

## **Craft and Context: The Two Pillars of Executive Coaching** by John Hoover, PhD

Coaches can offer new perspectives to those seeking help, essentially giving their clients permission to think, imagine, and behave beyond self- or otherwise-imposed boundaries. This is true of life coaches, musical coaches, sports coaches, and a wide variety of coaches. Coaches can lead their clients toward life-changing and career-changing epiphanies. However, when individuals set goals for themselves they are inevitably constrained by their fears; fear of failure, fear of success, fear of risk, even fear of change itself. Fear can strike even when people are on a high-potential fast track. “What if I fail to meet everyone’s expectations of me?” People protect themselves emotionally by staying safely within their comfort zones. More than people, any carbon-based life form continuously seeks the comfort of its familiar zone. However, skilled coaches are aware that: *True growth and development begins where comfort zones end.* Rather than play to their clients’ sense of emotional equilibrium, coaches help their clients feel safe venturing beyond the familiarity of their comfort zones.

Under a business or executive coach’s guidance, employees (from daily operations people to senior-most policy makers) can experiment and take risks they wouldn’t ordinarily feel safe taking. A business or executive coach or a manager who coaches can therefore play a key role in the emergence and development of a businessperson, shrinking the gap between expectations and actual performance, in exactly the same way a sports coach plays a key role in the life and career of an athlete. Coaching works within any genre in which it is applied because it is personal and intensive. It builds upon and refines an individual’s existing skills and talents, which must be among a coach’s highest priorities. More than anything else, coaches provide a safe and supportive environment that enables individuals to grow and prosper, wherever the coaching experience leads them.

This attentiveness to the individual is the *craft* of coaching. Listening, being present, building trust, and putting the needs of the individual above all else—as the coach helps the coaching client reach new levels of performance or achievement—constitute the human side of the coaching equation—the coach’s *craft*. Such is the craft of any type of coach, from life coaching, to vocal coaching, to private sports coaching. The craft of coaching is almost exclusively what all coaching education and training is about. It is what our 2005 and ongoing research indicates experienced coaches and aspiring coaches alike request most in the way of continuing education and preparation.

*But, what about the organization?* This is an essential question for the business and the executive coach. The organization is the font of many blessings for all stakeholders, although it is not always a distinguishable voice. However voiceless, the organization has the critical mass to transform the individual energies, talents, and capabilities of talented men and women into synergistic, powerful, and effective commercial and/or public-serving forces. Organizations in the private sector are profit-generating machines that pay wages, medical benefits, and retirement plans. Organizations in the public sector also pay wages, medical benefits, and retirement plans. In the symbiotic relationship between individual and organization, an organization’s health and well being shares importance with the individual’s growth and development. This creates a *context for coaching*.

For employees whose coaching is being sponsored (read that, “paid for”) by the organization that employs them, there becomes a new symbiosis of necessity and appropriateness. Business or executive coaching is similar to marriage therapy in that neither the husband nor the wife is considered the client—but rather the marital relationship that binds them. In a coaching engagement sponsored by an organization, the true client is the interdependent relationship between employer and employee. Both must succeed for the engagement to be considered a success.

## Contextual Alignment

Success of the coaching engagement is therefore *calibrated to the context* of the organization and the factors that define organizational success; not solely to the professional fulfillment of the individual. A talented individual who succeeds in one organizational culture might fail in another. The success or failure of the individual business or executive coaching client cannot be determined absent from the context of the organization that pays for it.

In our research, business and executive coaches report the need for definitions of success from the organization's perspective. Life coaches intend to deal with their clients in isolation from anything beyond their clients' sense of happiness and fulfillment. Life coaches deliberately resist constraints on their clients' ability to define success in life. Our research clearly reveals the over-emphasis on life coaching or individual-only focused coaching in corporate settings. Organizational representatives, oftentimes Human Resources and/or Organization Development executives, report that they need the coaching function to achieve alignment between what individuals do best with what organizations need most.

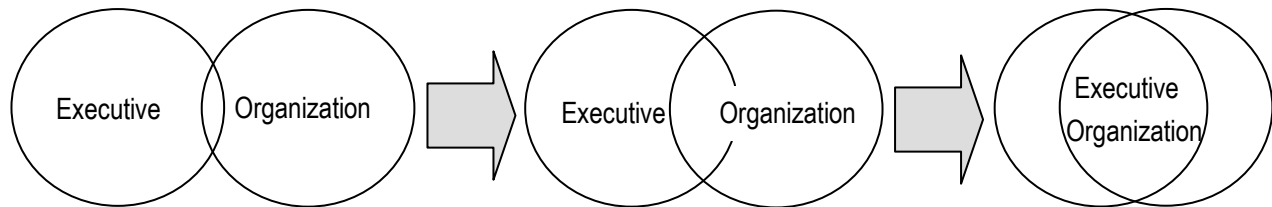
Thus, the ultimate compliment to the organization is an employee who is well-aligned with the organization's goals and strategies. The ultimate compliment to the employee is an organization that is committed to and invested in discovering and cultivating the best that the employee has to offer in the context of the organization's reward system and growth opportunities. This confluence where the best interests of the individual and the organization converge is the optimal flashpoint between the employee and the organization. The flash point is ignited most effectively by quality Contextual Coaching™ that provides the ultimate [Coaching Connection](#).

The perfect storm in a business or executive coaching engagement occurs when a business or executive coach, or a manager who coaches, brings expert *coaching craft* and appreciation of *organizational context* to the coaching experience. Such a storm can set individuals free from the tethers that bind them to restrictive ideas, self-images, or belief systems that shackle and restrain them from achieving all they can achieve to attain maximum success in their respective organizations.

