

The evolution of coaching: a cottage industry grows up

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Dear John

You are probably the best-known person amongst coaches all over the world. Your book *Coaching for Performance* has been one of the first from which most newcomers in this field are most likely to start their professional journey. At the same time, since this book was published, the field has changed significantly. One of the aspects of this change is signified by this journal that has a specific purpose to involve international community of coaches in further development of this field. We would like to know your thoughts on the agenda of coaching nowadays and its theory, research and practice. So we want to build our interview around the title of our journal.

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Interview with Sir John Whitmore

Q: Could you describe first how you became a coach?

I had been professional racing driver, retired, then started businesses. While they were successful I came to the point where I felt there must be more to life than two competitive games (racing and business). I then went to the Esalen Institute, which was visited at that time by Carl Rogers and Maslow. It was exciting time of emergence of humanistic psychology. I learned psychology and then explored how I could apply that to my previous fields of work. I came across Tim Galway and his work, and started the inner game organization. That is how it came about. First I started a ski school using inner game principles. Then business people wanted me to do it in their setting, so I expanded it.

Q: What is a week in your life like?

The first word that comes to mind is chaos! Now, in a sense, I am an elder states person for the field. I feel a responsibility to foster and expand and help the industry as a whole. Mainly I am speaking at different events and conferences all around the world. I travel constantly. I used to do 2–5 day trainings with corporations. Now I focus on conferences and single interventions with top leaders. That is what I do for leadership while going from one country like Russia to Korea, the US, four European countries and Iceland.

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Q: Could you tell us about these single interventions with leaders?

I have been focusing on the implications of the speed of changes in the world, particularly with globalization and instant communication. The world is changing so fast that the skills leaders required twenty years ago are no longer appropriate today. They have to have technological knowledge, obviously, but the way that information now travels throughout the world makes all knowledge potentially available. What we now need is to shift focus to the calibre of the person inside. The emphasis in leadership is now changing from the external skills to personal development. That is what is needed in today's business world. Change comes fast, people are afraid, but to succeed they have to be fearless. Leaders have to have a large vision because everything changes. This kind of skill emerges from within and can't be taught.

Coaching, however, can foster these internal skills to develop in people. And coaches are those who are in the position to do that. I usually work from this perspective, with a team of leaders addressing what they need to be doing, and what they need to be looking at to really call themselves leaders.

Q: What else can coaches learn from you in relation to leadership coaching?

In leadership development and coaching there is one important thing that I have noticed. Traditionally humans have always operated under a hierarchical structure: kings, priests or bosses. We have had that for centuries, and as a result people have been in the obedience mode and place. I see two issues of importance in relation to this.

One: leadership in all main institutions, politics or corporations or religion is failing, it is not doing a good job. Leaders have lost respect and people don't listen to them in the way that they used to (no longer "obedient"). Leaders do not cope well with changing circumstances in essence, maybe because they are underdeveloped personally. They may be clever and skilful but they are underdeveloped emotionally. This is a new challenge that we face.

Two: On the other hand we see the signs of evolution. We have reached a crucial point, the beginning of a shift away from hierarchy into self-responsibility. It may take 50–100 years for a full transition, but we are emerging into a world where people are taking far more of a responsibility for their lives. Coaching is an industry that works towards this far better than any other. Coaching helps build responsibility into the other person by enhancing their capability to make choices and decisions of their own. Coaching can be the midwife of this transformation in the evolution of mankind.

The most important task for us as coaches is to rise to this occasion! We are no longer a cottage industry and our role is massively important today. Coaches should not limit their vision, the world is a mess and we have an important role to play.

Q: In your opinion how has coaching changed since you first published your book?

I see the industry as becoming more mature since I began coaching 25 years ago and wrote this book 16 years ago. First there was a time when people saw an opportunity and rushed into coaching, some for the wrong reasons. Coaches of poor quality soon fell away because they were not successful. It is a kind of self-selection process.

Another group that is coming into coaching are those who are tired of the corporate world and tired of the hierarchy. They are looking for an exit and find their sense of self-responsibility in coaching industry. Many nowadays say: 'I want to be a coach' and this is to be encouraged. They need, however, to be constantly looking for different skills and knowledge. To the same extent, experienced coaches need to keep raising the standard, pushing the standards upwards.

Q: What sorts of skills and knowledge do coaches need to raise that standard?

Personal development leads to the psychological side of things, and coaches with psychological knowledge are better equipped to deal with those issues. I am cautious though of purely academic psychology: there is a difference between the intellectual understanding of psychology and the practice of it. People who are trained in applied psychology practices such as psychotherapy are more able to use psychological principles in coaching.

The second area is more sensitive; it is developing the spiritual dimension of personal life. Working all over the world I find every culture hungry for higher levels of personal development. In Asia, for instance, there is no division at all between psychological and spiritual development. For them development is happening along one and the same continuum. The separation comes from our western traditions. We have been seduced into western reductionism, which makes a separation between the psychological and spiritual. I believe that we need to learn from the Asians and see it as a continuum.

