

## Developments in Coaching Practice and the OD Practitioner

by Brian Nichol

Like many OD professionals I have been surprised by the rapid emergence of business coaching as a profession. Coaching has always been a part of the work of OD but to a large extent it was a taken for granted activity. Now it has moved to the center of the stage. The International Coaching Federation, formed as recently as 1992, estimates that in 2000 there were 10,000 personal and business coaches worldwide.

We can speculate about the rise of coaching at this time. Coach University's recruitment of students has about doubled every year since its formation, the ICF annual conferences are now attended by over 1000 coaches, and feature articles on coaching continue to appear in magazines such as Newsweek and Fortune. Thomas Leonard, the founder of Coach U, Tim Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Work* and other leading coaches have done a great job of bringing coaching to the attention of a wider audience. However, I suggest that the more fundamental reason for the current popularity of coaching is that the time was right.

At this time the corporate environment is an anxious one for many managers. Organizations want the financial flexibility to downsize and expand as market conditions dictate. Management attitudes have shifted from attempting to provide jobs for life to encouraging employees to regard themselves as independent contractors. Whereas managers could rely on their company to provide the necessary training now an increasing number of people are taking care of their own professional development.

There is a growing awareness of the value of coaching. During the last recession many managers had the direct experience of being coached through difficult career transitions (although the title of the person in the helping roles was career counselor rather than coach). Managers who have been helped in this way are ready to recognize the contribution of a coach to their day-to-day work.

The effectiveness of a coach can be spectacular. For a recent example, in the last edition of a local newsletter a psychotherapist told her coaching story (Carolinas Group Psychotherapy Society, March 2001). Because her practice had declined she hired a coach to develop her business. In a relatively short time she turned the situation around and now has a thriving practice.

### What is New?

Several things about the new coaching movement are new. The thoroughness of the training for business coaches is striking. For accreditation as a coach ICF requires a minimum of 125 hours tuition and Coach University requires 200 hours for a student to graduate (equivalent to 3 - 5 university courses). In addition to their time in class the trainee coaches work with their own coach, and quickly begin to recruit their own clients to form their own coaching practice. The combination of theory, practice and the supervision of their development adds up to a powerful training program. Although the mainstream universities have been slow to respond

to the demand for coach training I predict that in the next year or so we will see a Master's degree program in coaching.

The way that coaching is delivered is novel. Many coaches are coaching over the telephone. I had thought that I needed to be physically present with the client to develop a relationship and observe the client's non-verbal behavior. As it turns out coaching over the telephone works fine, if anything it tends to focus the coaching session.

The new coaching emphasizes the whole person. A coach works with clients on the issues they bring to coaching in the context of the rest of their life; health and fitness, personal finances, family and community. Integrity is an important coaching principle and the coach encourages clients to bring all aspects of their life into balance around their core values. The consequence for the client is the energy and commitment to make the things they want for themselves happen. Up until now coaching in OD practice has been more narrowly focused on the immediate problem.

So what does all this mean for the OD practitioner? At the present time it seems to me that the new developments do not have any significant implications for OD practice. If anything, I would say that coach training schools have something to learn from OD, too often coaches do not take a systems perspective when working to help clients make changes to their lives. However, an advantage to the OD professional of giving more attention to their coaching skills would be to strengthen working relationships with clients in change projects and, as a consequence, enhance the likelihood of success. Also, a new appreciation of coaching could suggest ways that coaching could support the implementation stage of a project. So often the urgency of the problem engages clients at the beginning of change project only for us to see their commitment drain away in the implementation phase. The deployment of coaches to work with people who are crucial to the implementation of the project could provide the support that makes the difference.

On the other hand, if we are interested to develop our work as a coach then it would be worthwhile to find out more and consider further training. As OD professionals we already have the core skills. Our developmental task is to adapt our expertise to the requirements of the business coaching situation.

The main benefit of the development of coaching for OD probably lies in the future. At this time, although there is a wealth of articles on coaching they are largely anecdotal. We are waiting for studies which present cases in both their positive and negative aspects. For obvious reasons we hear about the successes and not the coaching failures. It is an important turning point in a profession when practitioners begin to share their experiences in a systematic way. The careful description of cases enables a profession to develop their theory and technique, and thus enable a greater reliability in professional practice.

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