MEMORIES OF SIR JOHN WHITMORE

The great John Whitmore, grandfather of executive coaching and creator of the globally known GROW model, has sadly died at the age of 80. He was an inspiration to countless coaches around the world and combined powerful presentations with thoughtful writing and generous support of coaching and coaches everywhere. He will be greatly missed. In this special memorial spread, coaches pay tribute to Whitmore’s lasting impact.

‘I had the chance to meet John Whitmore on several occasions. I feel privileged and honoured to have known him. I have great respect for his pioneering role in coaching and for his deep humanity. John kindly invited me to speak at a conference he co-organised in Australia in 2008. I remember with fondness several stimulating long conversations we had, first in Sydney and later in Brussels, Prague and elsewhere. I have always valued his vision of coaching as a vehicle to unleash human potential in a purposeful way. I admired his frankness and humour unbound by social conventions when he was challenging managers to act responsibly, caring for the world at large. The superb preface he generously wrote in my book Global Coaching will stay with me forever and his memory will always be a blessing.’

Philippe Rosinski

‘My memory of John was of being a co-facilitator with him on a two-day “Coaching for Managers” workshop in a hotel in the Midlands countryside. Working alongside him was a privilege. On the second day we opened the doors at the back of the room to go out into the hotel grounds to carry out one of John’s favourite activities for coaching practice: participants co-coaching each other in tennis. It was a lovely sunny day and it went well with more balls going over than into the net.

On returning to the room we discovered that John’s laptop, which we were using for the PowerPoint, was missing, stolen by some opportunist thieves. Somehow he managed the whole business calmly, which would probably have totally thrown many of us. He demonstrated how to cope with the unexpected by adapting immediately and the workshop continued almost seamlessly. A real role model for all of us in the room.’

Jim Borritt

‘I was very saddened to hear of the death of Sir John Whitmore.

I came across his work initially through his book Coaching for Performance when I was working towards a diploma in coaching and mentoring back in 2001/2. His writing was lucid and engaging and struck me as coming from someone with enormous personal and professional integrity. The principles, models and ideas in that book became the primary influence on how my own coaching approach and style developed, not only in the initial stages of my work as a coach but continuing over the last fifteen years. I was utterly thrilled therefore to meet Sir John in Oxford in 2003 when he presented me with my diploma.

Looking back at his work, his optimism and humanity shine through. In his own words, coaching “is a different way of viewing people, a far more optimistic way than most of us are accustomed to, and it results in a different way of treating them...Coaching is a nicer way to do better business.” What an inspirational message. Thank you Sir John for your unique contribution to the Coaching profession.’

Edwina Parker

‘Finding the German version of John’s book Coaching for Performance in a Cologne book shop in the nineties was the main trigger for me to enter the coaching field. I had always been looking for a name and expression for all the various, diverse thoughts and approaches that I had identified as useful and had started to work with in Germany. John’s book gave all this a name and explanation, added much more and gave my work, in this way, a professional home, a professional field to liaise with. I got in touch with him very early, was very pleased about his early and intensive

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collaboration with the Association for Coaching, was inspired by his coaching work and other initiatives (e.g. the BeTheChange Conferences) and also had the pleasure to work in his core team for a while. I remember him well: John was always truly committed to making a positive difference in the world, and was such a kind and humble person at the same time. He was authentic in what he did, and showed backbone and conviction. He invited and encouraged people to make up their own mind, and welcomed diversity in opinions and approaches. So you could also argue and discuss with him very well. He was a great inspiration. His legacy is absolutely extraordinary and outstanding. My deepest sympathy with his family and friends and colleagues.’

Frank Bresser

‘Sir John was central to inspiring my own coaching journey. I met him a number of times including when he inspired us all at the AC Conference. He was a master at helping us to bring about positive change in ourselves and others by simplifying the coaching concept. It is indeed about two things – awareness and responsibility. John was a passionate tennis player for over 40 years, and his early work with Tim Gallwey revolutionised the way we approached the sport with the Inner Game. Thank you John. You will be sadly missed.’

Peter Dunkin

‘I was very sad to hear of John Whitmore’s death – and also reminded of what an inspiring influence he has been from the very beginning of my coaching journey and has continued to be. John was the person in coaching that I most admired as a human being, as a professional and as a dedicated influence for change in our world.

