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The system in the room: the extent to which coaching can change the organization

Clare Huffington

Commentary

In this chapter, Clare Huffington looks at the huge growth in the coaching market in organizations in all sectors in relation to the relative decline in the market for large-scale organizational consultancy and asks why this should be the case. Her particular question is whether one-to-one work is taking the place of consultancy to the system as a whole and the extent to which coaching is equal to achieving this task in an alternative form. The chapter draws attention to the retreat from the whole-systems thinking of the last ten years or so while emphasizing that many of the things organizations now want and need to do (partnership working, strategic alliances, mergers, and acquisitions) require the ability to work within and across systems.

After outlining the key ideas and techniques she uses in her work with coaching clients, Huffington explores via two case examples the extent to which it is possible to influence the organization as a whole via working with an individual client. In the first example, of work with a senior manager in an investment bank, it was possible to help the client to develop her systemic thinking to the extent that she herself took action to influence her colleagues

and other senior leaders in the organization so that change took place. In the second example of work with senior leadership team members and subsequently the CEO of an IT company, individual work with a group of leaders built a critical mass of curiosity and desire for change in the system from the levels below the CEO that he eventually could not ignore.

One of the key questions that remains is whether coaching individuals in an organization can ever be more than the sum of the parts: the challenge to systemic practitioners may be to design new methods and approaches to changing whole systems that appeal to leaders in organizations today. A number of the subsequent chapters in this book illustrate some possible examples. [Eds.]

In a way, the title of this chapter is a bit odd. How could an individual approach to personal and professional development like coaching change an organization? On the other hand, why has there been such a massive growth in the coaching market in the last ten or so years, with organizations the major purchasers of the service for their senior executives. What do they see in it?

On one level, one could view this as an attempt by organizations to recruit and retain good people by offering personal development as an executive “perk”—I recently saw the provision of coaching described in a job advertisement as one of the benefits of becoming a manager at a large chain of retail stores. Or, on another level, people now seem to lack trust that organizations will look after them and support their development, given the vicious downsizing and redundancies of recent years. The support function is now outsourced to the burgeoning band of external coaches rather than to internal managers. This may be why individuals seek coaching for themselves even if their organizations do not offer it to them.

However, there is another possibility: that coaching is, as described by one of my clients, “the new organizational consultancy”, a discrete, relatively cheap, controllable form of organizational consultancy compared with the large-scale major change consultancy popular in the 1980s and 1990s. There may be additional benefits from coaching. It mirrors or even simulates the

kind of leadership organizations now need—that is, the leader as coach or facilitator rather than army general or bureaucrat. So the leader, by having coaching, learns vicariously how to coach the system. One might equally say that the manager learns how to coach individuals by being coached him/herself (Bell & Huffington, 2008).

Coaching could become a vehicle for change in an organization if it is offered to the chief executive or boss of the organization and/or the key decision-makers; and in this situation, for this idea to hold water, there would also need to be a critical mass of decision-makers who share the thinking derived from their use of coaching. My experience suggests that it is also possible that coaching offered to people at lower levels in the organization can awaken them to making different demands of those senior to them. This, in turn, can allow different conversations to take place at that level, leading to changes in the way the organization as a whole is led and in its future direction. The coaching would need to be of a particular kind from someone who sees him/herself as an “organization coach” as well as a personal developer (De Haan & Burger, 2005). It would not be the kind of coaching that seeks to turn the individual away from the organization but one that helps the individual face into it and deal more effectively with his or her role in it. It would need to be focused on the uncertain but creative boundary between the individual in the organization and “the organization in the individual” (Huffington, 2006). This means the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs held in the organization that become part of the individual as a result of his or her engagement with it.

I describe below how these ideas have evolved from the systemic framework.

The coach, the coachee, and the organization

The classic triangle of person, role, and system (Figure 1.1) describes how the individual derives relatedness and authority through his or her role in the system/organization (Miller & Rice, 1967a). This model helps the organizational consultant or manager

to remember the mediating function of a person’s role in relation to the primary task of the organization and how it is possible for these elements to become uncoupled, thereby leading to organizational dysfunction.

Following on from this, it is possible to create a further triangle of coach, coachee or client, and organization (Figure 1.2) as a way of conceptualizing the coaching system. The coach derives authority from the organization via his or her contract with it to work with the coachee. The issues the coachee brings for coaching need to be seen in the context of the organization within which he or she works and which has paid for and commissioned the coaching.

