The Paradigm Thinking behind the actions of the International Coach Federation and some Implications for the Future of Coaching

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ABSTRACT

The way that coaching industry bodies put their organisations together and where they focus their energy is fundamental to how they and their members think about coaching. Governance structures, drives towards the professionalisation of coaching, the introduction of standards, accreditation requirements and competency assessments, as well as the types of professional development activities offered to members and what is recognised as valuable research, influence coaches and those who engage the services of coaches. Using Pepper's world hypotheses as a lens to examine the philosophical assumptions underlying these actions within the International Coach Federation (ICF), this paper seeks to gain insight into some underlying paradigm incompatibilities which may bring about unintended consequences.

Keywords: Coaching, accreditation, adapting to change, organisational effectiveness, flexibility

Senior executives in organisations have been educated to face political, social and financial challenges using a wide range of different approaches. Many of these approaches have limits to their effectiveness. As a result, executives continue to search for new approaches (Meadows, Randers & Meadows 2004; Ardagh 2005) and this need for a broadening of perspectives has been a driving force for the marked increase in the use of executive coaching over the past 20 years (Vaartjes 2005). Both a promising and dangerous practice (Fatien 2011), coaching is used to address many issues (Hooijberg & Lane 2009) as it gives support to executives in the current economic and social environment of change.

The international coaching community's move toward defining best practice, raising standards and encouraging a greater level of evidence based research (Tulpa 2008) has motivated providers and consumers to advocate the professionalisation of the industry to safeguard the quality, effectiveness and ethical integrity of coaching services (Rostron 2009). Yet, many of these actions are based upon 'standard of the day' practices without due consideration to the implications of doing so (Drake 2008; Christensen & Raynor 2003). As coaches and coaching industry organisations focus their efforts on "success" and "best-practices" through current conventional paradigm thinking, coaching risks not being able to successfully evolve, thereby being relegated to 'fad' status.

BACKGROUND

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) is the largest industry association influencing coaching around the world. Despite the global economic downturn, the ICF has seen dramatic growth since 2008 (http://coachfederation.org/coachingstudy2012/) and now has over 18,000 members in more than 100 countries with 51 percent in North America and 25 percent in Western Europe (www.coachfederation.org/icf-members/chapter-search/ September 2012). Members involve themselves in online development activities as well as face to face meetings conducted through their local chapters (http://www.coachfederation.org/icf-members/chapter-search/ 30 September 2012).

Decisions made by the ICF have far-reaching impact, in both a practical and theoretical sense, on the nature and purposes of coaching. To seek an understanding of the philosophical assumptions upon which their decisions are based and the actual outcomes in people's everyday organisational life, requires the use of a theoretical framework that is sensitive to the many qualities that contribute to the

complex nature of the activities of the ICF. Reducing that complexity to a point where some explanation becomes feasible, while not falling into the "pitfalls of reductive approaches" (Edwards 2005:286), this paper examines ICF activities through the lens of Pepper's (1942) world hypotheses.

Pepper's (1942) four world hypotheses are characterised by different sets of assumptions concerning the logical structure of the social world drawn from "common sense" (Emery 2000). They have enabled the appreciation and understanding of the nature of competing knowledge claims generated by social scientists through their systematic study of the social world (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988).

Developed within a path of partial skepticism (Tepe & Barton 2009), Pepper's world hypotheses are located between the extremes of cognitive attitudes called 'utter skepticism' and 'dogmatism.' Valid as ways of refining common sense that resist synthesis (Tsoukas 1994), they permit an understanding of philosophy, abstracted from different positions (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988).

ORGANISATIONAL ANALYSIS USING PEPPER'S WORLD HYPOTHESES

To understand the ability of the ICF to respond to the rapidly changing environment within which they, and their members, find themselves, Pepper's world hypotheses of formism, mechanism, organicism and contextualism as a form of organisational analysis provides a simple and effective means. The hypotheses can be used to benchmark the ICF to assess the organisation's flexibility and responsiveness. The intention is to examine the extent that their organisational structures and processes reflect Pepper's world hypotheses to determine whether there are any paradigmatic incompatibilities arising from conflicting underlying assumptions. In reality, the ICF will have elements of each one of these four hypotheses present in their structures and processes. However, one is likely to be dominant within the organisation.

