

Direct from

THE CONFERENCE BOARD



Coaching Summit 2015

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# The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching

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How Coaching Through an Organizational Lens  
Aligns What Individual Leaders Do Best  
with What Organizations Need Most

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The Art of Alignment

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## Prologue: *The Tale of Two Clients or the Coaching Conundrum*

*"Once used to bolster troubled staffers, coaching now is part of the standard leadership development training for elite executives and talented up-and-comers. Companies are giving their best prospects what star athletes have long had: a trusted adviser to help reach their goals."*  
- CNN.com

Portions of this prologue are borrowed directly from our AMACOM book, *The Coaching Connection: Developing Individual Potential in the Context of the Organization*. The snippet from a CNN.com report on executive coaching cited above describes one part of a trend. Executive coaching has often in the past been used to remediate damaging behaviors demonstrated by those with enough institutional authority to do significant damage to people and to the organization that employs them. When powerful executives behave badly by taking ill-advised financial or organizational gambles, their organizations suffer. When an organization suffers, the suffering trickles down to a variety of constituency groups.

Profits can be lost, benefits can be lost, jobs can be lost, and whatever good things customers and the community at large derive from the organization's goods and services are diminished or disappear altogether. Anything, such as coaching, that helps managers and executives make good decisions is worth the investment - whether that means turning around a manager's or executive's thinking and/or involving them in more productive habits, skills, and activities.

The emerging trend referred to in the CNN.com report, the trend that is eclipsing the remedial-only approach to coaching, is to identify emerging, high-potential leaders inside organizations and engage them with skilled coaches early on. The emergent practice is to use the guidance of a business coach to make high-potential individuals more effective business people the same way a sports coach improves the performance of a gifted athlete; transforming natural talent and ability into highly-refined skills and capabilities. While coaches in business and sports spend time reprogramming bad habits, addressing skills gaps, and establishing the most productive and efficient activities to enhance the business person's or athlete's ultimate goals and objectives, coaches prefer to (and should) enter the equation sooner rather than later.

*The Coaching Connection* is about connecting the dots between the need for highly-skilled, knowledgeable, and wise coaches and the exponentially-increased benefits of pre-emptive managerial and executive skill and competency building as opposed to reactive, after-the-fact interventions. If we've learned anything from the history of coaching, it is that effective leadership does not come naturally to the vast majority of people who are promoted into leadership positions and are compensated to lead. We have also learned that leading is not easy for anyone facing high-pressure demands from employee, customer, and Board expectations, internal and external economic challenges, and complex marketplace competition.

### The Conundrum

Who, then, is the coaching client? Is it the individual or small team receiving the coaching or the organization that is paying for it? Re-read the opening paragraphs of this introduction and note how many times the individual leader's fortunes are tied directly to the fortunes of the organization and vice versa. Throughout this book you will hear discussed this symbiotic relationship, this interdependence, between the organization and the members of its organizational population.

That makes the final answer: The individual and the organization that employs the individual are co-clients. This does not refer to someone who has been referred to professional therapy by the Human Resources department to be treated for depression or to receive marriage and family therapy; although even those referrals have a potential benefit to the organization vis-a-vis a happier and healthier employee. This is about the growth and development of individuals specifically in how they do their jobs and interact professionally with others now and in the future, both of which are directly and inexorably linked to the health and well being of the organization that employs them.

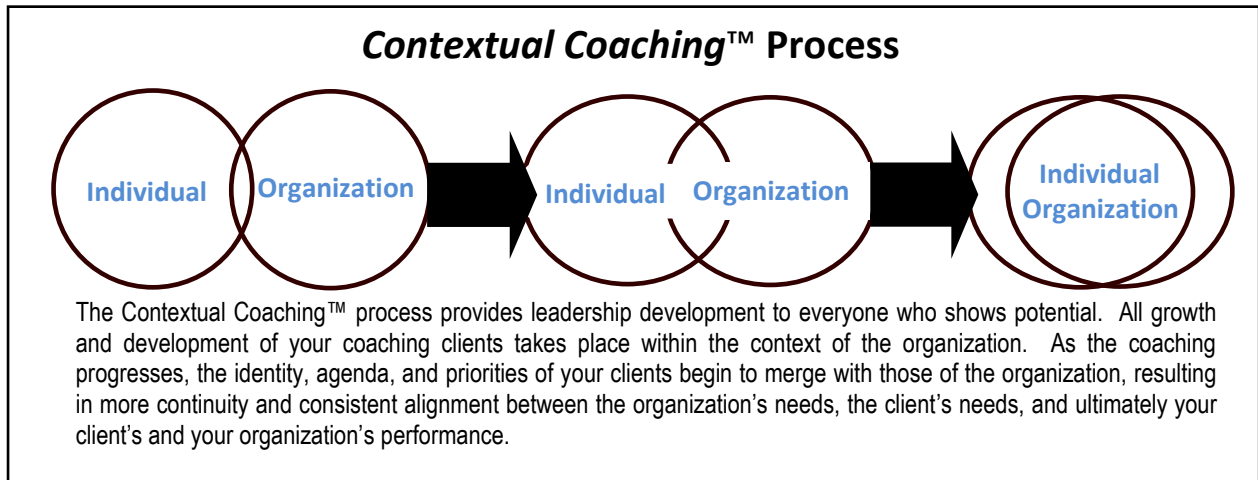
Conundrum solved. The tale of two clients unfolds. In a marriage counseling scenario, neither partner is the client. The relationship between them is the client. So it is with coaching in organizational environments. The highest value a coach or a manager who coaches can bring to both the individual or a small team is to find the place where the best interests of those being coached and the organization sponsoring the coaching converge.

The diagram below illustrates how the individual and the organization are considered (and often treated) as separate entities at first, but begin to merge as the Contextual Coaching™ process progresses. Ultimately, if the coaching is successful, the individual's and the organization's interests become one—or as blended as humanly possible. A well-coached employee who has experienced such convergence will be able to articulate how his or her function adds value to the organization.

Look no farther than a commonly-held definition of organizational culture to discover why the organization functions the way it does. Organizational culture is the driving, guiding—often silent and unspoken—force that defines how an organization conducts business, treats its internal and external customers, and positions itself in the marketplace. Organizational culture is also defined as the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that inform the real organizational environment and the real organizational conduct behind the rhetoric.

If espoused organizational goals and objectives are consistently aligned with organizational culture, an organization has a reasonable chance at achieving those goals and objectives. If organizational goals and objectives are at cross purposes with the shared beliefs, values, and behaviors that constitute organizational culture, the best efforts to act in spite of the culture, or in ways contrary to the true culture, are likely to produce entropy as the organization grinds to a halt (productivity-wise) in its own inertia. The AMA/Institute for Corporate Productivity Corporate Culture Survey 2008, commissioned and published by the American Management Association, concluded, among other things, that organizations with cultures that considered the individual needs of their employees tended to prosper more than those that didn't.

