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## *What is an Adequate Knowledge Base for Executive Coaching?*

Joel M. Rothaizer & Sandra L. Hill

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# What is an Adequate Knowledge Base for Executive Coaching?

Joel M. Rothaizer & Sandra L. Hill

*The authors of this article are organizational consultants. Rothaizer and Hill work as organizational effectiveness consultants, leadership development specialists and executive coaches. They also conduct organizational assessments and customize interventions such as teambuilding and training, depending upon the needs of their client organizations. The foundation of all their work is exactly the same, whether working with large-scale organizational change or one-on-one with an executive client. In this article, Rothaizer and Hill convey their first-hand observations of the harm that can be caused when practitioners let their perspectives be limited to the level of intervention, e.g., doing executive coaching and not paying attention to what they know as organizational consultants, e.g., the power of the organizational culture. In response to these observations, the authors offer a living systems perspective on working with organizations, as well as describing ways in which they engage their clients through the Clear Impact approach to executive coaching in the processes of contextual thinking, leadership versatility, developmental thinking, and personal awareness.*

“Executive Coaches without an organizational consulting background will be inherently limited in their overall effectiveness, as will those without a deep understanding of human development and human differences.” Is the above statement true?

The title for this article is derived from an article in the *American Psychologist* in August, 1979, entitled, “What is an Adequate Knowledge Base for Clinical Psychology?” and written by one of us (Rothaizer, 1979). It was a response to a conceptual model that had been presented for using psychology to alleviate human distress and promote human welfare. That model presented four strategies (clinical psychology, community mental health, community psychology, and public policy psychology), and asserted that each required a different knowledge base. So, for example, clinical psychologists needed to understand traditional psychopathology and individual differences, but did not need to appreciate the political and sociological implications of systems of deviance control, this being delegated to the community and public policy psychologists. Joel argued that this was confusing level of intervention with the conceptual basis for that intervention. He wrote that all psychologists, no matter what their level of intervention, needed a broad conceptual framework from which to work, and that the lack of such would inherently limit their work. He then gave some practical examples of how the limitations of a more narrow background could show up.

In this article we’ll describe the core foundation or pillars of all the work we do, in order to be catalysts for our clients’ success on all levels, whether that client is an organization, a team, or an individual.

## INTRODUCTION TO A LIVING SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

As Meg Wheatley (1998, p. 63) observed,

Our organizations rarely reflect our need for meaning, connection, and growth. Organizations can keep searching for new ties that bind us to them—new incentives, rewards, punishments. But organizations could accomplish so much more if they relied on the passion evoked when we connect to others, purpose to purpose. So many of us want to be more. So many of us hunger to discover who we might become together.

Let's first talk about *Living Systems* on an organizational level, and then we'll discuss the relevance to executive coaching as well. Understanding organizations through the lens of Living Systems is extraordinarily helpful in effectively guiding their evolution, enabling them to become more sustainably flexible, resilient, agile, and intelligent. Such a dynamic organization can respond more effectively in an environment of increased uncertainty, facing complex problems that don't easily lend themselves to simple solutions. From a Living Systems perspective deep engagement comes from organizational members finding *meaning, connection, and growth* through their work. We assist our clients in understanding that these come from clarifying *identity* (who we are), having an *inspirational purpose* (not the kind that just gets framed at the front door, but rather one that engages hearts, minds, and spirits), and identifying *values* that live as guiding beacons within the organization. Also arising from a Living Systems perspective is the profound importance of *contextual thinking*, addressing the whole before focusing on the parts. In understanding how to address root causes rather than energy-sapping symptoms, you can achieve the greatest impact with the least expenditure of organizational resources.

### Scientific underpinnings

A Living Systems approach is based on much of the new science research in physics and biology (see Meg Wheatley's *Leadership and the New Science*. 2006). It is contrasted with a *Mechanistic* approach whose roots are in seventeenth century Newtonian physics, which later became the foundation of the Industrial Revolution and then *scientific management*.

### How are they different?

The Mechanistic perspective sees people as machines and parts of machines. It tries to reduce everything into parts that can be analyzed and controlled. This orientation sees employees as operating on the principle of inertia (second law of thermodynamics): People are inherently lazy and will only do their work if poked, prodded, rewarded, punished, and/or wrapped with reams of rules and regulations. Without such control, they will do nothing (or worse!). For a Mechanistic image, think of employees as chess pieces moved around the board by leadership.

*The good news is we can interrupt the impact of Mechanistic thinking if we are aware that it exists in us and in our organizations, and if we have models that enable us to align our organizations with a more adaptive, fluid, and integrated perspective.*

From a Living Systems perspective, people are viewed as inherently seeking *meaning*, *connection*, and *growth* in their lives and in their work, and to the extent that they find it through organizational *identity*, *purpose*, and *values*, they'll naturally be enthusiastic and engaged. Living Systems (as contrasted with Mechanistic ones) see relationships, connection, and whole systems as the primary units rather than individuals, and they focus on collaboration and generation of collective wisdom rather than pure command-and-control.

