect on results, all other competencies remaining equal.

Although the two coaching fields are complementary, this could explain that the fundamental object of individual life coaching or executive coaching is quite different from that of team, family, organizational or system coaching. The object of individual coaching is focused on the development of personal performance while the object of team coaching is focused on the development of performing operational interfaces *between* the members of a structured system. That is the first reason why team coaching is more readily defined as a systemic coaching approach. Indeed, it is in team coaching that a systemic coaching approach can most obviously very powerfully help develop added value, at the service both to the team coach and to the collective client.

- **Beware:** One can observe that a large number of organizations extensively call on coaches to ensure the development of individual competencies and performance. This the case for coaches who focus on developing performance of CEOs, leaders, experts, managers, executives and individuals. These same organizations often almost systematically avoid calling on team coaches to develop collective interfacing competencies and performance. Within these organizations, the culture may be quite resistant to facing team issues, or may be privileging high profile personal success.

In some cases, coaches that claim to work on team coaching actually work on developing individual performance in a collective or team setting. This is what could more correctly be called “group coaching”, focused on individual development in a group setting. It is not systemic coaching centered on the development of the performance of the team as an interfacing system. The equivalent in sports would be to coach a group of tennis players, knowing that the process objective is to increase each player's personal skills. Group coaching can achieve very good results, but these will not necessarily increase the systemic added value potentially gained from more performing professional interfaces.

In organizational contexts, another more complex systemic field concerns “organizational coaching”. This type of systemic coaching concerns the development of the added value potentially gained from improving the interfaces *between* a number of teams. This organizational coaching accompanying process concerns an ensemble of teams or a team of teams and the development of their performance as measured by their collective results.

This systemic coaching competency is often displayed when accompanying an executive team enlarged with the personnel originating from the next level managers or teams within the same organization. Such a coaching process could be systemic organizational coaching if it is focused on the development of the performance of operational interfaces in a system who has a superior complexity to the one displayed by the executive team.

To propose a comprehensive model basde on increasing complexity, we can imagine that if the simplest type of coaching context is when dealing with individual clients such as in life coaching of executive coaching. One could then move to coaching pairs such as couples or business partners, then to coaching first-level systems such as teams, small networks and families, and then to coaching for more performing interfaces within complex systems such as larger extended families, corporations and professional, social and political organizations and complex international networks.

- **Beware:** Both Individual and Team Coaching can be Systemic Coaching. It would be an error to conclude that systemic coaching only applies to collective systems, or that individual coaching cannot be systemic.

The *object* of team coaching or system coaching is surely different from the *object* of individual coaching, but that could lead us to hasty conclusions if one confuses a *systemic approach* with *working with systems*. In their frames of reference and in their skill set, both individual coaching, team coaching and organizational coaching are much more alike than one may first imagine, and all can very powerfully gain in effectiveness by integrating a systemic perspective and systemic coaching tools.

For example, to train, develop and ultimately succeed, individual sports champions have very rarely progressed very far by themselves, on their own. In fact, truly individual successes often rest on occasional lucky opportunities, and are often very short-lived. The development of really sustainable individual performance more often rests on a much larger and systemic learning context and process.

Notice indeed that champions in any individual sport are generally developed in champion contexts where they can measure up to partners who are at least as good if not better than them. Even when in competition, a winner’s success often rests less on personal dynamics than on excellent interface management with the opponent as well as with the larger sports environment. Coaching for individual success must consequently also resolutely be centered on the development of performance interfacing with the individual client environment.

This reality is far from the short-sighted comments that would have the coaching profession be another proof that modern society is focused on solitary, and fundamentally egotistical, competitive development based on a me first philosophy of life. Whatever may think those who underline

examples of apparently individual performance, most successes are the result of collective commitment and concerted action. Individual achievements are strongly supported and achieved by a large behind-the-scenes professional, personal, family and social environment which support champions. Even if they generally stay out of the spotlights.

Consequently, in organizations much like in sports, the fact that one has competitors (etymologically the word comes from “petitioning together”) permits each of the partners in a field or on a market to individually surpass themselves, while being stimulated by the others. In professional contexts, if a large number of people wish to develop their personal results, they will do better and go farther when they collaborate with their environment and peers than when they attempt to do it on their own or against others.

- **Beware:** In organizations, calling on an individual coach can nonetheless be an important indicator that the concerned clients may have difficulties in truly and productively collaborating with partners in their environment.

