



ALIGNMENT COACHING

[A Broader Perspective on Business Coaching]

by John Lazar and William Bergquist

We propose three forms of coaching that can be of great value to many managers of performance improvement undertakings: performance coaching, executive coaching, and alignment coaching. Given that the first two forms of coaching have been described in many other publications (see for example, Goldsmith, 2000; Hersey & Chevalier, 2000; Goss, 1996; Johnson, 2000; O'Neill, 2000), we will attend in particular to the third form. We will also propose ways in which it relates to both of the other forms of coaching. Also, in setting the stage for these analyses, we will first attempt to further differentiate between these three forms of coaching.

Let's consider the broader term, *business coaching*. This general category serves as a context for all three forms of coaching in which a leader might engage. While one might wish to hire a personal and career coach if he or she decides to leave his or her current job, the subsequent issues are concerned with the values, decisions, and performance inside a specific organization. As implied by its name, *personal coaching* concerns issues that fundamentally reside outside the workplace—though they may interact with business-related issues. By contrast, business coaching is an intervention strategy that addresses specific business issues, rather than centering on the personal life of the person being coached—though the issues of business coaching may eventually lead

to reflections on fundamental life and career issues (Kumata, 2002).

Organizational leaders are charged with declaring the vision and direction of their organizations. They are expected to motivate and inspire others, managing their own moods and associated behaviors and thereby setting the tone and climate for how work gets done. When leadership falters or fails, that results in suboptimal performance for the leader, the leadership team, and the enterprise. Trust, enthusiasm, and engagement wane without leadership and wisdom.

Taking a human performance technology (HPT) approach (e.g., Stolovitch & Keeps, 1999), we can look at the business results that aren't being achieved and gather information to determine what root causes are contributing to the poor performance. Certain presenting problems (symptoms) will suggest specific prescriptive interventions. When it comes to leadership and executive performance, we can identify accountable results that aren't achieved and the behavioral performances and decisions that are missing or insufficient. We can select *performance coaching* (Bergquist, 2001; Goldsmith, 2000; Whitmore, 1996) or *executive coaching* (Bergquist, Merritt, & Phillips, 2003; Freas, 2000; Goss, 1996; Ludeman & Erlandson, 2004) as interventions to alter the direction and velocity (and even mood) of an executive's performance.

Sometimes these interventions will prove ineffective. Closer scrutiny may reveal that additional causative factors are in play: lack of motivation, ambivalent behavior, depression, resignation, resentment, distrust, etc. Another kind of coaching may be required—*alignment coaching*. This gets to where people live and make sense of their lives: their underlying values, beliefs, expectations, and attitudes. While this intervention tends not to be in the foreground, it often needs to be interwoven with performance and executive coaching as a way to address the whole person in context, not simply his or her behaviors and decisions.

Alignment coaching addresses issues of value and meaning in multiple contexts. It can clarify one's personal values and how those contribute to our perspective on the world. It can help one discern what's important. Alignment coaching can open the conversation about how one's personal values match or mismatch those of the organization and the personal and organizational impact of that match or mismatch. It can reveal ways in which we construct our world (known through what and how we use language; see Bergquist, 1993; Budd & Rothstein, 2000; Kegan & Lacey, 2001), the extent to which we acknowledge our degree of authorship in this construction, and the implications and opportunities for authorship and personal choice.

This article is meant to sketch the specific area of business coaching called *alignment coaching*, distinct from its performance and executive coaching brethren. In addition to the above definition and statement of intent, we examine four subtypes of alignment coaching; each brings a particular focus, set of distinctions, and anticipated outcomes. We offer a case study that illustrates the use of several types of alignment coaching, as well as both executive and performance coaching. We then relate this case study to an important distinction we wish to draw between three kinds of coaching issues: puzzles, problems, and mysteries. Finally, we suggest how alignment coaching contributes to learning, personal wellness and integrity, business performance, job satisfaction, and the joy of living.

Types of Alignment Coaching

Alignment coaching has emerged in recent years from several different roots—some of which are spiritual or religious in nature and several of which have a long and venerable history. These multiple roots have, in essence, produced four types of alignment coaching. While they go by many names, we label these four types using rather common and straightforward names: spiritual coaching, philosophical coaching, ethics coaching, and life and career coaching.

