

Coaching and the New Biology

by James Flaherty

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Executive coaching seems to be in its heyday. Articles promoting and explaining coaching have appeared in newspapers, popular magazines and professional journals. In many cases what's being called coaching is really the same old behavior modification techniques and human resource department interventions simply renamed. Because of the influence of powerful assessment organizations such as Personnel Decisions International, much of coaching is really short-term therapy applied to business. In other cases, drawing on sources from self-help books, weekend personal growth seminars and pop spirituality, people acting as positive-thinking cheerleaders for the goals of clients are calling themselves coaches.

Unfortunately practitioners following either of these routes have not included in their intellectual foundations the work of the new biology, specifically the work of Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela. Their work can provide a fresh and powerful perspective that can ground coaching as a distinct discipline.

My intention here is to point to a powerful foundation for coaching—one that builds upon the natural processes in which we are already embedded. Recent scientific work in this area can provide breakthroughs in human competence and fulfillment. This parallels breakthroughs in large system-change drawn from theories in physics.

In order to make this article more than theoretical, I'll keep referring to an actual coaching conversation that I sat in on recently. My client was the

state director of a nationwide non-profit organization. I was spending a day observing him, and it happened that he had a coaching session scheduled while I was there. The man he was coaching (“Fred”) had a strong personality, was very articulate, and had a strong background in the rough-and-tumble work of state and national politics. His ability to take charge and influence agendas was disruptive in the office. My client (“Bob”) had scheduled this session to follow up an earlier one in which he had pointed out Fred’s disruptive behaviors.

From what I could gather in the conversation, Fred emerged from his earlier session with a list of resolutions. He was going to be more patient, not interrupt people when they were in the middle of speaking, and be more collaborative in his decision-making process. Although Bob asked Fred the requisite question, “So, Fred, how are you doing with these new behaviors?”, he’d already made up his mind that Fred had failed with them and was going to spend the rest of the conversation convincing Fred of that. Can you predict what happened next?

One thing every coach can know for sure (and that my client Bob forgot) is every client has a body. This seems obvious, but most coaches in the two camps described in the first paragraph ignore this fundamental fact. When they do so, they reduce coaching to an informational intervention (e.g., 360-degree feedback sessions), a stern warning about the consequence of goals not being met and what should be done (e.g., coaching associated with job performance evaluation), or the mere creation of action plans to meet the client’s personal goals (e.g., most of coaching done outside of the workplace).

The reduction of what’s possible in coaching inevitably follows the models upon which the intervention is based. A model that only includes informing the intellect or motivating the will can almost never leave the client competent to continuously improve her level of skill while simultaneously enhancing her experience of fulfillment. This will become clear as we return to our case study where Bob does his best to change Fred’s behavior by addressing the intellect and the will.

Bob had made the classic mistake of imagining that by telling Fred what he wanted and promising dire consequences if he didn’t do it, Fred’s behavior would change. And it did for a while. But then Fred’s body took over. His body was full of decades of habit that pushed aside any intention he had to change. Consequently he resorted to his earlier behavior. Bob’s only

solution was to repeat the process again, this time giving a shorter time frame than the three months of the last session while insisting that the consequences would be really serious this time.

You can readily imagine what happened next: Fred fell into the same behavior of defensiveness, self-justification, and argument that were the subject of the coaching. As I squirmed in my seat, I watched Bob cite more examples and Fred argue that he was misunderstood, misquoted, unappreciated and besides, he was right anyway.

What Bob didn't know (and what Maturana and Varela present) is that people's actions always fit into a larger life frame which includes purpose, values, commitments, and community. Their work provides a biological accounting for the world of our everyday experience. In two of their books, *The Tree of Knowledge* (Maturana & Varela, 1987) and *The Embodied Mind* (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991), these neurobiologists provide a rigorous description of how individual cognition arises, i.e., how it is that we know while defining knowing as effective action (Maturana & Varela, p. 29).

By defining cognition as effective action, Maturana and Varela bridge the apparently irreconcilable gap between knowing (in the sense of being informed, reading about, or being warned) and doing (in the sense of responding to our environment and working to fulfill our intentions). The authors claim that human cognition has its biological roots in a long evolutionary path of interaction with their environment using a complex nervous system and by eventually learning to coordinate action in language. That's a well-known and well-accepted theory. What's more interesting for coaching is that they say that the same process plays out in an individual person's life.

If Bob had moved from these principles, he would have attempted to enter Fred's world by asking questions that revealed to both of them how the world was showing up for Fred. Since Bob didn't do that and the session was nearing its end, I asked if I could say something. I made two interventions. One was providing a metaphor that allowed Fred to see the situation in a fresh way. I labeled him a "jungle fighter" who had grown strong, decisive, brave and resourceful from living in the dangerous unpredictable jungle of national and state government. In other words, I understood his actions as being the product of his individual nervous system interacting with the world of politics.