In numerous cases of individual coaching, a great amount of work needs to be primarily centered on developing client capacity to develop excellent interfacing competencies to help them succeed much better *with* others than they would on their own. This is not only a question of philosophy, but also the best way to ensure sustainable success. In this prespective, individual coaching also rests on a systemic coaching approach.

Consequently, to be effective in its goal to really accompany individual clients in the development of their personal performance, individual executive coaching is essentially centered on client capacity to cooperate, network, support the development of peers, etc, in order to obtain support in return. Obviously, when an executive coaching or other individual client has understood the importance of collective interfacing to ensure personal success, there is a much higher chance that they will be ready to also initiate a team coaching process. In effect truly successful systemic executive coaching in organizations should ultimately lead to systemic team coaching. Truly successful systemic individual life coaching could likewise lead to systemic couple coaching or systemic family coaching.

To conclude, it is important for all coaches to consider that a “systemic” approach focused on helping clients develop more performing operational interfaces is just as important in individual life coaching or executive coaching as it is in team coaching or family coaching. For a coach, a “systems approach” is a frame of reference which permits the development of both individual and collective clients by increasing their capacity to develop performance interfaces with their environment, in order to have all benefit from the potentially available added value.

The Systemic Context of Individual Coaching

Each client in individual executive coaching or life coaching has continual interactions with their personal and professional entourage. All client interactions with their environment as a social and professional system exert continual pressure and offer means and potential support that can influence client beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and results.

The positive influences from private and professional environments support client successes as much as negative influences can foster, inhibit or limit growth. This is the systemic influence. Consequently, when coaching clients succeed with ease, or on the contrary, when their efforts meet little or no success, these results can as much be attributed to the quality of their interactions with their environments as to their intrinsic personal competencies as individuals.

Furthermore, if individual executive coaching or life coaching clients wish to grow, change, or transform personal or professional behaviors, these modifications will automatically affect their immediate environments. These environments will be automatically obliged to adapt. Anyone's success or failure affects their environment in a positive or negative way. Consequently, it is useful to consider that the “proverbial” resistance to change often attributed to individuals can just as much be originating from the interactions these individuals daily entertain with their environments. This focus that intergrates environment interfacing is central in systemic coaching with individual executive or life coaching clients.

- **Example:** Take a simple rather common example concerning an executive coaching client’s wish to develop better time management in a professional context. It is highly probable that the executive time management difficulties are indicators of a more general organizational culture within which time management is also a major issue. In the same fashion, most people are intimately linked to environmental systems of which they reproduce positive and limiting processes, behaviors, belief systems, habits, and results.

To pretend accompanying the evolution of one element of a system, for instance an individual executive coaching client, without having the client system react defensively to maintain its coherence, is often an illusion. This may explain why successful individual coaching processes often lead to clients seriously considering severing ties with the professional or family systems within which they had until then been satisfied to work or live.

With this frame of reference in mind, it is useful for a systemic coach to perceive each individual client and all of their interfaces with their environments as so many coherent systems. Accompanying individual client change automatically means accompanying systemic change effects on larger client environments, and therefore accompanying system evolution, or resistance to change.

Perceiving Clients as their System "Emissaries"

Consequently, a systemic coach can perceive all clients as “emissaries” of both their personal and professional environments. Indeed, if one takes into account all the interactions between an executive coaching or life coaching client and each of the social, professional and personal systems in which they participate, work and live, it is possible to imagine that the change motivation displayed by any one client is in fact as much his or her own motivation as that of the surrounding social and professional systems.

Although unaware of their collective or systemic burden, clients can be considered to be assuming the responsibility for change or motivation for growth in the place of their personal and professional environments. Let us stress that this "emissary" quality is probably more or less present for all clients, and not only those that are designated "scapegoats" in the case of "prescribed" coaching within triangular contracts.

- CEOs or chief executives who designate themselves as clients and call on coaches for support are also assuming the responsibility for growth and change for their executive teams if not for their whole organizations.

The systemic yearn for change and equivalent resistance to change are in fact subconsciously "delegated" to the individual executive coaching client by their environmental systems. The concerned executive coaching clients accept that responsibility, almost naturally and unconsciously. Systemic coaches take this into account.

- Parents and spouses who are motivated to initiate individual life coaching processes subconsciously carry the hope and fear of growth and resolution for their couples if not for their whole families.

