

The Potential of Coaching as a Profession Dedicated to the
Development of Systems Thinking and Evolutionary Learning

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ABSTRACT

The coaching profession operates from a systems worldview but does not use systems concepts to describe its processes. The International Coaching Federation defines coaching and outlines professional ethics. Although training programs and certification are in place, critics point to the lack of academic credentials and qualifications of coaches. The formation of the coaching profession was and is an evolutionary process emerging from the learning of communities of coaches. Coaching was developed in response to people challenged by the complexity of their lives in the face of rapidly evolving systemic environments. Coaching is the process of design and the coaching relationship is a design space. Design competence of both coach and clients grows in the processes of exploring possibilities for a more perfect life and world. The basis for practice is not theoretical, but grounded in processes that result in the measurable increase in client well-being. The coaching community would benefit from an understanding of its own systemic nature. Evolutionary design, evolutionary guidance systems, and design competence more usefully describe and further develop coaching practice. An understanding of systemics would further develop coaching's professional integrity, effectiveness, and reputation. With further evolution, coaching could eventually offer the world a profession dedicated to the conscious development of systems thinking and systems learning.

Key words: systems thinking, systems learning, evolutionary design, coaching, evolutionary guidance system

The coaching profession emerged in the 1980s in response to people challenged by the complexity of their lives in the face of rapidly evolving systemic environments. Thomas Leonard, a founder of coaching, was a financial planner who found that his clients often needed help with their demanding lives before they could manage their finances. He assisted a few clients, who then referred him to others. He soon realized that he was meeting the needs of an untapped market.

While established professions focused on medicine, law, health, mental health, economics, and education, Leonard and others recognized that the fragmented approaches failed to address the practical challenges of life as a whole. A conversation began. Study

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groups were formed. Materials and programs were collectively developed to meet the needs of coaches and clients.

The International Coach Federation provides the following definition of coaching:

Professional Coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. Through the process of coaching, clients deepen their learning, improve their performance, and enhance their quality of life.

In each meeting, the client chooses the focus of conversation, while the coach listens and contributes observations and questions. This interaction creates clarity and moves the client into action. Coaching accelerates the client's progress by providing greater focus and awareness of choice. Coaching concentrates on where clients are now and what they are willing to do to get where they want to be in the future. ICF member coaches and ICF credentialed coaches recognize that results are a matter of the client's intentions, choices and actions, supported by the coach's efforts and application of the coaching process.

(http://www.coachfederation.org/ethics/code_ethics.asp)

The definition fails to describe exactly what the coach's area of expertise is. Coaching as a practice is fairly well established, but coaching as a profession is not well articulated. The difficulty may lie partly because the professions are quite specific in their areas of knowledge, and coaches touch upon all areas of life.

I suggest that the coaches are experts in the conscious design of a life and of social systems, which is both a process and a worldview that deserves the academic rigor and recognition found in the processes of other professions. The conceptual framework and the vocabulary for describing coaching as a profession can be found in the systems world.

In Over Our Heads: The Systemic Basis for Practice

Roles, rules, and structures of human systems guided by tradition and Industrial Age assumptions are breaking down. People not only have to live within their social systems, but also design them as they go. This demands a level of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive functioning that isn't required in more stable, closed societies. As Kegan (1999) describes, regardless of education, socioeconomics, or culture, many of us are "in over our heads."

In the world of experts, the teacher, therapist, consultant, or counselor assumes the role of knowing and leading the client to greater understanding of different areas of life, but the path to and requirements for higher levels of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive functioning are illusive. From industrial age thinking, this appears to belong in the realm of wisdom and understanding, more within the scope of a spiritual teacher than within the scope of the academically trained expert. As Kegan (1999) states, "The curriculum is under development and the qualifications for expertise are questionable."

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At the same time, systems theorists have been describing societal evolution and the process of design:

During the relative stability of previous eras, piecemeal adjustments were able to bring our systems in line with the slow rate of change in the society. But in a time of ever accelerating and dynamic changes and transformations of the current era, piecemeal adjustments of systems that are still grounded in the design of the industrial machine age will create more problems than they solve. The constantly emerging new realities require continual design activity at all levels of society. They require the creation and re-creation of our systems so that they will coevolve with the new realities. (Banathy, 1996, p. 36-37)

Building a design culture is the absolute prerequisite of taking charge of our future and shaping our individual and collective destiny. (Banathy, 1996, p. 36)

Our age has been described as the information/knowledge age, the postindustrial age, the age of complexity, the postmodern era, and the age of high technology. While these labels may all fit, our era can surely be called the age of design...We design buildings, clothing, laws, processes, packaged food, power plants, all kinds of organizations, curricula, cars, and weapons—the list is endless. Take away design and we strip the world of most of its enabling mechanism...We have a choice. We can continue to be uninformed design illiterates...Or we can become design literate. (Banathy, p. 36)

Coaching is a process of evolutionary design. Evolutionary design has been described and researched in the systems community. A theoretical frameworks and vocabulary have been developed. It's time the two should meet.