### **How pervasive is the Mechanistic perspective?**

It's important to recognize the characteristics of Mechanistic systems because they are so pervasive, though sometimes in subtle form, even in the most seemingly enlightened organizational cultures. It is also critically important to recognize them because they account for much of the dismal state of employee engagement throughout the world. Many leaders, some overtly but many more inadvertently, are still looking through mechanistic lenses. We say "inadvertently" because very few leaders would consciously agree with this mechanistic perception of their employees. Yet, without consciously exploring the assumptions underlying organizational models, they perpetuate the mechanistic myths. Many would be surprised that much terminology in organizations is Mechanistic and comes from the 19th century military, such as command-and-control, hierarchy, front lines, line and staff functions, chain of command, and officers. The good news is we can interrupt the impact of Mechanistic thinking if we are aware that it exists in us and in our organizations, and if we have models that enable us to align our organizations with a more adaptive, fluid, and integrated perspective.

### **How do the two perspectives view employee retention and engagement?**

From a Mechanistic perspective, retention and engagement are done *to* employees. This underlying belief results in leaders attending workshops and consulting experts on how to further engage employees. They then sit in meetings and make new policies aimed at stemming the tide of employee disengagement. Yet, despite the importance placed on these topics, organizations on a worldwide level are truly in crisis, with employee engagement currently at an all-time low of 26% (as measured by the Gallup Organization), because most organizational cultures, including their leaders, perpetuate the old model. For example, stock options and other benefits may retain employees, but won't engage them. Organizations are left with more "dead in place" employees who are disengaged but can't leave for fear of worse options awaiting them. Further, as we face a world of increasing uncertainty and anxiety, the most natural response from a Mechanistic perspective is to centralize and assert more authority, reverting to a more command-and-control model of leadership, yet this is a root cause of disengagement throughout our organizations. From a Living

Systems perspective, engagement and retention are done *with* employees, rather than done *to*, collaboratively and sustainably.

### **Shifting perspective**

It is exciting to reintroduce our clients to Living Systems. We say reintroduce because when most people hear of Living Systems they naturally “recognize” them. This perspective has just been obscured by more pervasive ideas that are anything but natural, though common, in almost every aspect of organizations. However, clearly the real value of becoming reacquainted with Living Systems is being able to translate the concepts into practical reality in the organization’s system/culture and into the leadership styles of our executive coaching clients.

### **Mechanistic thinking has value, too**

In order to handle the complexity they inevitably face each day, it’s important for leaders to shift from “either/or” to “yes and” thinking. Consistent with that, we are not suggesting that there is no value in mechanistic thinking. For example, we are Certified Practitioners and a Licensed Consulting Firm in Holacracy (Robertson, 2009), in our view, the most effective organizational operating system we have ever seen. It incorporates the best of hierarchy and mechanistic thinking, not as a way to dominate people and processes, but rather as a way to ensure that top leadership takes responsibility for consistently holding the bigger picture, including the larger purpose and values of the organization, and driving that through the rest of the organization so that there is clear alignment. It combines that with the best of Living Systems, the kind of engagement and sustainable productivity that comes from self-governing teams.

### **Relevance to executive coaching**

How might a Living Systems perspective be relevant to an executive coach? Some possibilities include these: We said the Mechanistic perspective is much more pervasive than people would think. Our guess is that most coaches who read the above description considered that they embody a Living Systems perspective. But have you ever used a concept like *coachability* to assert that a client isn’t coachable? *This belief that coachability rests only in the client, rather than in the coach/client/organization system as well, is highly Mechanistic.* So the first potential value is continually looking for these orientations within ourselves.

Assisting our coaching clients in examining the lenses through which they see the world is profoundly impactful in facilitating their ability to be more effective with their organizations and teams. The most effective, fulfilled, engaged, and deeply purposeful leaders are ones that look through eyes of connection rather than separation. For example, they are the ones that take healthy ownership for results rather than blaming or complaining.

*From a Living Systems perspective, engagement and retention are done with employees, rather than done to, collaboratively and sustainably.*

Life is inherently unfulfilling without *meaning, connection, and growth*. This is a useful model for our coaching clients to examine their own lives, as well as the conditions they create for others. Asking ourselves and our clients, “Who am I?” (*identity*), “Why am I here?” (*purpose*), and “What truly matters to me?” (*values*) is a concise and powerful model for guiding our actions. What other implications can you think of?