Considering their active capacity to take responsibility, one could often imagine that individual executive coaching and life coaching clients are precisely the ones who in their personal and professional environment probably least need support or coaching. Consequently, in all individual coaching situations, the collective motivation for change can be considered subconsciously delegated by the system to the designated or self-designated executive coaching or life coaching client. Through the individual coaching process, the apparently solitary client becomes responsible to activate their less active and absent systems motivation for change and evolution.

Paradoxically, as soon as an individual executive coaching or life coaching client accepts to become his or her surrounding system's emissary, these systems can immediately consider that they are not responsible for any support to facilitate the expected progress or evolution.
Consequently, a systemic executive coaching or life coaching approach would include strategies and techniques to :

- Position motivation for change and resistance originating both from clients *and* from all significant environmental systems to which clients belong.
- Limit or circumvent all potential resistance behaviors which could originate both from clients and from client environments.
- Mobilize all positive and supportive energy in the environment to consolidate executive coaching and life coaching client actions.

Consequently, with a systemic coaching frame of reference, a coach could consider that all clients are in fact consciously or unconsciously "designated" by their environments. In the most obvious cases, they are formally designated and named in triangular contracts. In all other situations, clients are unconsciously wielding a collective motivation for change or scenario for transformation that they mistakenly take for only (only) their own.

Systemic coaching principles

In systemic coaching, coaches need to assume that their personal frame of reference, their personal and professional issues, their behaviors, feelings, thoughts, goals, issues and ambitions, all can be intimately linked to those that are harbored by the client. Concretely, that means that when a particular client chooses to work on a particular subject such as an ambitious project, this theme will most probably have very strong resonances in the life of that client's coach. In two words, systemic coaches need to be aware that they are never exterior or neutral with respect to any of their clients or to the nature of their client's work. Consequently, it is absolutely necessary that systemic coaches very concretely accept the systematic fact that there are holographic or systemic or fractal reflections between their own lives and loves, successes and failures, goals and ambitions, thoughts and emotions, etc. and those of everyone of their clients.

Consequently a first question that systemic coaches can ask themselves when facing any particular client during any particular session and sequence is: what is this client proposing that I face in my own personal life and professional issues? The systematic adoption of this perspective in systemic coaching rests on the underlying principle that we are all active participants in the reality we observe, rather than neutral and external observers.

One fist useful systemic coach strategy rests on this underlying principle. In consists in constantly searching for resonances between each client issue and the ones the coach may have in his or her own private or professional life. In this way, a client who may want to work on a particular conflict relationship, for instance with a parent or a boss is actually suggest the coach should focus on this same issue with hierarchies in the coach's personal or professional life, so as to discover new perspectives and new options. This is how on a regular basis, consciously or unconsciously, the systemic frame of reference suggests that client issues are not presented to a coach by chance. As a matter of fact, clients do not meet their coaches by chance. Not any more that it is a chance occurrence when two people meet and decide to share or partner in any other dimension of life.

Consequently, the systemic paradigm suggests that every single issue, problem, ambition, goal, project, etc. brought to a specific coach by any client is in fact a very personal growth and learning opportunity offered the coach, concerning a relatively important issue from the coach's own life. In this context, there are obviously a number of risks of projections coming from both the coach and the client, and these have been named transference and counter transference in other fields. These are considered a very concrete reality in systemic coaching. It is useful to be aware of them, and to implement a number of strategies to use transference patterns to benefit both the client and the coach's development.

Consequently, systemic coaching suggest each coach develops a deep understanding that each client is there to help the coach's development as much as for solving personal client issues. The client is actually proposing to the coach to work together on a common preoccupation or to join on a

common quest in order to jointly grow and develop. This client invitation requires that coaches be very conscious and present to their own issues, and be ready to admit to the, progress with them, solve them, or make them growth opportunities, with the client. This joint development process is actually what make systemic coaching extremely powerful, and puts it in the real coaching tradition that requires true and profound partnering with clients.

Considering this systemic coaching reality, it is useful to be conscious of all the interactive processes between the coach and the client, as partners in the coaching relationship, as the interfacing patterns will always reveal the main patterns in the common coach-client issues.

- **Example:** All clients that wish to deal with their delegation issues will systematically illustrate “here and now” in the coaching relationship, all that they do to avoid delegating, and coaches may likewise illustrate all they their difficulties in finding their rightful place in that type of relationship.