Spiritual Coaching

Coming out of a long tradition in many cultures, spiritual coaching primarily concerns the reflective inquiry into and

appreciation of the major, transcendent forces that (1) call on us to improve the quality of our lives, our community, and our society; (2) provide meaning and context for our complex and often unfathomable life experiences; and (3) provide an institutional base or set of ceremonial activities that enable us to express our deepest longings and life joys.

At the heart of spiritual coaching lies the process of *discernment*. Through this process, a coach encourages and enables a colleague to more deeply examine and reflect on the various “voices” that speak to him or her in life. The colleague discerns which messages are aligned with his or her own best interests and the best interests of his or her community and society. With the assistance of the coach, this individual also discerns which messages draw him or her away from these best interests (Willats, B., personal communication with Bergquist, 1986).

Philosophical Coaching

This second type of alignment coaching also comes from venerable roots—one might even declare that Socrates was the first philosophical coach! The primary function of the philosophical coach is parallel to that of the spiritual coach, except for the focus on the secular, rather than sacred, domain of life. The philosophical coach encourages and assists one to probe deeply into his or her *underlying assumptions and beliefs* and to reflect on how these underlying assumptions and beliefs relate to and impact his or her perceptions and actions in all aspects of life. (The process of philosophical coaching is closely aligned with the field of philosophical counseling and consulting. See Garro, 1999; Marinoff, 1999; Morris, 1997.)

Philosophical coaching might also involve probes into the emotional life of individuals. However, it is not therapy, and emotional life is addressed in a quite different manner.

Ethics Coaching

Obviously, the issue of ethics is extremely important in the scandal-ridden world of contemporary organizational life. The critical point to be made with regard to ethics coaching is that the coach is not trying to convince or coerce his or her colleague with regard to a specific set of ethics or life values. Rather, the role of the ethics coach is to help colleagues *identify and clarify their own values and ethical stances* and to identify ways they align with (and betray) these values and ethics (see two classic writings: Rogers, 1964; Rath, Harmin, & Simon, 1966).

The ethics coach also helps the individual trace out the *implications of his or her actions* in our complex, unpredictable, and turbulent world and form new ethical and value-based principles that are responsive to these challenging conditions. Finally, the ethics coach helps that colleague *expand his or her domain of reflection* regarding

values and ethics, seeking alignment between personal and professional life, between family and community, and between personal interests and rights and collective responsibilities in a changing society.

Life and Career Coaching

This fourth type of alignment coaching overlaps with personal coaching and is probably the most common and diverse of the four. What distinguishes this form of coaching from the other three and from personal coaching? The key factor concerns the breadth of the life-review process. Life and career coaching embraces the entire life experience of the individual (Garro, 1999). He or she examines broad and enduring life and career patterns with the assistance of the coach (Berman Fortgang, 1998; Sheerer, 1999; White, 1998). Financial issues might interplay with issues concerned with friendships, the use of leisure time, or the identification of alternative career paths (Whitworth, Kimsey-House, & Sandahl, 1998). Life and career coaching also differs from the other three forms in that it often involves inventories, specific sets of interview questions, and planning exercises (Whitworth et al., 1998.). The coach may play the role of catalyst, cheerleader, or even goad, encouraging a colleague to take specific steps that will move him or her toward specific goals and personal aspirations in both life and career.

A Case Study

One of the authors worked for one year with the president (let's call him Tom) of a multigenerational, family-owned business. What brought the coach to the company was a life-coaching issue: an acknowledgment by Tom that while business was going pretty well, he didn't have a life outside of work. In fact, his wife had mentioned to him that she felt "like a rose dying on the vine." So the initial step was to distinguish all Tom's concerns that might become an appropriate focus for coaching. From there, we could articulate a goal statement in response to the question of what success would look like a year hence, both at work and in other domains of life that were important to Tom (such as family, health and well-being, community service, etc.). Thus, the life-coaching approach provided an opportunity to recognize and identify the full range of life domains and their concerns, then ensure that work was appreciated within that context, rather than vice versa. Within each identified domain, stated levels of current and desired or projected satisfaction provided the gaps and created a tension and pull where coaching could occur.