### **CONTEXTUAL THINKING: THE FOREST, NOT JUST THE TREES**

The single most important perspective that arises from Living Systems is *contextual thinking* or *understanding the impact of environment on results*. It is a vital leadership competency, as well as the perspective that enables us to assist our clients in consciously guiding the evolution of high performance cultures. For example, imagine a car mechanic tells you that one of your tires is wearing very unevenly. You wouldn't just replace that tire. Why? Because you know you have to first get the car in alignment. Otherwise, a new tire will also wear very unevenly. Yet, in our organizations, when someone isn't performing well most leaders seek to only correct that employee's performance or look for a new employee, rather than first considering what was out of alignment in the organization/group context that might have led the first employee to be struggling. Assessing and addressing the internal and external contexts in the organization, team, or individual, rather than just looking directly at the organization, team or individual, is the essence of contextual thinking. For example, minimum requirements for a context that maximizes the possibility of success of a team include: (1) an aim aligned with the larger organization's purpose; (2) members who are the “right people in the right jobs,” with clearly defined, mutually agreed upon and aligned roles and goals; and (3) with sufficient resources and autonomy to make a difference. Common symptoms associated with the lack of any of these include interpersonal conflict, team and individual performance problems, and low morale (to name a few).

#### **What is an organizational culture?**

It is sometimes described as the *personality* or *operating system* of an organization and guides in large part how people think, act, and feel. There is always an organizational culture. Without an intentionally developed culture, the culture has a powerful though unexamined impact. In the words of Harvard developmental psychologist Bob Kegan, the organization is *subject* to this unexamined culture and at its effect, similar to the unexamined subconscious of an individual. As such, much time and energy is wasted in organizations setting futile goals and chasing symptoms, because the root cause of so much of organizational behavior lies within its culture. Again in the words of Bob Kegan, when the culture has been examined, it becomes *object* and visible, giving the organization an opportunity to make conscious choices.

### **What is contextual thinking and why do we place so much emphasis on it?**

Simply put, it is about a shift in perception, looking first to the organizational culture for cause rather than to the individuals within it. Contextual thinking is needed to understand some of the most important reasons why organizations operate as they do, why people behave as they do, and how to most effectively influence performance and behavior. This is often called *systemic thinking*, but we found that term has become muddled. Most leaders and consultants claim to think systemically, yet most do not adequately understand systems or apply the power of the context. The internal context is the culture (including subcultures) operating within an organization (impacting purpose, values, norms, leadership, structure, practices, and processes), while the external context is that which surrounds the organization, the environment in which it operates (economy, market forces, etc.). Both are major factors in determining its likelihood of success or failure. Yet most organizations have focused much more on the impact of the external context(s) in which they exist than they have focused on developing an internal context (organizational culture) which will help them achieve their desired results. The irony is that the organization can have the greatest impact on internal context, while the external context is only under their influence at best.

What often happens instead of contextual thinking? Organizations have their “stories.” They are called stories because they have a life of their own that builds over time as they are told and retold, usually corroborated by many as the “way it is.” These stories tend to focus, among other things, on the behavior and/or performance of certain individuals, teams, etc. and rarely reflect an awareness of the context in which the stories take place. Looking for a scapegoat or blaming individuals and subgroups for what is actually driven by the culture can cause irreparable damage and severely limit the success of an organization and potentially undermine any change efforts. This mistaken attribution of root causes, also known as the *Fundamental Attribution Error* (FAE; see Gladwell, 2002), seriously detracts from the conscious development of a high performance culture.

### **What is the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE)?**

A large amount of research consistently shows that when an individual, group, or team within an organization acts in a particular way, we tend to *overattribute* that to internal characteristics, personality traits, motivations, etc. and *underattribute* it to the impact of the context(s) in which they operate. The FAE derives its name from this misattribution of primary cause, leading those in organizations to focus on symptoms rather than root causes.

### **Our approach to organizational culture**

There is always an existing organizational culture that is driving behavior and performance, whether examined or not. We assist

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our clients in separating symptoms from root causes. They then consciously build organizational cultures that align what matters most at multiple levels and with multiple stakeholders. In addition, by training leaders and others in how to think contextually, they become more skillful in their roles, and more able to take healthy ownership for results, thus greatly reducing energy-sapping blame-and-victim thinking and behavior. A final key element is the development of a viable and inspirational organizational purpose, one that can engage people's hearts, minds, and spirits.

### **Our latest metaphors: The “Bad Fish!”**

#### **Approach<sup>®</sup> and “Pond Thinking”<sup>®</sup>**

We're always looking for new ways to present contextual thinking to our clients. We also know that when you change language you change thinking, and then behavior, and ultimately you profoundly impact the culture. Now we present a picture of some fish swimming in a pond. We ask, “If some of those fish started swimming awkwardly, or were turned over on their backs, would you blame the fish?” People respond, “Of course not. We'd check the pH of the pond, the nutrients, look for any toxic runoff, etc.” And then we say, “But in your organizations you blame the fish instead of asking what in the pond might be causing them to behave as they do!” We call this the “Bad Fish!” approach, and contrast it to “Pond Thinking.” These terms have caught on with our clients, and are actively changing thinking, and then behavior. They've proven to be sufficiently novel and intriguing to be “sticky.” Of course, this does not mean that it is not important to *also* hold individuals accountable for their behavior and performance; it means that if context is not considered first inaccurate assessment of the issue or situation is likely to take place.

