

SYSTEMIC ORGANIZATIONAL COACHING, a Case Study and Methodology

Creating Space for Coaching Large Systems

FOREWORD: Individual or one-on-one coaching of managers and executives has become a standard service in most international organizations. Ironically, an excellent individual coaching process often results with the coached professional leaving the organization that has financed the developmental relationship. Indeed, it can often be measured that when a person develops into his or her potentials while the immediate team and organizational environment doesn't, then that person will often choose to quit in order to find another professional context: one that is more conducive to his or her personal and professional growth.

- The obvious conclusion to this state of affairs directly leads to consider the need for team coaching, and more effectively to transform numerous teams simultaneously, for organizational coaching.

To be more precise as to what is meant by organizational coaching in this article and in the case study presented further below, the process concerns the simultaneous coaching of up to ten or twelve coherently related leadership, management or expert teams.

More precisely, organizational coaching often concerns:

- The simultaneous coaching of an executive team, obviously including that team's CEO, and including that team's whole next level of key players - up to 100 next-level managers and experts.
- In other corporate contexts, organizational coaching can concern simultaneous work with a large number of inter-related teams, such as a whole country or regional distribution network, a large number of inter-related production leadership teams, a world-wide financial or marketing extended leadership team within a given corporation, etc.
- To achieve maximum effectiveness, it is useful to undertake organizational coaching in a unified time-space context: ideally for three consecutive days and in one large ballroom that can host all the concerned teams.

This unified space-time context allows for a truly transparent collectively shared process where all the concerned system and sub-systems can progressively align on their collective goals, on implementing measurable common procedures and processes and transforming their management and leadership culture.

- Typically, the *common procedures and processes* include learning an effective meeting methodology that allows for much better decisions and ensure their follow-up, while simultaneously developing tracking systems, ensuring information flow, developing transversal team work, allowing for more ownership, initiative and empowerment, focusing on measurable results, etc.

One measurable result is less, shorter and much more effective meetings throughout the system. The second measurable result is a tangible evolution in the organization's management and leadership culture, generally aligning the latter with the ongoing worldwide information/digital revolution. A third measurable outcome is a significant surge in operational results.

To achieve this end, the three days serve to practice new meeting methodologies in order to implement these in all the organization's future executive team, in formal teams, in transversal, network and operational or functional meetings. In a viral fashion, this change in meeting processes have a direct effect in gradually modifying the whole organization's professional interfaces and relationships.

- Typically the *content* of such an organizational coaching process is anchored in each organization's and each team's current operational reality, focused on achieving its measurable results within its defined strategy. This could concern the preparation for a major restructuring process, undertaking a merger or acquisition, increasing top-line and bottom-line results, shortening time-to-market, modifying business models, increasing product or service measurable quality, increasing client satisfaction, etc.

During a three-day organizational coaching process, all these examples of operational goals are achieved while learning to implement more effective processes. Each team autonomously designs its own practical and measurable action plans, with tracking systems, pilots, deadlines and written commitments, thereby developing team ownership.

- Typically, a three-day organizational coaching process ends with a complete list of commitments on how each team and the whole system intends to follow up the measurable implementation of their learned processes and procedures in all their meetings, *AND* on achieving their stated operational goals.

The case study presented below relates a two-day *systemic organizational* coaching experience for over seventy people including a CEO and three to four levels of key players originating from corporate headquarters. The description of this event aims to illustrate how systemic organizational coaching can usefully and rapidly accompany a large-group, corporate, solution-oriented transformational process and to help ensure large system operational success.

This case study also illustrates a few key organizational coaching processes that would be different from implementing an executive coaching event followed by a series of team coachings or group coachings within the same organization. Again, organization coaching as proposed in this article concerns coaching large organizations by addressing the whole system as a client, by simultaneously coaching a very large number of teams and people originating from the same system.

Along with the coaching art of creating a trusting relationship, listening, asking questions, this case study will consequently attempt to explain and illustrate how to coach within systemic learning environments by designing coaching architectures to accompany very large groups and systems in general, and for organizational coaching in particular.

In other words, the example below demonstrates how large-system clients can find their own answers, move beyond a crisis situation, design their own action plans and develop their own solution-focused motivation through a systemic organizational coaching process within appropriately designed learning environments.