This analysis of the ICF is conducted within a prevailing environmental paradigm which favours hierarchical control and regards linear historical projection of trends and analysis as being more important than synthesis (Cabana, Emery & Emery 1995). As such, in todays organisations, C-suite executives and Boards make decisions relying heavily on quantitative analysis based upon the fundamental belief that we can predict the future and solve problems by having more knowledge about the constituent parts that make up a problem rather than consider a synthesis of parts to understand a

complex dynamic whole. People are required to act as if stability is a given, the old ways are the right ways, problem solving is enough, thought is separate from action, cooperation can be mandated and there is one 'best' right way to do things (Cabana, Emery & Emery 1995).

Formism

Formism represents a taxonomic or classification approach to understanding (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988) in which objects of study are thought to exhibit certain systematic, observer-independent similarities and differences (Tsoukas 1994). Giving everything a label within a system of labels provides the sense of structural "fullness" that counts as understanding in this world view (Pepper 1942). Formism attempts to eliminate context and consequently it is a dispersive theory, lacking in precision.

Formistic classification systems are extremely important in science. For example, chemistry relies on the periodic table and without it we would not have the significant advances we enjoy in modern society. In coaching, benchmarking is a similar process. The standards used in this process represent attempts to understand the world by describing its unnaturally isolated constituent parts. Although classification systems are important in the developmental stages of a discipline, by themselves they do not allow for an understanding of how parts interact. This is where the mechanistic world hypothesis enters.

Mechanism

Mechanism refers to the machine as its root metaphor, with discrete parts responding to stimulation in a structured system. People operating within this world view explain things by cause and effect relationships of parts within a whole (Pepper 1942). The world is seen as being made up of purposeless and passive parts that operate predictably. Any deviation from regularity is reacted to with changes that restore it. Like Newton's theory of the clockwork universe, in mechanism it is explanations of the parts that lead to an explanation of the whole (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984).

Mechanism is based upon two assumptions: that the world can be understood completely and that such an understanding can be obtained by analysis. That is, mechanism involves taking apart what is sought to be understood, followed by an attempt to explain the behaviour of each of the parts taken separately. To understand the parts, the parts have to be also taken apart. This reductionist process stops only

when indivisible parts are reached. Once the parts are understood, they then have to be aggregated using cause and effect relationships to reach an understanding of the whole (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). This exclusive belief in cause and effect, with no regard for the environment, has consequences.

Given reductionism, it follows that there must be a first cause, which is generally taken to be God or some other explanation that requires acceptance on faith (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). Because of the assumed comprehensibility of the world, everything other than God has to be assumed to be the effect of some cause. Such determinism leaves no room for choice, hence purpose, in the natural world (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). Physical/Engineering/Hard systems operate mechanistically (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988) which is particularly useful when change is slow and the variety of elements that interact and influence one another remain fairly constant.

Formism and mechanism both assume that the world can be described as a closed system. That is, in organisations, internally generated rules and procedures predominate. However, it is established that, where people are concerned, the world is best understood using an "open systems" view where organisational capability for rapid and flexible responses predominate (Haslett 2011). The world hypotheses that assume an "open systems" view are represented by organicism and contextualism.

Organicism

Organicism provides a systems approach to understanding, by focussing on organic wholes that are more than the sums of their constituent parts. It is a view of forests, instead of trees (Haslett 2011). It deals with historic processes in an essentially organic way; the unfolding of a logic that is immanent into the object of study (Tsoukas 1994). Not leaving much to chance, organicism sees the world as coherent and well-integrated (Tsoukas 1994). Therefore, within organicism it is seen as possible to identify the manner in which things 'hang' together (Tsoukas 1994).

In organicist systems, change is a given, and it is stability that needs to be explained (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988). For example, with an organicist perspective, a person is expected to move from one stage of growth to another in an orderly way. Therefore, to explain a person's current stage, requires an explanation of the orderliness of changes from stage to stage (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988). That is, it is the rules of how change operates, assuming that changes occur according to the rules of change that are themselves unchanging, that would need to be explained (Hayes, Hayes & Reece 1988).

Contextualism

A contextualist approach to understanding is embedded in the particular historical and contextual circumstances that make each situation unique. It is a relativistic way to see the world (Haslett 2011). Unlike formism and mechanism, contextualism is synthetic: it takes a pattern, a gestalt, as the object of study, rather than a set of discrete facts (Tsoukas 1994). Like formism, contextualism is dispersive: the multitudes of facts it seeks to register are assumed to be loosely structured, not systematically connected by virtue of a lawful relationship (Tsoukas 1994). Thus within a contextualist approach, no distinction is made between appearances and an underlying reality (Tsoukas 1994). The process of inquiry thus involves looking at an event as the result of the intersection of several trajectories whose origins and destinations are unknown to an inquirer.