Unfortunately, you cannot coach a culture. But, you can coach the individuals who engender and sustain a culture. As a result, both the individual and the organization can, and should, win. Such is the basis of the Contextual Coaching™ process model:



## The Benefits of Using the Contextual Coaching™ Model

Although coaches or managers who coach work, or will be working individually with coaching clients or coaching teams, the Contextual Coaching™ model is a true organizational process. Contextual Coaching™ was developed as a comprehensive way to expand traditional executive coaching into an organization development process, based on *alignment*. Using a systems approach, Contextual Coaching™ produces simultaneous growth and development opportunities for the organization and whoever is being coached. Your individual clients' contexts remain fundamental aspects of the coaching engagement and drive the developmental process for the individuals while, at the same time, enhancing your clients' roles in the broader growth and development strategy of the organization.

This dual focus means that you, as a coach or a manager who coaches, will address multiple contexts that affect your clients' unique situations as well as aligning the coaching process with the strategies, cultural imperatives, talent management systems, and competency requirements of the entire organization. As a contextual coach, you will map the coaching process to a changing organizational landscape, complete with enterprise-wide strategic agendas and individual issues, revealing how each one compliments the other.

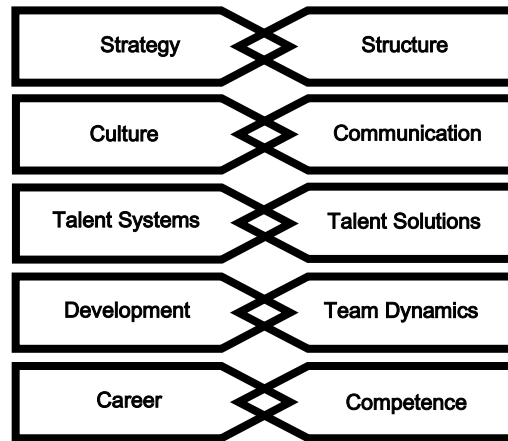
## Two Customers – One Process

One of the greatest challenges when coaching in organizations is the complexity involved in having two customers who need to be satisfied through one process. The coaching process remains an individual development intervention that focuses primarily on the growth of one particular employee. Yet, the organization's expectations need to be satisfied, as it has either funded the program or otherwise supported it with organizational resources.

Great coaches try to manage this process through good stakeholder management. This means establishing and sustaining relationships with their coaching clients' key constituents, such as their Human Resources partners and their manager(s), if the latter is not indeed the coach. This group of stakeholders is referred to as a stakeholder or coaching coalition and is described in greater detail in the third and fourth commandments of Contextual Coaching™. By clearly expressing expectations of these constituents, checking in with them regularly and generating reports to ensure the process is tracking with said expectations, the coach is able to manage expectations and provide important communication relative to the coaching success.

The return on investment from these engagements is maximized when both the coaching client and the organization are seen as customers in the process. Because of this, the Contextual Coaching™ model is well positioned to satisfy both co-clients and achieve overall success within a single engagement. All contextual coaches, in each assignment, seek to balance the needs of the individual with the requirements of key constituents, including the coaching client’s manager, learning and development groups, and Human Resources departments.

The diagram below illustrates the ten generic dimensions of an organization that comprise the framework for Contextual Coaching™. Coaches coach their individual clients or teams of clients on specific behavioral and/or skill-based competencies in the context of the overarching backdrop of the organizations leadership design and agenda. The ten dimensions of organizations in this diagram are the macro framework of coaching reports, while the individual



coaching objectives are the more intensive micro focus of the engagement reports. If an organization has defined ideal and optimal leadership competencies, conduct, values, behaviors, skills, and or disciplines, those replace these generic dimensions as the framework for the engagement and in Contextual Coaching™ reports.

Contextual Coaching™ is a structured approach to coaching that, when applied, will result in a well-balanced coaching client who is aware of and skilled at addressing major areas of complete and comprehensive organizational focus in a way that the organization expects its leaders to behave.

The ten components of the Contextual Coaching™ generic model shouldn’t be thought of as the Ten Commandments of Coaching. They represent architectural knowledge for a well-balanced organizational leader. However, leaders should be knowledgeable about all ten if they expect to serve their respective organizations well and help them become employers-of-choice filled with well-balanced employees-of-choice. The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ that follow are an overview of what Contextual Coaching™ is and how and why it should be practiced.

### Another Part of the Trend

So far, the discussion has focused on trends toward blending the benefits of business coaching and the advantages of using it primarily for leadership and performance development—not to mention using it sooner rather than later. The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ will reveal the essentials to developing well-balanced managers and executives.



It is possible that you might be a certified coach in addition to a manager who coaches. You might be coaching someone else's direct reports or you might be coaching your own. Sometimes you might be doing both, depending on your case load. The underlying approach to creating well-balanced coaching clients is the same in any case, although the exact execution might vary slightly from one scenario to the next.

Executive coaching is increasingly popular for all the positive reasons already mentioned. That's the good news. The bad news is that the use of external coaches remains among the most expensive of all external organizational interventions. Thus, the growing trend to bring the coaching function inside the organization. There are advantages to that, as well as disadvantages.

For now, suffice to say that organizational coaching, at least for mid-level managers and possibly people working for them, will increasingly be delivered by people inside the organization. At Partners International, we are especially close to this practice because our firm is called upon to prepare internal candidates to provide coaching services—mostly in FORTUNE 500 up to FORTUNE 50 companies, as well as major not-for-profits. These coaches are sometimes specially-trained HR professionals. At other times, they can be managers or executives who have expressed interest in developing coaching skills, and often have naturally-empathic and advanced emotional intelligence coefficients that help them bring value to others.

Regardless of the precise distinction (coach or manager who coaches), anyone who coaches is engaged in a noble cause—*developing and aligning what individuals do best with what their organizations need most*—nothing could be more important to the health and well being of an organization and all the constituencies who rely upon the organization's success. That means coaching, no matter who is doing it, needs to be contextual to provide maximum ROI.

## Join the Excitement

You will enjoy a rewarding coaching experience if you are new to it or, if you are an experienced coach, you will enjoy organizational coaching even more as you practice Contextual Coaching™. As a coach, you deal with things that conventional training and development do not deal with. You engage in more individual, intimate, and personal aspects of your clients' lives than a classroom or online instructor typically does. When people less intimately affiliated with your clients broach a subject that is as potentially sensitive as leadership competence (for example), your clients might shut them out. Improperly or insensitively approached, your clients might disconnect from, or push back against, even you until you sharpen your coaching skills and earn their trust.

Rewarded behavior is repeated behavior; therefore, you want to reward the right behavior through your coaching. That seems axiomatic. What makes just as much sense (but we seldom stop to think about) is that, when inappropriate or non-productive habits and behaviors are rewarded, they are also repeated. Why else would your clients engage in them? People only engage in behaviors for one of two essential reasons: (1) to gain something as a result of the behavior or (2) to avoid something as a result of the behavior.



