



Reflections from the field

Developing stronger practitioner certification in coaching-related professions: a USA perspective

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Something quite exciting happened recently. For the first time in the six months that I have been receiving a publication from a national executive recruiter, the December 2002 issue listed several positions for Organizational Development (OD) and Human Performance Improvement (HPI) Professionals. Half of those positions were listed with multinational firms. This is a welcome sign that corporations are starting to understand the need and value for developing the human systems on which their process systems depend.

Developing respect and credibility

While the demand for this work continues to increase, a respect and credibility problem seems to persist for all of these professions. Without established best practices, agreed-upon core competencies of knowledge, skills and definitions, many under-trained coaches and OD consultants leave organizational leaders wondering about the real value of the field. My guess is that most executives intuitively understand the need and value for emphasis on the human side of organizations, but find themselves frustrated by the lack of consistent understanding of the nature of the work and the measurable outcomes they can expect. While most professionals I have worked with in OD have graduate level management educations, very few coaches have any sort of certification at all, and the certification programs offered by U.S. coaching institutes only provide rudimentary theoretical and methodology knowledge and skills attained through short, limited training programs.

Drawing distinctions among coach training programs

As U.S. coach education programs are designed, I believe it would be valuable from both a marketing and a scholarship perspective to distinguish, differentiate and integrate the related (often inseparable) fields of Organizational Development, Human Performance Improvement (HPI), Training and Development, and Executive and Strategic Coaching. Both internal professionals and external consultants would benefit from a clear definition and description of these important organizational roles. Along with an understanding of convergence and divergence, there needs to be development of theoretical foundations and core competencies that would identify a professional with the comprehensive skill sets and knowledge to effectively perform in these roles.

My observation has been that most coaches, OD professionals, and HPI trainers focus their work *either* on the human systems (personal development, human potential, group psychodynamics, etc) *or* on the process systems (systems design, work skills training, quality improvement, process improvement). Instead, organizational leaders

and the coaches and consultants who provide interventions and development, need to have a comprehensive understanding of *both* of these key ingredients to bottom-line organizational results.

Advancing professional practice through better empirical research

Most consultants and coaches offer solutions without truly assessing and diagnosing the problems their clients actually need to have addressed. The result can be similar to prescribing cough syrup for a headache. Without a comprehensive approach to assessment and diagnosis of both the visible and invisible dynamics that affect performance, effective interventions cannot be designed or implemented.

For example, ‘change management’ and ‘culture crafting’ are key buzzwords used these days in the U.S. to sell organizational leaders on new strategies. But these interventions too often focus on promoting ‘buy in’, or stakeholder support, for the change, merger or new process, and ignore the impact of the anxieties and fears those changes trigger at all levels of the organization. Until those anxieties and fears are addressed, no amount of motivational pep-talk to elicit ‘buy in’ will be effective. A skilled and knowledgeable coach or consultant would have a strong theoretical understanding of key process strategies, but also insight into current theories in humanistic, cognitive and psychoanalytic psychology as they apply to group psychodynamics. Likewise, understanding organizational culture from the perspective of systems thinking and evolutionary theory can enable coaches and consultants to guide their clients toward conscious cultural evolution within their organizations.

The U.S. market for effective coaching, consulting, and organizational development professionals continues to rise. This is great news! The benefits of these evolving professions are clear in terms of their impact on leadership and organizational effectiveness. However, the consensus among O.D. practitioners (and I would guess coaches as well) is that these benefits are nearly impossible to “measure” and “prove” with traditional Return on Investment (ROI) metrics. Personally, I disagree with this assessment. Instead, I would suggest that useful ROI metrics need to be developed and made available to highlight the results achieved at an organizational level. At the moment, results simply are not measured.

In a comprehensive 2000 study, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD, 2000) reports that only 3% of training/HPI initiatives are evaluated at Kirkpatrick’s “Level 4” of training evaluation. Kirkpatrick (2000) identifies 4 levels of workplace training/performance evaluation:

- Level 1: reaction (the “smile sheet”: Did the participants like the training/intervention?) 95%
 - Level 2: learning (did the participants learn the material?) 37%
 - Level 3: behaviour (do the participants apply this learning in the workplace) 13%
 - Level 4: results (what is the impact on the organization?) 3%.
- (ASTD State of the Industry Report, 2000)

In my view, one of the clearest opportunities for differentiation in any organizational or leadership development effort is ongoing evaluation and measurement. Coaching, consulting and Organizational Development efforts, like traditional workplace training initiatives, should be designed with clients to deliver the outcomes the client hopes to achieve. Without this clear design and development of coaching/consulting initiatives, the profession has little hope of ‘proving’ empirically the value of coaching and O.D. initiatives. In the coaching profession specifically, my guess is that client expectations, needs and outcomes are rarely addressed, and a general “I’ll coach you to be a better leader” understanding is accepted. Unfortunately, without clear outcomes, the intervention may or may not have a measurable impact on the individual leader or on the organization itself (i.e., how would a client define ‘better leadership’? What tangible impact would ‘better leadership’ have on the organization or on individual career progression? In a tight global economy, value and benefit of any program needs to be clarified sharply before budgets will be stretched to include such interventions.

Without an emphasis on client and organizational benefit, supported with measurable results, the organizational professions will continue to struggle to make a real difference and impact. In times of economic prosperity, executives are more willing to explore new and unproven strategies. The dot.coms grew exponentially during these times, with young, GenX executives valuing the personal potential and development of their employees. Cultures emerged which were casual, innovative, and highly creative. With the collapse of so many of these promising and humanistic-focused corporations, the reaction has been that such strategies don’t work. If we, as coaches and consultants hope to maintain human development as a key organizational strategy, we must learn to balance financial viability with human and cultural well-being. In a tight economy, this requirement means proving our value and measuring the results of our professional contributions.

References

- American Society of Training and Development (2000) *State of the Industry*, Chicago: ASTD.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (1998) *Evaluating Training Programs*, San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.