Within contextualist social systems, change is regarded as regular with every event reconfiguring an already established pattern, thus altering its character. Every moment is qualitatively different and should be treated as such (Tsoukas 1994). Intuition is seen as important. That is, contextualism is about understanding events by first grasping intuitively the whole pattern (Tsoukas 1994).

THE INTERNATIONAL COACHING FEDERATION (ICF) THROUGH PEPPER'S LENS

The International Coaching Federation (ICF) advertises that it is recognised around the world for its coaching core competencies, connecting members to a global coaching community, establishing a professional code of ethics and standards, developing an internationally recognised credentialing program, facilitating networking opportunities through local ICF chapters, conducting and dispensing coaching research, establishing guidelines for coach-training programs, providing focused discussion through special interest groups, conducting regional and international conferences and partnering with strategic and resource partners to benefit members (www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/overview/).

> *The ICF is dedicated to advancing the coaching profession by setting high professional standards, providing independent certification, and building a network of credentialed coaches. [The ICF] exist(s) to support and advance the coaching profession through programs and standards supported by members and to be an authoritative source on coaching information and research for the public* (www.coachfederation.org/icf, July 2012).

Although not distinguishing coaching from other 'helping' professions, the ICF defines coaching as "partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximise their personal and professional potential" (www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/overview/ May 2012).

Governance

Mechanistically conceived organisations are centrally controlled and structured hierarchically with the ultimate authority able to affect any part of the system, without being itself affected (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). The ICF's Board of Directors is responsible for overseeing the management of its affairs, funds, and property.

> *The Board has full power and authority to put into effect the resolutions and decisions of the ICF and determines its policies and interprets its by-laws. The Board supervises the direction and control of the ICF and its committees and publications, and may adopt such rules and regulations for the conduct of its business as is deemed advisable. It may in the execution of its powers, delegate certain of its authority to the Executive Committee* (www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/icf-leadership/ 4 July 2012).

Interactions in a mechanistically conceived organisation are minimised because all members of the system, except for the ultimate authority, are seen as only needing that level of information necessary to do their jobs. Instructions are not explained or justified and blind adherence is required (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). This description does not seem to apply to the ICF as it regularly seeks input from coaches and explains the rationale for decisions and proposals for change made by the Board in emails to its members. It further embarks upon studies into coaching and provides support for research into coaching. However, the ICF's rules surrounding credentialing of coaches and accreditation of coach training programs suggests some mechanistic assumptions.

Until recently, coaches had to be credentialed to be eligible to vote for positions of leadership on the Board of the ICF. The credentialing of coaches and accreditation of coach training programs processes allowed examiners to determine whether a coach or coach training provider had reached the ICF's predetermined set of endpoints as defined by their quality framework competencies. Conformity to the ICF's formistic competency standards framework was therefore necessary for a coach to participate fully as a voting member. Thus, while a variety of points of view were sought from coaches, and the

Board was democratically elected, the structure of the ICF was such that points of view from coaches not prepared to undergo the credentialing process, were systematically given no weight.

Beginning in 2012, ICF rules were changed such that all ICF members are eligible to vote and have a voice in the future of their organisation (www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/icf-leadership/ 29 September 2012). These newly instituted minimum eligibility requirements for membership (email to members June 2012) require coaches to have undertaken 60 hours of coach specific training. This training must be provided by one of the ICF's list of Continuing Coach Education Providers who will have undergone an accreditation process with the ICF or by a coach specific training provider who has aligned their training to the ICF's core competencies. Thus the ICF continues to centrally control the views of its members through its membership processes. This approach has obvious advantages for the orderly administration of the ICF. However, the danger is that innovative approaches to coaching and research, approaches that do not meet the competency guidelines set out by the ICF, are systematically screened out.

This argument could well apply to other organisations, such as the Australian Medical Association, the Australian Psychological Society and most other professional organisations. And, while not necessarily designed to preclude a diversity of views, these structures promote conformity and entrench the status quo. Clearly in certain fields, there are advantages to having an accepted body of knowledge that everybody recognises as necessary for practice, such as accounting standards, but it is argued here that the coaching industry needs a different approach. The risk is that coaches, having gone through such a membership or credentialing process, may be more likely to rigidly apply 'accepted' assumptions that are inadequate for assessing and responding in the rapidly changing environment within which they find themselves.