If your corporate coaching clients become extremely competent at what they do, they might get recognition, a raise, or a promotion. If your clients are hanging onto their jobs by a thread, becoming more competent with the help of a coach might mean not getting yelled at, reprimanded, or possibly terminated. The first is intentional behavior, which means intending toward something good. The second example is avoidant behavior, which means doing something to avoid a negative consequence.

If your clients' behaviors have been suspect for a long time, you might need to help them engage in avoidant remediation in the near term. Once you have been able to stabilize their position in the organization, the two of you can refocus on building toward intentional growth and development in the long term. Building the tallest skyscraper in the world requires first excavating a deep hole in the ground. In other words, begin building in the opposite direction. The building needs to be anchored deep in bedrock to have the strength to stand tall. As a coach or a manager who coaches, you must secure a strong foundation before your clients can grow their careers.

Contextual Coaching™ propels your coaching clients toward reaching their full potential within the context of the organization sponsoring the coaching. Contextual Coaching™ engenders a strong partnership between the individual's immediate needs, long-term career strategy, and the organization's immediate needs and long-term success strategy. Contextual Coaching™ can transform a potential or actual individual↔organizational disconnect into a thriving partnership. It can transform dissonance into resonance, contradiction into cultural compatibility, and mutual exclusivity into mutual interest. But, no amount of coaching, under any given methodology, will produce co-benefits for co-clients if only one client is engaged in the process.

When all is said and done, coaches play a critical role in helping both the individual and the organization develop. Hopefully, it is done soon enough to avoid the kind of damage people with institutional authority can do when not grounded in good leadership skills and management science. The good that coaches and managers who coach do for their clients and for the organization will have a ripple effect—even a trickle-up effect—on more people than one might realize. That is the power of making the coaching connection between the individual and the organization.



## Introduction

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The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ are not as sacred as the more famous commandments Moses carried down from Mount Sinai, dashed to pieces, and trekked back up the mountain to replace. The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™, like the more famous commandments, are meant to frame a way of being and doing—not how to live life in total, but specifically how to frame the coaching of senior and emerging leaders in organizations. Whereas the original commandments were a mixture of “how to” and “how not to” (“thou shall” & “thou shall not...”), the Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ are all “thou shall.”

The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ were created as the framework for a presentation made to the 2015 Conference Board Coaching Summit in New York City. The ten-week *Countdown to the Conference Board* began on January 5, 2015. For ten consecutive weeks, through the Coaching Summit on March 10, HumanTalentNetwork.com published one of the Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™. This book is the compilation of those ten weeks of publishing.

On March 10, Dr. John Hoover, Senior Vice President of Partners in Human Resources International and co-author of *The Coaching Connection: Developing Individual Potential in the Context of the Organization* (AMACOM), joined Dr. Harris Ginsberg of Pfizer and Dr. David DeFilippo of BNY University, in discussing *The Next Big (Coaching) Conversation – The Leader and Organization as Co-Clients*.

This panel was designed to introduce and discuss the significance of keeping the voice and interests of the organization alive and involved in executive coaching engagements. Although that aspiration seems axiomatic, many organizations continue to conduct expensive executive coaching engagements without an enterprise-wide coaching framework or a formalized reporting structure and protocol that align coaching work with the organization’s established leadership principles, values, and/or competencies. It seems equally implausible that organizations would not capture and analyze the structured interview 360 data and other information from coaching reports (without compromising coaching client confidentiality) to identify organizational leadership trends and talent development opportunities.

Yet, organizations with formalized executive coaching structures and processes like those above, even if only to ensure consistent quality from one engagement to the next and/or from one geographic location to another, are the exception, not the rule. As the 2015 Conference Board conference literature points out, organizations have much to gain by moving toward contextual alignment in coaching and acknowledging that *the true client is the relationship between the leader being coached and the organization*. The reasons are clear:

- Executive coaching must produce a benefit for the sponsoring organization that is consistently equal to the benefit for the leader being coached.
- The leader being coached and organization must be considered co-clients to ensure the voices of both are heard and honored in coaching engagements.
- In order to gain full organizational value as multiple engagements take place across the global enterprise, the leadership patterns and trends that emerge must be captured, compiled, analyzed, and reported without compromising confidentiality.

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment One: *Coach in the Context of the Organization*

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Coaching in the context of the organization (or coaching through an organizational lens, if you prefer) means aligning what leaders do best with what the organization needs most. Enterprise-wide alignment between leaders and corporate strategy is critical to successful executive development not to mention optimal execution on the organization's most pressing organizational needs.

Without compromising any of the confidentiality, craft, and reflective practice that help make executive coaching the most powerful (and expensive) individual leadership development intervention available, elevating the voice and presence of the organization in coaching engagements is essential to maximizing the value of the organization's coaching investment.

If the goal of executive coaching is to build the leaders who will build the business, the approach to developing leaders, whatever it is, must be framed in the context of the organization. The symbiotic relationship between individual leaders and the organizations that employ them must be defined and documented in the context of the collective. If organizations that sponsor executive coaching engagements hope to maximize the benefits of developing their leaders, the leadership development processes, protocols, and guiding principles must align with and thereby advance the strategic agenda of the organization.

Traditional ad hoc executive coaching engagements that are not contextually aligned with the strategic agenda of the organization are inherently myopic. The odds are poor that a broader organizational agenda will be well-served by executive coaching, strategic team alignment, or any leadership development activity when executive coaches' or group process facilitators' peripheral visions are too narrow to see the full organizational spectrum. Chances are slight and mostly coincidental that detached and isolated leadership development activities—especially executive coaching—will add significant enterprise-wide value.

The Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™ each describe one dimension of coaching through an organizational lens. To establish the organizational context within which the contextually-aligned coaching will take place, talent strategy designers must:

1. Establish criteria for selecting, training, and supervising executive coaches
2. Establish enterprise frameworks within which coaching engagements take place
3. Establish reporting and data analysis processes and procedures to ensure coaching consistency, alignment with the sponsoring organization's strategic agenda, and data mining opportunities

All of this work, including nuanced sub-processes, must be based upon and aligned with the sponsoring organization's established leadership development principles, values, or competencies. Any competent global business strategy conversation must begin with competent talent and leadership development strategy conversation. Coaching in the context of the organization requires knowing the organization and continuously asking, *“How is this helping the leader being coached and the organization paying for the coaching?”*

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Two:

### *Coach with the Art of Alignment*

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Drilling deeper into the different dimensions of coaching in the context of the organization, the concept of alignment is ever present. Alignment in executive coaching, and leadership development in general, is more than the absence of chaos, although order is a positive outcome. Alignment is the intentional and deliberate establishment of purposeful relationships between people, processes, ideas, and resources in order to initiate, accelerate, and sustain desired outcomes. That sounds like a good way to spend a day at the office.

