This Ain’t Your Momma’s Doublewide!
or
Executive Coaching at the Crossroads

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Editorial Note: This article is adapted from the 2003 Distinguished Professional Contributions Address presented at the 19th Annual SIOP Conference, Chicago, April 2004.

I couldn’t resist this title. Doublewides (a doublewide, for the uninitiated, is a trailer house that is twice the width of a singlewide) are a signature feature of east Texas where I live, featured in jokes, songs, and advertisements.

In the case of my title, this is an actual advertisement, a giant sign as you drive north from Houston, offering doublewides that are truly eye openers!!! My hope is that this speech will open your eyes to a new view of executive coaching and what the future might be, much as mine were opened as I prepared this. If you are a practitioner, I hope your eyes see things changing faster than you knew; if you are a researcher, I want you to know that for you too, there is “gold in them thar hills.”

I love talks rather than articles because they give considerable license for unreferenced opinions and biases. I must confess, however, that my opinions are seldom all my own. I steal shamelessly from my friends and colleagues, in this case with their permission. Those from whom I have drawn most heavily for this talk I will call FOGs...Friends of George...and I owe them greatly and thank them mightily for sharing so willingly, knowing up front that I would steal their ideas and perspectives.

I believe that executive coaching is changing rapidly, that I-O psychology has had little impact on coaching, and that I-O and SIOP are truly at a crossroads; we can choose to have influence or we can dribble the opportunity away. But let’s choose consciously, not by default. For this talk, I will address four issues:

1. Why Bill Gates has a coach…the lure of executive coaching. Why has executive coaching become so popular?

2. Execution 2004. It’s not about the death penalty. This is what is happening today.

3. Why David Peterson and I coach alike—The equifinality of expertise. The fact that David and I coach alike was a real eye opener to me (and I suspect will be to you also) with implications for how we go about the future.

4. The road ahead…alternative futures. My summary will, I think, convince you that I-O has had little or no role in executive coaching and suggest some ways that we can change our coulda/shoulda/woulda’s into a DID.
1. Why DOES Bill Gates Have a Coach?

In fact I don’t know whether Bill Gates has a coach or not; I use him simply as a symbol for CEOs. I have heard that his replacement, Steve Ballmer, does, and to show that this is not another “west coast phenom,” I have heard that across the country the CEO of Johnson & Johnson has two coaches. My question is, how did we go in 20 years from a world in which “real men don’t eat quiche” to a world where every executive has a coach or two? How did coaching become so popular?

My simple analysis is that it is a matter of supply and demand. On the demand side, executive jobs became much more difficult, both on the soft side and the hard side. On the soft side, those who told us about a new work force, different in attitudes and gender, ethnicity and cultural background, were right. And the benefits of the new work force do not make it any easier to lead! On the hard side, of course, “Web quarters” and virtual teams and distant bosses and direct reports (nobody is subordinate anymore) have made leadership an order of magnitude more difficult. For executives, the prospect of somebody offering help was indeed alluring.

On the supply side, we saw increasing numbers of available practitioners. Business schools were turning out MBAs who wanted to work on the soft side, not the finance side; schools of social work and helping-oriented psychologists graduated in growing numbers into a world of declining demand...the world of managed health care made being a clinical or counseling psychologist or social worker less attractive, and the restructuring of business produced large numbers of consultants looking for clients. When one wannabe coach was guided to the New Jersey OD Network as a resource he found that it has 900 members!

As a psychologist who had learned that money is not a motivator, I learned a lesson when I went to work on Wall Street. It didn’t take long for someone to tell me, “…if you think money doesn’t motivate, you just aren’t paying enough.” When the supply of potential coaches found out what executives were willing to pay for help (not to mention the other rewards), the stampede began. For example, companies may well pay $250–350 per hour for executive coaching, (I was told that $25,000 is the going rate for 6 months of executive coaching), while my clinical friends tell me that a PhD clinician in a competitive metropolitan area typically charges $100–$150 per hour.