The Professionalisation of Coaching

Many believe that coaching has much to gain by developing into a 'profession' and that the industry can draw on the lessons learned in medicine and psychology (Drake 2008). While medicine and psychology became professions by developing an agreed and unified body of knowledge (Gray 2011), coaching has emerged from an eclectic array of disciplines with many sources of knowledge. This raises questions about whether coaching needs its own defined knowledge base to move towards professionalisation and, if so, can coaches agree on defined levels of skill and knowledge. Answers to

these questions mean making decisions about who will be 'in' and who will be 'out' (Grant & Cavanagh 2004).

The ICF sees itself as the vehicle to overcoming these challenges and professionalising the industry. In its Strategic Plan, it defines its core purpose as to "Lead global advancement of the coaching profession" (International Coach Federation 2011 Annual Report 2012). It claims support for its pursuit of professionalisation through research which indicates that the overwhelming majority (84%) of coaches believe that coaching should be regulated and that professional coaching associations are best placed to handle this responsibility (ICF Global Coaching Study 2012).

The ICF's response to professionalisation of the industry is to break down the activities of what they see as effective coaching into smaller parts, label them as competencies and standards and assess coaches against these benchmarks. This combines a formistic categorisation process with a mechanistic accreditation process.

Standards, Accreditation, Competency Assessments

When explaining their core values, the ICF considers all parts of the ICF Community mutually accountable to uphold the values of integrity, excellence, collaboration and respect. They define integrity as upholding the "highest standards both for the coaching profession and our organisation" and excellence as setting and demonstrating "standards of excellence for professional coaching quality, qualification and competence" (International Coach Federation 2011 Annual Report 2012). Thus, to achieve professionalisation, the ICF seeks to create an "attractive credible presence and voice for professional coaching (http://www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/ 4 July 2012) by constructing a Global Standards System, establishing a world class credential program and professional entry thresholds, implementing governance councils, establishing registered education and testing providers and administering ethical conduct processes (www.coachfederation.org/about-icf/ 4 July 2012). The purpose of requiring coaches to adhere to (their) standards is to produce predictable results aligned with organisational hierarchical control (International Coach Federation 2011 Annual Report 2012).

As the only globally recognised independent coaching credentialing system in the world, the ICF has now surpassed 8,000 credentialed coaches and 190 accredited training programs (International Coach

Federation 2011 Annual Report 2012). The ICF's approach to the enforcement of the standards associated with these processes is supported by Griffiths (2008) who concluded that the ICF's core competencies are suitable to pave the way for standardisation of coaching worldwide because they are empirically based. Grant (2008) further supports this view with control being the desired outcome of the implementation of coaching standards.

An advantage of this process is that shared "standards" are upheld and those who purchase coaching services can be assured of certain adherence to ethical guidelines. However, there is a danger that these processes can minimise the possibility for a diversity of views within the ICF. The views of those who do not share the ICF's current view that professionalisation requires establishing and assessing coaches against competency standards risk being marginalised. The argument in this paper is that if the status of 'profession' is pursued through the enforcement of global standards and accreditation processes as described, then coaching could well languish.

DISCUSSION

Many coaching approaches are reinforced by the prevailing environmental paradigm (Bailey, Ford & Raelin 2009) which favours mechanistic and formistic thinking. There is the danger that coaches can languish in the epistemological trap of applying the same principles and assumptions as the clients they are trying to serve (Olalla 2010; Bailey, Ford & Raelin 2009) but need to escape. For credentialed members of coaching industry organisations, such as the ICF, there is also the issue of how they are influenced through their membership.

Although the ICF will have elements of each one of Pepper's four hypotheses present in its structures and processes, this analysis, based upon examination of the way the ICF is conducting its drive towards professionalisation and its preoccupation with standards and accreditation, has identified that its dominant assumptions are likely to be those associated with an analytical view of the world, namely formism and mechanism. The proposition is that training coaches to standards endorses a closed system approach defined by a high degree of certainty and predictability as happens in a highly stable and repressive environment (Haslett 2011). This view also suggests a concern with long-term planning activities to ensure the stability and predictability of ongoing systems. However, the world is changing rapidly.