Back in 1988, when I first read Coaching for Performance, what struck me most, and has stayed with me, was the depth of John’s vision. He saw coaching as a vehicle for human evolution from hierarchy and control, to personal awareness and responsibility leading to contribution in an interdependent world. Wow! That beats a primary focus of increasing the bottom line.

I watched yesterday for the first time an interview with John by Darren Robson and found it wonderful and very freeing from the mental constraints of “doing it right” according to some other coach or organisation.

I had already been coaching for some time when I did a four-day training with John at the Findhorn Foundation, where his ex-wife Diana was a trustee. He had a tennis racket in the room and challenged us to figure out what the grip was that one Wimbledon champion had used for both forehand and backhand. Every session I approached him with a new idea for it – none of which was the one. However, he seemed to enjoy the fact that I kept persevering and at the end gave me a prize of the tennis book written by his son Jason with John’s help.

A few years later I wrote my own book, The Self Factor, and asked John if he would write the foreward. Despite his incredibly busy schedule, he wrote a foreward that added to the book and showed that he not just written something quick to oblige. In it he shared the note that his then five-year-old son, Jason, had written for John just before John competed in his first motor race after 20 years. The note said “bleve in your self”. I think this can be a message to remember and honour him with.’

Duncan Coppock
PLAYING THE FOOL

Hetty Einzig, Editor of Coaching Perspectives, reflects on John Whitmore’s seminal role in pushing the boundaries of coaching beyond technique to disrupt assumptions in the business world and speak truth to power.

‘I’m not here to make friends this morning – the reason for this is I’m going to push the edge a little...’ With these words and his signature chuckle, Sir John Whitmore, grandfather of contemporary coaching, begins the keynote presentation at the International Coaching Federation conference of 2008. The talk continues conventionally enough, with mention of those coaching stalwarts ‘challenge and support’. He ambles across the stage, hands in the pockets of his baggy cords, scratching his neck amiably, and then all of a sudden you find yourself listening to the following... all we have to do to ensure the extinction of all life on this planet is to do nothing... we live in a world that... is dependent on us consuming. We have moved from a presentation on coaching into different territory entirely – not that he didn’t warn us, but the thrill and shock are palpable. He continues in the same vein, an eloquent lament for our planet and a vigorous call to action.

Mary would think John’s broadside against the state of the world was misplaced at a coaching conference, where politics has no place in coaching. But I believe he was right... John’s aim was to disrupt us from our coaching comfort zone of neutrality into a state of wakefulness that should be uncomfortable, as it provokes us to rethink and reassess our assumptions. As one of the most well known and respected of the first generation business coaches, Whitmore earned his right to extemporise. John valued coaching highly - and he thought we could do better. He invited his audience to cross their comfort edge in order to bring greater purpose to their coaching. Whitmore was the right person to provoke this discomfort: he knew his audience well, and they thought they knew him too.

No one who heard Whitmore address an audience of bankers, industrialists or policy makers, or military forgot it. Whitmore was a Wise Fool: he felt impelled to speak out, to tell the truth as he saw it, to strip away the fine words – ‘let’s be honest here, banking is really gambling – with very large sums of our money.’ As a member not only of Britain’s aristocracy but as a coaching grandee, it carried special weight when John flouted those trappings for the guise of the Fool – disruptor and challenger of the status quo. His address was intended as a wake up call. And it hit its mark. We were awake and listening.

Whitmore’s life work was to rattle certainties and challenge assumptions, to awaken sleepwalkers and urge them to engage with the work to be done to make a better world. Based on a firm foundation of parental models of service to the community, Whitmore’s coaching was shaped by his experiences at the Esalen Institute, a 1960s hub of exploration into the new sciences and psychologies, incorporating Eastern spiritual philosophy and radical politics, plus his training with Roberto Assagioli in transpersonal psychology, which successfully marries the spiritual, moral and psychological into a practical psychology of living. These roots underpin his coaching model GROW and his significant contribution to establishing coaching as a prime support for performance and development in business.