A Shared Worldview and Process

The coaching community holds certain beliefs and assumptions about their clients and life that are well articulated by systems theorists. Some examples are:

Wholeness: The person is a whole that cannot be divided into parts. A fragmented approach leads to fragmented attempts at solution. The coach's job is assisting with a client's synthesis, not analysis.

Embeddedness: Individuals are systems embedded within systems of relationship, family, community, society, etc. Effect one part and the whole is effected. Increase the health of one system and the health of the whole is increased. The coach knows that work in one area of a life effects all others, that the health of the individual will effect the health of her systems.

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Evolution: People are self-organizing living systems that evolve to meet the increasing complexities and responsibilities of their lives. The systems in which we live are evolving. Continual evolution is a requirement in modern life. The goal of the coaching process is continual evolution toward increasing life and professional competency.

Negative vs. positive feedback processes: Adjusting the system is not adequate in the face of evolving surrounding systems. Problems are indicators of poor design. A better approach is to redesign the system to eliminate problems. Coaching is concerned with the present and future, with the design and improvement of a client's life and the systems within he lives.

Design: It is possible to design one's life and the systems in which one lives. Design is a process, a way of thinking that occurs in the moment as well as reflectively with others. In the coaching relationship, the real work happens outside of the sessions, when design is put to practice as a way of life.

Values and vision: Values and idealized images of a more perfect life are guidance systems for our thinking and actions. Coaching is a process of clarifying and evolving those values and images.

The design space: The idealized images of a more perfect system set up a "gap," a space between where we have been and where we want to go. Design occurs in that space. The coach consciously assists the client to create a design space.

Design competence: Design competence develops in the process of design. Maintaining and developing the design space involves setting up the images of a more perfect system, creatively moving toward those images, and evolving the images. It involves maintaining the free flow of information, people, and resources toward the idealized image of possibility. The coaching relationship demonstrates a way of thinking and responding that is taken out into clients' lives. Design competence develops in the coaching process.

Conscious evolution: People have the capacity to both imagine a more perfect life or more perfect human systems, and create the design spaces for evolving toward them. We can consciously evolve the systems in which we are embedded.

Articulation of standard coaching processes in systems terms provides a consistent conceptual framework and vocabulary for practice for all coaches. Further understanding of processes like self-organization, chaos and complexity, negative and positive feedback, evolutionary guidance systems, and more offer the coaching community increased potential for further conceptual development and articulation of practice.

Systems Thinking and Coaching As Mutually Beneficial

Coaching has developed from the input of thousands of people into a web-based body of practice. The fragmented views of human experience found in academia—the

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division of the individual into psychology, philosophy, religion, physiology, sociology, etc.—clash with the worldview and practice of coaching.

Coaching's strength as an emerging profession has been in its ability to evolve to meet the needs of people. As coaching becomes more entrenched, as its principles more fully developed, and accreditation and practice further defined, it runs the risk of becoming more static. The profession itself is a design space. It must continually evolve itself to maintain its responsiveness to its members and clients.

Because academia has traditionally defined the professions, coaching's status as a profession has been questioned. Systems concepts define its nature and further form a foundation for practice. A systems approach further validates coaching as an important profession particularly designed for people in the midst of the challenges of the changing social order.

An understanding of systemics would further develop coaching's professional integrity, effectiveness, and reputation. Systems concepts, systems research and systems inquiry offers a solid foundation for coaching research. They offer coaching a means for further articulating and evolving coaching practice and the profession itself.

Coaching offers systems theorists a professional sphere of practice, where theory can be put to work. With further evolution, coaching could eventually offer the world a profession dedicated to the conscious development of systems thinking and systems learning.

By placing systemic thinking squarely in the realm of professional coaching practice, both can find a strong place in academia, a system undergoing continual evolution itself.

The marriage of the two offers the potential for a rich future.

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