

EXECUTIVE CORNER

Elio Vera interviews Sir John Whitmore

Background

Sir John Whitmore is Chairman of Performance Consultants International, the foremost provider of coaching, leadership development and performance improvement in the workplace globally. A pre-eminent thinker in leadership development and organizational change, he works with leading multinational corporations to establish coaching management cultures and leadership development programmes. He has written five books on leadership, coaching and sports, of which *Coaching for Performance* is the best known having sold 500,000 copies in 17 languages. Pioneer of Coaching and Leadership Development, honoured with the President's Award by International Coach Federation (ICF), rated as the Number One Business Coach by The Independent newspaper and as having had the most impact on the coaching profession by the Association for Coaching, Sir John Whitmore is one of the leading figures in the international coaching community with activities and operations globally. He is godfather and pioneer of coaching in the workplace, including training programmes to develop a coaching style of leadership and management, creating coaching cultures and executive coaching. Sir John Whitmore also delivers Transpersonal Coach Training for experienced coaches wanting to acquire leading-edge coaching principles and techniques to help their clients discover the power and effectiveness of who they are and create deep and meaningful change, broader perspectives on the challenges they face, and achieve higher performance and authentic leadership. Sir John Whitmore founded Performance Consultants with partners after originally forming The Inner Game in the UK following a period of studying and working with Tim Gallwey and Bob Kriegel in the USA. They were the first to formulate the coaching processes and introduce their approach to organizations. For over 30 years, Performance Consultants' experiential learning programmes have helped individuals in organizations to overcome the inner obstacles to human potential and high performance (e.g. fear, doubt, limiting beliefs) and to develop their own leadership qualities and ability to unlock potential and raise individual, team and organizational performance.

Elio Vera: In your extensive experience as a coach what forms and ways of coaching you consider are more valid for cross cultural management?

Sir John Whitmore: There is, and always will be, some different cross cultural interpretations and many other coaching books are now in circulation and the profession is growing fast. Some more recent books change and add components to coaching, sometimes based on their own particular cultural needs. I may disagree with some of interpretations but I seldom challenge them. It is also true that the practice of coaching will change as it "modernizes" in the ever changing business cultures and countries. I do not see that any of this is a problem. I do not want to say that there is one right way to ask coaching questions. I have tried to indicate that

people make different choices according to the circumstances at the time and the mood/feeling of the coachee and the ideas of the coach at that time. There is no right and wrong.

Elio Vera: Please share an interesting anecdote or case you have experienced in managing your company across cultures.

Sir John Whitmore: I had a very interesting experience many years ago when I ran an early training for an executive team in France. They were friendly and talkative before we started but then they hardly spoke and just took notes. In the coffee break they were talkative with each other and made phone calls – a modern disease! I asked them why their behavior had changed. They told me that teaching in France was very hierarchical and professor was always right. “We don’t ever argue with him/her”. I said that after the coffee break we will do it the English way, meaning that they could/should question, challenge, and disagree with me if they wanted to. They laughed a lot and enjoyed it very much saying that they wanted to do it that way in future. They agreed that workplace coaching should not be done in a professorial way, and everyone should be more egalitarian. That is true for coaching anyway.

Elio Vera: In your company do you expressly encourage the creation of a feeling of mutual proximity, a spirit of group, a sense of belongings?

Sir John Whitmore: In our trainings we always try to maintain good “open people skills” that is good for both coaching and business relationships and efficiency regardless of nationality. However, I am sure there are a few countries and cultures that such friendship would be a step too far at the moment and I would respect that.

Elio Vera: According to your effort to ensure good open people skills, does it exist in your company a specific programme or activity to encourage these attitudes?

Sir John Whitmore: If that is what we believe in, that is what we need to practice ourselves. I have discussed this with my two PAs, who are now my equal friends as people, even though I have a different workplace title.

Elio Vera: In your experience as a coach how is it possible to develop the individual skills and to encourage the intelligence of the employees to express themselves regardless of their national cultures?

Sir John Whitmore: Rewards are done by giving trust and responsibility and accepting that mistakes sometimes occur for all of us, and that is necessarily allowable. There should be no national discrimination at all. People are people regardless of their nationality. My mother, father, two wives were all different nationalities. All people do things differently whatever country they come from. Good coaching is very natural and spontaneous and is not rule driven – though many coaches fall into that belief trap. No coaching has been in any way inconvenient to me. I always respond to and try to meet the needs of the coachee. The more experience that one has had of a variety of people at work and the different ways that they see things and act, the better one can allow differences and know that there is not one right way to do anything. What about the way that one athlete, Fosberry, changed the way the whole world now does the high jump – the Fosberry Flop. As a qualified commercial airline pilot, a successful racing car

driver (British and European Champion) of many different types of car, I am very comfortable with a variety of activities and different ways to doing them. Coaching is that way too. I am an expert but I change the way I do it to learn more, to see what works best. I even did a simulated test flight moon landing with the Captain of Apollo 12, Pete Conrad, the third man to walk on the moon. The more things you do, the better you do things. Far too many people at work do the same task repetitively and so their skill and variety is limited. Work is badly organized by most managers – far too repetitive. They are not good at managing themselves, because of too much repetition.

Elio Vera: The new IT world, like social networks and the “Cloud”, what role has been having in the cross cultural management inside your international group?

Sir John Whitmore: All the IT button pushing games that take the place of interactions with other kids and employees, are quantitative knowledge activities. What we need much more these days is qualitative wisdom, which enables us to do the right things with our knowledge. Knowledge without wisdom can be very dangerous. The seed of a tree, an acorn for example, is much more clever and important than the chip in your mobile phone that you think is so clever. That seed costs nothing and yet it can produce a 50 meter high tree that lasts for 100 years. Can you stupid phone chip do that? Of course not. Nature is infinitely more clever than modern IT. Wake up, humanity!

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