I worked with John from 2002, eventually becoming a partner at Performance Consultants, the company he founded in the early 1980s with Olympic gold medallists David Hemery and David Whitaker. Our paths crossed earlier. The Artemis Trust, where I was Research and Development Director, funded the first pilot programmes run by Whitmore and David Hemery in 1986 at the National Sports Centre at Bisham Abbey. Participating in those pilot workshops at Bisham Abbey was great fun. In drizzling rain we stood in teams of four on planks of wood tied together with rope as makeshift skis, competing to reach the finish line first; we built platforms and piled aboard, trying to scale the others’ fortress; we played group games, explored feelings, fell about, climbed trees, talked and laughed a lot. Now standard team building stuff, at the time it was pretty unusual to ask respectable businessmen (and a few women) to set aside their suits and play games. Some participants were wide-eyed, and even, privately, a little dismissive. As sports psychologists and experienced sportsmen, Whitmore and Hemery understood that through physically playing together we would be nudged to let drop our guard; we would step out of our everyday selves and discover something new about how we related to each other, about ourselves and about leadership.

Play emphasises immediacy. Once engaged in play, the present moment is all. We are engrossed, time stands still, expands, conflates, and all time is encapsulated in this instant. The Fool is the master of this kind of instant transformation, of the gestalt that changes everything. The Fool is not a character to be played all the time in all situations, but if we can become familiar and comfortable with this role, then he will accompany both coach and client along the journey, engineering breakthroughs and providing air and space for creativity. If as coaches we can have the Fool available to us to interrupt the stuck records of past stories or to call forth a different instrument from the orchestra, then we will also enable the risk-taking that may provoke insight and growth, or even change the rules of the game. John taught me this and I remain so grateful for his insights, support and colleagueship over those years. May his influence live on.

This article is adapted from an essay in The Future of Coaching: vision, leadership and responsibility in a transforming world by Hetty Einzig. Publ. Routledge 2017.

FAMOUS COACH OR RESPONSIBLE ACTIVIST?

In 2012, ICF Turkey Chapter held a ‘Coaching Conference’. Umut Ahmet Taracki sat in the front row so he could listen clearly to the main speaker, the legendary coach Sir John Whitmore. ‘I was ready to hear how to be a good coach… then John started to speak:’

‘I will not tell you the truth today. Because nobody knows the truth. It is impossible; all the facts are distorted by us. We distort everything that we learned by our paradigms. Old learning blocks new learning. What we have learned up to now, has not brought happiness to people. So new learning is needed. But before we start we must forget what we know. I call this unlearning.

I was shocked by the words. I came here to learn something but he recommended unlearning to me. So I took a deep breath and tried to forget my knowledge.

‘The system is collapsing. Consuming constantly; this is not a sustainable approach. As the consumption race continues, it is not possible to move forward together. Leaders do not see it; they are also collapsing because they cannot learn anything new. They need “Unlearning”. Coaches can help them do it. They can help leaders let go of old learnings and learn new ones’.

Wow, it was a double shock! One minute ago, I was the one to unlearn but now I was the coach who is responsible for unlearning. So in this way I prepared myself for a new level of understanding.

‘Responsibility and awareness are two factors that coaches are trying to create. These factors can be used to recover the system. Be aware! Technological know-how has already passed our mind’s capacity to accumulate. Our mind is behind us. Trainers should notice this. Be aware! Hierarchy has collapsed. Instead of hierarchy a new system should be established where everyone takes their own responsibility. People who just do what they are told can never change the system’.

I was thinking if coaches would try to create responsibility and awareness, they should start with themselves. But how? I didn’t have to wait long. John explained it simply, clearly:

‘What drives you to work? Fear, failure, money or the drive to finish things on time? These approaches encourage fear. Fear must turn into trust.’

Than he gave us a road map. A new understanding of coaching. A new way of thinking:

Five years on he has passed away. But he left us a way to move on. I remember him through his words… He was not just a coach but also a responsible activist. John Whitmore: rest in peace. Your words remain with us to create new activists and new coaches.

Umut Ahmet Tarakci
Chair of AC in Turkey
Sir John Whitmore, second Baronet Whitmore, was a huge influence on me in my life, both as a coach and in motor racing. In the coaching community, John was rightly regarded as a pioneering icon, but perhaps his accomplishments in motorsport are less well known.