If executive coaching is intended to align what leaders do best with what organizations need most, the strengths and interests of individuals must be aligned with the vision, purpose, and strategy that the organization has defined and beacons must be established and illuminated to keep the organization on course. Alignment between leadership strengths within an organization and the organization's strategic agenda is more an art than a science because it is not absolutely, infinitely, and precisely replicable. The strengths and interests of leaders shift and drift from season to season, with stages of life, changes in roles and responsibilities, and the ever-changing state of the industry. Any industry.

#### **The Four Levels of Coaching Motivation**

The four levels of coaching motivation will be explained more thoroughly in commandment nine. For now, suffice to say that not everyone who experiences coaching in organizations approaches the opportunity with the same level of motivation. Are the coaching clients (participants, coachees, leaders, or however you refer to them) involved (a) voluntarily because they raised their self-selected hands seeking help as they prepare for expanded responsibilities or new roles and/or some other workplace challenge? Are the coaching clients (b) enthusiastic and willing participants in action-learning, strategic team alignment or other group leadership development activities that offer coaching as an enhancement and additional layer of support for the growth and development of the leaders involved?

Are the leaders participating in coaching because (c) it is a requirement for participation in a mandated action learning, strategic team development, or other group leadership development program or, as is the case in some organizations, because participation in individual leadership coaching is required of every leader above a specified level? In the case of motivation for coaching level (c), the motivation for participation in coaching activities runs more to compliance than to enthusiastic engagement. Although begrudging compliance might be the entry point motivation at level (c), coaching clients, participants, and/or leaders being coached can still become converts and fans of the coaching process, the concept of coaching in general, and coaching relationships.

At the fourth or (d) level of motivation for coaching, the coaching client, participant, leader being coached, or coachee<sup>1</sup> is involuntary, has no interest in receiving coaching, might even feel that coaching is pejorative and/or punitive, and is involved because he or she is compelled to participate by company policy or threat of pending disciplinary action.

### **Alignment Throughout**

Regardless of the level of motivation for participating in coaching activities or the specific structure, length, or design of the coaching engagement, the work the coach and coaching client conduct together must be aligned with the organization's leadership development principles, values, or competencies. In turn, the leadership development agenda must be aligned with the organization's overarching business strategy. "Must be aligned," that is, if the strategic needs of the organization sponsoring (read paying for) the engagement are to be served. There must also be alignment if the individual's success through coaching is to be defined in the *context* of the sponsoring organization's culture and global strategic agenda.

The presenting issues for the coaching engagement, regardless of what they are exactly or where they fall in the four levels of coaching client motivation, become the specific, targeted outcomes of the coaching engagement. With Contextual Coaching™, the coaching engagement itself and all coaching engagements across the enterprise are framed in the context of the organization's cultural construct and strategic business agenda. This is the alignment of the individual micro-agenda with the organizational macro-agenda.

For coaches, individuals responsible for managing the coaching function in organizations, even coaching clients and other interested stakeholders, the essential question that points back to the need for contextual alignment is, "How is this coaching engagement helping the individual *and* the organization?" That is, in fact, the essential question, which should be posed regarding any investment in learning and development—especially super-expensive leadership development interventions like executive coaching.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons that the term "coachee" is falling into disfavor is because it sounds disempowering. To be a "coachee" makes it sound as if something is being done to the poor individual rather than the individual being a fully-empowered partner in the process. Terms like "coaching client," "participant," and "leader" are used with increasing regularity in reference to the individual being coached.

How and why is the participation of each person involved in executive coaching helping the individual and the firm? How and why is the coaching process itself helping the individual and the firm? How and why is this leadership development investment increasing the profitability and/or financial stability and success of the firm?

Organizations perform better and become more profitable and financially-viable as soon as employees perform better. Employees perform better when their leaders perform better. Leaders perform better when their best thinking and productivity is enhanced and elevated by well-aligned coaching and leadership development.

Always coach with an eye toward the art of alignment, aligning every level, all the time.



## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Three:

### *Keep the Voice of the Organization Present and Alive in All Coaching Engagements*

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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. It's not an "official" pronouncement from the C-Suite. It's not the company line published in the newsletter or the annual report. Those are all well and good. That faint, small voice is the actual voice of the real collective values, beliefs, hopes, fears of the organizational population. It's the organization.

"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. I don’t want the payroll checks to bounce.*”

Like any other complex organism, an organization made up of carbon-based life forms must 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 to keep the doors open. Anti-profit organizations also need to cover payroll and expenses to keep the doors open. Regardless of how organizations meet their needs, they 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 personal and professional 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 and the ability to write 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 as established by the organization’s leadership strategists. The answer, whatever it is, must align what individual coaching clients do best 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 and/or an ability to write so it can cry out when individual interests pull value away from the good of the whole.



Figure 1

As you can see in Figure 1, the voice of the organization gains insight, clarity, and volume where the members of the coaching coalition (that you’re about to read about in commandment four) converge.

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Four:

### *Coach Through an Organizational Lens*

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Keeping the voice of the organization alive in every coaching conversation and aligned with the context of the global enterprise requires the establishment of the four-cornered coaching coalition (see Figure 2); a group of interested, invested, and involved stakeholders that usually includes the coach, the coaching client, the coaching client's manager, and an organizational sponsor—usually an HR, Talent, or OD partner. This coalition not only gives voice to the organization (as you saw illustrated in Figure 1), it also constitutes the organizational lens. Among the most common and vital functions of the coaching coalition is (a) negotiating the list of feedback providers for structured-interview 360 assessments conducted by the coach, (b) establishing the list of questions the multiple raters will be asked by the coach, and (c) reviewing the reports that the coach and coaching client prepare at the beginning, middle, and end of the engagement—Action Plan, Mid-term Update to the Action Plan, and Final Report.

Through a wide-angle lens, Contextual Coaching™ or coaching in the context of the organization is a holistic approach to executive coaching that balances and aligns the individual's need for leadership growth and development with the operational and strategic needs of the organization. It simply means to coach in the context of the organization or coach through an organizational lens in which the individual coaching client and the organization sponsoring the coaching engagement are co-clients. In the Contextual Coaching™ process, none of the leadership competencies, principles, or values that the organization subscribes to are left out of the engagement—especially those requiring the hardest work.

As you saw in Figure 1, the coaching coalition is integral to the Contextual Coaching™ experience and keeping the voice of the organization alive and active in the coaching conversation. Some call this working group a stakeholder or collaborative coalition. Regardless of exactly what it is called, the coaching coalition is critical to the success of any organizational Contextual Coaching™ engagement.