To summarize, the aim of this article is to provide :

- a practical perception of the way team coaches can expand their practice towards systemic organizational coaching,
- an illustration of how a few basic coaching systemic principles can create positive learning and growth environments for large-system organizational change.
- an opportunity for established organizational coaches to compare and confront their experience to another's.

THE CONTEXT

The executive team of a prominent international leisure organization, say “ABC Corporation”, had previously followed a three-day team development and systemic team-coaching session. Following that conclusive team-development work, the executive team decided to also address their corporate “top seventy” key managers through a coaching process to get them aligned to pilot an urgently needed company turn-around. With this population and to achieve that goal, they decided to organize a two-day off-site systemic organizational coaching process.

The Goal: The objective of the systemic organizational coaching event was to get the top seventy key managers “on board” and committed to design and carry out the necessary transformations ABC Corporation urgently needed to implement first in order to survive, then in order to succeed.

The History: The situation was clearly critical. Less than a year prior to the planned two-day organizational coaching event, the shareholders of the company had hired a new CEO to turn the company around and get it focused on achieving results to make it profitable. The company had been losing money for years.

The previous CEO had been in place for decades. He was the son of one of the founding fathers who had in turn been the sole previous CEO. As could be expected, in spite of the fact that it had public shareholders, the company had always been a very relational and family-run operation.

On the one hand, ABC enjoyed excellent client satisfaction, a good image, and had developed a world-renowned brand. On the other the company suffered from poor people management, lack of standardized processes, strong unions, and powerful historical clans each wrestling to defend vested interests and internal spheres of influence. This state of affairs had led to financial results for years. Over the past decade, the company had gradually become a financial black hole.

The Challenge: Most of the personnel publicly resisted the principle of change. The new CEO and a large majority of the newly hired executive team was perceived as an external group of exceedingly technocratic and ambitious implants who did not understand the specific culture of the company nor its extraordinarily original product. In fact, to preserve the integrity of their historical heritage, a large majority of ABC's managers and personnel truly believed that it was their duty to actively resist any form of organizational change proposed by the new management team. As an indicator of this state of affairs, several consultants had been hired over the previous years to promote more professional processes and implant seeds for organizational change only to become the targets of concentrated organized resistance to the point of being rapidly rejected.

Expectedly, the new systemic coaches called in to accompany the planned off-site two-day event were welcomed by old timers with horror stories relating how all previous experts had been disqualified and rapidly hustled off. On one occasion, the organizational coaches were jokingly asked how long they thought they would survive. The bets were on and the stage was set for exciting drama.

Consequently, in this organizational coaching context,

- There was no room for failure. Should the organizational coaches be rejected and the event be unproductive, the new management team would considerably lose credit. This would reinforce the strength of organized resistance and send the new CEO a clear message: “Don’t even try to

implement change”.

- Considering that any type of coaching approach does not propose change from the outside but is more focused on accompanying its emergence from within the company, a hands-off systemic organizational coaching process seemed to be particularly recommended.

The Participants: These included the CEO, the predominantly new ten-member executive team, and 60 next-level headquarter managers and key players originating from ABC's main departments: Finance and Accounting, HR, Marketing and Sales, R&D and Operations.

The Setting: An off-site residential location provided a very large room to host the 70-odd participants for the organizational coaching plenary meetings, plus eight break-out rooms fitted with chairs and flipcharts, no tables, for sub-committee teamwork.

The Coaches: Although just one organizational coach could have been sufficient to implement the two-day process, a *team* of three other assistant coaches were hired

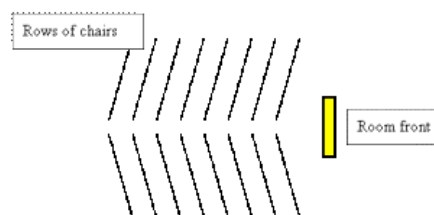
- to offer several targets in the event of nourished resistance.
- for the longer term and should the event be a smashing success, it was also considered strategic to introduce several organizational coaching resources for possible follow-up processes within the rest of the organization.

