

# Freedom At Work

## The move toward self-responsibility in the corporate world

By John Whitmore

**C**orporate coaching means different things to different people; however, its most widely recognized form is executive coaching. This usually means that the client company contracts an external, independent coach for some half dozen coaching sessions of one to two hours with an executive over a period of several months. The focus of these sessions often starts in the boardroom, but soon broadens to embrace fundamental career and life choices, not infrequently stemming from the executive experiencing a lack of meaning and purpose. There are many variations on the executive coaching theme, but coaching at work may take other forms too – forms which may have a greater impact.

My coaching work with corporate clients over 25 years has led me to become more engaged in the transformation of the management style of organizations than in executive coaching. This entails a sea change from command and control to management behaviors rooted in the principles of high-performance coaching. During such an engagement, some executive coaching is often desirable and desired since the approval and maintenance of any change of management style must begin at the top,

and in action, not just in word. Top executives need to understand the purpose, principles and benefits of the coaching approach – indeed, need to have experienced them first-hand, if they are to provide the inspiration, impetus and support necessary. Real change, however, demands the full commitment of all staff in leadership, management, supervisory and training roles, and that is the challenge.

### One Company's Triumph

For any organization to shift from a traditional management culture to a performance coaching culture, considerable investment is required in time, money and courage. The latter is the hardest to come by. A hugely successful Brazilian conglomerate called Semco is one of the few and the first organizations to truly make this sort of change. Its original sole owner, Ricardo Semler, began the transformation process some 25 years ago. I recommend his first book, *Maverick*, which tells Semco's turbulent and triumphant story. After reading an early copy of my book, *Coaching for Performance*, Ricardo sent me a card to say that he had been using the principles of coaching without knowing it. Semco's success financially and in human terms is leg-

endary. Ricardo writes and speaks eloquently about it, and his books and lectures have inspired many senior executives, but when it comes to action they retreat, afraid to act and full of excuses.

Another way to describe this transformation is that of a paradigm shift from the common culture of fear to one of trust, but this description is daunting and no more palatable. It is a step too far for most corporate boards to contemplate. Even if they find the courage, they are likely to be thwarted by institutional shareholders to whom they are beholden. I have to acknowledge that few large corporations I have worked with, and there have been many, have been willing to enter into a process even remotely as ambitious as that of Semco.

### The Need for Change

Why is such big change necessary? For many reasons, but the first is that in the past decade, realities such as globalization, instant communication, economic instability, climate change and terrorism – to name but a few – have burst onto the global agenda. The collective needs and objectives of humanity are being thereby reshaped faster than ungainly corporations can change course. The effect

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of this is that, while they are probably modernizing faster than they ever have before, in relative terms they are falling further and further behind. It is the new agile smaller companies led by young entrepreneurs with a different management philosophy that are responding and will flourish.

The second and more fundamental reason is that the whole of humanity is reaching the stage of evolution, both individually and collectively, at which hierarchy and autocracy are losing authority as people in every culture increasingly demand more freedom of choice in their lives and at work. This leads ultimately to a far greater degree of self-responsibility. It is no coincidence that coaching, of which self-responsibility is the principal purpose and outcome, is in increasing demand in all its forms. It is an industry that

has grown up to meet this unstoppable trend and the need that it creates.

If these two primary reasons for change are insufficiently persuasive for some leaders to consider, then they and their organization are simply unprepared for the future and there is no value in adding other reasons until an awakening occurs. The gradual movement of corporations from hierarchy towards democracy has been in process for many years, but it has now become urgent. The greed of the few at the top, their fear of loss of control, the degradation of the environment and the increase in the wealth gap, have recently become ever more apparent and unacceptable. While the old order fights a rearguard action, positive change is in the air, and on the ground. Those corporate leaders who are awake to what is happening, large-

ly outside their control, are seeking alternative ways of doing business. The coaching support for leaders to develop their values, their vision, their courage, their innovation and their agility to act, is a vital part of the transformation of their companies.

### Emotional intelligence

MBA's and economic degrees are no longer the most important requirements of future leaders; they are but externalities that are readily available online. What is in greater need is the development of inner strengths and abilities that are not academic in nature. Daniel Goleman's research has demonstrated that emotional intelligence or emotional literacy is twice as important as academic, intellectual or technical knowledge for people to be successful in organizations these days.

For too long our emphasis has been on the external or the quantitative, rather than the internal or qualitative, and look where that has got us. Now is the time to restore the appropriate balance, and the coaching industry is specifically geared to fill the qualitative vacuum and mount a major challenge to the position held by old world consultancies, who sell, tell and bill, but often fail to fully engage the staff of their client organizations.

Nokia, T-Mobile and IKEA, each companies with whom I work, are huge but they are agile, young, modern and determined, and are working hard to keep pace with the social progress. Signs of similar changes are occurring in public sector institutions, education, health care, all kinds of training, local government, the rehabilitation of prisoners, even driver education (see sidebar).

The emerging shift from the subservient, convenient and automatic following of orders, to the expectation

## Risk vs. Self-responsibility

The most successful teenage pregnancy prevention program in the UK, called “Teens and Toddlers,” is not about instructing teenagers how to put condoms on bananas, but upon coaching them to develop their emotional intelligence and self-responsibility.

In another example, I am an advisor to a three-year European Union Commission project charged with recommending how driving instruction throughout Europe can best be replaced by coaching. The demand for this has come from the fact that a disproportionate percentage of young men between the ages of 17 and 23 are being killed on the road in all countries. The problem is their risk-rife attitudes at that age, and traditional driving instruction does nothing for that whatsoever, whereas coaching can. Again it is all about the development of self-responsibility.

As a result, there are 40,000 driving instructors in England alone that urgently need to be retrained to become driving coaches. Any volunteers?

Driving and having sex are perhaps the two most risky activities for our youth today. Sadly, our education systems have failed to prepare the ground for our children to cope with them safely, because the principles of, and the need for, self-responsibility to be instilled early have yet to be fully recognized.

of and demand for more choice by ordinary people at work and elsewhere in their lives, is the consequence of human evolutionary progress. It is being accelerated by the undeniable failure of leadership in so many fields, from climate change to international affairs.

### The demand for coaching

All reputable methods and schools of coaching hold awareness and responsibility – of and for self and others – to be the core objective of coaching, regardless of the coaching subject matter. It does not matter if coaching is for recreational or workplace performance, for education or training, or for quality of life issues such as the search for meaning and purpose, or for advanced self-development – these principles remain the same. Self-responsibility is here to stay unless evolution goes into reverse. Coaching is the only industry that is geared specifically for developing self-responsibility, and its skills will be in ever greater demand. The best forms of psychotherapy and spiritual teaching at either end of the human development spectrum are also based upon these same principles, but both are stigmatized in some eyes, and as such gain far less access.

Just as the number of coaches is increasing fast (the International Coach Federation is attracting record numbers of new members a month), so will their need to develop ways of serving wider sections of the public, and in large groups too. There are countless other equally numerous and even more stretching examples of work to be done in the interests of evolution, and of human lives. The coaching industry is in its infancy, going on adolescence; this is not meant in a derogatory way, but simply relative to its future growth potential.

Will it now rise to the challenge of our time, throw off its self-indulgent, limiting self-beliefs, embrace self-responsibility, and step up to the plate? I hope so, and what a great opportunity exists for us all! The “choice” of title for this magazine could not be more relevant for our time. •

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