The most flexible and adaptable organisations in today's unstable environment reflect the assumptions of Pepper's contextualist world hypothesis which is aligned with an open systems view of the world. However, Pepper's lens has established that many of the ICF's structures and processes are formistic and mechanistic which assume stability as the norm. A challenge for the ICF is to be responsive and adaptive to an unstable world, rather than perpetuate a structure that limits its responsiveness and adaptability. As the ICF makes decisions that potentially risks limiting its voting membership to those coaches who either agree with or at least are prepared to go through their credentialing processes, they risk being driven by undeclared dogma. Once people get stuck in a mindset promoted by the governance systems and processes of the organisation, it becomes more difficult to recognise and address its limitations. As a result, the status quo is maintained and the system becomes inflexible; unable to change, innovate, respond rapidly and coherently to new opportunities or threats.

Coaching is not yet a profession (Drake 2008) and there are those that argue that coaching should be wary of following the path to professionalism taken by professions such as psychology (Hawkins 2008). Dangers include accreditation standards becoming overly formulaic; the profession becoming overly concerned with serving its member interests rather than those of its customers; the profession becoming institutionalised, thereby not learning or adapting fast enough; and/or reducing the concept of supervision to a cultural socialisation where the elders of the practice shape the behaviours, understanding, perceptions, feelings and motivations of less experienced coaches (Hawkins 2008). And, such professionalisation risks institutional dogma which reinforces conservatism and inertia with the prospect of learning and the ability to adapt greatly reduced (Hawkins 2008). These risks are related to mechanistic and formistic views with underlying assumptions focusing on control, understanding the world through being able to explain its constituent parts and the utility of hierarchical cause and effect driven structures in a world where change is slow.

As well as the dilemma of whether global standards and accreditation practices represent the right path towards professionalisation of the coaching industry, there is added confusion as different coaching bodies apply different standards and approaches, use a proliferation of terms and offer a wide variety of routes to becoming accredited (Hawkins 2008). While holding the opinion that internationally shared frameworks for coaching are both necessary and overdue (p. 29), Griffiths (2008) acknowledges that with each new set of standards and with so many new coaching accreditation

authorities emerging, the credibility of the coaching industry is threatened. However, Griffith's answer to this problem lies in strengthening existing coaching standards, rather than by moving away from the standards route towards professionalisation. Instead, Griffiths (2008) attributes the diversity of standards to a lack of collaboration within the industry. As such, Griffiths (2008) advocates more adherence to the mechanistic thinking that has produced these problems while calling for collaboration, which is incompatible with mechanism. Collaboration is an environmental factor, yet within mechanism the environment is not required to explain anything.

CONCLUSION

The formistic and mechanistic organisational structures of the ICF as viewed through Pepper's lens, are ill-suited for addressing human interaction within a rapidly changing environment. Mechanistic organisations are inflexible and represent a closed system that assumes change is slow (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). However, coaches deal with people operating in rapidly changing business environments and this incompatibility between philosophy and practice is based upon dogma that will eventually falter.

The chaos that Griffith (2008) identifies in trying to control a limitless array of possibilities to create a closed system though standards and credentialling is virtually impossible. This suggests that the 'push' toward professionalisation should be reviewed. With coaches needing to be continuously adaptive learners to remain effective (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984), they require a readiness, willingness and ability to change, but these are what a mechanistic organisation with its assumptions lacks (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). This represents a dilemma for the ICF because organisations that operate under mechanistic assumptions become dysfunctional over time (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984). And, when effectiveness is perceived to decrease, mechanistically conceived organisations often respond by 'solving' problems through further reinforcement of rigidity and closer adherence to rules and regulations resulting in a vicious cycle as they become increasingly dysfunctional (Gharajedaghi & Ackoff 1984).

Given the ICF's ever expanding influence, the danger is that without deep critical reflection at the philosophical level, certain effective frameworks will be precluded from future consideration. Thus coaching can become a "dangerous tool" (Clegg, Rhodes, Kornberger & Stilin 2005), a tool for "soft

domination" (Courpasson 2000) and possibly reinforce the problems it is supposed to treat (Berglas 2002). Care must be taken to thoughtfully challenge any approach or system that is ill-equipped to effectively address a rapidly changing, ever evolving open system. The challenge for the ICF is to continually and consciously reflect upon any potential disconnect between the philosphical assumptions underpinning their decisions and those that are needed to take effective action in our rapidly changing environment.

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