The team of systemic organizational coaches had solid previous experience working together. The coaches were actively engaged in a collective supervision process on other common and separate contracts.

FIRST DAY

The organizational coaching event was kicked off with an introductory plenary meeting in a large room where everyone had freely chosen their seats. The initial seating architecture of the room was a classical theatre arrangement with no tables and all the seats facing the front of the room where a few flip charts had been placed.

This very traditional conference-style room architecture could let everyone expect a top-down approach delivered either by the CEO or by designated expert consultants.



Plenary session I

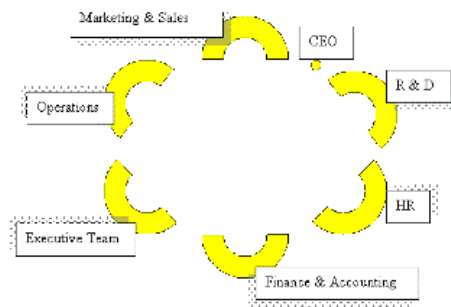
In this setting, the CEO did indeed give a very focused and short introductory speech. He rapidly thanked all participants for their presence and personally asked them to actively get engaged in the organizational coaching process that was to follow. After a very short context description of the organization's urgent challenges, the CEO also stated the objectives for the two day organizational coaching event: Work together to define future avenues for necessary organizational focus first on better people management, quality, financial results, and then on growth and development.

The four systemic organizational coaches who were standing in distributed locations in the room then summarily introduced themselves. One of them immediately asked the participants to regroup within their ten-to-fifteen member departmental teams. The members of the executive team were also asked to sit together in a distinct group and the CEO was asked to sit outside of the executive team, on his own.

Each of these leaderless or transversal teams was asked to relocate as a group within the larger room, facing the empty center.

To summarize, the physical re-organization of the plenary session resulted in six transversal groups:

- five departments, each without their official department heads,
- plus the executive team without the CEO.



The proposal to re-organize the plenary session layout created confusion in the room as everyone had to change seats and integrate their formal teams. This had a surprise effect. It disorganized or re-organized a spontaneous seating arrangement where individuals had regrouped with friends and were getting ready to implement their own agenda and/or to watch the show.

In effect, the organizational coaching implicit or hidden architecture was radically modified by the new seating arrangement:

- As the participants regrouped within their departments, this brought to the foreground the existence of differentiated departmental entities which each had their own specific identities.
- The departmental level became a potential subject in the process, each suddenly appearing as a defined and pertinent sub-system which would have room for existence and expression during the two day organizational coaching event.
- The division of the initial mass of participants into distinct groups with identities and possible responsibilities redirected and added complexity to the initial two-way polarity between the CEO or the central stage, and “the rest” of the personnel.
- Each of the executives was seated within the executive team. Consequently, this team also became present as a distinct and pertinent entity within the larger system, with a specific identity and responsibility. The executive team was also distinctly separated from the CEO.
- Consequently, if departments were organized *as transversal teams* without their department heads, the executive team was also positioned as “just another” transversal team without its head. This presented the executive team as a structural equivalent to all the other teams in the room.
- The partially new team of executives was mostly recently recruited into the organization. Seated without their CEO, they were perceived as a more vulnerable sum of individuals.
- The fact that the CEO was seated in the round but by himself and away from the executive team could also make him look more vulnerable. This position separated his identity and function from the rest of the executive team.

In the new organizational coaching seating configuration, all the participants, within their teams, were now facing each other rather than all looking in the same direction. Elements of the more complex organizational structure was physically revealed and perceived.

Again, note that the whole system in the room had been reconfigured into two levels of transversality: within each group, there were no formal leaders, and within the room, each of the groups was positioned “in the round” as a collective system equal to any other.

Asking all the departments and the executive team to sit and face the empty center of the room indeed provoked a completely new perspective more conducive to organizational coaching. The sudden change of focus away from the CEO and the coaches could be physically felt. For the seventy managers, the focus of attention was suddenly on themselves and on their immediate teams.

This illustrates just that reorganizing room layout to help a system change perspective^[1] is a simple way to refocus energy and allow for other and more complex perceptions and interaction. This strategy is a powerful systemic organizational coaching tool. It is absolutely not focused on content but just on redesigning implicit interactional architecture.