Complete success, *complete coaching* if you will, must simultaneously promote individual *and* organizational growth. At best, focusing only on individual performance acceleration without considering the organization's strategic agenda diminishes hoped for return on the coaching investment. At worst it invites complete failure and forfeiture of the investment.

According to the College of Executive Coaching, up to 88% of organizations use coaching now. Ninety-five percent of organizations have increased use of coaching since 2003. None of the organizations surveyed in 2007 reported a decline in the use of coaching over the prior five years. Only the economic tsunami of 2008 has slowed the growth of executive coaching. Partners in Human Resources International and other leading providers of coaching solutions to organizations confirm in 2009 that demand for mid-level coaching is currently lower than in prior years, but executive coaching is holding steady as organizations place a higher premium on the abilities of their more senior executives to lead their organizations to do more with less. One of the solutions to the mid-level coaching gap is for organizations to train internal coaches and increase the craft and contextual abilities of managers who coach—one of the primary audiences for [The Coaching Connection](#) (AMACOM, August 2009).

## Contextual Coaching™ Process



As the coaching progresses, the identity, agenda, and priorities of the coaching client merge with those of the organization, resulting in more continuity and consistency between the organization's needs and the coaching client's performance. Contextual Coaching™ is the most advanced thought leadership in coaching *and* organization development. Much has been made over the past decade of identifying, developing, and deploying an individual's strengths in the workplace. But how much thought has been given to whether or not those strengths enhance or endanger the organization's core culture and strategic agenda? Contextual Coaching™ encompasses both, serving the best interests of both.



John Hoover, Ph.D. is a former executive with The Walt Disney Company and McGraw-Hill as well as a Senior Vice President at Partners in Human Resources International. His academic credentials and background in counseling psychology, combined with his executive experience, create a perfect storm of craft and context for executive coaching. He is expert in organizational transformation, organization development, and leadership behavior, specializing in communications, team dynamics, and sustainable change. Also experienced in cultural transformation, John is particularly effective at improving interpersonal effectiveness.

John's psychological and tactical business experience combine to transform strategy into action. Dr. Hoover has experience as a consultant and executive coach to C-level executives and Board members in the private sector, academia, and not-for-profit social service agencies. His experience and educational specialization in organizational behavior and design uniquely positions him to coach Board members and other key policy makers in making vital operational and organizational decisions that unleash the full talent potential of their organizational populations. Always stressing effective communication strategies, John helps executives and Directors to map their cultures and to see and fully appreciate the internal landscapes of their enterprises as well as the dynamic and volatile nature of the marketplace. He has coached and consulted with ABC Television, Boeing/Rocketdyne, Childhelp USA, CIT, Delta Air Lines, The Disney Company, Dow Jones, Fielding Graduate University, Hilton Hotels, HBO, IBM, McGraw-Hill, Printronix, Prudential, Sanyo Fisher, Xerox, and many others.

In addition to his consulting, John is a recognized thought leader and author. He frequently delivers workshops and keynote speeches for clients and trade associations. As an author of more than a dozen books on leadership, individual and organizational performance, and personal and professional relationships (some with a decidedly humorous edge), John has appeared on NBC's TODAY, the FOX News Channel, ABC Now, Forbes.com, Bloomberg Television and Radio, AOL Business, National Public Radio, CNBC, MSNBC, in the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, plus dozens of other print, radio, and television interviews across the United States and in a dozen other countries. His books, which have been translated into 18 languages, include:

- Hoover, R.J. (2011) *How to Work for an Idiot: Survive & Thrive without Killing Your Boss*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition)
- Gorrell, P. & Hoover, R.J. (2009) *The Coaching Connection*. New York: Amacom.
- Cox, D. & Hoover, R.J. (2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed) *Leadership When the Heat's On*. New York: McGraw-Hill

- Hoover, R.J. (2007) *Collins Best Practices: Difficult People*. New York: HarperCollins
- Hoover, R.J. (2007) *Collins Best Practices: Time Management*. New York: HarperCollins
- Hoover, R.J. (2007) *Bullwinkle on Business: Motivational Secrets of a Chief Executive Moose*. New York: St. Martin's Press
- Hoover, R.J. & Sparkman, B. (2005) *How to Sell to an Idiot: Twelve Steps to Selling Anything to Anyone*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons
- Hoover, R.J. & DiSilvestro, R. (2005) *The Art of Constructive Confrontation: How to Increase Accountability & Decrease Conflict*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons
- Hoover, R.J. & Valenti, A. (2005) *Unleashing Leadership: Align What Your People Do Best with what your Organization Needs Most*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press
- Hoover, R.J. (2004) *How to Live with an Idiot: Clueless Creatures and the People Who Love Them*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press
- Deacon, D. & Vance, M. (1995) *Think Out of the Box!* Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.
- Cox, D. & Hoover, R.J. (1994) *Seize the Day: How to be an extraordinary person in an ordinary world*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press
- Hoover, R.J. & Hoover, R.J. (1993) *An American Quality legend: How Maytag presaged the quality revolution*. New York: McGraw-Hill

Dr. Hoover holds Master's Degrees in Marriage and Family Therapy, Human and Organization Development, and a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems. He has taught and lectured as adjunct faculty at Aquinas College, Cal State Fullerton, College of the Desert, Middle Tennessee State University, and Vanderbilt University. He is on the faculty of the American Management Association and is a Tennessee Supreme Court Rule 31 Civil mediator. Dr. Hoover also teaches at Fielding Graduate University and City University of New York.