This concept helps the coach to remember to keep the coachee’s organization in mind as well as the layer of meaning around the coaching system itself. In initial explorations with the coachee about the reasons for seeking coaching, the coach needs to keep in mind as many layers of meaning as possible (individual, group, organization, etc.), and this includes what it means for the coachee to be consulting this particular coach. This links to the layers of meaning described by Cronen, Pearce, and Tomm (1985).

For example, in my case, there have been expectations/fears in the coachee when I was working in an organization famous for psychotherapy services. One client, who had been encouraged to seek coaching by their organization, felt that she was seen there

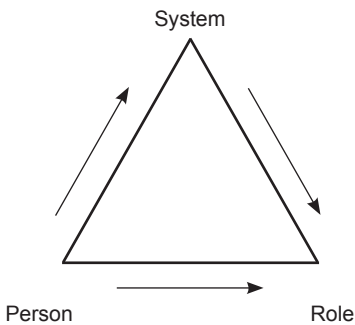


Figure 1.1. The triangle of person, role, and system (Miller & Rice, 1967a).

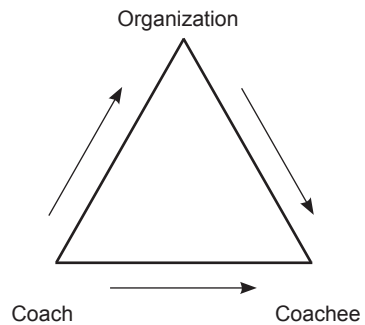


Figure 1.2. The triangle of coach, coachee, and organization (Huffington, 2006).

as “mad” and that I would be “diagnosing” her and offering her “treatment”, rather than a space to think about her issues, whether individual or organizational. Another example would be the organization that offers coaching to lawyers who may become partners. The expectations associated with this particular context are well described by Noakes and Gower in their chapter about leadership development for lawyers. There is no choice about whether to have coaching, so it acquires a particular meaning connected to judgement or gate-keeping associated with the partner selection process. This can create both constraints and opportunities for the coach in exploring the potential that coaching has for helping coachees who may feel under duress.

Becoming aware of the meaning that coaching has for the coachee helps me to understand what might be missing or problematic in the organization. So how am I being used or taken up by the coachee? In the first example above, the coachee expressed very different views from others in the organization, and this tended to be construed as disruptive rather than creative. This gave clues about where the organization had got stuck in its development and had become overly rigid and bureaucratic. The coachee became anxious about the way she was seen as challenging the organization and had been labelled as difficult and sent for coaching to stop her being like this—or at least, this is how she saw it.

The “organization-in-the-mind”

The “organization-in-the-mind” is a concept developed by Pierre Turquet (1974) and subsequently by David Armstrong and colleagues at the Grubb Institute and the Tavistock Consultancy Service (Armstrong, 2005). It refers to the way the individual conceptualizes and emotionally registers the organization within him/herself. It is the organization within the individual; this may or may not be the same as the “organization-in-the-mind” of other individuals, but it will clearly bear a close relation to it. One might say that, from a psychological point of view, the organization is

the sum total of the many “organizations-in-the-mind” of all who are inside or outside or in some relation to it. Thinking in this way helps one not to take for granted how the individual is thinking or feeling about his or her workplace but to remain curious about it, even if I think I know about the person’s kind of work and core business. I have found it helpful in my development as a coach to be working with organizations whose core business I do not know well, simply because this means I have to ask a lot of questions about them.

Although I spent many years based in the health sector in the UK National Health Service and have my own NHS “organization-in-the-mind”, I try not to assume how it feels to other NHS workers. I ask what ideas and feelings they have about it and how these contrast to when they joined; also, what made them work in the NHS in the first place? This is a way of enquiring into their primary task in being there, perhaps in contrast to the organization’s primary task and how they see this (Lawrence, Bain, & Gould, 1996).

For example, a client of mine is a successful CEO of a famous marketing consultancy. However, the most important aspect of his workplace to him is that it is like a family where he feels he belongs: this is his “organization-in-the-mind”. He needs it to feel like this for personal reasons connected to his background, but it is clear that others feel like this too. This seems to create a sense that it is sometimes difficult to make radical changes to the business that might require a different structure or for people to leave because the bonds and allegiances to the business are more than just professional ones. The ties are more like family ties, and thus a different, more rationally based view is harder to express. One might hypothesize that it has been important or even inevitable in a creative business where a lot of money can be made that emotion needs to run high to succeed creatively and win the work; purely professional relationships between people would not be enough because they might be too rationally based to generate the emotional connectedness needed for creative endeavour. Of course, the downside of this is that more emotionally based work relationships blur personal/professional boundaries and personal conflict, and emotional outbursts of a potentially disruptive nature

are rife in this industry, which lives at a higher emotional temperature than others. It can make sensible business decisions hard to reach except in a crisis.