In this way in systemic coaching, the delegation issue is not a coaching subject or issue but a very concrete relational issue that is active and observable within the coaching relationship itself, and that completely involves the coach as a person involved in the client work. Consequently developing an acute feeling for, and understanding of the systemic processes that occur and recur, as interfacing patterns between any coach and client is paramount to systemic coaching. A systemic coaching posture constantly and very practically takes into account the fact that there are intimate resonances of meaning between what may first and superficially appear to belong to distinct fields: the client issues the coach’s issues, and the coaching process during the time in which the coach and client are working on their common theme.

This type of systemic coaching consciousness of the intricate nature of coach and client being will allow the coach to use a number of systemic strategies, tools and techniques during the coaching sequences, in order to powerfully enlarge both the coach and the client frame of references and perspectives.

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Systemic Coaching Ethical Interventions

In order to invite the systemic reality into a systemic coaching session, it is fist useful for systemic coaches to rapidly ask themselves one of the following questions: How does this theme, brought to me by this client now, very personally concern me? How am I deeply and personally involved in the same configuration as the one this client is presenting? Who, that has been important in my emotional and/or professional life, does this client remind me?

Surely, the awareness of the shared issues that may exist between a coach and client do not always surface immediately. Sometimes it is only late in a coaching session or after its conclusion, and sometimes after the relationship has ceased that a coach will come to acknowledge the personal importance of a client’s work. Too often, coaches realize much too late that they have been intensely involved in a client’s work. It is then too late to use that awareness as a positive growth opportunity for both.

The feeling one is carrying too much, an unexpected emotion, inappropriate weariness, a sudden rush, boredom, or any other in habitual systemic coach reaction will sometimes help that coach realize that something interesting is happening under the apparently smooth surface of the fluid coaching interaction. Sometimes, later in supervision, a coach will realize that the relationship with a client is far more significant than initially expected. Whenever this awareness surfaces, a systemic coach needs to search for the common positive quest for growth and development.

- **Caution:** There is indeed very little use for a coach to feel guilty about loosing an illusionary distance and neutrality with respect to any specific client, and it is absolutely useless that the coach refer the client to someone else.

In fact that distance and neutrality never existed, and another coach will also be just as involved. On the contrary, by assuming the existence of pattern resonances between coaches and clients, systemic coaching proposes that both develop as partners that have unconsciously but very usefully chosen to work together.

Consequently, whenever a coach becomes conscious that a client is dealing with an issue that awakens reveals coach emotional or personal resonances, one may first assume there may be an ethical issue that may or may not need to be cleared.

- The coach could unwittingly decide to be quiet about the felt resonance, and will loose a huge opportunity for systemic coach and client growth.
- The coach could choose to share the reality of his or her personal involvement in the client issue, and immediately gain in effectiveness, transparence and partnering.

Choosing not to mention coach implication in the client issue has very well known effects. Clients immediately feel it when coaches retain anything personal, intellectual, emotional or whatever. They feel there is an energy blockage in the fluidity of the relationship, and may interpret this coach restraint in a number of different ways, but that will affect the client work. Coaches who try to suppress their involvement are also most prone to subconsciously influencing the course of their client work. It is also quite well known that secrets in a relationship end by weighing very heavily on the quality and fluidity of the relationship. At any rate, one needs to remember that coaches are to develop a posture resting on very clear if not limpid ethical and personal transparency.

- **Caution:** It is therefore strongly suggested that systemic coaches share with clients, and immediately admit to any lightest personal

involvement with any client issue.

To offer an example, imagine a client who wants coached on writing an article or a book, and who chooses a coach who just by chance has issues publishing or writing, or has written and published a large number of books. Should the coach reality be kept silent, that could well be perceived as a blatant lack of transparency and honesty to the client. So the coach needs to say something, but what and how? If indeed the coaches admit to have written a number of books, the client may immediately choose to question the self-designated expert for advice, and thereby relinquish personal responsibility to undertake an internal quest on the issue.

So the first principle about sharing personal involvement with a client issue is to be very humble. In any situation that would be to say that each experience was a different struggle and a new discovery. That no two people solve the same issue in the same way, and any one person probably progresses in life very differently. It is important for the client to find their own special way to do exactly what they want, at their own pace, in the way they want.

So sharing personal involvement with a client issue is not so easy. For begining or control-oriented coaches, it is perceived to be too a great risk that will provoke a loss of credibility. For the systemic coach, a quick and effective, very light sharing process needs to be practiced until it becomes fluid, short and natural. There are several short steps to such an ethical sharing procedure, and the gain can only be fully perceived once one has experimented the liberating experience it provides both the client and the coach.