In this specific organizational coaching situation, the change in the room layout provoked a rapid remodeling of the implicit architecture from an obvious centralizing polarity to a more systemic multipolar transversal circularity.

Sub-Group Process

As soon as the transversal teams were seated, each was asked to organize for work to be carried out within the break-out rooms. More specifically each of these sub-group had to put forward specific volunteers who would assume the following three delegated organizational coaching functional roles to help each team focus on their desired output:

- a moderator who would ensure all participated,
- a time keeper to help respect deadlines and
- a scribe (other than the moderator) to write team input and comments on the flip chart.

A short description of each role was given to each of the volunteers to read to their team-mates as soon as they arrived in their break-out rooms. The organizational coaches also explained that there would be several other break-out sessions over the two organizational coaching days, and that these distributed functional roles were to later rotate among the team members so as to make sure everyone got a chance to serve their team's meeting effectiveness.

First Assignment

All the teams were given the one and same assignment based on the same questions. In each team, another volunteer was asked to take precise and detailed notes of the team assignment, for future reference when in their break-out setting.

Each team was to fill one separate flip-chart page for each other team, executive team included, heading each of the pages with their own department's name followed with the name of the other team they were addressing. For each of the other teams in the room, each team was to *list perceived options for future performance*.

- Specifically, the question was “What could X team (each other team) do within its realm of responsibility and in the immediate future to significantly add value to the whole organization's measurable results?” (Fill at least one flip chart page per department)

The second part of each team's assignment was to fill one more flip-chart page with items it believed the other departments would suggest *it* could address as *options to increase their own department's future performance*.

- This last question was “What do you think the other departments will tell you that you need to do within your realm of responsibility and in the immediate future to significantly add value to the whole organization?” (Fill at least one flip chart page for your own department)

The systemic organizational coaches stressed that the items written on the list were to be as specific and practical as possible. They needed to be fully self-explanatory in a way that could be understood by people who were not present on that day.

It was also specified that *all* team members need not agree on *all* items, but that if three people in a team agreed on a given item, that item should be listed, respecting the exact wording proposed by the concerned participants.

Ample time was negotiated with the teams to carry out their task. Half jokingly, to create a healthy competitive spirit focused on producing significant results, one of the coaches commented that the results of the break-out assignment work would reveal each department's internal capacity to work effectively both in quantity and in quality. The sub-groups were then hustled off, each to their respective break-out room.

Break out Session I

During the break-out session, the systemic organizational coaches avoided visiting any one group more than three minutes at a time, never more than one coach in any one team at the same time. Each organizational coach paid a rapid visit to all the groups at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of the allotted time to get a quick intuitive feel for each group's internal process and progress. The organizational coaches avoided paying any attention to content produced by any of the groups. The CEO avoided visiting any of the groups including the executive team, but separately briefed with the team of organizational coaches on the ongoing organizational coaching process concerning the larger picture.

Notes:

- This kick-off process was another shift in the architecture of the two-day systemic organizational coaching event. When everyone expected to interface between departments in the larger group, they were quickly hustled off to work within their own teams: each department and the team of executives in separate rooms had to work on its own specific assignment. This second geographical shift again succeeded in changing the organizational coaching energy focus. Although each participant was asked to concentrate on listing possible improvements within *other* departments in the organization, the whole work process was *internal* to each of the departmental teams.
- Each team was also asked to voice what it thought could be improved within its *own* realm of responsibility, *in the absence of their own department head*. This allowed for some powerful self-confrontation which could not be influenced by relational strategies focused on the team leader's presence.
- Providing break-out rooms in which each group had privacy gave each team the opportunity to feel responsible for its own work and rest on their own internal processes. This helped refocus their energy on themselves, without their leaders, and away from the larger system.
- Within the executive team, the members were also asked to voice what all thought could be improved within each one of their departments, in the presence of that department's head, limiting defensive arguments and out of the presence of the CEO. Interestingly, this team coaching process was an all-time first. The executives had never convened all together around a collective task in the absence of the CEO.

The break-out sessions intensely worked on their production right up to a late lunch.

