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# The Foundations of Coaching

## Roots in OD

By Matt Minahan

I’m not sure that the year 1994 would stand out in your memory, without a birth, death, graduation, move, or marriage in your life. From a historical perspective, there also weren’t many unique events that occurred, but from an OD perspective, it’s the first year that coaching made its way into the business press and into organizational journals, despite playing a prominent role in good OD practice for years prior.

To give you a sense of just how long ago, or how recently, that was, remember that it was also in 1994 that Nelson Mandela was elected President in South Africa’s first interracial national election, the IRA declared its Northern Ireland cease fire, Jean Bertrand Aristide returned to govern Haiti, and thousands were killed in the Rwanda massacre.

It was also in 1994 that Newt Gingrich was named Speaker of the House and implemented the “Contract with America,” O. J. Simpson was arrested for three murders with 95 million people watching the white Bronco car chase, four members of Al Qaeda were convicted in the World Trade Center bombing, and major league baseball players went out on strike.

Also in 1994, *ER* and *Friends* debuted on NBC, establishing NBC’s dominance of the Thursday-night lineup. At the movies, we were paying \$4.50 a ticket to see *Pulp Fiction*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Quiz Show* and *Nobody’s Fool*. Steven Spielberg won his first directing Oscar for *Schindler’s List*, and Tom Hanks won his second consecutive Best Actor Oscar for *Forrest Gump*, after winning in 1993 for his role

as an AIDS patient in *Philadelphia*. It was also the year that we lost Richard Nixon, Cab Calloway, Burt Lancaster, John Candy, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Tip O’Neill, and it was in 1994 that Kurt Cobain killed himself at 27.

Beside a quaint stroll down memory lane, why all the reminiscing? It provides us a bit of context, and historical perspective on the field of coaching, and just how it has come about. In searching three of the most popular and comprehensive business and economics research databases for the terms “executive coaching” or “executive coach,” the earliest references refer to athletic coaches and the manufacture of stage coaches for executives. By the late 1980s, there are a handful of references to the manager’s role as a coach, rather than a supervisor, of employees, including one by OD Network member Harvey Hornstein.

The first real writing on what we would now recognize as executive coaching appeared in 1989, when there were 3 articles on coaching, followed by none in 1990, 1 each in 1991 and 1992, 8 in 1993, and then 32 in 1994. But even with a growing number of citations, coaching didn’t make it into our OD literature until even later than 1994. In *Organization Development Classics, the best articles from the OD Practitioner from 1968 to 1997* (Van Eynde, et al, 1997), there is no reference to coaching. Which raises the question, was there coaching before 1994, and if so, who was doing it, and how?

The short answer is a resounding Yes! There was plenty of coaching going on

prior to 1994, and 1984, and 1974, and all the way back toward 1964, if a bit obliquely. It was happening in the context of effective OD interventions that dealt with the role of the leader in a change project.

One of the earliest reflections on organizational leadership was *The Functions of the Executive* (1934) in which Chester Barnard, retired as CEO of New Jersey Bell, described the organization as a series of communications channels. He also discussed managerial authority both as a power that emanates from the leader, but also as acceptance, which emanates from those being led. Suddenly the implications for managerial behavior shifted from “having enough sticks to make employees comply,” toward “being able to influence effectively so that employees will comply.”

The field’s early focus on group and personal development dominated our methods through the 1940s and 1950s, with NTL Institute as the center of gravity for this new philosophy about individuals and groups. The strong influence of The Tavistock Institute among educators and managers emphasized the themes of power and authority in the organization.

During the 1950s and 60s, the Ohio State Leadership Studies helped flesh out our understanding of leadership as a blend of *consideration* and *initiating structures*, with about 1800 examples of leader behavior underling the Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ). The Michigan Leadership Studies explored *task-oriented behavior*, *relationship-oriented behavior*, and *participative leadership*.

By the early 1960s, when Herb Shepard and Dick Beckhard invented what we would now recognize as OD consulting, they expanded the application of these group approaches to organizations.

Given the dynamics of power and authority that revolve around the leadership job, one would think that the role of the leader would have been a central part of the early OD projects, but there isn’t much evidence of that in the literature. In *The Planning of Change*, the 1969 classic by Bennis, Benne, and Chin, not only is “coach” not indexed, nor is “leader” or “leadership,” or “manager.” (Notably, there

are 16 references to Marx or Marxism, but that’s Karl, not Groucho!)

The big breakthrough in considering the leader’s role in change, laying the theoretical groundwork for coaching, came from the intersection of OD and psychology. *The Practice of Managerial*

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*Psychology* (DuBrin) in 1972 has several chapters devoted to leadership and management development, and a long OD case study.

Henry Mintzberg (1973) did one of the earliest ethnographic studies of leadership, observing five executives in the process of doing their work. He found that executives’ work didn’t fall neatly into planning, organizing, controlling, motivating, and coordinating as Drucker believed. Instead, he found that managers played ten different roles, falling into three broad categories, *interpersonal roles*, *information roles*, and *decision roles*. He further found that managers engage in a large number of brief activities, where half of their activities were completed in less than nine minutes, only 10% took more than an hour, and most were at the initiation of others. In 1976, Harry Levinson’s classic *Psychological Man* devotes more than half of the book to the manager’s role and impact on the organization.