- The first step in the ethical sharing process consists in asking clients the permission to interrupt. This ensures that clients pay attention to what will be said in the ensuing process.
- The second step is for the coach to briefly announce the resonance between the issues: “I am suddenly conscious that have (or have had) the same issue and that it is (was) also hot (intense, difficult, painful) for me.”
- The third step is to mention the danger in this coach client resonance: “I could get personally involved and project in your situation, which would definitely not be useful for you, or me, as a coach.”
- The third step is to offer a co-managed solution. “This being said, I am OK to coach this situation if we both agree to watch out that we don’t mix or overlap our issues, and that you find your own personal solutions without my influencing in any way.
- ”“Are you OK with this offer”, would be a last step acquiring client agreement to continue the work.

When short and direct, this type of ethical intervention presents a number of systemic advantages that are completely congruent with the principle of coach humility and transparency. It offers the client a possibility to be responsibly vigilant to the possibility of coach personal projection in the ensuing client work. It allows for a much stronger coach client alliance as partners who share the same human issues and challenges and who can admit to work together on these, while remaining respectful of each other’s differences. It suggests the client does not become submissive to the coach’s prior or knowledgeable experience, should the coach loose distance. It reminds the coach that personal or professional perfection and infallibility is not a human characteristic. It suggests that the coach could well consider progressing on the same issue by allowing the client to freely and responsibly work on theirs. It liberates the coach energy that could have been tied up is keeping silent and hiding the resonating feelings, emotions, thoughts, behavioral patterns, judgments, etc. And to conclude the long list of direct and indirect benefits, ethical interventions are totally in keeping with the systemic coaching point of view that we are responsible actors in a participative universe. We are never external nor neutral to any experience that we are ever offered by any coaching client.

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Systemic Coaching Resonance Interventions

Once systemic coaches have started to assume the humbling reality that whether they are aware of it or not, they actively participate in the client universe and may even become significant actors within client issues, other very powerful systemic coaching tools can allow them to progress in the coach client partnership.

To proceed by example, imagine the following coaching context: A young unemployed male client hires a coach to first find a job and then develop a solid professional career. During the coaching sessions, that client seems to offer minimal energy to solve the employment issue. The young man often answers questions by saying he doesn’t know, that he is lost, that he feels stuck. Client silences are long and expectantly passive. The accompanying process feels heavy and bogged down, with the coach feeling increasingly powerless.

It is obvious that the coach is taken by the situation, feeling the exact same powerless position and related emotions that the young client is feeling in his job-seeking process. On the one hand, the client doesn’t know how to get out of his dead end, and on the other hand, the coach is feeling the same dead end and powerlessness while accompanying the young client. There is an obvious pattern and energy resonance between the two relational situations, one concerning the client and his job search, the other concerning the coach and his client.

Systemic coaching assumes the principle that this type of pattern resonance is always present in all coaching relationships between all coaches and all their clients. Whatever happens within the here and now coaching relationship intimately and precisely reflects what is happening elsewhere in the client issue, involving other relationships with other people. This is also true for the coach, as the here and now relationship with the client also reflects other situations within which the coach is involved with other people.

Coming back to the above mentioned ethical sharing process, it would be very useful for the coach to share how he or she is intimately involved in the same type of issue elsewhere, and to suggest they both watch out in order not to mix their overlapping concerns. Indeed, the first coach awareness should concern becoming present to admitting to feelings of personal powerlessness in other contexts in his or her personal or professional life. The theme of powerlessness may indeed be what may have brought this coach and this client together in order to offer them an growth opportunity and

environment to work in a transparent and solution-oriented partnership.

Beyond the ethical sharing process, however, the coach could also attempt to mention the shared resonance in a different way, by sharing a personal feeling or perception. This sharing process could also follow a general procedure that is often used by systemic coaches:

- The first step consists in asking the client the permission to intervene, in order to get full client attention before volunteering what can follow: “May I share a perception of what may be happening here between us in our coaching relationship?”
- If the client accepts, the next step the coach is to share a perception and/or feeling: “I want to admit that I am feeling quite powerless here, as if I had to search alone for options without active support on your part, and carry the weight of more than my personal share of responsibility. Like you in your job search, I am at loss as to what I could do for us to move forward here. So I want to share this with you.”
- The next step is to offer an avenue to grow together, in a question form. “The question for us could be: how can we work differently here together so as to be lighter and have more energy?”
- Lastly, the coach can thank the client for the given space and listening, and give the back client the floor: “And I want to thank you for having listened to my issue. Do you have any thoughts you would like to share on how we could move forward from here?”