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Plenary session II

In the first organizational coaching afternoon, all reconvened in the plenary room, and were asked to seat as previously, “in the round”, each participant again within their respective department. The department heads were also seated within the executive team, without the CEO and the CEO was asked to sit on his own, slightly out of the circle.

Each team was asked to physically deliver their folded list of written *options for future improvement* to each of the other departments and to the executive team.

Much to everyone's surprise, the coaches asked each team to simply put away these lists of items that concerned their avenues for future development. They were neither read nor presented, but were put aside for later work to be carried out within each concerned department.

Note:

- Everyone had expected to witness or participate in a collective sharing process which could have turned into a finger-pointing and justification session focused on each department in turn, and more importantly, on the executive team. The fact that this opportunity was not given again caught everyone off guard.

Instead, the team of systemic organizational coaches asked each of the sub-groups to share their perception of the work *process* they each had experienced while in their break-out configuration. It was stressed that they were not to mention any of the *content* of their work.

The difference between process and content had to be explained, as a significant number of participants failed to understand the subtlety.

Each team in turn presented and even openly discussed *how* they had worked together as a team, while all the other groups listened. During this organizational coaching process, the systemic organizational coaches were the only ones to put questions to each concerned team, after the latter had freely expressed itself for a full ten minutes.

The following are examples of some of the questions which were put to each team by the organizational coaching professionals:

- Who were the most central participants? Who were the most peripheral participants? Which participant was most focused on results? Who was most centered on the correct and complete wording of each suggestion? Who was the most involved in the content of the work? Who helped most to facilitate the process? Were there any strong oppositions? Were there any participants acting as mediators? How were the three designated process roles played out? How could these roles be improved in future break-out sessions and team meetings? How could the general team meeting process be improved in the future, no matter the content? Etc.

The two-plus hour organizational coaching debriefing process gradually became a central piece of work. As each team took its turn, the comments on internal processes were increasingly relevant, and the participants took to heart describing their particular team profile and process.

Notes:

- This formulation of specific team processes revealed differentiating characteristics both to the concerned teams and to the rest of the organization. Each team feedback expressed processes and identities which clearly stood out from the others.
- Organizational coaching questions were put to help team members simply state types of interpersonal contribution to each other and to the larger group.

Some of the systemic organizational coaching questions were focused on revealing possible correlations between *the way* each team was exposing their working process in the plenary session, and *the way* they had worked in their break-out room.

Examples:

- If in the organizational coaching plenary session, only one person exposed the team process while the other members listened, how did that reveal the way they had worked together in the break-out room?
- If they all actively interrupted each other as they exposed their process to the larger group, how did that reveal the way they had worked in their break-out room?
- If two people stayed silent or on the outer fringes of the team during the organizational coaching plenary presentation, how did that also reflect the way these two had participated or contributed in the break-out process?
- If two or three tenors were the only ones to speak in the plenary, how was that an indication of the way they had worked as a team in their break-out room?
- If the whole group was restrained and volunteered very little information in their presentation, what did that indicate of the way they had worked in the break-out session?
- If two people disagreed with each other during the presentation, did that reflect a similar polarity during the break-out work?
- If a team displayed powerful energy, motivation or passion, how did that reflect their break-out room dynamics?
- etc.

No matter the team answers during the organizational coaching process, the conclusion of each team's work was elicited with the following question:

“As a team, what can you decide to do differently in the next break-out sessions and in future team meetings to achieve more satisfying participation and more performing collective results?”

As each team exposed its sub-group work process and answered the systemic organizational coaching questions, attention was given to ensure that participants from other groups did not interfere during the explanation and clarification process. When each team-coaching sequence was over, however, a few limited *process questions* and perceptions were allowed from the other groups and from the CEO.

Notes:

- Each department's presentation of its internal sub-group *process* provided numerous systemic indicators of how that department had worked in the break-out rooms, and further, on how that department worked in general. In effect, this organizational coaching sequence gave the rest of the organization relevant insights as to the quality of each different department's internal interfaces and a feeling for each specific departmental culture.
- Given the executive team members were positioned as part of another observing group, they were both in a position to observe their own department's internal processes from the outside, *and* in no position to speak for it or to protect it.