I asked him to describe how his body actually felt when he was at work and he located times when he felt compelled to speak, to act, to straighten things out, and not let his intentions be lost. In my view that's when the coaching begins: when the client first notices how their body actually is in the situation that calls for coaching. It's only there that an intervention can be made in behavior. Before, there's only hope, and afterwards, there's only regret.

The use of a metaphor helps because it is a marker that can provide the language that allows the client to remember, to observe, at the critical moment when the targeted behavior is in play. I went on to describe some practices that Fred could take on. They had to do with calming his body so he would not be wound up like a jungle fighter at work. He would begin an exercise program, change his diet, and take other similar actions that made it more likely that his body would start to calm. That was enough work for one session.

Here's a more formal way, based upon the insights of Varela and Maturana, to explain the coaching I just described. Our individual cognition develops because of the social space in which we are raised and the series of perturbations we encounter. For example, in a fascinating and experimentally based presentation, Varela et al propose that color vision arises from not only the structure of our nervous system, but also because of the language we speak and the social practices in which we engage (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, pp. 157-171).

It's not simply a matter of belief, as some would have it; but of engaging in the socially constructed practices that individually involve our nervous system in a direction that allows for that particular perception to be made without the intervention of a conscious intellect. It's a recapitulation of Aristotle's notion that we become what we do (Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1982), with the addition that once we become that, we keep recreating ourselves by living in and responding to the world that spontaneously arises from the distinctions seamlessly melded with our nervous system.

We don't do what we're doing in our day-to-day life now simply because we were given information and encouragement. From the first moments of life, we became members of a language and social-practice community. We learned to speak and act and thus create our world by engaging in the

practices of this community. Absent from our participation in these practices, we never can become fully human (Maturana & Varela, p. 128–129). When we do engage with them we become Japanese, Brazilian, Australian, or French, and within these traditions we might become a pilot, a surgeon, a musician or a jungle fighter. The process in each case is the same.

By engaging in practices and thereby embodying a language of distinctions, we enter and create a world of possible actions, meaning, standards for behavior and criteria for success. Coaching is at its most powerful when it employs those forces that brought us to where we are now. Consequently it's the job of a coach to provide language and practices that allow the client to observe and participate in a new realm of action and meaning.

In my example, I was first assisting Fred to become aware of and then exit the world of jungle fighter he had been in. The next step would be to invite him into the language and practices of being a professional manager in a collegial environment that came to decisions by consensus. It will take Fred a while to become a natural speaker and actor in this world, but by learning the language and practices of the office it will become possible.

This is what traditionally happens in apprenticeship programs and it's what's behind Dewey's notions of learning by doing. It is my claim here, echoing Maturana and Varela, that there is no knowing outside of doing: we didn't learn to walk by someone explaining it to us; we had to practice driving to be able to do it; we learned algebra by working many problems; we can play the piano because we rehearsed for hours.

And yet in the face of the evidence of our everyday experience, as well as the convincing theories of Maturana and Varela, many coaches still attempt to bring about long-term lasting change simply by giving feedback, using emotional motivation, or cheerleading. Instead coaches must provide a path along which a client can consciously self-evolve. I say "consciously" because we have unconsciously engaged in the process for our whole lives. The created path includes a series of practices requiring the client to begin new behavior and observe herself newly. The new observation necessitates a new language. As Heidegger would say, by learning a new language, we enter a new world (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 1962).

Remember back to when you began any new discipline, wasn't one of the first tasks to learn the language so that you could navigate within that domain? Remember learning high school physics or art history or set theory? The only way to enter the world as a participant was to learn the language, and it was only by continuously engaging in the practices that the language became second nature to us, or what the new biologists would call "part of our cognition." Coaches must be people who are familiar with the language of the domain in which they are coaching and must be competent in designing a path of practices appropriate to individual clients.

Coaching is its own world, which means that the first step of anyone becoming a coach is to learn the language and engage in the practices that allow them to become a competent member of that world. To my dismay I keep finding people calling themselves coaches who have never made this step. It's like someone who heard Arthur Rubinstein play piano once and said, "I could do that!" but never learned the language of music or spent the hours practicing.

Similarly, the world of coaching has its own distinctions that must be embedded in the body of the coach, just like the distinctions of flying airplanes and playing piano are in the bodies of pilots and musicians.

About the author

James Flaherty is the founder of New Ventures West and author of *Coaching: Evoking Excellence in Others*, which Peter Senge claimed "will come to stand out as a definitive work" in the field. He designed the *Professional Coaching Course* in 1995 and has led it over twenty times. He also coaches senior executives and provides coach training within large organizations through Integral Leadership.