This illustrates the point that the “organization-in-the-mind” can often derive from primary emotional processes associated with the work the organization does (Menzies, 1959). This refers to the emotions generated by the core business of the organization. For example, for nurses, there may be emotions of fear, disgust, sympathy, and even guilt associated with dealing with the ill and with death and dying. In investment banking, there are emotions of excitement, greed, and risk associated with making big deals involving a lot of money. It is important within the approach that I use to try to understand the “organization-in-the-mind” of the individual coachee, especially where this might conflict with what the individual or organization need to do to survive and grow.

The problem as attempted solution

Clients bring to coaching issues that they experience as problems or blockers or perhaps opportunities that they want to make the most of. Within a systemic approach, it is important to be able to see these issues as keys to unlock understanding of the organization. I like to see the individual in front of me as a representative from the organization coming to tell me what the organization has got stuck with. The individual is thus carrying something on behalf of the system. He or she is perhaps bringing “symptoms” that represent a problem or issue that is emblematic of the system’s developmental issues of the time. The case example presented later in this chapter can be seen in this way.

A smaller example would be the Finance Director (FD) of a pharmaceutical company who has been told he needs to change his management style. The company is growing globally, and his centralist style is no longer appropriate for a company that will be dispersed all over the world, with local finance offices that need to be able to make their own decisions to suit local circumstances. The FD has been referred for coaching to help him change his

individual style, but his increasingly controlling behaviour has been his attempted solution to the problem of how to keep control of a system that is becoming fragmented. It is a challenge to the whole company, not just the FD, although he may feel it first because of being in charge of a highly sensitive function in the business. The company needs to find a way to lead and manage in the new circumstances that does not impose more control from the centre but creates a system of governance that allows autonomy as well as regulation and monitoring.

Increasing feedback in the system

One of the things I have noticed about clients who come for coaching is that their organizations often seem to lack self-knowledge and also lack difference and diversity. They feel very stuck, and the individual's request for coaching appears to indicate a wish to bring about change in his or her own and the organization's stuckness. So anything coaches or coachees can do to increase information and feedback can be helpful. Clients can become inspired by the coach's curiosity to become curious as well and take on some homework to explore the organization, questioning his or her assumptions about how things are—for example that change is not possible. This can open up new routes to change, such as, for example, finding out why the organization has no performance management system, or what their boss thinks about their chances of promotion, or what others in the team think about their ideas about future strategy for the business.

Another way of doing this is for the coach to conduct 360-degree feedback interviews with respondents chosen by the client, usually a mix of boss, peers, and direct reports. This approach is very different from 360-degree feedback questionnaires administered annually by some organizations as part of a formal performance or appraisal process. It differs from this in that it is confidential, individually tailored, and conducted by someone external to the organization and aims to challenge and probe the views others hold of that individual and why they hold them. It is intended

to help the coachee to develop an observer position both of him/herself and the organization. Some of the questions, while jointly devised by the coach and coachee, are specifically designed to explore the organization-in-the-mind of respondents: for example, "What gets in the way of you benefiting from x's strengths [where 'x' is the coachee], in terms of either the individual him/herself or his or her role or organizational issues?" I have often found that not only does this release more feedback and information for the individual concerned, it also raises the curiosity of respondents in a useful way both about that individual and the organization. At the least, it creates a new alertness or awareness of that individual being interested in his or her development and in change, which might not have been seen before. I have often encouraged the individual coachee to go back to respondents, who will be a mix of direct reports, peers, and senior people. The discussion would not necessarily relate specifically to their feedback, which is confidential, but in general terms to what they will be doing differently as a result of all the feedback received. In several instances, this has changed a limited connection to a much better relationship.

Other ways the coach can personally increase feedback in the system are by observing the coachee at work—for example, being part of a management team development workshop in the role of observer of the client who is the CEO and giving him live feedback about his behaviour. Clearly this has to be very carefully contracted with all participants, but my experience of doing this is that it can create a context in which all participants become aware of and interested in examining their behaviour, not just the CEO. The experience of being observed helps everyone present to become more aware of how they are being seen and how they are seeing their own behaviour both as individuals and organizationally. At the end of a recent management team development workshop where I was observing the CEO, there was a discussion with all present about how the organization appeared to outsiders, with people offering their hypotheses about what they thought I was seeing as well as questions to me about this. Thus, we were sharing our different perspectives on the "organization-in-the-mind", and this led to a further discussion about what might need to change in the organization in the future.