- The executive team members were also asked to expose their perception of their own internal sub-group work process and propose options for future development to become more effective as a team.
- The CEO was put in a position to observe the differences, complementarities and intricacies of the different team processes and cultures. This observation of the organization “laid out” before him could help him develop vital strategic perception and distance.
- All the participants were given the opportunity to realize the importance of developing better internal team processes to help achieve more performing results in the future. Furthermore, each team discovered some specific areas of process improvement on which they could rapidly focus.

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Second Assignment

Once each of the transversal teams had exposed their processes and answered the organizational coaching questions, they were asked to produce different volunteers to assume the same three meeting roles for their *next* break-out session: moderator, time keeper and scribe to be up at the flip chart. The new volunteers were given fresh role descriptions to be read again upon their arrival in the break-out rooms.

One extra volunteer in each team was asked to precisely and completely write down the next assignment for future referral when separated in their break-out rooms.

Within each of the departmental teams and within the executive team, the next assignment was the following: take all the lists concerning *options for improvement* originating from other departments, plus the list you have made for your own department.

With these lists, each departmental team on the one hand and the executive team on the other:

- Was first asked to synthesize all the comments and produce a detailed master list of *all proposed departmental (or executive team) options for future improvement, without making any choices or censorship*.
- They were then asked to select what they estimated were five to ten priority items which they felt would make a significant difference in their department's contribution to the organization's results.
- Next, they were to set measurable goals and deadlines which could indicate that each priority item has been satisfactorily dealt with.
- They finally were to design clear, practical and dated action plans to move forward with each priority item in order to reach measurable goals.

It was specified that each team's master list, ten priority actions, goals and deadlines and each action plan had to be written on standard A4 paper to permit photocopies for later distribution. A copy of each team's results was to be given to each team members, to their department head and to the CEO when the work was completed.

A decision-sheet template was distributed to each team for it to fill. This sheet had a column for decisions, another for deadlines and a third for that decision's follow-up pilot. It was stressed that the quality of these decision sheets would be considered the main indicators of each team's performance.

The systemic organizational coaches proposed that one team member assume the “secretary” role within each group, a different role from the “scribe” role at the flip chart. This extra role would continuously focus on filling the team decision sheets during the work in the break-out sessions. The participants filling this role would ensure that the wording of each decision was clear, that each decision had a pilot designated within the team, and that each decision had a clearly defined calendar deadline.

Some participants proposed that copies of all team decision sheets should be e-mailed to all the participants present in the two day organizational coaching event, and this was agreed.

Time for the successful completion of this work was negotiated with the teams in the organizational coaching plenary group before they broke out. The allotted time partly ran into the next day's morning. Consequently, the break-out groups worked on their own until the end of the day and were delegated the responsibility to start the next day on time, each in their own break-out room.

Notes

- Finishing the first organizational coaching day and beginning the next within the break-out teams delegated more energy and responsibility into the teams rather than have the participants stay focused on the plenary group. The message given by this segmenting clearly added to the participants focus on co-managing internal processes within departments and the need to get each department's act together.
- Consequently, the plenary session was perceived as less central in the two-day organizational coaching process. As far as the content of all the work was concerned, the organizational coaching plenary session had indeed simply become a larger arena within which the delegated team work was organized.
- Each team was asked to focus on establishing department priorities, setting goals and designing action plans out of the presence of their department heads. This organizational coaching design contributed to enhancing in-team collective and transversal responsibility.
- The team decision proposals could not be considered as final as they were made without their team leaders. They were nonetheless interesting as these were to emerge from a delegated organizational coaching process. Each transversal team had been put in a position to drive itself or take empowered initiative without waiting for their leader to define priorities and design action.
- The same was true for the executive team which was to develop its collective responsibility in the absence of the CEO. While each department focused on its own issues without their department leader, the department leaders were asked to do the same on the executive team

level, in order to focus on issues which concerned the organization as a whole. This organizational coaching process “pulled” department heads up and out of their department-specific or territorial priorities into their more important executive roles.