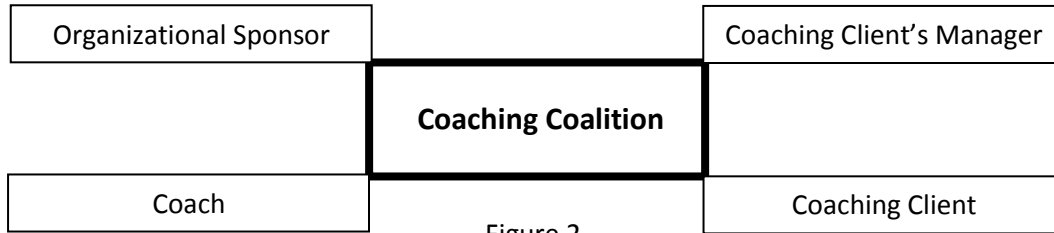


Figure 2

To better ensure coaching engagement success, the constituents and key stakeholders need to be committed and willing to invest time and energy to the coaching process. Key constituents and stakeholders include any important participants in the coaching process and your coaching client’s overall leadership development. They provide insight into your coaching client’s goals as well as information throughout the coaching engagement that can deepen the experience for the coaching client, and help to monitor personal and professional development—while maintaining alignment to the organization’s cultural and strategic context.

The voice of the organization is kept alive and active in the coaching conversation through the coalition members and the way each of them represents and articulates a different organizational perspective or point of view in the context of the organization’s established leadership competencies, principles, or values.

Each corner of the coaching coalition can, and often does, represent a unique point of view while still representing the voice of the organization. It’s easy to see the varied perspectives coming through the coaching coalition’s conversations. Imagine that the coaching coalition is discussing communication skills, for example. The Coach might share something like this:

*“During coaching engagements, I periodically paraphrase or restate what I hear my coaching clients saying—using other words that make it clear that we’re on the same wavelength. Sometimes I point out when we have common experiences so my client feels more confident that I truly get where she’s coming from. I’ve published books and articles before and my coaching client writes a lot of high-level documents. We both know what it is to stare at a blank screen with a deadline looming. Knowing we both have that experience can help us reframe our thinking.”* Can you see the coach’s perspective on communication skills coming through here?

The Coaching Client or leader being coached might say something like: *“When I am presenting in meetings, I have a tough time keeping people focused on the problem that we’re solving for. I’d like some help getting people to pay attention to what I’m saying, especially when they’re my peers and I can’t just order them to do things. I really think that I’ll get things done more collaboratively, like my performance review calls for, if I can exert more influence when I’m communicating.”* Can you see the coaching client’s perspective on communication skills coming through?

The Coaching Client's Manager might say something like this about communication skills: *"I know it helps me as a manager for my people to tell me what's going on in a clear and concise way. That not only helps me manage better, but it helps other departments work with us more effectively. I'll help you work on that. As for me, I know that I need to do a better job of being clear and concise with my messaging for all the reasons I just stated. Just last week, I changed my mind about something and didn't let everyone involved know that I had shifted gears or why. When I am confusing, ambiguous, or inconsistent in my communication it makes it tough on my team members, our partners across the enterprise, and the organization as a whole."* Can you see the manager's perspective and the organization's voice begin coming through a bit more powerfully here? Managers of coaching clients can quickly get caught, indicted, and convicted of doing what they are trying to coach their reports not to do—if the coalition conversation stays alive.

The Organizational Sponsor (perhaps a Human Resources Business Partner) might say something like: *"One reason the organization is investing in this coaching engagement and others like it is because we need cultural consistency in the way people communicate, especially leaders of teams. I have been asked to improve the ways I deliver feedback when managing coaching engagements, so this is something I'll pay close attention to. Even with individual contributors, it's important for all of us to continuously improve the way we give feedback and use respectful language when we do it. For the work you do one-on-one in this department and with teams from other departments, we all need to model our leadership competencies around respectful and honest feedback."* Can you see the organization's voice coming from a slightly different perspective when looking through the Human Resources, Talent, or Organization Development Partner's lens?

The more every coaching coalition member participates, the stronger and more comprehensive the organization's voice becomes. The more the organization and the individual being coached are aware and acknowledge their symbiotic relationship, the more effective both will be. The previously mentioned fabulous, overarching question regularly asked by everyone in the coaching coalition, especially the coach ("How is this coaching engagement helping our organization?"), becomes even more powerful as the members of the coaching coalition conduct a more authentic and animated coalition conversation.

The coaching coalition is not only the voice of the organization; it is the lens through which the coaching engagement is observed and conducted.



## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Five:

### *Co-Create the Coaching Engagement*

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In commandment three and four, the discussion focused on keeping the voice of the organization alive, present, and participating in executive coaching engagements through the formation of a coaching (or stakeholder) coalition. The coaching coalition has at least four members: the coach, the coaching client, the coaching client's manager, and the organizational sponsor. Organizational sponsors are most commonly Human Resources people. Sometimes they can be organization development, learning, or talent partners. The important issue is to bring multiple perspectives to the coaching engagement that, among them, will keep the interests of the organization represented, protected, and promoted.

Since executive coaching engagements are sponsored by organizations to help skill up, smooth out, or otherwise enhance a leader's ability to lead in a productive and profitable manner, the engagement is not a private affair between a coach and his or her coaching client. The individual being coached and the coach enjoy a special relationship - one that is marked by respect, trust, professional bonding and, of course, confidentiality.

Just because an organizationally-sponsored coaching engagement is an experience shared among the members of the coaching coalition, it doesn't mean that it violates traditional coaching protocols, which include the privilege of confidentiality. Co-creation of a coaching engagement or an individual coaching session means that the experience and the work involved is shared among at least two people.

The elevation in status of the individual receiving the coaching is consistent with the belief that a coaching client is a privileged individual in whom the organization has chosen to make a sizeable investment. Common logic would suggest that someone in whom an organization is willing to invest a large sum of money must be valuable to the organization. Executive coaching is arguably the single most expensive investment an organization makes along the leadership talent development continuum.

All this to say that an organization has a right to expect results—a return on its investment, if you prefer. The act of co-creating the engagement, that is the entire coaching process for the leader receiving the coaching, is an important step toward ensuring a maximum return on investment for the individual leader receiving coaching and the organization. That’s why co-creating the engagement is a macro or big picture endeavor. Together, every member of the coaching coalition discusses what is going to take place throughout the engagement and comes to agreement on how the engagement design will most benefit everyone involved.

As mentioned in Contextual Coaching™ commandment three, the coach must be organizationally savvy and function as a facilitator to make sure all voices are heard and acknowledged as the coaching engagement is designed. That’s the only way the voice of the organization can be heard. Whereas the basic outline of executive coaching engagements remains similar from one engagement to the next, specifics of what happens inside the engagement are almost never the same from one engagement to the next.

This macro perspective—setting the expectations between the coach, the coaching client, and the organization—is essentially how the engagement framework is built. And the contextual framework will be consistent from one engagement to the next across the organization,; thus ensuring enterprise-wide continuity and quality assurance as leaders are developed. If you use executive coaching to build the leaders who will build your business, you need to take steps to ensure that the framework for coaching engagements is aligned with your organization’s leadership development strategy.

If you are the individual responsible for managing the coaching function in your organization, you must hire organizationally-aware coaches and be a good teacher for your coaching clients and their managers to make sure everyone understands that every coaching engagement across your organization marches to the beat of your organizational leadership competencies, values, and/or disciplines.