The result was, as Wall Streeters say, the market cleared. The demand was met by the supply and the result was that through the 1980s and 1990s, there was an explosion of executive coaching, truly a period of “irrational exuberance.” As a February 21, 2000 Fortune article read “Coaches are everywhere these days...coaching really is the Wild West of HR.” It seemed that everybody wanted a coach and everybody wanted to be a coach. Companies had “coaching practice managers” and stables of 100 or more “approved coaches.” Whole cadres of executives and middle managers were
given coaches, whether they needed it or not. Like other fads before it, executive coaching became the new darling of leadership development.

2. Execution 2004…It’s Not About the Death Penalty

Like the irrational exuberance of the stock market, all good things come to an end. If the 1990s was about expansion and vision and dreams, the 2000s are about efficiency, getting more from less, and about execution, execution, execution. And, as the executive world goes, so goes the world of executive coaching. Indeed, the fad has peaked.

I began to get wind of this as part of my daily doings in a “coach briefing” from a company that was an early adopter of executive coaching. Its new coaching strategy was entitled “Coaching for Business Results,” with the emphasis now on RESULTS, with more use of internal coaches, and a “disciplined” process for managing external coaches. Further collaboration came when an executive responsible for a 2-day executive offsite asked, “Why do we need these OUTSIDERS?” the outsiders being a dozen of the company’s “best coaches” who would help facilitate the meeting; need I say that he canceled the outside presence.

As I talked with my FOGs, I heard that organizations were demanding results, that credentials were back in (I have started calling myself Dr. again!), that “time-limitless” coaching was now “no more than 6 months,” that companies were looking for single-source providers who could monitor their coaches, and that there was price pressure at the top as well as the bottom of the range. Those of you versed in strategy or marketing will recognize the characteristics of a “commodity” product, rather than a specialty, with all that implies.

One particular FOG (breaking my rule of not thanking FOGs individually, I am especially indebted to Claudia King at Sun Microsystems, an HR rather than I-O colleague) shared information that truly made me sit up and listen and that made me realize that the world of coaching is changing far more rapidly than I had realized. The following description is a mixture of my imagination and fact:

CEO Scott McNealy to EVP-HR: “What is all this executive coaching that is going on?”

EVP-HR to HR team: “Scott wants to know what is going on with executive coaching.”

HR team: “Let’s put together a 6 sigma team and get a handle on this.”

6 Sigma Team: “We need to survey our customers (executives in SUN).”

Executives: “We spent millions on coaching last year, there are no controls, we have paid everywhere from $3K to $100K for coaching, nobody knows if we get anything.”
6 Sigma Team: “Let’s benchmark with other companies.” Result: Best practices are getting things under control, defining coaching, specifying evaluation, who can be a coach, cutting costs and standardizing pay.

6 Sigma Team: Let’s define what we want from a vendor (definition of coaching engagement…16 hours of assessment, 14 hours of coaching, 12 hours of evaluation…qualifications for a coach, et.al.), send out an RFP (sent out 60, got 30 back), select some vendors (selected 6) and put those vendors through a dynamic bidding process. Let’s have the vendors meet with our customers (Sun executives) to see who fits best with them.

Customers: “My biggest concern is whether any of these coaches know anything about our business?”

What really got my attention was the dynamic bidding process designed to get the best price for Sun. Here is how it worked: At high noon on the appointed day, all vendors signed onto the Web for an anonymous display of each vendor’s $$ bid for a coaching engagement. The “dynamic” of the process was that vendors could change and keep changing their bids depending on what they saw.

As this process was described, I realized that we had truly entered a new era in executive coaching. As so often happens, once sensitized, one sees it everywhere. I heard other stories, none of which I can vouch for, but here are two interesting examples: Cisco’s defined coaching process is much more structured than Sun’s with coaches billing for telephone minutes; Dell Computer has contracted all their coaching to a single vendor in a $5 million contract.

Indeed, “This is not your momma’s doublewide.” As one person put it, we have entered the era of Managed Care Coaching, provided by EMOs (executive maintenance organizations). You may say, “Well, that is just high tech; that isn’t happening in other industries, and it is California!! What do you expect?”

I’d reply, “Don’t bet on it. Things often, if not usually, start in high tech and in California and make their way east…around the world.”

But, is there an alternative? If I-O executive coaching is to differentiate itself, how? As I began to ponder, that is where my big surprise came in.