In psychological terms, transpersonal psychology is an emergence that followed humanistic psychology. It is all-inclusive, a way of the whole systems: individuals, groups, collective and spiritual side. I would say that in the future it is going to be essential for a skilled coach to have the transpersonal skills because one of the issues that come up in coaching is a spiritual one: a desire for a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

In relation to other techniques, maps and models for the coaching profession, I am in no doubt that these are needed. If you want to be a complete coach, have some.

Q: How does positive psychology fit into your understanding?

A recent conference on coaching and coaching psychology that I attended was nearly entirely cognitive, behavioural and humanistic. It didn't even mention transpersonal – they missed the importance. However, there was one speaker in positive psychology and I can see that there is a bridge in what was being said between the humanistic and transpersonal.

Q: What could you describe as your 'old pain' in relation to the coaching field?

I am not sure that I have an 'old pain'. When things do not work for some reason or when they move slower, there is still learning there. So who am I to say at what pace change is supposed to happen? I am a change agent, an alarm clock: wake up, or smash it and go back to sleep. If you are in that role, push the boundary: why didn't you wake up ten years ago! But it isn't a pain. I accept the role to push the

boundaries because it is useful. At the same time I can accept that some people put the brakes on: the world can't be all crazies like me.

I have no disappointment in my experience of the growth of coaching; everything is a part of evolution.

Q: What are the main challenges you believe we face as a coaching community?

Our internal perspective needs to change. When the 'cottage industry' was growing up we had a self-perception that we are the little guys. I would say that the role of coaches in the future is every bit as significant and important as the role of consultancies today. Consultancies charge huge amounts of money for technical advice to do things differently. The role of a coach in the development of the people in corporations is every bit as important as a piece of technological advice.

Coaches need to say that we are a young industry but we need to stand shoulder to shoulder with other consultancies and not see ourselves as being small. We are here and what we are offering is more valuable and more in demand than that which consultancies offer. We have technological knowledge coming out of our ears. But that is a quantitative sort of input. What we don't have is the qualitative input that enables us to use technology responsibly. We have runaway technology that has produced an unwise process of destroying our planet environmentally that is in large (80%) used for military purposes. I would say that we have too much knowledge for the wisdom we have.

Yes, consultancies bring knowledge, but not wisdom. Coaches don't bring wisdom but they evoke it in people! Coaches can draw wisdom out of people. If coaches have a wider or spiritual perspective, they are in a better position to dig down to foster wisdom in leaders, not just cleverness. Leaders can become people with real visions and real values: compassionate people who care for all of humanity and not just their corporations.

Our corporate system in the world is tribal. It is primitive and secretive, driven by a game of competition. We can't afford to play that game any longer. We have created a mess in the world, but if we have created it, we can fix it! So we need to play catch-up with the wisdom. This is blindingly obvious and if we could do it we would have a different world!

Q: What is your view on coaching policies and regulation of this profession?

It is difficult to regulate an industry like this – there are so many different application areas. How do you regulate one set of applications to another? What about coaching prisoners, for example? These coaches would require all kinds of specific skills and knowledge that others wouldn't need to know. It is very important to take the context of coaching into account and it is presumptive of people to say specifically how it should or could be.

At times I feel that people are too rigid in what they call 'coaching'. In some ways coaching is doing whatever is appropriate in the moment of your interaction with another human being. If you are totally responding to what the client needs you may be asking questions, but you may also be challenging, telling them things, offering sympathy. It has to be appropriate to the circumstances and the skill of the coach is to be appropriate.

Q: In what way do you think that coaches may not be optimally appropriate?

The process is more complicated than we like to think. When you call your coaching non-directive, you are pretending if you believe that you are 100% responsive to the coachee agenda. The mere fact that you are present has an influence. The content is what the coachee wants, but the context in which it takes place is the presence of the coach. So if I have a global vision, or spiritual vision, I will ask different questions, even about something mundane. My presence has an impact, I can't help it and I have to be honest about it. So to be appropriate we need to be as clean as we can about our presence and not to pretend that it doesn't have impact.

For example, when we taught skiing, which was coaching versus instruction, we would allow the learning to have as much freedom by focusing our awareness on the person and choosing appropriate behavioural responses. But we set the context: what piece of mountain, how steep is the hill, how deep is the snow, etc, in order to put a safe container around the person. We create an environment that is a safe place to learn. Coaches need to be aware and responsible for their relationship with the client as well.

Q: What would your message be to the international coaching community that will be reading and contributing to this journal?

Be a part of this incredible transition from hierarchy to self-responsibility and rise to the occasion. Coaching is the industry specifically focused on building self-responsibility in people and what a wonderful opportunity it is to be a coach in this time of transition!

Notes on contributors



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