SECOND DAY

During the break-out session, the systemic organizational coaches again avoided getting caught up in each of the groups’ dynamics and content, only occasionally “getting a feel” through limited and very short visits. The CEO again avoided contact with any break-out session including with the executive team. One of the systemic coaches stayed with the leader for most of the time, debriefing the leader's perception of the organizational culture and putting forth questions focused on helping him define his future management and organizational development strategy.

At the end of the organizational coaching sub-group work each team was asked to photocopy their decision sheet of proposed actions in order to distribute these to the designated participants before the start of the following plenary meeting.

Plenary session III

The third plenary session architecture and process resembled the second, focused on sharing each team's break-out process with more spontaneous sharing volunteered from each team member. The participants had become familiar with the idea of freely sharing their perceptions on their team's internal processes with the larger group.

The two hour debriefing process displayed much better team work. This validated the fact that the organizational coaching break-out sessions were both more productive and solution-centered. Some volunteered comments even mentioned specific individual behaviors which were perceived as non productive and that the team had learned to manage and re-focus, in order to stay on track and become more productive.

- Organizational coaching questions were both focused on eliciting an in-depth debrief on the sub-group work process and on sharing perceived differences and improvements from the first break out session.
- More time was spent on specifying possible competencies of the different meeting roles and how those could help each team develop future effectiveness.
- Coaches specifically asked each team how the rotation of the organizational coaching meeting roles could help them develop more efficient and participative teamwork in the future, within the departmental teams and the executive team, back in their usual work environment.

This second plenary session lasted until lunch.

Third Assignment

After lunch, a third organizational coaching break-out session was organized. Each departmental team was asked to reconvene, but this time within a slightly different architecture, each team *including* their department head. Consequently, the executive team members did not participate in this assignment as an executive team.

Within each department, the same three meeting roles, minus the scribe at the flip chart, were played by yet other volunteers. The department heads were asked *not* to assume any of the previously defined meeting roles. As *de facto* decision makers, they were asked to assume no other functional role. These were delegated to other team members so as to keep their hands free and let their teams manage their own meeting process.

The content objective of this last organizational coaching break-out session was to finalize each departmental action plan and produce decision sheets that were to be distributed

- to each other department team member, by e-mail
- to each member of the executive team, including
- the CEO.

More specifically, the question was: “What is your department going to implement to significantly contribute to increasing customer perceived quality *and* measurable organizational results?”

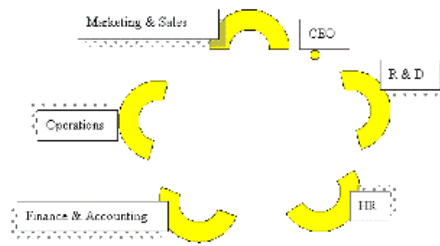
In effect, in order to officially make these final decisions within the two-day organizational coaching process, the architecture of the departmental teams was now modified to reinstate each department head's presence as a decision-maker.

Considering that each department head was participating in their own department's meeting as decision makers and that the executive team was not able to convene with the CEO, the executive team set a future date to meet and committed to e-mail their decisions to all the 70 participants, within the month following the organizational coaching event.

During this last sequence of organizational coaching break-out work, the systemic coaches stayed out of the way and debriefed with the CEO on the results of the two-day process and possible ways to follow up in the future.

Plenary session IV

The last plenary organizational coaching session was slightly modified to reflect the sub-group work which had just taken place. Each of the department heads including their team leader was asked to stay grouped. Consequently the executive team did not stand out as such in this last session.



In this new organizational coaching configuration, each department was asked to present the way they had worked together, concentrating on process and avoiding to develop content.

Organizational coaching questions to elicit information also focused on having the teams express how they had integrated the presence of their department heads as compared to previous break-out sessions. Conclusion time was also given for each of the department heads to express how they had perceived their team's work and their part in it. A discussion followed to underline the potential in having all future departmental meetings be run with the same delegated process roles, keeping the department head free from having to manage the meetings and therefore able to focus on the quality of collective decisions.

CASE-STUDY CONCLUSIONS

- The executive team committed to follow up on all department decisions on a monthly basis.
- A date was set for the whole group to reconvene in another organizational coaching process within nine months to evaluate achievements and move forward.
- The CEO made a short concluding speech underlining his commitment to follow up on all the departmental decisions as well as the pending executive team meeting focused on elaborating their own final objectives and deadlines.