It is important that the coach simply and directly share very clearly owned personal feelings and perceptions without judging or accusing the client and without attempting to provoke client shame or guilt. By just sharing personal feelings and thoughts, the coach is assuming a personal responsibility in the coaching relationship and process, and admitting to being a significant and co-responsible participant or partner in whatever interactive process is being shared with the client.

After sharing, it is useful for the coach to ask the client how to move forward together, or how to proceed differently to achieve shared success in the coaching relationship. This opening towards solutions is an invitation for the client and the coach to decide to interact differently, thereby extracting themselves from a shared unproductive or dissatisfactory pattern. Indeed this systemic coaching strategy rests on the assumption that if the coach and the client both succeed in changing a common or shared unproductive interactive pattern together, within the coaching relationship, this will get them both on the right track to modify the same pattern in other relationships and interactions elsewhere in their lives.

This systemic coaching strategy is completely in keeping with the systemic axiom that global or larger processes (for instance in the client and coach lives) can be changed if they are dealt with very locally, in the immediate coaching relationship, in the course of a systemic coaching sequence.

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Some Classical Systemic Coaching Tools

Before introducing systemic coaching “tools”, it is useful to underline that a systemic approach in executive coaching and life coaching rests much more on a particular frame of reference than on the use of any specific technique tool or exercise. All coaching tools can therefore potentially be systemic tools if the frame of reference of the coach is systemic. More specifically all tools and skills which help map out and work with the client environment or the constellation within which the client lives and works can be useful for a systemic executive coaching or systemic life coaching approach.

- **Caution:** Some paradoxical questioning skills and other mind bending tools have already been presented in other articles on this website and will not be repeated here. If most of the systemic coaching tools presented below can be used as is or adapted for telephone coaching, a good number were developed in individual or collective face-to-face situations.

Drawings

A picture is worth a thousand words. When working with predominantly visual clients, a paperboard or large paper and some markers can both help create spectacular client awareness and facilitate rapid decisions for change and performance. After asking clients if they are willing to experiment a clarifying approach and obtaining permission to proceed, a systemic coach can simply ask:

_"To grasp the situation with all the actors you are mentioning, could you draw the situation as you perceive it ? And don’t hesitate to comment whatever you are drawing.”

Without much more formality, getting executive coaching or life coaching clients to elaborate a simple graph, analogical image or symbolic drawing will often help reveal numerous key elements of their « systemic » constellations. Once a first visual ensemble is completed by executive coaching or life coaching clients possibly including all the principal actors involved in their issue (including positioning themselves on the drawing), interactions revealed by arrows, and boundaries or other physical elements, the systemic coach can ask if the client is done. When executive coaching or life coaching client is satisfied with their production, the systemic coach can ask them to relinquish the markers, take some distance and comment and react to the picture.

After that, the systemic coach can ask questions to help executive coaching or life coaching clients progressively enlarge their perception of their drawn projection.

- What can be the significance for some people being positioned towards the top of the page, towards the bottom, far apart, close together, grouped, solitary, inside or outside boundaries, etc?
- Why some relationships are close, distant, one way (as revealed by arrows), light, heavy, solid, non-existent, etc..

- Who has been forgotten, what are the different qualities that appear, what is revealed by the colors, the scratches, the straight lines and curves, etc.

All this work needs to be carried out at reasonable distance without executive coaching or life coaching clients changing or adding anything to the original drawing. The next piece of work consists in accompanying clients in the expression of the changes that they would care to apply first on the drawing, then with corresponding concrete action plans in their real day to day environment. Obviously, the type and amount of questions the systemic coach could ask are very intimately linked to the exposed situation, to the agreed objective of the work and to the coach's intuitions.

- How to develop better protection, get closer, more distant, and from whom?
- How to create more productive interfaces, center all the actors on a common goal, get the constellation on a successful path ?
- What new actors could be brought in, which ones need to be excluded, which could be important supporters, which need to be watched, and how ?
- What would an ideal drawing look like, or the one of the future, or the solution ?
- etc.

Again, not all these illustrative questions need to be asked. A choice limited to the most pertinent ones need to be followed by careful listening to the systemic executive coaching or life coaching clients comments and silences.