The reflecting team

It is occasionally possible for coaches working with a number of leaders in an organization to come together as a reflecting team (Andersen, 1987) to share themes, although not individual content, with other coaches. Sometimes the organization sponsoring the coaching will be interested in receiving feedback from individual coaches to assist them in understanding the development needs of their executives. I have come across several clients like this. For example, when I was coaching a number of clients in an investment bank, I asked to set up a quarterly reflective meeting with the organizational sponsor, the Head of Learning and Development, to feed back on themes coming out of the coaching work, not confidential material relating to individual clients. This had been set up with the individual clients beforehand in that, in my initial meetings with them, I had mentioned that I would be seeking the possibility of reporting back on organizational themes to the sponsor. The clients thus engaged with me in the context of a feedback loop to the organization. Far from being a threat to confidentiality, all the clients welcomed discussing with me the kind of themes I should report back on when we met just before quarterly meetings with the sponsor; thus, it added a systemic dimension to the coaching rather than detracting from it.

For example, at one point, there was a theme of women in leadership roles finding it very difficult to assert themselves with male colleagues. When this was discussed in a reflective meeting with the organizational sponsor, a training event for women in leadership roles was developed. This may not have been the right "solution" to the "problem", but it did create a sense of a feedback loop and organizational impact from coaching, and also the possibility of creating a reflecting team of coach(es) and organizational sponsor(s) working together on the organizational meaning/impact/change possibilities arising from coaching themes.

A more developed example of the reflecting team is where a team of coaches working with a team of clients can meet with the organizational sponsor(s) and discuss themes and issues across the organization and team. This is the basis of the second case example I describe below.

Systemic questioning

I have found that a key aspect of working as an “organization coach” (De Haan & Burger, 2005) with an individual leader is to help the client see that leadership involves being able to keep the whole system in mind. This marks a critical step from being a manager of individuals or processes or a specific function or silo into being a leader who can keep the whole in mind. In practice, leaders are also managers, and managers are also leaders, so that they need to be able to switch perspectives from whole to part and back again with great flexibility. Coaching can help clients to do this by teaching them systemic thinking and practice. One of the ways to do this is by asking systemic questions. These questions, which come from systemic family therapy (Tomm, 1987, 1988), can easily be applied to work with clients in organizations in the form of “interventive interviewing”. They link one-to-one work with the whole system or organization in which the client works, so as to help them develop their own systemic thinking and capacity to influence the organization in their leadership role (Hieker & Huffington, 2006). Tomm (1988) identifies certain types of systemic questioning: *lineal* questions, *circular* questions, *strategic* questions, and *reflexive* questions.

- » *Lineal* questions are used to orient the coach to the coachee’s situation and help him or her to investigate it. Lineal questions are factual and based on who did what/when/how/why—for example, “How old are you?” “What is your role in the organization?”
- » *Circular* questions are those that try to find the patterns that connect people, tasks, beliefs, context, and so forth—for example, on hearing that the client is worried about his relationship with his boss, “Who else is worried?” “Who do you think worries the most?”
- » *Strategic* questions are those that tend to open up new avenues of thinking—for example, “What has stopped you from discussing your concerns with your boss?”
- » *Reflexive* questions introduce a hypothetical future scenario and encourage the coachee to take an observer perspective on

his or her situation, which tends to mobilize his or her own problem-solving resources—for example, “If you were to share with a colleague how you experience the conflict with your boss, what do you think he would do?”

I would tend to use all these types of question at different points in my coaching.

For example, Kate was a consultant in a global professional services company. She was very successful with clients, but her colleagues found her brusque and uncaring. She wanted promotion, and this depended on colleagues having a good opinion of her. At our first meeting, we began with *lineal* questions about the organization where Kate worked and how she used her time. It became apparent to her that she knew little about her own organization apart from her immediate area, and she resolved to find out more. I used *circular* questions linked to her behaviour, such as, “What do you think your colleagues think about your performance with clients?” and *reflexive* questions like, “How do you think junior colleagues would react if you offered to mentor them on how to win new projects?” This resulted in Kate deciding that 360-degree feedback interviews would be useful in helping her to understand exactly what colleagues thought about her. Other questions that tuned Kate in to her impact on others were future-oriented *reflexive* questions, such as, “Where do you expect to be in five years’ time?” and “How would you like to be described as a partner in the firm?” and observer-perspective *reflexive* questions like, “When you are brusque with your secretary, how do you think others feel about you?”