It is also necessary for our clients to know *how* to recognize the elements of, and then develop, a “High Performance Pond.” It is clear that some of those conditions are generic, such as clearly defined purpose and values developed to impact and address external contextual needs and conditions, effective leadership, effective strategy and goals, supportive operating structure and system, and the right people in the right jobs. Some other elements are specific to individual clients and situations.

The key point here is that it is not enough to know the importance of contextual thinking. It is also essential to know what it takes to ensure the organizational culture (and subcultures within it) are catalysts for effective performance and engagement. Once we are clear what our clients want to achieve we complete an organizational assessment, including interviewing internal and external stakeholders for perceptions of strengths and challenges, assessing operating systems and structures for their alignment with desired results, and adding other relevant assessments as needed. We then collaborate with our clients in designing the most efficient and effective ways to address current reality and achieve sustainably higher engagement and results.



**Relevance to executive coaching**

Hopefully this is already clear. What Sandra called *second generation coaches* in our first *IJCO*<sup>™</sup> article (Hill & Rothaizer, 2007) often like to say something like, “My clients have all the answers within them.” We know that this is a very limited and incomplete perspective. We sometimes like to say, instead, tongue-in-cheek, “We firmly believe that our clients always have the answers within themselves. Except when they don’t.” The *second generation* approach sees teaching as something that’s antithetical to coaching. But our clients can’t see through contextual thinking lenses until we’ve presented that model to them. In other words, they “don’t know what they don’t know” or haven’t been exposed to. Presenting a model through which to see the world isn’t telling someone what to do. Once the model is presented, they then most likely have the opportunity to take a broader perspective and have a view more accurate than their previous way of seeing the world. They can then explore the implications of their new insights. As we have said above, we’ve found that assisting our executive coaching clients in integrating Pond Thinking into their leadership is likely the single most impactful gift we can offer them.

It is also not enough for coaches to think contextually. They also have to understand what contextual factors to take into consideration. This will guide their questioning, as they and their clients explore current reality. Assisting their clients to think contextually will then empower them to identify root causes rather than flailing at symptoms.

**LEADERSHIP VERSATILITY**

What is the common approach to leadership development? Organizations need to design an overall leadership development strategy, and then integrate it into all aspects of their organizational culture. Many companies promote or hire individuals for leadership positions, because they were experts at the knowledge work of the company within which they work, rather than because of their leadership potential. Often these companies then provide little guidance on how to lead. Companies that do provide leadership development are left with the dilemma of deciding which of the many competency models to adopt. Often those competency models have an overwhelming number of competencies, with little guidance on which are most important. It’s like a leader we once worked with who divided the priorities of his direct reports into *A*, *B*, and *C*. The problem was that the average number of *A* priorities was fifteen to twenty! And to make matters worse, the competencies within these models are often difficult to make sense of or understand how to address.

Our experience tells us that leaders must be visionary while promoting execution. They must also be prepared to take a strong stand when appropriate, while ensuring that all employees have the opportunity to make a difference.

*There is always an organizational culture. Without an intentionally developed culture, much time and energy is wasted in organizations setting futile goals and chasing symptoms.*

### **What's the essence of effective leadership?**

We have found a model that reflects what we see as the essential elements of leadership. *Versatile Leadership* (Kaplan & Kaiser, 2006) is the ability to respond effectively to a myriad of different and changing conditions by having a wide range of possible responses, as well as the wisdom to know how and when to apply them. The model focuses on two specific dualities that account for most of what it takes to be an effective leader. These are *dualities*, not *polarities*, although most leaders see them as opposed to each other. The most effective leaders, however, are those who can fluidly integrate seemingly contradictory approaches given what is required in a given situation. They're the ones who can listen well and also take a strong, clear stand; the ones who can hold people clearly accountable while also creating a deeply engaging context. This is highly related to *Developmental Thinking* which we'll discuss in the next section.

The first duality/polarity, as well as continuum, in the Leadership Versatility model is *What you lead: Operational Leadership* (driving execution, meeting short-term goals, aligning resources) vs. *Strategic Leadership* (setting direction, being visionary, big picture and long-term focus). The other is *How you lead: Forceful Leadership* (taking a tough stand, holding others accountable, taking charge) vs. *Enabling Leadership* (delegating, empowering, collaborating, helping people feel valued). These dimensions alone account for much of what it takes to be an effective leader; adding other competencies has little value. If a leader is balanced on these dimensions, he or she is almost certainly in the top 10% of all leaders on multiple factors including ability to drive sustainable results. The power of this model, coupled with its elegant simplicity, makes it an ideal choice for integrating into the organizational culture.

### **What does it mean for a leader to be *balanced*?**

This model is one of the very few that explores over-doing as well as under-doing, and that presents leadership competencies as paired complements. Most leaders are *imbalanced* on these key dualities (too much of one, not enough of the other). Even more important, they are often out of touch with the direction of these imbalances, and thus greatly benefit from a 360 degree feedback tool based on this model. Otherwise, evidence shows that if leaders don't receive feedback, then even the most earnest of leaders will often be addressing the wrong behaviors. In other words, the correlation between the way leaders view themselves and the way others perceive them approaches zero.