John began racing in 1958 after a few years competing in the British RAC and Monte Carlo rallies. 1959 was a very successful year for him, as he won ten out of twelve club races in a Lotus Elite, and at the invitation of Colin Chapman (Lotus founder) John partnered Jim Clark at Le Mans 24-hour race, finishing tenth overall and second in class.

By 1961 John had won the British Saloon Car Championship (now known as the British Touring Car Championship) in a Mini, and in 1963 he very nearly won it again. During this period, perhaps John’s coaching skills were starting to form as he helped various ‘stars’ such as Steve McQueen to develop their racing driver skills.

By 1964 John’s talents had led him to win the 1600cc class of the European Touring Car Championship, in addition to becoming a Ford factory driver in the infamous Ford GT40s. His speed and versatility were highly respected. John was acutely aware of the dangers in motor racing, so by 1965 he retired as a racing driver to focus on his family, his new interest in flying, and ultimately on the creation of his coaching business, Performance Consultants.

My abiding memory of John as a coach and racing driver was his story of when, aged 52, many years after he had retired from racing, he accepted an invitation to drive a ferocious 8.1-litre McLaren M8F Can-Am car in three historic races. Having finished third at Montlhéry, and second at Donington Park, he was intent on winning at Silverstone, his final race. In the final hour before the race John was anxiously pacing up and down when his six-year-old son, Jason, asked him ‘Why are you nervous?’ Jason then wrote a note for his Dad, which said: ‘Believe in yourself.’ John was incredibly moved by his young son and as he later joked, ‘Fortunately Jason hadn’t been to school at that point, because if he had he would probably just have written, “Good luck Dad.” I thought, even if I can’t believe in myself for me, I can do it for him’. And John won the race!

Thank you, John Whitmore - for your legacy and for being one of my inspirations.

Clive Steeper
READERS’ VIEWPOINTS

A DAY WITH A MASTER – SIR JOHN WHITMORE IN ABERDEEN

Every now and again in life, an opportunity arises where you encounter someone of importance. More often than not, this ends up in a missed opportunity through security, for example, or perhaps timing, or not having the confidence to go there.

On 22 May 2012, that opportunity arose for me (somewhat engineered by myself!) as Project Manager for an Association for Coaching event being held in Aberdeen that day. Having arranged to transfer Sir John to his venue, I set up a breakfast meeting with a colleague.

In true coaching style, the conversation goes something like this. In life, you get one opportunity, if you take it you will be fulfilled, if you don’t, you will forever reflect on what might have been. I have chosen to take this opportunity as I have considered the ‘What’s the worst that could happen?’ So I ask for a photograph, a signature in the first coaching book I bought – Coaching for Performance – and a short interview with some key questions based on a lifetime of experience in the coaching and business world. The response is a very polite; ‘Thank you. I would be delighted,’ on all counts.

THE INTERVIEW

Question – What would be your all time favourite Coaching question?
A – ‘Who are you?’

Question – If you had one thing left in your life to change through coaching, what would that be?
A – To fix the world and all that is wrong about it. (Carbon emissions, greed and corruption)

Question – What are the treasures from your life that you would use to go forward?
A – Achievement in sport through a choice made by me and not driven by parents, flying aeroplanes, and finding self in a life-threatening situation in a strange place and learning how to handle not knowing anything.

Question – What advice would you give developing coaches or people aspiring to be coaches?
A – Not only to ask nice questions, but to have confidence to challenge clients, keeping this appropriate to the person (in rapport)

Question – As a qualified sports psychologist, what is your theory for success?
A – The ‘Inner Game’ principle of Focus

CONCLUSION

I found Sir John to be a warm, passionate and highly ethical person with very strong human values. Through his presentations, he delivered a genuine care for what is going on in the world today; in Transpersonal Coaching a skill to feel the ‘greater good’ in self and life, with some great examples of how this has shaped his existence; and even at 75 years old the motivation to make a genuine difference in the world.

‘Never judge a book by its cover’ is a great metaphor in Coaching, and my own greatest successes have come through using this and the ‘seek-to-understand’ philosophy of management writer Steven Covey in practice. Only then can you truly make the difference to the people who seek your services.

Brian Shanks