Kate was able to spend a few months gathering data about her organization and her colleagues and meeting them to discuss feedback about her, with the result that they formed a good impression of her interest in them and willingness to change. She was able to work to change her behaviour at work and became a partner later that year.

The case study below involved using systemic questioning to help the coachee become more aware of the whole organization.

*Case example 1:
Getting the system in the room*

My coaching client was Sarah, a Vice President in an investment bank. She was part of a group of vice presidents new to senior management roles who were offered six sessions of senior executive coaching as part of a management development programme. One of her development issues was her problem in making presentations to senior colleagues, as she had had feedback that she came across as unclear and unconfident. The bank would usually respond to a problem like this by suggesting Sarah went on a course to improve her presentation skills, but as Sarah believed she presented well in other situations, she thought there was more to it, so she brought it to me in our first coaching session.

I began my work with Sarah by explaining that we would explore her issue from many different perspectives and that I would need to get to know her as a person, in role, in her working group and also about her view of the organization and its challenges. This shows how I would build understanding of the layers of meaning involved in the client issue (Cronen, Pearce, & Tomm, 1985). So after some orienting questioning (lineal questions about Sarah and her role and the organization), it was possible to explore the issue, staying quite close to it initially and gradually extending the frame of reference by following the client feedback (Campbell, Draper, & Huffington, 1991). Some useful questions were:

- » “What is different about presenting to senior colleagues than it is in other situations?”
- » “What are you trying to achieve when you are presenting in this situation?”

Then I widened the frame of reference to:

- » “Do you think colleagues have similar problems?”
- » “What kind of business challenges are the bank facing right now?”

I did not ask Sarah about herself personally at this stage, for several reasons. First, it was not what she was interested in doing, as she was keen to think about her role and the organization and

the task she felt she had of tackling her immediate issue. Second, I would not usually start exploring a work issue with a client by questioning about the individual as a person. I would want to keep the field of inquiry as wide open as possible at this stage, as this helps orient both the coach and the coachee to the organizational meanings of the issues brought to coaching.

We discovered that presenting to senior colleagues was anxiety-provoking for several reasons:

- » it was they who would decide on Sarah's upcoming promotion
- » the most difficult situation was in business unit meetings, where senior traders were not eager to hear presentations from Sarah as she was leading the operations side of the unit and, in particular, a new initiative to be more aware of risk management
- » the bank was in a downturn following a lack of confidence in the investment banking world due to the collapse of Barings Bank (this was some years ago); hence Sarah's apparently personal issue represented an organizational failure of confidence
- » her presentations were intended to signal a change of behaviour to traders, which they were resisting.

The anxiety they felt about scrutiny of their behaviour appeared to be experienced by Sarah, who became nervous and presented poorly as a result.

Sarah went away from the first meeting with some homework based on the curiosity she now felt about the organization rather than just herself: to check if others at her level and in her function were also experiencing similar difficulties in meetings with traders.

Next time we met, I asked Sarah how her research had gone. She had discovered that other colleagues were in fact experiencing exactly the same kind of problem. They welcomed the chance to share thinking about why this was the case. They wondered if the traders knew about the initiative to be more assertive with

risk management and the role they had been given in leading this. They decided to discuss this with the Head of Operations. Meanwhile Sarah and I explored the relationship between traders and operations in the past and since the initiatives about risk management had been introduced, so that we both could better understand the resistance to change that she had encountered. Some useful questions were:

- » “What is the hierarchy now in the relations between traders, operations, and other functions in the bank?”
- » “How do traders see the area of risk management?”
- » “If traders were to think more about the risks of the deals they make, how would this affect profits in the bank?”

She replied that, while the traditional hierarchy in the bank was traders first, then other functions (e.g., IT), and lastly operations, the new risk-management initiative was being led by operations, thus reversing the hierarchy. She thought traders did not like risk management because it would inhibit the daring they needed to do their jobs well; if they were to stop and think too much, they might get nervous, and this might affect the potential for both big risks and big wins. Risk-taking was, in fact, what gave them job satisfaction.

Next time we met, Sarah reported that the Head of Operations had taken seriously the meeting with Vice Presidents in the function. It seemed that the traders may have chosen not to know about the change in policy or that it had not been properly communicated or worked through in business units about what this might mean and how they needed to work. He undertook to meet with the Head of Trading to discuss it further.

Sarah and I worked on how she needed to prepare differently for meetings with traders now she better understood the impact of her presentations on them. It was a new idea for her that she might be making *them* anxious rather than the other way around. She decided to have more limited aims for the presentations and would present less information overall. She would prepare a few key points on cards, rather than using a large number of slides.