Those gaps became the context for a regularized process of life coaching. At the heart was the opportunity to create a "game" or project for each domain. For each domain, Tom was asked to generate a future or possibility as a context for what could be available in that domain, then to identify success criteria for satisfactory completion of that project.

Imagining himself a year in the future in that successful project context, he could "reverse engineer" several milestones with identified results that led back to the current time. Returning to the present moment and with a milestone before him, he could then identify what actions he could take to achieve the stated results by the time the milestone occurred. Executive coaching was then focused on a specific performance aspect: making choices about what actions Tom said he would take to move closer to the next milestone. Performance coaching focused on the efficacy and fulfillment of those actions each week.

In the business domain, we identified work projects to create a well-run company that would meet Tom's criteria: Allow for 35% less time spent at work, work only in high-leverage areas, develop organizational capacities and performance capabilities to perform at the same or higher levels, and so forth. Overall, there were more than two dozen projects started, almost 20 completed in the year we collaborated.

Separate from these projects, there were several opportunities for other types of alignment coaching. Throughout the year, we regularly focused on the leverage points of philosophical coaching: distinguishing Tom's background listening, beliefs, alignment with personal values, overall coherency, and consistency. For example, we distinguished, then talked through Tom's beliefs and values about how best to support his wife when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. As a result, Tom was able to talk through critical issues with her as they came up, reducing stress for both of them and assuring wise decisions. Overall, this type of coaching enabled Tom to make important internal shifts. He thus experienced greater freedom, confidence, and self-expression, as well as reduced "noise" that would have interfered with doing what he said he would do.

There also were two opportunities for ethics coaching: the re-examination and readjustment of commissions for the sales force and the bankruptcy of one of the company's subsidiaries. The establishment of equitable sales commissions was one of the first projects chosen, given its assessed consequences for repeat and new sales. A number of coaching conversations allowed for the framing of the values and fairness issues and framed how to discuss them with the salespeople, ultimately assuring alignment with Tom's personal values. The choices he made on reflection provided a place to stand, a confident and generous context to speak from, and the chance to successfully complete the negotiations. The bankruptcy situation also enabled conversations to clarify values, distinguish ethical dilemmas, and make hard but congruent choices.

At the end of six months, the coach sat down with Tom to assess his progress. We used both objective and subjective data: number of projects started and completed, timeliness and budgetary parameters on the one hand, level of per-

ceived satisfaction on the other. According to Tom, we were slightly behind on the number of projects completed and ahead on number of projects started and projects within budget. But of equal importance, he was making an explicit effort to move forward in each of the life areas he had identified. His level of satisfaction score was the same on two and higher on the other five. And this was at the time of his wife's diagnosis and treatment for breast cancer and the Chapter 11 bankruptcy proceedings.

At the end of the year's work, the coach again sat down with Tom to assess the results we had produced together. Of the 30 projects on the plan (for which executive and performance coaching had been provided), 19 had been completed, one revoked, six were still in process and on schedule, and four were in process and delayed. Overall, the project work was ahead of budget by about 5%. And in the seven life areas (for which alignment coaching was provided), compared to six months earlier, Tom had a higher score on the wheel of life exercise (Whitworth et al., 1998, p. 203) on three domains and the same score on the other four. Compared to scores at the beginning of the coaching and consulting, Tom had higher levels of satisfaction for all domains on which he had been actively working. And he was spontaneously thinking about and planning how to move his games forward after our collaboration ended. (As an aside, his wife successfully came through the cancer treatments, and the completion of the bankruptcy proceedings, though painful, freed up time and energy for Tom to give to the moneymaking divisions of the business.)

Puzzles, Problems, and Mysteries

We propose that Tom is confronted with three different types of issues, each amenable to one of the three forms of coaching being considered here (Bergquist et al., 2003).