By the late 1970’s, Beckhard and Harris devoted a whole chapter to The Demanding Role of the Manager in their book, *Organizational Transitions: Managing Complex Change* that emphasizes the multiple constituencies and demands of the outside environment on the manager. Surprisingly, they don’t touch on the role of the manager or leader in the

change process in the whole, short, 110-page book.

However, the literature in the field may not properly reflect the fact that coaching was, in fact, a central part of good OD as it was practiced in the 1960s and 1970s. Blake and Mouton’s *The Managerial Grid*

(1964) was a leadership development intervention in which line managers from within an organization served as the Grid Laboratory Seminar leaders and delivered the seminars to managers from a diagonal slice of the organization, followed by team development, concluding with stabilization, which included individualized support, or what we’d recognize today as coaching.

Richard Beckhard had very strict terms under which he would agree to take on a new client, beginning in the early 70s. He required a 5 year commitment by the organization, regular offsites of the senior management group, and a personal relationship, that we would now recognize as a coaching relationship, with the leader.

Our understanding of the role of the leader and manager – and our ability to coach within the context of OD – took another major leap forward in the 1980s, as consultant-coaches integrated the two broad themes of *competency-based leadership* and *principle-based leadership* from the management literature into their work. Richard Boyatzis dissected the managerial job into 16 competencies, which, along with the derailment studies at the Center for Creative Leadership, provided the foundational theory frames for leadership development programs throughout the 1980s and beyond. They provided one

particular framework within which OD consultants were able to coach their clients.

The other major theme, *principle-based leadership*, had two primary sources which informed consulting and coaching practices. Eastern and Christian influences underlie the concept of Greenleaf's *servant leadership* (1977) that calls on leaders to subordinate themselves to the needs of their followers, similar to Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples. Strains of that same theme predate even Christ by 6 centuries in verse 61 (formerly 17) of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Preeminent is one whose subjects  
barely know he exists . . . .  
When the ruler's trust is wanting,  
There will be no trust in him . . . .  
When his work is completed and  
his affairs finished,  
The common people say  
"We are like this by ourselves."

The other advocate of *principle-based leadership* was Stephen Covey, who's 7 *Habits* writing (1989) was integrated into the Franklin Day Timer, and expanded into a full range of products for managers and consultants.

By the early 90s, when coaching first shows up in the professional literature, there were three other major themes that OD practitioners were using as the basis for coaching within the context of consulting. Meg Wheatley (1992) brought the hard sciences and complexity theory to the practice of leadership. In his work on Emotional Intelligence and later Primal Leadership, Daniel Goleman built on Boyatzis's competency research and Howard Gardner's work on *multiple intelligences*. And, *appreciative inquiry* found its feet in the 1990s, with its roots co-claimed by the Case Western graduate school (Cooperrider, 1996) and NTL (Watkins, 2001).

Long time OD practitioners may look through these last several paragraphs similar to a long-lost family photo album, with a pang of "Oh, gee, I remember *that!*" and "Can you believe we actually *did* those things?"

But the truth is that these are just some of the major themes and theories

that have influenced the practice of OD and the coaching that occurred within that context. Today's OD consultant, like her predecessors, would have a hard time doing an effective OD intervention without a heavy dose of leadership or executive coaching.

Executive coach, trainer of coaches, teacher, friend, and OD Network member

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Diane Hetherington says that coaching is an intervention at the individual level of the organization, and therefore, coaching doesn't have the systemic component of a true OD intervention. However, there are a number of organization-wide coaching programs for executives that claim to have a systemic impact in part because of their wide reach within the system. Many of the best OD practitioners today are participating in them.

The early 1990s saw the emergence of the literature on coaching, which has introduced coaching theory frames, methodologies, and an important measure of rigor that OD practitioners have never really had within reach before. In that regard, the evolution of coaching has been a major asset to OD.

That's also becoming evident in the OD literature as well. From a period in the 60s and 70s, when coaching wasn't even mentioned in the literature, to as early as 1995, there are more than 12 mentions of it in *Practicing Organization Development* (Rothwell, Sullivan, & McLean). Marshak includes as a professional role for the OD consultant, "the skilled executive coach, able to advise, support, and where appropriate, constructively confront client system managers, executives, and members to encourage and help develop the skills, behaviors, and attitudes

necessary for their success and that of the overall change effort." (Jones & Brazzel, 2006, p. 23)

So, what's the relationship between coaching and OD consulting today? The *Gestalt* figure/ground concept may apply. When the OD project is the ground, it is easy to see executive coaching as one figure among several, including action research,

strategic planning, organization design, job design, culture change, business process design, and team development among others. When coaching is the ground, it is not so easy to find OD consulting in the frame.

In the end, where you stand on this issue likely depends upon where you sit. If you sit with the "coaching is a new area of inquiry and practice and isn't really OD" folks, you will likely have coaching as the ground. However, if you're among the thousands of OD practitioners who have been, and are currently, doing coaching, you're likely to see it as a figure – one among many – on a busy portrait of the field of OD. Just as it's hard to imagine Herb Shepard and Dick Beckhard taking on a major corporate client and not coaching them on their role in the organization, it's hard to imagine one today as well.

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