She anticipated some of the possible objections and prepared her responses to these. Some useful questions here were:

- » “How do you think you can present so as to make the traders less anxious while still getting the risk message across?”
- » “How could you initiate collaborative discussions on how to implement the new policy together?”

At the fourth meeting, we discussed progress. There had been some further organization-wide attempts to communicate the new risk policy better. She had been able to help promote some collaborative discussions about risk in the business unit as well as making some presentations, which went down well.

Sarah mentioned her remaining nervousness with senior people in the bank. Having explored the systemic background to this issue, Sarah wanted to talk to me about its personal resonance. In my experience, there is usually a personal resonance or valency in the individual to pick up on organizational tensions and register them in a personal way, the mistake being to see the issues as only personal. We therefore used part of this session to explore the significance of Sarah’s issue in terms of her relationship with authority figures. She had a strict father who often used to frighten her with his violence. She tracked some of her fear in relation to senior colleagues back to her relationship with her father. This led into a discussion about men and women in the bank and the fact that there was a gender as well as functional split between traders and operations staff, traders all being male and operations staff being both male and female. The bank tended to cover up gender issues in political correctness for fear of sex-discrimination cases going to court, as had happened recently. Sarah felt these factors emphasized the traditional supremacy of traders in the bank hierarchy and was a further systemic as well as personal factor in the situation we were exploring. Some useful questions here were:

- » “What other situations in your life have made you feel the way you do in presentations to senior traders?”
- » “What did you do in the past that helped or did not help you that might be useful now?”
- » “How does the bank address gender issues at work?”

At the fifth meeting, Sarah told me she and her colleagues were now meeting regularly to support one another with the implementation of risk-management strategies across the bank. They aimed to try to meet regularly with the Head of Operations as a kind of advisory/consultation group to help him in his large change project. She was about to enter preparation for promotion, and the assessment of her by traders in the business unit was critical. Sarah felt her performance at the meetings was now much better, but we used part of the session to plan how she would write her business case and approach the assessment meetings with senior managers, including traders.

At our last meeting, Sarah told me she had been successful in gaining the promotion she wanted. She felt she had a very different, broader view of the issue she had initially brought to coaching and, as a result of the research she had undertaken and the action that followed on from this, had acquired a support/reference group in the other vice presidents in the operations function she did not have before. She had also gained a more influential relationship with the Head of Operations because of helping to promote a wider discussion about the change issues in the bank and the difficulties of implementing new policies.

Assessment

The work done with Sarah shows that it is possible, with the right client, to provoke the person's curiosity about the organization sufficiently for him or her to, first, become more systemically aware and, second, become more active in the system to change things based on new information and feedback. It certainly improved the situation for this individual client, but was it anything more than "tinkering around the edges" of the organization? If the coach is working as an "organization coach" in this way, it could be seen as covert and not fully legitimized by the organization, rather like a kind of internal consultant (Huffington & Brunning, 1994). The impact on the organization is limited by the portal or gateway through which one has to work—in this case, a single individual and someone relatively junior in the organization.

*Case example 2:
Impacting the organization*

In the second case, it was possible as a coach to have some impact at the leadership level of the organization, as it involved coaching of members of the top management team of a global IT company. This work had the potential to build the “critical mass” of debate and challenge that the CEO needed to bring about larger-scale change in the organization’s leadership and overall business direction.

The company had begun as a start-up four years before and had doubled its profits in that time and spread its operations across the world. It was facing opportunities for further growth but also huge challenges about how to develop the organizational structure and leadership and management capability to run the larger, more complex organization. The top management team of ten directors in particular still had the casual style of the start-up they were four years ago and operated as a group of representatives of silos or divisions and functions within the organization, with the CEO very much in charge. As a growing company, this way of operating was no longer fit for purpose. The CEO was planning to leave, so he needed to develop successors; team members themselves needed to develop the next level down as they stretched themselves to cover larger and larger areas of responsibility as the company grew; and the team as a whole needed to act corporately and collaboratively to develop a holistic vision and shared strategy for the future of the company.

The company had no history of leadership and management development, and only a few of them, who had come from other companies, had experienced coaching. An external consultant had advised that the top team needed development in its leadership of the company and so did the individuals within it. This was not taken forward. At this stage, the CEO and top team did not seem to see a business case for it—they did not make a connection between personal/team development and company profitability. It appeared a distraction from important operational issues and was therefore not prioritized.