In several cases, Tom is facing issues that we would identify as *puzzles*. These are the everyday issues that anyone working in an organization must face. Puzzles have answers. They are unidimensional in that they can be clearly defined and readily quantified or at least measured. Puzzles concern such things as changing a production schedule to accommodate a major new

order. Puzzles also concern changes in organizational policies to accommodate new federal laws or an overall increase in wages to keep hourly workers from leaving the company.

Clients face a second set of issues as well. We identify these issues as *problems*. When Tom is confronting a problem, there are many more cognitive demands being placed on him, for problems do not have simple solutions. They are multidimensional and interdisciplinary in nature. Problems can be viewed from many different vantage points and it is unclear when they have been successfully resolved. Schon (1983) calls these issues "messes." For example, we find a technical solution and realize that the problem has financial implications. We address the financial implications and soon find that there are a whole host of associated managerial concerns. Problems that exist in contemporary organizations often concern such things as personnel policies (that are not forced by new government regulations), compensation systems (that are not just wage increases), productivity, morale, creativity, risk-taking, flexibility, and trust.

Finally, there are issues that Tom must face that defy either clear specification or decisive action. We identify these issues as *mysteries*. This type of issue concerns deeply felt and experienced aspects of life. In some cases, mysteries are associated with loss or misfortune. Why is this person sick or why did

Type of Coaching	Nature of Issue Being Addressed	Examples of Issues Being Addressed	Sub-varieties of Coaching Strategies
Performance (Behavior)	Puzzle (Unidimensional, quantifiable, internal locus of control)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing a subordinate with feedback • Building the agenda for a meeting • Preparing a presentation for board meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Engagement</i> (interpersonal relationships) • <i>Empowerment</i> (group functioning) • <i>Opportunity</i> (preparation for major event)
Executive (Decision making: cognition/thought and affect/feelings)	Problem (Multidimensional, complex ("messy"), mixture of internal and external locus of control)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determining whether to give specific feedback • Identifying the primary purpose for specific group's existence • Understanding the leadership style one prefers in group settings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Reflective</i> (deliberating about options, assumptions, beliefs) • <i>Instrumented</i> (gaining clear sense of personal strengths) • <i>Observational</i> (gaining greater insight regarding one's own actions)
Alignment (Fundamental beliefs, values, purposes)	Mystery (Unfathomable, unpredictable, external locus of control)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determining whether or not to remain employed in an organization that places a low value on human welfare • Identifying the ethical and appropriate action to take in a particular setting • Clarifying one's own values and perspectives with regard to personal search for both career advancement and personal autonomy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Spiritual</i> (discerning one's spiritual directions) • <i>Philosophical</i> (critically examining fundamental frames of reference) • <i>Ethics</i> (identifying and consistently acting on one's own values and ethics) • <i>Life and Career</i> (identifying and acting on broad life and career preference patterns)

Figure 1. The Business Coaching Taxonomy.

she die? Why has this leader or this organization been identified as the cause of the economic downturn in this community? In other cases, mysteries are associated with birth, love, or good fortune: the smiling face of a new-born grandchild or the continuing love for a spouse, the opportunity to move into a new international market as a result of a chance encounter with someone at the airport. Mysteries can be neither measured nor confined by a category.

Mysteries seem to take place outside our sphere of control or influence. Psychologists call this an “external locus of control” (Rotter, 1966; Seligman, 1990) and note that some people are inclined to view most issues as outside their control (that is, as mysteries). By contrast, puzzles are usually under our control. Psychologists identify this perspective as an “internal locus of control” and note that some people are likely to view all issues as being under their control (that is, as puzzles). Problems are usually complex mixtures of controllable and uncontrollable elements. To successfully address a problem, one typically needs a balanced perspective with regard to internal and external loci of control (see Figure 1).

What about Tom’s puzzles, problems, and mysteries? His initial issue appears to be a mixture of problem and mystery, an appropriate focus for life coaching: balancing life and career, love and work. With additional clarity, Tom was able to create a project or “game” for each domain, and the issues became problem based. Each game was complex, multidimensional, and interdisciplinary, with its own measures of success.

