

# The challenge for the coaching profession

John Whitmore



**Coming from a place of caring, sharing and collaboration in the current 'never enough' business culture of fear, acquisition, possession and competition, is indeed a challenge, or so it would seem. It may, however, be easier than we think; we may find there is little to lose, and our future may depend on our ability to manifest such qualities. Indeed if we are to take the bigger vision of coaching to business, that of creating a better quality of life for all, we must 'be the change we wish to see in the world' and become role models of collaboration ourselves. So how are we doing on that count?**

Since its arrival in the world of work some 25 years ago, followed by 10 years of becoming accepted and established, the coaching industry has grown exponentially. Such fast progress is inevitably accompanied by growing pains but they have been less traumatic than might have been expected, and less energy consuming than the psychotherapy profession experienced at a similar stage in the 1960s and 70s.

The majority of workplace coaches have come from three areas, from sport, from psychotherapy or as dropouts from the ravages of corporate life as consultants, trainers, HR professionals or executives. Those coming from sport brought expertise in high performance, those from psychotherapy have contributed in the areas of life coaching, stress management, and personal psycho-spiritual development; HR people are strong on career development and ex-corporate consultants or executives often combine coaching with mentoring in their areas of expertise. Of course the divisions have become blurred over time and many coaches move comfortably in all of these areas in line with the coaching principle that you do not have to be an expert in a field to coach in it.

More coaches with less history are now entering the profession, and coaching schools to meet their needs have sprung up, ranging from the on-line instant coach variety to modular courses leading to an academic diploma or degree. Several self-styled 'governing bodies' or umbrella associations have emerged of which the International Coach Federation was the first, originating in the United States but with regional outreach in Europe, the Nordic countries, Australasia and elsewhere. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council, and the Association for Coaching followed in the UK; then the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches in Canada and a number of others surfaced. Each attempted to occupy a slightly different territory, cater for a different type of coach, or offer a different service to members or groups. Some became involved in coach education or accreditation, while others claimed the high ground in devising standards and ethics.

## Collaboration

After a fantasy flirtation with the idea of becoming 'the Global Coaching Governing Body' for a short while, most of these associations accepted that this was not to be, and settled for the compromise of a niche role and/or collaboration. Each probably found that working together was easier said than done

and that when differences arose, it always seemed that it was 'them' who were not as elevated as 'us', and 'them' who were holding things up. As is often the way, it is all smiles on the surface, but a mildly guilty grumble behind the scenes.

Likewise small coaching companies and consultancies both compete and co-operate with one another in ways dependent more on the mood and the day of the week than any cohesive intent. This is especially so when coaching reaches a new territory or country. The first there on the ground feels that it owns coaching and then a second organisation, often bigger, enters the game. Now the first feels usurped and faces the uncomfortable choice of being subsumed within, or playing second fiddle without. Notions of 'unfairness' and 'we are better than them anyway' are entertained, if not expressed.

Of course there are a few – happily few – coaching companies that are unashamedly about making money and little else, and to hell with collaboration, the competition and the client too, in the end. Their values are transparent to all but themselves, the coaches that join them and the least discriminating potential clients. Fortunately they will fall by the wayside sooner or later, but not before someone has made a pile, and a few others have lost their way.

As for the rest, what lies at the root of these good intentions, and also the squabbling? The short answer is evolution, and the lack of it, respectively. There are many evolutionary models that apply equally to individuals and groups, ranging from the simplest three stage models like Firo B, (Inclusion, Assertion, Co-operation), to the elegant multi-coloured Spiral Dynamics. The most widely known is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, so that is the one that I will refer to here. Our dominant Western culture collectively is currently at the lower Esteem level, better described as the need for Status and Recognition. We have an economic structure commensurate with that consciousness; capitalism rooted in acquisition, materialism, and self-importance at the top and survival at the bottom.

It is not surprising, therefore, that our most common social attitudes and behaviours are products of that same consciousness and the system that it spawns, so competition, protectiveness, mistrust, command and control, are the norm and habitual in our culture. Since our psycho-spiritual evolution has been

slow, in the past at least, many people go as far as to believe that these less than pleasant qualities are endemic to human nature. Any amateur psychologist or professional coach knows better, but that is the way much of society sees it, that is the environment in which we grew up, and some of it remains with us, despite the work we may have done on ourselves.

## Schizophrenic

Is it a wonder then that when we try to collaborate, for that is what our higher aspirations are, our competitive, protective, fear driven attitudes and behaviours sneak out? It is not surprising that we find it hard to get our associations, our companies and even ourselves, within our own organisations, to collaborate. We are schizophrenic; we want to, at the higher level, and we don't want to, at a more primitive level within ourselves. Of course on the outside we speak of the good stuff like trust and co-operation, but our behaviour does not quite live up to our good intentions. Like most psychological change, it is easier to do the new stuff than to give up the old, but without giving up the old not much will change.

We coaches are aware of this problem because the biggest part of ourselves is almost certainly getting up into the Self-Belief or Self-Actualising level, and from any level it is easier to see the previous ones, than the ones ahead. Most business people have some notion of the higher levels too, but the lower levels still dominate their experience, or their need for conventional or corporate security holds them hostage. They can't or won't give it up.

Exceptional business people, the all too rare Ray Andersons and Ricardo Semlers of this world, are themselves entirely in those higher levels, and by their extraordinary achievements, they are a living demonstration of them – having rid themselves of their fears and their old consciousness. In fact, their consciousness, in my view, may well be ahead of that of many coaches.