Nevertheless, the HR Director, a member of the top team, hired a group of coaches to work with members of the top team, includ-

ing herself. I was asked to coach the HR Director. Then began the difficult task of encouraging engagement in the process by other members of the top team. The CEO did not take the lead, so it was difficult to get the attention of the others. Eventually, after six months, one or two members of the team, notably those who had experienced coaching before, engaged with their coaches. They were perhaps attracted by the design of the programme. It was to begin with 360-degree feedback interviews followed by six coaching sessions. The feedback interviews were to be conducted by the coach on behalf of the coachee and would include peers, direct reports, and the CEO.

Regular meetings of the coaches with the HR Director were also part of the package. The purpose of these meetings was to share themes, not specific content, coming out of the individual coaching as well as to update coaches on information about the organization. Initially these meetings were marked by frustration: how would this initiative ever take off if the CEO was not involved or was apparently not interested? Those who were receiving coaching seemed to feel frustrated, too—that the CEO was a “control freak” and that top-team meetings were dysfunctional because they were so dominated by him that no one else got a look-in. They tended to be working at far too operational a level and not developing the next level down. They felt in need of more time, attention, and coaching from the CEO but rarely met him. He was also far too involved in detail and not strategic enough. There was a need for a debate in the senior team about leadership development, but it did not happen. We also learned that a key project had begun to track gaps in recruitment, identify star performers, and define potential successors to the CEO.

Examining the dynamic in the team of coaches was also instructive. We were a competitive group with conflicting views on what was going on in the organization and who was to “blame”. Some of the coaches had been hired by top-team members themselves rather than by the HR Director; I was the only coach who was a member of an organization, and I was the only one (unknown to the others) being paid to attend the coaches’ meetings. The interaction between us seemed to mirror the unacknowledged competition in the top team as well as its diversity and hidden allegiances, particularly with the CEO, who tended to manage them as

individuals rather than as a group; thus the top team was more like a collection of individuals who had one-to-one relationships with the CEO rather than being a collaborative team.

As time went on, the critical intervention appeared to be the 360-degree feedback interviews and the analysis of the themes from these interviews in the coaches' meetings. As most coachees included in their respondents other members of the top team including the CEO and sometimes external stakeholders including Board members, everyone started to get involved in the process of developing more feedback in the system. After a few months, management development as a key organizational priority appeared on the Board agenda, so the CEO now had to take notice. It seemed that the Board took a different position in relation to management development, which allowed the CEO to change his. Some of the questions that were asked in the feedback interviews oriented respondents to organizational issues such as:

- » "How is x [coachee] dealing with the challenges and opportunities facing the organization right now?"
- » "How is x developing the next level down?"
- » "How can x develop more influence in the organization?"

Themes in coaches' meetings about a year into the project included the need to be patient and let the flow of feedback do its work. More people in the top team were signing up for coaching or feedback, and there was much in the feedback about continuing frustration with the functioning of the top team and the style of leadership adopted by CEO, and the need to work more collaboratively and get out of the detail. Pandora's box could not be closed and the messages could not be put back in. The "seeping model"—as members of the coaches' meeting called it—now seemed to be slowly working.

The next significant event was that the CEO asked to meet me to talk about some of the feedback coming out of the 360-degree feedback interviews which had reached him. In particular, he was concerned about complaints that top-team members were too controlling, even bullying, in their management style. He thought this might be a factor behind poor recruitment and retention of senior

people in the organization because people were unhappy with the organizational culture. This information was part of the results of the recent project and touched upon his key concerns about his own succession and the survival of the company in the future. He wanted help from me about how to discuss this feedback in his meetings with his direct reports in upcoming appraisal meetings. At this meeting, I asked him if he thought his team members were behaving like this because this is what they thought he wanted. He was very shocked and started asking me how he thought they were seeing him. He seemed concerned at the idea that he might be seen as a bully or too controlling. This provided an opportunity to suggest he might like to have feedback interviews conducted about him. Shortly after this meeting, I was asked by him to undertake 360-degree feedback interviews and coaching for him personally. This began with collecting feedback from top-team members and others in the organization, including Board members, and then meeting the CEO to develop a personal action plan based on the developmental areas outlined by respondents to the process. So the CEO at last got personally involved in the developmental work, which would perhaps enable a wider discussion of changes needed in leadership and direction in the company as a whole.