The Empty Chair

During systemic coaching work concerning the relationship or the interfaces with an absent actor, and after obtaining executive coaching or life coaching client acceptance, the coach can propose that they address that person directly as if he or she were present, by addressing an appropriately placed empty chair.

_"This person is sitting here. You can formulate what you want to say right away".

To preserve systemic coac integrity, we recommend that coaches never take the absent actor's position on the empty chair nor play their role but rather stay just outside of the client's scene and scenario. The systemic coach could, however, ask the client to change seats and respond for the absentee, or to feel the situation in that person's place. A dialogue could then take place between the client and the absentee, giving life to a consequent relationship or interface, as it is perceived by the executive coaching or life coaching client.

It is sometimes useful to suggest the systemic executive coaching or life coaching client get up and choose a third position, maybe standing, to observe the other two seats they had occupied, and to comment on the relationship and possible operational interfaces between themselves and the absentee.

The empty chair technique is particularly recommended when executive coaching or life coaching clients need to practice a specific dialogue with an absentee whom is perceived as difficult to face or to address.

This technique originates from Fritz Perls and Gestalt Therapy. It is widely used in a number of help professions. Beyond helping executive coaching or life coaching clients gain awareness by visualizing and living a projected relationship, a coaching approach will follow up with quality questions centered on possible client solutions, with the client practicing behavioral options and with co-conception of action plans that will ensure that the executive coaching or life coaching client will be satisfied and motivated to implement future changes.

The Empty Chairs

Several mobile empty chairs in a relatively spacious room will permit the same visualization of interactions between numerous influential actors participating in a systemic executive coaching or life coaching client relational constellation. On each empty chair, a piece of paper with the name of each actor (plus an empty chair for the client) will help the client and coach keep track of who's who in sometimes very complex situations.

A first phase consists in placing each of the absentee actor in their chairs, taking into account relative distances and orientations. The following work consists in:

- Asking executive coaching or life coaching clients to take distance from the visible constellation and to comment it without changing any of the chair positions.
- Asking clients questions on the relationships between the absentee actors and with themselves (empty chair), on each person's relative positions, orientation, and symbolic relationship to other physical characteristics of the room (rug, furniture, doors, windows, corners, etc.)
- Asking executive coaching or life coaching clients to focus on their issue or objective and on the possible options and actions to come to a satisfactory result or achievement.

The same type of clarification process can be used to elaborate a living "sociogramme" when all the actors of a team or family system are present in the systemic executive coaching or life coaching coaching process. Typically, the coach can ask one of the team or family members, for instance the most recent arrival in the team, to position all the other team members in the room. Each is silently led to a representative place and eased into a relevant posture by the volunteer who is simultaneously commenting the work to all the others.

Coach questions are then put to each of the actors in turn, focused on elements of performance and on changes that could be implemented in the constellation to ensure better results. The client comments are later translated by the team into concrete action plans with precise deadlines.

Recursive or Systemic Questions

With or without the above spatial and visual techniques proposed above, “circular” questioning, or the art of asking recursive systemic questions is an integral part of the systemic coaching skill set. Originally, this type of systemic questioning comes from family therapy. In this context the team or family members are asked in a collective environment right in the midst of the accompanied system. Note that this type of systemic question can also be put to an individual executive coaching or life coaching client during the chair work presented above. By using client words and expressions, recursive systemic questions concern client perceptions of interactions between significant actors within the client constellation.

Examples:

- What does Dan do in meetings when Diane and John argue “for ever” over priorities and deadlines?
- When your two sons are fighting, and you try to put a stop to it, what does your husband do?
- When “heated” discussions take place to explain the origin of your department’s problems, who are the first persons attempt to bring the team to discuss future solutions and action plans?
- Can you provide the decreasing order of your team members’ commitment level as it is revealed in your monthly meetings?
- Imagine that you whole team (or family) starts to focus on ways to reduce expenses, who are the members who will be most resistant to that change?

Note again that these same systemic coaching recursive or “circular” questions can be asked in a team coaching or other “system” coaching situation when all the members are present.

Note also that the formulation of systemic coaching recursive questions calls for all the linguistic subtleties already covered in the article on coaching questions (Toolbox II) on this website. They can concern the perception of a past situation, an optional future action, an ideal situation, establishing a list in a decreasing or increasing order or importance, etc.