One *caveat*. What we said above is true only if the right conditions exist in the organization/group for administering 360 degree feedback. Discussion of when and how to effectively administer 360 degree feedback tools is outside the scope of this article other than to mention two important factors: (1) if there aren't effective other ways for employees to provide feedback in the organization,

then the data on the 360s will be contaminated, and (2) the extent to which leaders and their raters understand Contextual Thinking will greatly assist the usefulness of the results.

Productively addressing imbalances in versatility requires awareness of and attention to the biases of the organizational context, such as a bias for being operational rather than strategic. Equally important is for individual leaders to be aware of their own beliefs and assumptions that drive their *leadership behavior*. You cannot effectively address imbalanced behavior without first addressing *imbalanced thinking*.

### **How does personal development impact leadership ability?**

With higher development, leaders are more inner-directed, fulfilled, versatile, and effective. They make decisions that are aligned with their deepest values and the good of multiple stakeholders. At lower levels of personal development, leaders are overly driven by a combination of their context and their self-oriented wants and needs, rather than being driven by what's right for the organization from a larger perspective and aligned with their deepest values and wisdom.

### **Relevance to executive coaching**

Hopefully, this is obvious as well. Presenting this model (which again, didn't exist within our clients until we taught it!) has been extraordinarily helpful to our clients. It helps them look at their biases and assumptions. Seeing the "yes/and" of being forceful *and* enabling, operational *and* strategic, helps them be more agile and effective.

## **DEVELOPMENTAL THINKING: STATES AND STAGES**

We use developmental models extensively, drawing on the work of Ken Wilber (2007), Susanne Cook-Greuter (2005), Bill Torbert (2004), Robert Kegan (1998), and many others who studied the sequential levels of human development well into adulthood. These models reflect different ways of making sense of the world and then responding to it, some clearly better than others for effectively dealing with complexity, ambiguity, and rapidly changing conditions. Through a developmental lens, we can see that a *stage* is the level an organization, team, or individual has reached that's stable and habitual. *State* is a temporary level, either higher than usual due to support, or lower than usual due to stress, a misaligned context, or other adverse conditions.

### **How do we apply our understanding of stages and states?**

This differentiates our work from that of many others. Typically, trainers and motivational speakers come into organizations, and people are "pumped up" for a short while (between hours and days), until they gradually revert to the influence of their current

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organizational context. Our integrated approach—including being catalysts for developing high performance cultures, and introducing leaders and others to powerful tools and perspectives—is designed to help organizations and their members evolve to a *sustainable higher stage*. That’s what matters.

### **Developmental thinking**

Any two leaders will view the same situation and make sense of it very differently, *and not all these ways are equal*. Some are more effective than others for leading successfully under conditions of increased uncertainty and complexity and for *leading through change*. Leaders with higher developmental thinking are better able to manage a wider span of influence and generate more sustainable results which engage the greatest number of diverse stakeholders. They are better able to respond effectively to a broader variety of conditions because they have more choices at their disposal and the wisdom to know how and when to apply them. Leaders at higher developmental levels understand how to help build collaborative contexts that bring out the best in organizations, teams, and the individuals within them.

The higher levels of developmental thinking include:

- The ability to think contextually;
- Increased self-awareness: Who am I? How can I better understand others? How am I impacting those around me? What are my strengths and challenges, and how will I address them?
- More complex and integrative thinking: having an *opposable mind*, yes/and vs. either/or thinking, embracing contradiction and paradox, and taking multiple factors into consideration; ability to see and integrate wider and higher perspectives, including multiple stakeholders and a look further into the future; holding that many things can be true at once.

### **Developmental collective models**

Individuals move through fixed developmental sequences; collectives (societies, cultures, organizations) do as well. Spiral Dynamics (Beck, 2006), for example, expands on Clare Graves’ work and maps the sequences that collectives move through (e.g., Magical/Tribal, Egocentric, Traditional/Mythic, Modern/Rational, Post-Modern/Pluralistic, Integral). We find these useful in helping to evolve the contexts of our client organizations, as well as in understanding the impact of those contexts on the individuals within them. The collective level of development has a gravitational pull, for better or for worse. When it’s higher than that of individuals, it tends to pull them toward uncommon levels of functioning, as a temporary state. When it’s lower, it constrains the gifts of those individuals.

### **Relevance to executive coaching**

Coaches with a postmodern orientation tend to say that there are many ways of making sense of the world, and they all have value. This is true, and not true. While they all have value, some are clearly more effective than others. Understanding developmental models enables us to identify the level at which our clients are currently functioning, and to help them see next steps toward higher development. Understanding the developmental level of their context(s) assists them in understanding the forces that are impacting them.