Every coaching report that’s filed (and there should be no less than an Action Plan with a Mid-term and Final Report) paints a backdrop of how the leader being coached is growing and developing in the organizational context. Once again, the essential question that cuts to the chase with any coaching engagement is, “How is this helping our organization?”

Specific details, such as how many face-to-face sessions will be conducted between the coach and the coaching client, how often, how many reports will be developed collaboratively between the coach and coaching client, how often will the coalition meet together to discuss the reports are all macro issues when it comes to engagement design. Most Contextual Coaching™ engagements will involve a 360-degree assessment comprised of the coach conducting a series of structured interviews. As also mentioned in the third commandment about the coaching coalition, the coalition negotiates which feedback providers will be approached to provide multi-rater data and which questions will be asked to ensure the most salient challenges are surfaced for the coaching.

These are all macro issues of co-creating the executive coaching engagement. Contextual Coaching™ commandment number six will deal with the micro-issues of co-creating the individual coaching sessions. The reason alignment is emphasized so often is because the macro design of engagements to ensure the organization is continuously engaged in executive coaching must resonate with the micro challenge of making sure the individual leader's unique growth and development needs are successfully addressed, which they cannot be unless the macro context of the engagement is established. And so goes the dance of executive coaching, where what individual leaders do best aligns with what their organizations need most.

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Six:

### *Co-Create the Coaching Session*

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In commandment five, the discussion continued from commandment three about keeping the voice of the organization alive, present, and participating in executive coaching engagements through the formation of a coaching (or stakeholder) coalition. The coaching coalition's primary function is to ensure that the interests of the organization are represented, protected, and even promoted throughout coaching engagements. In the sixth commandment of Contextual Coaching™, the emphasis shifts from the overall coaching engagement to the individual coaching sessions.

The coaching engagement represents the overall coaching program or event for a leader being coached and needs to be aligned contextually with the sponsoring organization's leadership development strategy, as well as its overarching organizational strategic agenda. One mantra to put on your wall is: *"A successful business strategy begins with a solid talent strategy."* The coaching coalition works together to monitor and guide coaching engagements to ensure the engagements are consistently aligned with organizational leadership and business strategies.

The coaching sessions are much more personal and involve only the coach and the coaching client. As discussed in commandment five, the language around coaching is shifting and some might say, maturing. Some would refer to the coach and coaching client as, "the practitioner and the participant." Or, "the coach and the leader." Others would still say, "coach and the coachee." Regardless of how you label those involved in coaching engagements and coaching sessions, what transpires between them must still be aligned with the sponsoring organization's strategic agenda. However, it is the more intimate work between the coach and the leader receiving coaching that accomplishes said alignment while still enabling growth and development of the coaching client against his or her individual coaching objectives.

In the macro work of the coaching coalition, as it co-creates the *coaching engagement*, the primary focus or at least equally-shared focus is on the alignment of the engagement to the organization's leadership and business strategies. When the coach and coaching client co-create each coaching *session*, the more intimate micro focus is on the individual leader's growth and development agenda. Even during their more intimate work, however, the coach and coaching client remain mindful of contextual alignment. Although the privilege of confidentiality is honored, the organization's needs are never out of mind.

### Guiding the Sessions

The International Coach Federation (<http://coachfederation.org>) has done a comprehensive job of bringing together guiding principles and best practices for non-directive coaching techniques. The ICF list of 11 core competencies, if practiced properly, will help guide and enhance any coaching session. When seeking consistent quality of executive coaching across an organization, the ICF core competencies are an excellent standard to apply. The context of what leaders should look like - and ideally how they should show up, present, and conduct themselves - is a matter of establishing leadership competencies, values, and/or principles that align with the organization's cultural and strategic agenda. The individual coaching sessions as well as the coaching engagements should be conducted in that context.

### The ICF Eleven core competencies are:

#### A. Setting the Foundation

1. **Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards** (These are well-defined by the ICF and can be studied on their website.)
2. **Establishing the Coaching Agreement** (Every session needs to be co-created between the executive coach and the leader receiving the coaching. Every executive coaching session has an agreement between coach and leader on what the session outcomes should be, even if the agreement is oral. The written Action Plan and the mid-term and final updates to the Action Plan reflect the expectations and the work being done inside the overall coaching engagement and are signed off on by the coaching coalition members. Contextual alignment to the organizational strategic agenda is always the framework or backdrop when the coaching is contextual.)

#### B. Co-creating the Relationship

3. **Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client** (This is essential for the intimate micro coaching session work that the executive coach and leader being coached do together. In addition to trust and intimacy between the executive coach and leader, trust and respect need to be established for all members of the coaching coalition and, hopefully, become a mainstay of the entire enterprise.)
4. **Coaching Presence** (In session work between the executive coach and leader receiving coaching, it is imperative that the coach be totally present and available emotionally and intellectually for the coaching client, no matter the issue and regardless of the overriding contextual framework. It is the coach's fiduciary responsibility not to be distracted.)

#### C. Communicating Effectively

5. **Active Listening** (This is a skill that helps everyone in the workplace and beyond. It is not reserved only for the micro one-on-one coaching sessions or the work of the coaching coalition. Active listening is essential at both the micro- and macro-levels if the coaching engagement is going to succeed.)

**6. Powerful Questioning** (Challenging conventional or unconventional thinking that might be binding up a leader is one responsibility of an executive coach. But, it is also a skill that can unleash new, more reflective, better, and broader thinking virtually anywhere—including when co-creating coaching engagements. Executive coaching is largely a cognitive endeavor.)

**7. Direct Communication** (This is another skill that has broad value and application, especially in formal organizations as well as interpersonal relations. Coaching sessions are good opportunities to learn and begin practicing direct communication skills and techniques.)

#### **D. Facilitating Learning and Results**

**8. Creating Awareness** (The heightened individual and organizational awareness that will, hopefully, sweep the organization and broaden peoples' thinking often begins in intimate coaching session conversations. The way that powerful questions break through mental and emotional blockages and bifurcations to promote reflection is one way that coaches help their coaching clients create awareness.)

**9. Designing Actions** (Operationalizing the ideas and new thinking that emerge from coaching sessions and making them real, palpable, and authentic is a primary goal of coaching. Turning reflective thinking and new awareness into new behavior conclusively demonstrates how the work that takes place in coaching sessions and across the entire coaching engagement aligns with the broader organizational outcomes as established in the engagement's contextual framework.)

**10. Planning and Goal Setting** (Once again, the executive coach and leader begin the work of mapping out specific objectives to be achieved to turn new awareness into real outcomes. From the micro level to the macro level, the alignment between individual plans and goals and organizational plans and goals should ideally be in the context of the organization's desired culture and strategic agenda.)

**11. Managing Progress and Accountability** (Osmosis is not a commonly accepted coaching technique. If it were, powerful questioning would not be necessary. Coaching, as defined by the ICF, is more inherently heuristic in that the answers emerge largely from the coaching client's experience and common sense. This is to say that the new learnings must represent incremental or large-scale progress and be memorialized in order to keep the coaching client accountable for his or her growth and development. This 11<sup>th</sup> core competency from the ICF is particularly valuable when considering that there is a contextual framework within which organizational coaching will be conducted.)