There was yet another level of focusing in this coaching process that transformed the issues Tom was addressing into specific, manageable puzzles. Specific work projects were identified that had measurable criteria (e.g., 35% less time spent at work). At the end of six months and after a year of consulting and coaching, progress in each domain could be assessed and new plans made. This is the great benefit of being able to move in coaching from mysteries and problems toward puzzles: Accountability can be established (given that puzzles have internal loci of control and outcomes can be assessed).

This didn’t mean that the rich problem-based and mystery-based components of the coaching process were set aside. They continued to illuminate and undergird Tom’s actions. Furthermore, Tom identified additional problems and mysteries throughout the coaching engagement. Together with his coach, he addressed the problems associated with equitable commissions and the responsible handling of his subsidiary’s bankruptcy. He also had to confront the mystery of his wife’s breast cancer and medical treatment.

This is the strength of recognizing all three types of issues in a coaching engagement. If the problems and mysteries Tom was confronting were not acknowledged and addressed in the coaching session, then the puzzles on which he chose to focus would have been viewed outside their full context. His wife’s cancer and his ethical struggles regarding com-

pensation and bankruptcy were part and parcel of his daily working life. They could not be ignored, nor could the coach have avoided them by referring Tom to a therapist or religious counselor. Business coaching will inevitably move through puzzles, problems, and mysteries—given that these three types of issues are inherent and interwoven in all contemporary lives and organizations.

What about the three forms of coaching? How do they relate to these three types of issues?

We would suggest that puzzles are often addressed through performance coaching. Tom was receiving performance coaching during the time he was enacting his projects (“games”). By contrast, executive coaching is usually appropriate when a problem is being identified and analyzed. The client was receiving executive coaching when he first identified the projects and planned for their enactment. Alignment coaching is appropriate when the issue being considered is a mystery or (as is often the case) a blending of mystery and problem. Alignment coaching was employed when Tom addressed the balance between his life and work and when he was struggling with the compensation and bankruptcy issues. Alignment coaching was employed in particular when he was attempting to operate as both the owner and leader of a business and the loving husband of a woman who was fighting breast cancer.

Should one person have provided all three types of coaching? We believe that it is appropriate for a single coach to employ all three types when assisting another person with his or her complex life issues. When one person is doing the coaching, there is consistency and each issue can be more fully understood within the context of the other issues. Most issues are nested in other issues. Puzzles are nested in problems that are nested in mysteries.

This doesn’t mean that a coach can ignore the important differences between performance, executive and alignment coaching. When there is a shift from puzzle to problem, things get more complex and less clear. The performance coach becomes an executive coach and moves back from execution of a decision to the process of decision making itself. Success is harder to measure and the coach must be clear with his or her client that he or she is no longer in the safe harbor of clearly defined puzzles.

Similarly, when moving from a problem to a mystery, the coach and client must be clear that they are beginning to address issues that may have no solutions and that often lie outside the control of the person being coached. At this point, the coaching session often moves away from action and toward reflection, away from thoughts and toward feelings, away from a focus on means and toward a focus on end-points and ultimate purposes. This *isn’t* religious counseling, though aspects of religion and spirituality are often part of the agenda. This *is* alignment coaching.

Perhaps most important is that alignment coaching *isn't* psychotherapy, and one must be careful about not moving across this boundary (Cavanagh & Grant, 2004; Williams, 2004). Alignment coaching, however, is healing and one might say “therapeutic”—and the world in which we now live is very much in need of this healing type of dialogue. When addressing problems and mysteries, one will inevitably confront highly emotional issues that tap into long-standing fears and concerns. However, the alignment coach and the person being assisted will consider these emotions, fears, and concerns as *part of the context*, rather than as the *primary focus of the coaching session*.

The Value of Alignment Coaching

We have shown and illustrated the settings in which executive and performance coaching can occur and how they contribute to learning, expanded repertoires, and perspectives, as well as desired results. Yet the deeper satisfaction and joy of the process and the interim outcomes are often enabled by alignment coaching. It can expand one's capacity to positively reframe situations to create and declare the benefit. Because alignment coaching specifically attends to one's context and values and the meaning that stems from those foundations, it connects us with our life journey and our narrative about why (we say) we're on it and grants opportunities for valuable learning that is essential for traveling well. 🌱

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