Also, as Joel argued in his 2008 presentation at the ICF Annual Convention, coaches tend to overassess the level at which they are currently thinking. We really can't take our clients past what we've been able to see, and having the humility and wisdom to honestly assess our own "lenses" is the first step to evolving them.

*But in your organizations you blame the fish instead of asking what in the pond might be causing them to behave as they do! We call this the "Bad Fish!" approach, and contrast it to "Pond Thinking."*

## **THE ENNEAGRAM**

*You can't find your glasses when they're sitting on your nose!* We love the Enneagram (e.g., Riso & Hudson, 1996), and provide customized support for using the Enneagram as a tool to improve overall organizational effectiveness, including enhanced teamwork and more versatile leaders. Understanding how we see the world, and how our perspective is the same and/or different from the equally viable perspectives of others, is important not just for leaders, but also for all organizational members. The Enneagram, among many other valuable contributions, provides us with an understanding of the context within us as individuals.

### **What is the Enneagram?**

The Enneagram describes nine different sets of values and filters through which the world can be seen. With our approach, it does not "put people in boxes." Instead, we assist organizations and individuals to recognize and expand the boxes they are already in, and ultimately to dissolve those boxes. It's a respectful and *dynamic* system that provides a path of healthy development for each type, including how to build on strengths and avoid pitfalls. It assists leaders and employees in understanding themselves, clients, customers, others in the organization, and the organization itself through new eyes. Energy is freed for productivity and creativity that was previously lost in frustration and agitation. While the developmental thinking model reveals genuine differences in overall leadership effectiveness, the Enneagram reveals ways that we are different but equal within a given developmental level.

### **Beyond surface behavior**

The Enneagram is focused on much more than surface behavior. It instead illuminates what most likely actually drives the surface behavior, the underlying motivations. We refer to these as *governing variables*: the attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, mental models, filters of perception that guide how we act. But how aware are we of

what's actually driving our behavior? And what are the implications of that? Without development, the Enneagram types operate quite unconsciously in us. We don't notice the assumptions we make, the beliefs we hold, and our particular emotional, mental, and physical patterns. We instead operate on autopilot. When people first learn the Enneagram they tend to be quite surprised at how much of what they considered *spontaneous* behavior is accounted for by the Enneagram type. Later, they are equally surprised at the increase in their ability to lead and perform more effectively.

### **Movement from subject to object**

Robert Kegan (1998), an esteemed developmental psychologist, sees individual evolution occurring as we develop the ability to step back and reflect on something that formerly was hidden or taken for granted. Aspects that are *subject* are unseen governing variables. They're affecting everything we do, yet they can't be seen because they're the lenses through which we see—thus they're unquestioned, seen simply as part of the self. In Kegan's words, *we don't have things that are subject – they have us*. We're at their effect, without even knowing it. When we can step back and these become *object* they can be seen and considered, questioned, and reflected on. We didn't even know we were wearing colored glasses—now we can take them off, look at them, understand their impact, see the world more clearly, and make different choices. Instead of those things having us, *we have them*, along with far more *degrees of freedom* and ability to respond effectively. The more degrees of freedom we have, the more perspectives we can take, the more we can effectively address the contexts in which we work, assisting the evolution of organizations, teams, and individuals. This relates to our last *IJCO*<sup>TM</sup> article, "Coaching and the Unconscious" (Rothaizer & Hill, 2009).

### **Common language for talking about differences**

The single most common reason for misunderstandings and conflicts within organizations is contextual (misaligned incentives, lack of clarity of goals, etc.). The second most common reason comes from assuming others see the world through the same glasses we do, and, therefore, that everyone else is a more or less well-developed version of us. As a common language and model for talking about differences, the Enneagram greatly assists in eliminating energy-sapping power struggles while facilitating appreciation for diversity of perspective and effective collaboration.

### **Organizational Enneagram type**

We've found that organizations and the internal organizations/groups within them have clearly identifiable Enneagram types as well. These organizational types profoundly impact how work gets done. Understanding an organization's type powerfully assists optimizing its culture. It provides a roadmap for effective organizational and individual evolution, as well as identifying strategies that are likely to be more successful.

**Relevance to executive coaching**

Again, hopefully this is already clear. We don't insist that our clients explore the Enneagram, but many find it of profound value. Helping our clients to identify the Enneagram type of their organization also helps them understand their "fit" within it. *We have spent many years developing our unique and groundbreaking approaches to the Enneagram.*

### **THE CLEAR IMPACT APPROACH TO EXECUTIVE COACHING**

Executive Coaching is one of the ways we enhance capability and capacity in executive and other leaders' performance, thus strengthening organizational and individual effectiveness and fulfillment. We weave our understanding of contextual and developmental thinking and the Enneagram into our executive coaching work with clients in two important ways: (a) *in our own understanding of the issues, challenges, and developmental opportunities our clients are facing*; and (b) *in assisting them to develop knowledge, skills, and abilities that best address the root causes of the situations they face.*

From a Living Systems perspective, our clients are continually impacting and being impacted by the contexts in which they work as well as their own development. We thus are interested in addressing the overall ecology, rather than looking at our clients as separate "parts" to be "fixed" and then returned to the organizational "machine." In this light, we understand that we have and are responsible to multiple customers: the person being coached, the sponsor (when there is one), and the organization as a whole.