Comments

For systemic organizational coaches, the above case study illustrates how a large-group coaching process can create a malleable learning environment within which large "systems" and their significant sub-systems can simultaneously work on their own challenges and towards their own solutions.

The demonstrated organizational coaching process was not focused on delivering expert content. In fact, never did the organizational coaches input any analysis or content on any general or specific organizational issue.

The demonstrated organizational coaching process was not focused on ironing-out issues concerning individual or collective relationships. In fact, hardly any coaching attention was focused on individuals, interpersonal or inter-group relationships. This relational dimension was directly treated by the concerned teams, as needed.

The organizational coaching work almost exclusively consisted in setting the stage or giving space for the client "systems" to grow by working on their operational competencies and interfaces centered on finding and implementing solutions. All relational issues, if any, were left to be mentioned and treated by each system while they independently worked to achieve their goals.

Consequently during this organizational coaching process, the content of ABC's organizational challenges was directly addressed by the organization's employees and executives. This organizational coaching work was intentionally organized by offering coaching questions focused on addressing future departmental and executive team solutions and action plans for success.

All the organizational coaching break-out sessions were self-managed by each of the departmental teams. As the two days rolled on, visits by the systemic coaches in the break-out rooms became more rare and much shorter. This gave each team the clear message that their work processes and content belonged to them. All the team members found the opportunity to experiment and develop their own working process focused on achieving their own tasks.

The organizational coaching plenary session process debriefs were focused on how the participants *said* their teams had worked *and* on the way (the process patterns) the team delivered that information in the plenary meeting arena. The systemic organizational coaches focused on asking questions which would help each team discover and develop better internal team processes. The two-day systemic organizational coaching event aimed to let each team experiment on its own, then develop its own awareness and come to its own conclusions and solutions.

The systemic organizational coaching process had a simple objective: change the direction of the personnel's energy focused on the executive team and CEO, in order to refocus on achieving each local team goals. The measurable outcome of the two-day organizational coaching event

succeeded in redirecting the organization's implicit architecture and energy polarity.

More specifically, the aim of the systemic organizational coaching process was to provoke large scale "triangulation" within the organization. When two entities, no matter the number of people concerned, are in a relational bind, the best way to get them out of their face-to-face confrontational "polarity" is to get all the actors to face a third (triangulating) direction, a common objective.

In our organizational coaching case study with ABC corporation, the triangulation process was not initiated right away. the coaches first subdivided the large group into departmental subgroups to create a multi-polar relational situation in the plenary meeting room, extracting all the leaders from their natural teams. As a result, the "upwards" focus in each team was made impossible, and the team members were invited to face themselves and each other rather than their hierarchy.

The second organizational coaching assignment was tailored to have each team consider room for developing its own potential rather than only focusing upwards to resist content-focused directions given by the executive team and CEO. The executive team was treated as just another team with the same assignment, which made it an equal *partner* in the solution-oriented systemic organizational coaching process.

Only after a first round of organizational coaching break-out team-work was each team asked to focus on their own department's options for improvement. Only then did the real "triangulation" process take place, as each person, departmental team and the executive team all started focusing on their own responsibility to achieve their contribution to organizational goals. When they started all looking in the same direction, they forgot about their opposition and started working on their common solutions.

Considering the two-day event goals was mainly focused on redirecting upwards resistance to the new management team towards achieving operational goals, less time and energy was allotted to formally implanting more effective team meeting processes. Indeed simultaneously achieving such a cultural transformation would have required more practice, and therefore one more day. This goal was only partially achieved in this event, but was followed with subsequent in-team work in operational divisions, world-wide.

In this case study, the sub-group team-work was undertaken in dedicated break-out rooms, one per team. This is to be exceptional. Much more collective energy, focus, alignment, commitment, etc. can be achieved when organizational coaching takes place in on large ballroom, tailored to include all the concerned teams both in plenary sessions and in their sub-group work.

individual, team and organizational systemic coaching work continued within this 20 000 employee world-wide organization for the following four years, with the same team of coaches *and* with numerous other trainers, experts and consultants.

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