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The Third Commandment: Keep the Voice of the Organization Alive

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Countdown to the summit

This is week three of the ten-week countdown to the Conference Board's 2015 Coaching Summit. The Summit will begin with a pre-conference event on March 9 with the keynotes and breakout sessions on March 10 & 11. On March 10, Dr. John Hoover from Partners in Human Resources International will join Dr. Harris Ginsberg of Pfizer, Dr. Eric Hieger of ADP, and Dr. David DeFilippo of BNY University in discussing *The Next Big Conversation – The Leader and Organization as Co-Clients*. This panel is designed to introduce and discuss the significance of keeping the voice and interests of the organization alive and involved in executive coaching engagements.

For each of the ten weeks leading up to the Conference Board's 2015 Coaching Summit, *Human Talent Network* is featuring one of the Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching. Last week, *Human Talent Network* featured the second commandment of Contextual Coaching: *Coach with the Art of Alignment*. Contextual Coaching commandment number three:

Keep the voice of the organization present and alive

If you work late at night when the office corridors are quiet you might hear a faint voice. It is usually difficult to discern where exactly the voice is coming from or what it is saying. But, it seems to be coming from the walls; maybe the ceilings and the floors, too. The voice is so faint that it only makes you look up from your computer screen and dart your eyes to the right and then to the left when there is no other sound.

During business hours or when night custodial vacuums are making loud sucking sounds, the voice is undetectable. The next time it's quiet; next time you hear it; listen closely. It is the voice of your organization. Not the "official" pronouncements from the C-Suite. Not the company line in the newsletter or the annual report—that's all well and good—but the actual voice of the real collective values, beliefs, hopes, fears of the organizational population.

"What about me?"

You lean forward and listen closer.

"What about me?"

That's what you thought you heard.

If your ears are sufficiently attenuated to hear the actual voice of the organic organization and to recognize what it is you're hearing, you might respond by asking, "What *about* you?"

The voice of the organization might respond in any number of ways. It might cop Audrey II from *Little Shop of Horrors* and say, "Feed me."

It might do a Bill Murray imitation from *What About Bob?* and say, "Give me, give me, give me. I need, I need, I need."

It might just say, "Please, don't forget about me."

Like any other complex organism, an organization made up of carbon-based life forms needs to have its essential needs met in order to survive, much less thrive. Most free-economy organizations must also fulfill the desires and expectations of their customers/constituents. That includes meeting the life sustaining needs of their internal populations.

Broken down even further, for-profit organizations need to earn enough after-tax income to cover payroll and all manner of expenses in order to keep the doors open. Anti-profit organizations also need to cover payroll and expenses to keep the doors open. Regardless of how organizations get their needs met, organizations in turn meet the needs of those who depend on them.

The real needs of an organization and/or the people who depend on it can be very different from the perceived needs of an organization and/or the people who depend on it. One of the greatest benefits of coaching people in organizations is the opportunity for individuals to reflect upon their circumstances, challenges, and opportunities and to distinguish between things that are good for them and things less desirable.

Most human beings have audible voices and language that can be used to clearly articulate wants, needs, and desires. Organizations need help to verbalize wants, needs, and desires. In order to express themselves, organizations borrow vocal cords from the members of their organizational populations. In an organizational coaching engagement, the primary voices include the members of the coaching (or stakeholder) coalition (see the Fourth Commandment of Contextual Coaching).

The organization must be given a voice through the willingness and ability of the coalition members and other stakeholders to pay attention and articulate what is needed to help the organization survive and thrive. The feedback captured in multi-rater assessments and other coaching conversations is one way that the organization's voice can be heard—even if the collective voice of the organization is blended with the wants, needs, and desires of individuals.

A simple way to create a distinction between the needs of the individual being coached and the needs of the organization sponsoring (read: paying for) the coaching engagement is to ask a simple question: "How is this helping the organization?"

Answering that question is one way to ensure the organization's vocal chords are well-exercised throughout coaching engagements. It's easy to identify what the individual coaching client needs to survive and thrive. But, what about the organization? What is the cultural context in which the individual coaching engagement takes place and against which its success will be measured?

Skilled contextual coaches and professionals who manage the coaching function in organizations (often referred to as organizational sponsors) know that they must establish an enterprise-wide contextual framework for coaching engagements (see Contextual Coaching Commandments One & Two) and then coach to the specific growth and development needs of the individual coaching client within that contextual framework.

When the organization asks, "What about me?" The answer is in the contextual framework. It is within the contextual framework, as established by the organization's leadership strategists, that what individual coaching clients do best aligns with what organizations need most.

In order to keep the third commandment of contextual coaching, *Keep the voice of the organization present and alive*, make sure the organization has vocal cords with which to cry out when individual interests pull value away from the good of the whole.

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John Hoover, PhD, is a New York Times best-selling author and former executive at The Disney Company and McGraw-Hill. He coaches senior executives and their teams to venture outside of their boxes. By day he is a mild-mannered SVP at Partners International in New York City (partners-international.com), certified by the International Coach Federation, a coaching supervisor certified by the Coaching Supervision Academy, and a former Marriage & Family Therapy intern, licensed by the California Board of Behavioral Sciences. It's all about relationships, if you haven't picked up on that theme. Dr. John's hat trick--executive, coach, and author--is the perfect storm for supervising executive coaches and working as a thinking partner to those developing leadership and talent strategies that align what individuals do best with what their organizations need most. (More relationship stuff.) With more than 12 books to his credit from Amacom, Barnes & Noble Press, Career Press, HarperCollins, John Wiley & Sons, McGraw-Hill, and St. Martin's Press (including the New York Times, Business Week, and Wall Street Journal best-selling "How to Work for an Idiot") Dr. Hoover co-created the Contextual Coaching™ framework at Partners International and teaches fun stuff about managing coaching functions in organizations at Fielding Graduate University.

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