We recognize that *factors critical for success* in executive coaching include:

- Having a sponsor who collaborates in setting goals and expectations, approving development plans, and staying in communication with both coach and client to ensure coaching stays aligned with the organization's needs. At times, a leader can serve as his/her own sponsor.
- Understanding that masterful coaching focuses on developing long-term capability, rather than just assisting clients in solving immediate problems. This requires much more skill than simple problem-solving coaching.
- Always having some form of initial and ongoing consultation and goal setting, assessment, creation of a development plan, coaching to that plan, and evaluation of results.

*The second generation approach sees teaching as something that's antithetical to coaching. But our clients can't see through contextual thinking lenses until we've presented that model to them. In other words, they "don't know what they don't know" or haven't been exposed to.*

- Knowing that people cannot report on their own blind spots, no matter how sincere, and therefore, some form of gathering stakeholder data is almost always required.
- Recognizing that leadership presence and credibility comes from having an authentic style congruent with the leader's deepest values.
- Knowing that once a leader has been put in a perceptual "box" by others, it's very difficult to get out. Most people look only for what confirms their current perceptions and ignore contradictory data. It's therefore vital to change behavior and at the same time sensitize others to notice the changes in behavior.

### **SOME EXAMPLES**

What sets us apart from many executive coaches is the way in which we integrate our expertise and experience as organizational consultants into our coaching.

#### **Helping a client and sponsor to understand the impact of context**

One of us was asked to coach an executive we'll call Dale. Dale was Vice President of Sales for a large organization. We were called in because of a long-standing conflict with Chris, Vice President of Implementation. The initial story from the sponsor, the EVP of Sales: Dale just can't get along with Chris, and it's really impacting Dale's career. Dale could progress much farther if this conflict is handled. On the other hand, if it continues we have serious concerns about Dale's ability to even stay in his current position.

Some coaches would have explored internal dynamics. Is there a mismatch in MBTI types? Or let's give them each a DISC and see if their communication styles conflict. But in doing an initial assessment of the context, it was very clear what accounted for most of the friction. Dale and his organization could sell Product A, and make a little profit. Or they could up-sell the clients to Product B, and make a great deal of profit. The up-sell to Product B is what enabled them to put food on their tables, pay their mortgages, and send their kids to college. Chris, on the other hand, only implemented Product A. Chris was evaluated on the number of people using Product A, and the quality of those implementations. It was a classic contextual conflict: When Dale's numbers went up Chris' numbers went down, and vice versa. Is it any wonder there was friction? Is it any wonder that Chris attributed negative motivations to Dale, e.g., up-selling to people who really didn't need Product B? Yet the EVP was unaware of this, and attributed the problems to Dale! Remember the Fundamental Attribution Error? And what's more, Dale had never stepped back to ascertain the root cause of this conflict with Chris.



If Dale and Chris had met on a beach somewhere, they probably would have really enjoyed each other. This had very little if anything to do with their internal dynamics. But almost any two people in that situation would be in conflict.

In an ideal world, this assessment would have led the organization to shift the reward structure, but this was beyond the control of the sponsor. What did happen was Dale and Chris sitting down, reflecting together on the context and how it was impacting their relationship and how they felt about each other, and collaborating on how to make the best of a misaligned situation. This had a very positive impact on their relationship, which went from strained to cooperative. Dale has since been promoted.

### **Mismatch in expectations**

One of us was asked to coach a leader reporting to an Executive Vice President of a large international company. The first interview was with the client. “What are you looking to get out of coaching?” The client responded, “Everything is great, I love my job, but I think I could do an even better job if I could communicate more effectively and delegate a little more.” The second interview was with the sponsor: “This employee is in serious trouble. I have concerns about honesty, including possible ethical violations. We take such things very seriously here, and even slight transgressions are a serious problem. Also, some relationships are seriously broken.” We asked the sponsor, “Does the client truly know the extent of your concerns? Have you ever made clear the expectations and values of this organizational culture, and how it might be different from the client’s previous culture? Have you given clear feedback about what you need to see?” The answer was a reluctant “no” to each of these questions. Our response was, “I can’t coach in this context. Coaching works well within a context of clear communication and expectations. I can’t go forward with this assignment.” What followed were several coaching sessions with the EVP on how and what to communicate. It took two months for conditions to be suitable for coaching of the designated client to begin. And we never stopped being aware that we’re always coaching a system, not just an individual.

### **Creating a context that supports coaching**

In another assignment, as much time was spent in the first two months coaching and consulting to the system (including the manager, manager’s manager, and HR executive) as was spent in coaching the designated client. This led to a context that truly supported coaching being able to make a difference, and success in what had been a very tenuous situation. If this engagement had been approached from only a limited coaching perspective, rather than as a consultant involved in a coaching engagement, the coaching engagement and the client would not have been successful in the organization.