When co-creating the individual executive coaching sessions, expectations need to be established and agreed upon between the coach and the leader receiving the coaching. When co-creating the entire coaching engagement, the coach, the leader, the leader's manager, the organizational sponsor, and any other members of the coaching coalition must negotiate and come to agreement on what the outcomes should be and how they will align with leadership competencies, values, and/or disciplines established for the organization, all based on the organization's overarching strategic agenda.



## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Seven:

### *Establish and Maintain a Coaching Culture*

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As a provider of Contextual Coaching™ services, our executive coaches are always on the new frontier looking to help our coaching clients add value to the organizations that employ them. Working to develop enterprise-wide cultures of coaching makes enhancements of habits, skills, and attitudes pre-emptive rather than reactive. Too often our telephone rings *after* an executive had been promoted into a position he or she is not qualified and/or experienced enough to occupy. In such cases, our coaching services are often requested to instill five or more years of leadership maturity in six months or less.

That's a tall order under any circumstances. Instead of waiting until material and emotional damage has been done, relationships broken, and dissention sewn far and wide, a deliberate and healthy culture of coaching helps to keep people at all levels of the organization continuously engaged and working on habits, skills, and attitudes—individually and corporately—as a way of doing business, not merely dealing with difficult and challenging behavior after the fact.

Unless your organization is consciously, systematically, and strategically building and sustaining a culture of coaching, summoning an internal or external coach to contend with a dysfunctional behavior is more likely to resemble a 911 call rather than strategically developing leadership strengths. A proactive culture of coaching focuses energy and resources on creating thinking partnerships, accelerating performance, and making good talent better rather than waiting for things and people to crash and require correction or rescue.

In our experience as a provider of executive coaching services framed in the context of the organization's leadership development strategy, some of the most frequently-cited reasons for coaching would be:

- To enhance executive presence
- To develop leadership potential
- To help executives deal with stress
- To address habits, skills, and attitudes
- To prepare high-potentials for promotion
- To prepare high-potentials for succession
- To improve intrapersonal communication
- To help find assistance with personal problems
- To soften critical or abusive leadership behaviors
- To help people understand and better fulfill their roles
- To interpret 360-degree feedback and put it to good use
- To help the individual transition to a larger or stretch role
- To interpret and put to good use self-reporting assessment data
- To help the individual navigate a major organizational transformation or crisis
- To help shape perceptions and expectations to improve attitudes & relationships

Why should an organization adopt one-on-one coaching? Are not training and development or organizational learning solutions enough?

You will never get anyone in the talent development business to criticize the practice of organizational learning. Partners International occupies as much space in the organizational education and strategic team alignment universe as we do in executive coaching. There has never been an executive, artist, or athlete who did not improve on his or her natural talents and abilities with expanded knowledge and practice. There has never been an organization that performed better over time in a state of ignorance than in a state of enlightenment.

Training and development activities are good. But, coaching is better. It is the difference between classroom learning for children and having a private tutor who is a subject matter expert. It is the difference between attending golf, tennis, or skiing clinics versus private lessons.

The best possible outcome results from a combination of both training and development opportunities and one-on-one coaching. In Action Coaching, or what we refer to as Strategic Team Alignment, it is the combining of real-time learning activities with individual coaching that gives the entire learning experience maximum traction. If organizational learning is an effective topical ointment, coaching is a fast-acting, quick-dissolving gel tablet with a concentrated dosage.

No single form of training and development gets a businessperson's attention as completely as coaching. No single form of organizational learning addresses an individual businessperson's complete range of developmental issues as completely or comprehensively as coaching. No other form of workplace intervention offers more hope of radical performance improvement.

Coaching is action learning at its very best. Completely real-time and real-world, individual coaching is a continuous living tutorial on habits, skills, and attitudes—all in the context of the organization—especially in the social and professional interactions of organizational life.

Consider what executive coaching is most commonly needed for: to fully groom and prepare people for the new roles and responsibilities the organization needs them to assume. Or when disruptive executive behavior has reached critical proportions and organizational policy makers are faced with the daunting prospect of severing ties with an expensive sample of senior talent.

When there are only seconds left on the clock to preserve this monumental investment in human capital—that is keeping a senior executive from derailing or setting the senior executive back on the rails after he or she has derailed—one does not send the senior executive to an instructor-led classroom or an online course to bring about change. It means calling in an executive coach. When the *whole team* needs a powerful intervention or performance acceleration, the answer to the problem is dialing up Strategic Team Alignment with individual coaching for each team member.

As we mentioned in the sixth commandment of Contextual Coaching™, to articulate the shared values, beliefs, and expectations across the enterprise and then to consistently coach to them wherever in the world the coaching is taking place, there is no better list of coaching competencies than the list compiled by the International Coach Federation and detailed in commandment six:

1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards
2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement
3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client
4. Coaching Presence
5. Active Listening
6. Powerful Questioning
7. Direct Communication
8. Creating Awareness
9. Designing Actions
10. Planning and Goal Setting
11. Managing Progress and Accountability

If your mid-level to senior-level executives practiced these competencies as a matter of daily corporate leadership culture, you could, figuratively speaking, put the executive coaching industry out of business. I say “figuratively speaking” because executives, like entire organizations, always want to be better. That means there will always be a place for executive coaches, especially those who align what individual leaders do best with what organizations need most.

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Eight: *Keep the Leader and the Organization as Co-clients at All Times*

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As discussed in Contextual Coaching™ commandment number four, the organization needs to have a voice in what it is paying for in terms of leadership development. Coaching is usually the singular most expensive investment organizations make in developing leaders. The voice of the organization is kept alive and audible in executive coaching engagements through the work of the coaching coalition described in the third and fourth commandments of Contextual Coaching™. That is, at a minimum, the participation of the coach, the leader being coached, the leader's manager, and the organizational sponsor is established as a formal expectation throughout the engagement.

The coalition members come together initially in a dialogue facilitated by the coach to contract for the engagement, set expectations, and determine who will be on the list of feedback providers during the structured interviews conducted by the executive coach. The coalition also discusses and ultimately decides upon what questions the coach will ask each of the feedback providers in the structured interviews. Then the coach debriefs the 360 structured interview feedback with the leader being coached and works with the leader to co-create an Action Plan for the coaching engagement that will be presented to the coaching coalition for approval. The coaching coalition meets again for a mid-term update to the Action Plan and a Final Report.

Why so much emphasis on co-client status for the leader being coached and the organization? The idea came out of training in Marriage and Family Therapy (MFT). MFT, as anyone close to psychological counseling or clinical social work knows, is rooted in systems theory, specifically, family-systems theory. When partner number one comes into the counseling room for couple's therapy, he or she is not the therapist's client. When partner number two comes into the counseling room for couple's therapy, he or she is not the Marriage and Family Therapist's client either.