3. Why David Peterson and I Coach Alike

One very helpful FOG is David Peterson, who willingly shares his expertise, as well as his writing. David was kind enough to send me a case study he had written for a new issue of Consulting Psychology Journal, a case study describing in detail a coaching episode with Jennifer, an executive at HP. I started to read the 38 pages as it printed out, and I found that I couldn’t put it down. I couldn’t believe what I was reading. I thought…well, before I tell you what I thought, let me tell you my cognitive structure around David and me.

Keep in mind that although I know David only professionally (I have attended his SIOP workshops, have been on programs with him, have shared ideas via e-mail or the telephone); I am opinionated. From my limited view,
David and I are about as different as two people can be. In that view, David is studious, serious, determined, methodical, quiet, has a sense of humor; on the other hand, I admit to being flippant, shooting from the hip, easily distracted, disruptive, a dilettante, opinionated. I think of David as representing the best of Minnesota dustbowl empiricism. As for me, even though I got a PhD at the University of Wisconsin, my years in NYC and Boston made me a lot more “holistic,” if you will. I assumed that David’s coaching would not fall far from the tree: assessment, gap analysis, action plan, etc. etc.

Much to my surprise, as I read David’s case, I was reading about my own coaching. I marveled at how David (so different from me as a person and in approach) was doing all the things I would have done!!!! No matter how we started our coaching careers, 20 years or so ago, we are both (at least arguably) experts now, and as experts we do the same things. (I realize that David may shudder at that conclusion, and without one of my cases to read, he can’t really defend himself!).

I remembered an old study of schools of therapy from about 1950 that was making the rounds when I was a graduate student. It compared experienced and inexperienced therapists of the same schools of therapy—Freudian psychoanalysis, client centered therapy, interpersonal therapy. The study found that experienced therapists of different schools were more alike in their practice than the inexperienced and experienced therapists of the same school. At least that is my 40+ year memory!! Indeed, there is a kind of equifinality among experts, and I’d suspect that the same holds true of executive coaches. And better yet, this surprise got me thinking about coaches as experts.

There is a fascinating literature of expertise that cuts across many disciplines to the point that we can generalize about characteristics of expertise and experts. It takes a long time to become one (the rule is at least 10 years—in anything—chess, mathematics, guitar, you name it), it doesn’t happen by accident (it takes hard, concentrated effort), it is domain specific (When you’re rich they may think you really know, but you don’t!), and self-regulation is a key (Many are called, but few are chosen!). Experts are truly different from you and me, they have more knowledge—but not just more declarative knowledge, also latent knowledge and procedural knowledge that enables them to seem to the uninitiated almost magical!

The essence of building expertise is building new cognitive structures and patterns that enable the expert to function as an expert. As I thought about coaches as experts, it also occurred to me that becoming experts is what I-O psychologists are extremely good at. Expertise is what enables David and me to coach alike. And it is expertise that can lead I-Os and SIOP into the future. What path will we take?
4. The Road Ahead...Alternative Futures

One alternative is to continue as we are. After surveying the field, I concluded that we don’t have much history: We have ignored executive coaching, we have had little or NO impact on the field, we have obsessed on a few “Does it work?” questions, and may well get caught up in an endless loop of surveys of what is going on around us.

I get a lot of pushback on this from I-Os—this is not a politically correct conclusion within SIOP, but let me give you just a few examples. Remember my SUNny story? As I looked at the final six vendors that Sun chose, only one of the firms had I even heard of! That one is well-recognized in our field, but intriguingly its coaching practice is not headed by an I-O psychologist! I googled one of the unknown-to-me vendors that offered a background on some of its coaches. Here are four executive coach educations to get you thinking: educated in Japanese studies; master’s in social work; masters in future studies; PhD Systems Engineering; doctorate in psychology (Whatever that is!). I don’t want to disparage their coaches—they may be terrific—but I-Os they aren’t.

Another example. One of my FOGs was kind enough to send me a copy of Profiles in Coaching: the 2004 Handbook of Best Practices in Leadership Coaching, a new book published by Linkage. The book presents 50 short essays about leadership coaching by “50 Top Coaches.” My initial reaction was that not one I-O psychologist appeared on the list of top coaches, but then I saw Warner Burke’s name. I have never heard Warner describe himself as an I-O psychologist, but indeed he qualifies: He is not just a member but a Fellow of SIOP and a quick check of the SIOP program revealed that he has been on the program for the last several years. Okay, I concede...ONE of the 50 is an I-O psychologist. Another, Marshall Goldsmith, one of the editors of the volume, does list a PhD in psychology, but a New Yorker profile of Marshall describes him as a “happiness doctor” rather than a psychologist. A guru, yes...an I-O? Hardly.