Assessment

This work demonstrates how it is possible to build, in the system, a critical mass that can generate feedback that can bring about change. But in this case it was not fast, as the whole process to date has taken 18 months! The critical mass involved in the coaches' meetings was working to make sense of the systemic forces at work. This involved the impact of the developmental work with members of the top team and their increasing ability to voice their frustration in the senior team. However, this came together with concerns about recruitment and retention in the company reflecting dissatisfaction at lower levels and the concerns of the Board about the organization's readiness for the future. So the critical mass involved a desire for change at all levels in the company, but the increased feedback allowed this desire to be voiced and

shared; thus the coaching work provided a catalyst for change. The information about change in different parts of the system that was shared in the coaches' meetings and the hypotheses and systemic formulations we developed together informed each of us in our work with individual coachees, thus creating feedback loops that incorporated more and more systemic information over time. This eventually escalated into piquing the curiosity of the CEO, but I would say that the "tipping point" (Gladwell, 2000) was the involvement of Board members. I would like to think that some of the questions that I asked enabled them to link profitability to management development in such a way that it became an urgent issue. For example, "Can you describe x's capability and skills in developing the next level down so as to release him for more strategic work?" or "What will happen if the organization is unable to develop credible successors for the CEO when he leaves?" When management development got on the Board agenda, it rose up the list of priorities for the CEO and suddenly made its own business case, rather than being a "nice to have but not to do" that could be ignored.

The coaches' meetings would not have taken place at all without the influence of an imaginative HR Director who created a collaborative system for thinking about management and leadership in the organization. This group mirrored the working group that the top team needs to become. In that sense, it is a kind of simulation—not that it was planned in this way, but its laboratory style of working helped the process of engaging the top team in development in the same way that the top team itself needs to work to engage the organization in its development.

One could argue that the coaches got too interested in a particular outcome—that is, engaging the team and its members in coaching—rather than being interested in why they were so interested in this outcome and what this represented about the organization. I think I got caught up in this too, as if I could only be valuable if I was coaching more members of the team or if I won the "prize" clients, including the CEO. Thinking about it now, I think it has something to do with the company goal of innovation in IT. This is where the excitement and motivation come from and how the people there are skilled and rewarded. They have difficulty in staying with and developing products once created,

whether this is in terms of their worldwide operation or in terms of people in the organization. They are keen to get on with the next big idea and keeping on moving. The coaches' team, while it did get caught up in discussing moving forward all the time, was nevertheless able to think about the internal resources of the organization and how they could be developed so as to sustain the future growth of the company.

Conclusions

So does this mean that all coaches are frustrated organizational consultants trying to influence at one step removed? Taking a step back from this question, the job description of a coach working within a systemic framework is not an organizational consultant by another name. However, if one sees one's role as helping one's client to develop an awareness of him/herself as a member of an organization and new perspectives on his or her authority to act in role, then this may result in changes in the organization. It is otherwise too indirect and limited a role—unless one is working with the top leader of an organization or with large numbers of more junior people—to be able to have an influence on wider organizational change. And, indeed, clients come for coaching with an issue that they often see as very personal, and usually it is both personal and organizational. Following the client's feedback and curiosity is vital, and some clients are more interested than others in exploring links between their issues and the organization, although this can change over time. Sarah happened to be very interested in the organizational meaning of her "problem" and keen to approach it in this way from the start. Other clients might be different. In the second example, the coaching work took place within a framework designed by the organizational sponsor to have a wider impact.

A second related question to the above is whether it is more difficult these days for those leading organizations to think and act systemically. This may, paradoxically, be why they seek a one-to-one intervention in the form of coaching. Performance targets and high pressure on leaders may produce a situation where people

experience organizations very individually. There is a lack of a sense of community and of being able to rely on corporate thinking, even though many organizational goals can only be reached by teamwork or collaborative behaviour across the organization (Cooper & Dartington, 2004). It seems to be the case that those entering senior leadership roles need to be able to keep the whole organization in mind and think systemically in a way they have not had to do before. If a coach can help them to do this, it is not the same as the coach being an organizational consultant; however, it may involve the coach helping the leader to take a consultative stance in relation to the organization.

In the second case example, it was as if the organization was so fused with its task that it had lost a sense of the informal or “sentient” system of developing people to be able to do tasks and thus ensure the sustainability of the organization as well as the creative ideas it seeks to exploit. The downsizing of organizations and the removal of layers of management seems to mean that those left in leadership roles have bigger and bigger jobs with more and more tasks. The parts of their roles that had to do with being aware of people and their needs just gets “lost”. This function is perhaps outsourced to the external coach and is only seen as business-critical when there are not enough managers and leaders to fill posts or when the management style is not fit for purpose in a new organizational context. The role of the coach here is perhaps to be able to help clients become more aware of both the task and people side of a leadership role and to bring this awareness of emotion into the life of the organization.