If we coaches are going to help business people to reach these levels, and I would argue that this is essential for human survival in the not so long term, we had better have reached at least that level of consciousness ourselves. Our continuing internal competitiveness indicates that we are clearly not there yet. To get there, we need to actively engage in personal development work beyond that of training to improve our coaching skills, and

that would take us inevitably into the transpersonal or spiritual arena. As coaches we can no longer afford the lazy luxury of not going into that space – or if we choose not to move on in there, we need to acknowledge the limitations on our ability to work with more advanced individual clients or the more progressive corporations.

Of course the assertions above are based on the assumption that we cannot use transpersonal coaching techniques to best effect, unless we are ourselves embarked on a transpersonal journey. In the latest edition of my book, 'Coaching for Performance', I have attempted to make such techniques as user friendly as possible, and, in a pragmatic, way they will work to a degree anyway, but how much is our being also a part of the system in play? In any event, if a client is 'going transpersonal', do I not have a duty to tell him or her if I myself am not there yet? The jury is out on this for me.

### Tendency to compete

Of course another aspect of Maslow's hierarchy is relevant when we look at the youthful creators of some coaching companies. An essential stage in personal development is moving beyond the self-interested level of status and recognition into self-belief, and that liberates us from fear. One vehicle for this right of passage is having competed successfully in the business game. Fortunately, I and others emerging from sport usually worked out much of that stuff back then, and have less of an unrequited need to play the competitive game as a coach. Some younger entrepreneurial coaches suffer from a conflict of interest as they work out their own stuff through their colleagues and even their clients at a lower level. This is an argument for getting coaches to work out their competitive needs in some other field before, lest they blight the industry with their personal process – but of course that may seem a little harsh. It does mean, however, that they should be aware of their tendency

to compete, and make a conscious decision to co-operate when appropriate.

There are others who, in every other way, are embarked on their journey, but are still in the grip of their own fears of inadequacy, their need for recognition and their desire to hold onto what they have. They too have a hard time collaborating, even with their erstwhile colleagues, lest they somehow lose something. This is especially true in the coaching field around copyright issues. They use techniques, exercises, models and PowerPoint visuals in their teaching of others to become coaches, but then become protective of their material. This is schizophrenic behaviour.

What pray are they going to lose? Don't they want the coaching industry to succeed? Don't they see that they will be the first beneficiaries if their colleagues, other coaches and their clients do a great job? Are there not plenty of people out in the world who need what they have to offer, for them to release their fear of sharing? Do they not want the next generation of coaches to stand higher on their shoulders?

I am reminded of the premier sports promotion company, IMG, a number of years ago. When founder Mark McCormack discovered that here was a limit to the amount of sponsorship money he could generate for his golf clients because golf had a limited profile as a sport, he decided to promote golf itself. The result was that all competitive golfers benefited, his own players and their competitors too, but was that bad for anyone? No.

When we share, people trust us and they share in return or simply because of the role model we are. This is moving beyond, "Well, I'll share when they share," to "I'll share anyway, whatever they do". When we all share, we all do our job better. When we do our job better, as midwives of human consciousness, the corporate community gets better and they in turn improve the planet rather than take from it.

### Role model

Come on coaching organisations; let us truly, willingly collaborate with one another, including the willingness to give up a little, to compromise, in order to raise our vision in the profession and beyond. Come on coaching companies and consultancies; find ways of working together to give clients what they really need. Let us begin to recommend each other to clients, if you honestly recognise that another provider is better equipped to meet the client's need than you are. Think about the respect you would gain from both client and competitor for so doing – if you must justify so doing with a pay off. Come on you fledgling coaching companies in countries new to coaching; get together to enable coaching to be a healthy role model right from birth. And come on individual coaches in and outside organisations; cut the copyright crap, share all you have and let coaching put its best foot forward all the time.

These sorts of behaviours are just what we want, or should be wanting, the business community to be adopting for the good of all. What stops us doing it then? Fear, of course, fear that we might be left out, fear that we might not measure up, fear that our weaknesses might show, fear that we won't win, fear that we will be seen as weak and a million other fantasy fears.

Hey, the coaching industry needs some coaching. The Inner Game, the purest basis of workplace coaching, is predicated upon us recognising and eliminating the internal obstacles to our becoming what we may be, and fear is the greatest of those obstacles. If we expect to shift business from the Fear paradigm where it is ensconced now, into the Trust paradigm where it needs to be. Do we, ourselves, not have to make the shift first?

"If you wish to change the world, with whom do you start, yourself or others?"

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## UK ICF response to Sir John Whitmore's article

Richard Bentley

**John Whitmore presents a vision of a world built on trustful collaboration rather than divisive fear. What role can coaching play in realising that vision?**

Coaching is by its very nature a collaborative process focused on releasing human potential. The fact that an increasing number of organisations are embracing coaching is, therefore, in itself encouraging. As is the fact that the leading coaching associations in the UK are meeting regularly, and have been for the past two years, to identify and build on what brings them together rather than divides them.

Furthermore, on the global front, the International Coach Federation would not have grown to over 9,000 members in over 30 countries without extraordinary levels of collaboration.

Should we, perhaps, trust that this 'bottom up' process, despite its imperfections, could eventually build to become a key part of the shift from fear to trust that the world so badly needs? Are we in fact witnessing the process of 'emergence', so fascinatingly described in Steven Johnson's book of the same name, where a collective intelligence emerges when enough individual elements interact and organise themselves – even though no one is in charge?

Our current challenge as a profession seems to be finding the most effective way (to quote from ICF's own mission statement) 'to expand awareness of the contribution coaching is to the future of humankind'. To achieve this both coaches and coaching organisations need to be seen to deal with each other in an

atmosphere of collaboration and trust.

Perhaps the first quality we can model as coaches in seeking the way forward is humility – a recognition that our perspective is just one of many possible and that we need to engage in a productive dialogue with the business world to reach a deeper understanding of the potential benefits of coaching to organisations... and to society.

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