One more example. Where do people get trained to be I-O psychologists? To paraphrase my title, it ain’t in your momma’s doublewide. Joyce Bono and her associates at the University of Minnesota were kind enough to share some preliminary results from their extensive survey of executive coaching practice conducted last year. None of 15 mainstream I-O programs offered a coaching-related course; how about Royal Road University? Or how about the International Coaching Federation with its 6,000 members?

Perhaps yet again, I do us an injustice. I learned that Bob Lee is the U.S. affiliate of International Centre for the Study of Coaching at Middlesex University, London, offering an executive coaching education program in New York City, as well as that Bob teaches a course in coaching at the New School...albeit it is in the business school, not psychology! And I am sure
there are others I have missed, but I argue that like Warner Burke these are the exceptions that prove the rule.

My conclusion is that if we are to have an alternative future to our dismal past we have to make a choice. If we choose to, what would that future look like? I can imagine a future where I-O leads the way, doing what we do best, examining the issues and becoming experts. We need to examine the following:

1. How DID we get here? My cursory supply/demand suggestion is just that. We need somebody to think that through. Why is coaching such a fad?

2. What DOES happen in executive coaching? What is the coach doing? Why? What is the coachee doing and why?

3. When DOES executive coaching work? Like it or not, executive coaching in one form or another will be with us a long time. We don’t need broad outcome studies of “does it work”…we need to know when it works and when it doesn’t. And why?


5. Shouldn’t we put the PSYCHOLOGY back in I-O? Like it or not, executive coaching works at the intersection of business and several areas of psychology. As a FOG said, “Executive Coaching is the ultimate application of Applied Psychology.” Somehow in our growth as I-Os, FOGs tell me that we have forgotten our roots…and our future.

SIOP can lead the way. We can begin by making a concerted effort to get going in the area. Start with an Executive Coaching Task Force to examine what IS executive coaching and how can we contribute? If executive coaching is the ultimate application, then what is cutting-edge practice? We can sponsor research in the area…we won’t need any more surveys of usage; let us become experts in the microanalysis of how coaching works. There is a wealth of expertise from studies of counseling that we can apply. Let’s bring in the notions of expertise and cognitive structures. And several of my FOGs suggested that we have not stepped up to our role as educators, either of coaches or of executives. Certification programs are beginning to abound, but what do they mean? We need to educate about what we bring to the table. What does it mean to have an I-O psychologist as a coach?

Is it too late? My FOGs tell me NO. Most would say the field is still in flux, that we have a 2–5 year window when we can make an impact or lose the whole thing.

How do we get going? SIOPs fast growth and size, while offering many advantages, run the risk of making us stodgy and bureaucratic. My years as chair of many of our SIOP committees has made me painfully aware of the slowness of committee decision making. But the world is not waiting. Many of us now operate in Internet time, with long-term planning now a very short horizon ahead. We can’t wait 5 years to decide.
Our colleague Tim Hall uses a short poem by Shel Silverstein when teaching MBAs in an attempt to get his MBA students in leadership to take charge of their leadership development! I’ll close with that poem as a plea for us to JUST DO IT:

All the Woulda-Coulda-Shoulda’s
Layin’ in the sun,
Talking’ ‘bout the things
They woulda-coulda-shoulda done…

All those Woulda-Coulda-Shoulda’s
All ran away and hid
From one little did.

End Notes

My long career has been, to a greater extent than I like to admit, the result of Friends of George, far too numerous to thank individually here but to whom I am much indebted. My special thanks for this talk go to these: Joyce Bono, Peter Cairo, David Campbell, Susan Enis, Ray Flautt, Tim Hall, Gil Hoffer, Laurie Hutton-Corr, Dick Kilburg, Claudia King, Bob Lee, Mike McGrath, Joel Moses, Karen Otazo, David Peterson, Rob Silzer, Sharon Ting.

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