Also consult an article on paradoxes in executive coaching

Coaching "Prescriberrs"

Numerous coaching contracts are formally or informally solicited by third parties for a potential target client whom the coach is programmed to meet later, sometimes only after several “preliminary” meetings. These third parties are part of the “future client” systemic environment: a manager, HR, spouse, parent, sometimes a friend or peer. Very often in organizational contexts, this situation will take place when establishing the coaching contract initiated by a human resource representative to accompany a “client” from the same organization. A dedicated article on this website develops in detail the complexity of triangular contracts and relationships specific to coaching prescribed by third parties.

This triangular situation can also be much more complex if the designated client’s manager is expected to be included into the loop, plus the manager’s manager, and if the original contact was sub-contracted from one first coaching or consulting organization to another coach. In those cases, what is initially presented as a simple individual coaching contract can turn out to be an extremely complex and systemic political scenario with numerous opportunities for manipulations and power games.

For the systemic coach, a systemic strategy consists in coaching all the parties that are introduced into the loop, as soon as they are met. The systemic coach can also ask each to see them again at predetermined times, *for the good of the designated client,* to ensure the latter has all the support necessary to reach objectives and succeed.

In each meeting with each of the “third parties”, the systemic coach focuses on the present actors and accompanies them in designing actions focused on ensuring the designated client's success. This focus on coaching all the prescribers in turn can be instrumental in developing the systems awareness of its own responsibility to ensure designated client performance, if not performance for the system as a whole.

Inviting Absentees

This systemic coaching strategy consists in enlarging the coaching context by inviting significant absent actors into the executive coaching or life coaching sessions, if not for the whole coaching process. At minimum in the case of triangular contract coaching within an organization, the process can be designed with a number of sessions dedicated to three or four-way systemic coaching including the designated client, his or her manager or managers, and/or peers and/or personnel.

If this option is not included in the original coaching contract, it can always be renegotiated and added later to enlarge the coaching process and include other significant actors in the organization or in the client constellation. At the very least, some solicited actors will significantly position themselves by refusing to participate. In this progressive fashion, an individual executive coaching or life coaching contract can gradually be enlarged to become a collective or systemic coaching process. With a collective approach, the systemic coaching process can more powerfully accompany system development, which will in turn become a “learning” and growing family or organization for a larger number of its key members.

Obviously, it is often useful that a systemic coach immediately propose collective, couple, system, group or team coaching when several interacting players can gain in improving their interfaces to ensure collective and individual success. In this way, initial organizational searches for coaches to ensure individual contracts can often lead to team coaching if not organizational coaching with more conclusive systemic coaching results for many more people.

On a more complex team coaching level, the same systemic strategy consists in proposing coaching sequences that would include the working presence of other transversal teams, subordinate systems, client teams, union systems, etc. This environment-inclusive type of systemic coaching process is focused on developing more performing external interfacing for system success and can lead to much more conclusive results than the ones

originally expected by the contracting team.

Triangulation in Systemic Coaching

"Triangulation" is a strategy that consists in helping executive coaching or life coaching clients redirect their energy when it is concentrated on a difficult, non-productive or "polarized" face-to-face relationship. The systemic coach helps the client system focus onto a third party or new common objective constituting a positive and motivating pole of interest. The act of redirecting "stuck" relational energy towards a third operational pole of interest (triangulating) helps reposition the partners out of an unproductive relationship and redirect their energy into action towards achieving a new motivating and constructive objective.

In individual, couple and family coaching or again in professional, team and organizational coaching, the simple strategy of mobilizing a system towards common, ambitious and motivating goals often works like magic. This systemic coaching strategy is based on the idea that if you put lions face to face, they will fight for territory, but if you put them side by side focused on achieving a common goal such as a potential prey, they will hunt together. All the energy previously caught-up in negative and counter-productive or competitive relationships is suddenly liberated and redirected by the partners to achieve their common aspiration or "conspiracy" (which etymologically means "collective aspiration").

The results obtained by "triangulating" in systemic coaching seems to prove that when systems are too focused on internal relationships and conflicts, it is more efficient to help the members refocus on a common goal than to try to help them "iron out" or solve the relational issues". Consequently, in families, teams and systems which are too focused on internal relationships, triangulation seems to confirm that it is more useful to propose a "team coaching" process focused on operational performance than to propose a more classical team building approach focused on developing communication skills to improve relationships.

To acquire a KINDLE book on Masterful Systemic Coaching

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