*With our approach, it does not “put people in boxes.” Instead, we assist organizations and individuals in recognizing and expanding the boxes they are already in, and ultimately in dissolving those boxes.*

### **Actively intervening in the system**

This coaching began with being told that the executive's performance was extremely important to the whole multinational company. They had tried a new strategy, and the overall success of this strategy was tied to the performance of this executive's unit. Yet, whenever the client asked for appropriate support, it didn't come at all, or came too late to be useful. For a while, coaching focused on how the client could get the needed support. Despite using good skills and approaches, and having the unit's performance severely compromised, the support still didn't come. It was apparent that there were some political and other contextual undercurrents in this large and complex organization that were at play, but we didn't know what they were. So the coach intervened in the system, and sent out multiple emails to the different internal stakeholders, asking to set up a joint face-to-face or conference call to clarify expectations, both the organization's expectations of the client, and what the client could reasonably expect from the organization to support success. This was strategically designed to force the issue and create a shift in the overall system, which was being supported by lack of clarity coupled with lack of willingness to address the lack of clarity. The alternative of just staying in a coaching mode was to have the client be scapegoated, without ever knowing why.

### **Shifting from a Mechanistic to a Living Systems perspective**

The client was a female executive in a heavily male-oriented culture. The issue was establishing credibility. Her manager, in a very senior position in this large organization, was sitting on the sidelines, playing safe, protecting his own influence and career at her expense. The coach asked for a private meeting with the manager, and introduced a Living Systems perspective in which the client and manager were coresponsible for the success of the client in achieving greater credibility. This model of *coresponsibility* touched the manager. It resonated as true and undeniable. He and his direct report were in this together. They were connected, not separate. With this shift in perspective, he took considerable risk, including standing up in her defense at the Senior Executive Meeting with the CEO.

### **Building developmental capacity**

The client was brilliant and successful, but wanted to take her leadership to the next level. An understanding of developmental thinking led the coach to see that the "next" was integrating the perspectives of others, being able to "step into" their shoes. This led to suggestions for different developmental action plans. "Think about your process for addressing complex problems. What might the experience be of those who bring you these problems?" "Wow, I never thought of that. It would be disempowering and frustrating. I don't want that. How can I change?" Through these developmental action plans, this client eventually came to an ongoing process

wherein whenever she had a major meeting to lead, she would schedule a meeting with herself about the meeting, and reflect on the perspectives and agendas of the different people who would be attending. During this meeting with herself, she often picked up the phone and contacted some of these stakeholders to ask what they and their peers were most concerned about. The impact on the meetings and overall organizational success was so great that, years later, in an informal lunch, this former client reported that she's still following through consistently with this process, because it's had such a positive impact.

### CONCLUSIONS

We've done much mentor coaching, and continually see the unfortunate and often painful results that come from coaches approaching their work through a narrow lens. Clients get scapegoated. Coaches get scapegoated. Coaches and clients are frustrated because insufficient attention was paid to setting up a context that would truly support coaching. Coaches take on difficult assignments to "fix" clients in trouble, believing through some combination of ego and naiveté they can overcome the problems in the Pond that have led everyone to declare their client a Bad Fish!

We see dangers in coaching schools that teach generic coaching skills and see that as a sufficient knowledge base for working within organizations. We see danger in executive coaches who "wall off" their relationship with their clients from the organization as a whole.

On the other hand, we've seen how introducing our proprietary concepts of Bad Fish! Thinking and Pond Thinking have changed the way our clients see the world, and have changed the way their leaders see their own responsibility for setting up a context that supports our clients. We see so many coaching engagements whose success depended on our stepping back and integrating our consulting lenses, including introducing models that simply didn't exist within our clients until we carefully presented them.

We look forward to any ongoing dialogue around this topic.

*As a common language and model for talking about differences, the Enneagram greatly assists in eliminating energy-sapping power struggles while facilitating appreciation for diversity of perspective and effective collaboration.*

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Rothaizer and Hill have assisted thousands of leaders and their direct reports in enhancing organizational capabilities. They each have extensive training and over 30 years experience in understanding the functioning of both organizations and the people within them. With offices in the United States and Canada, their focus is on organizational effectiveness, leadership development, team development, and executive coaching. They assist their clients in focusing on root causes rather than energy-sapping symptoms, and in discovering unique and elegant solutions to seemingly complex problems. They incorporate a *Living Systems* perspective and *Contextual Thinking* into all their work, as well as integrating *Developmental Thinking* models and the Enneagram.

Hill has a doctorate in organizational psychology, while Rothaizer has a doctorate in clinical/community psychology. They are also both certified Holacracy Practitioners and Enneagram teachers. Their clients have included AT&T Bell Laboratories, Mellon, Cisco Systems, ADP, the Government of Canada, General Electric, and the World Bank.

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