The marriage or covenant between the two individuals is the client. When two or more people join in a relationship, an organization is formed. An entity is created that is more than the sum of the individual parts. Anyone who is coaching a senior or emerging leader (or anyone for that matter in an organizationally-sponsored coaching engagement) is coaching the relationship between the leader being coached and the organization. The organization is not only a co-client, as the individuals in a relationship or marriage counseling scenario are, but the organization is arguably the primary client.

This understandably flies in the face of those who have defined coaching engagements as individual and intimate relationships between the leaders being coached and their coaches with the organization held at a safe distance. Many practitioners prefer to only allow access to the coaching process and what is transpiring if and when the leader being coached and his or her coach elect to allow the cone of confidentiality to be lifted and/or and the curtain of confidentiality to be pulled back.

In Contextual Coaching™, these things are honored. The coaching client or leader being coached always owns the engagement and his or her 360 data. However, in the expectation-setting stage of co-creating the engagement with the coaching coalition, it is made very clear that the organization is indeed a co-client unless the leader being coached refuses to include it or the organizational sponsor or leader's manager do not allow it, in which case the executive coaching engagement is compromised. Unless the coaching is part of an employee assistance program, exclusion of the organization and its overarching corporate interests is suspect to say the least.

It is difficult to conjure a scenario in which an organizational leader can be coached for success outside of the cultural, structural, and/or political context of the organization that pays the leader's salary and funds the coaching. Many coaches feel as if they can coach organizational leaders successfully without aligning what the leaders and their organizations need most. But, if the voices of the organizational sponsor and the coaching client's manager are removed from the conversation, who speaks for the needs of the organization in the "marriage" between the leader and the organization he or she works for?

Coaching clients need to find their authentic voices in the workplace and coaches are great thinking partners in that process. But, for a coaching conversation to be genuine and authentic, the organization's voice must be heard as well as the individual's. Imagine a Marriage and Family Therapist counseling a couple and only allowing one of them to speak. How authentic would that be? Could that process truly be called credible? What if only one party to the relationship were even involved, other than to write a check to pay for it?

All too often, the coach and the leader being coached disappear completely behind the curtain of confidentiality and can't be heard at all underneath the cone. When they re-emerge six-to-twelve months later (or more), oftentimes no one truly knows what was to be accomplished much less what, if anything, *was* accomplished. Life coaching and Employee Assistance counseling are horses of a different color. If an executive leadership coach shows up riding a life coaching or EAP horse—and tries to convince you that all horses are the same—beware. One of the co-clients might be in danger of being excluded.

Regular reporting in the form of an Action Plan, Mid-term update of the Action Plan, and a Final Report are designed to keep every member of the coaching coalition abreast of the progress of the engagement and the voice of the organization present and participating. More than merely informing coalition members, each presentation of an updated report gives coalition members—that is to say the voice of the organization—the opportunity to be heard and weigh in on important issues. This produces excellent feedback and ongoing guidance to the coach and the leader being coached.

Confidentiality is a privilege; coaching is a luxury. Both serve important purposes and can produce powerful results. A coaching engagement with one client absent and/or one client's voice muted, is likely to be as effective as one hand clapping. Contextual Coaching™ is about context. The emphasis with systems theory shifts focus from parts to the organization of parts, recognizing that interactions between the parts are not static and constant, but dynamic processes.

If there is more than one party in a relationship (which, by definition, there must be in order for it to be called a relationship) there is a *system*. The greater the number of components, the more complex the system. Wikipedia says, “A general systems perspective examines the way components of a system interact with one another to form a whole. Rather than just focusing on each of the separate parts, a systems perspective focuses on the connectedness and the interrelation and interdependence of all the parts.”

To ensure the coach, the leader being coached, the leader's manager, and the organizational sponsor don't become myopic and insular in their thinking and engagement, all parts of the system, all four corners of the coaching coalition (see commandment four) must deliberately strive to maintain co-client status for the leader being coached and the sponsoring organization at all times.

Sometimes the co-client status can be affirmed by members of the coaching coalition by simply scribbling the proverbial Contextual Coaching™ question on the palms of their hands, occasionally opening their hands, looking at one another, and asking, “How is this helping the organization?” Never forget that Contextual Coaching™ is the art of aligning what leaders do best with what their organizations need most. It takes two hands to applaud.



## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Nine:

### *Establish Co-beneficiaries*

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Contextual Coaching™ commandment number nine twists the lens on the notion of the leader being coached and the organization sharing co-client status. Taking the conversation a bit further, the coaching coalition must discuss how much of a benefit the organization and the leader being coached will derive from the expensive engagement. Before a coalition is even fully formed (that is, before a coach is selected), the leader, the leader’s manager, and the organizational sponsor must consult with one another to decide if coaching is even the right solution for what is ailing or facing the organization and the established or emerging leader.

There are many other things that can be done with that money. None of the alternatives will provide as intense and intimate a learning journey as executive coaching. But, coaching might be overkill. If executive coaching is stigmatized in an organization, as it is in many if not most organizations, it might be impossible to convince the leader to be coached to voluntarily “submit” to the humiliation of being coached.

Those sound like strong words, but men and women in positions of leadership can do the math. If they look around and see that only “problem” people are getting coached, why should they raise their hands or agree to coaching? It can be a tough proposition to get a leader in a non-coaching culture to cooperate. Even if he or she feels compelled or coerced to be coached, his or her degree of self-disclosure and transparency is likely to be limited.

In sort of a glass-half-full or half-empty reasoning scheme, I recall a football coach once saying, “When you pass the ball, three things can happen and two of them are bad.” Needless to say his team rushed the ball a lot. It wasn’t very entertaining football. Using similar reasoning, there are four levels of coaching cooperation in organizations and only one is truly voluntary:

- A. Level One: Voluntary—Coaching as Opportunity
- Leaders, emerging leaders, and other potential coaching clients raise their hands and ask for a coach because they are eager to grow and develop as leaders and they see coaching as a positive tool to help them get better.
- B. Level Two: Glass Half Full—Coaching as an Acquired Taste
- Coaching engagements are recommended by others (like the boss maybe) and the coaching client comes to appreciate coaching as a rare and unique opportunity as he or she gains more experience with it.
  - Coaching engagements are included as part of team leadership training or Action Learning events and the leaders being coached consider the coaching to be a positive extension of the training. They sometimes ask to sign up for more.
- C. Level Three: Glass Half Empty—Coaching as a Necessary Evil
- Coaching engagements are recommended by others (like the boss probably), coaching clients don't like the idea of coaching after seeing only "problem" people get coached, and might find it intimidating and/or pejorative. They fear that they might be stigmatized by the process. But, they will go with the program and possibly pick up a positive leadership technique or two, realizing that it is wiser for them politically to cooperate than to push back.
  - Coaching engagements are included as part of team leadership training or Action Learning events and the leaders being coached consider the coaching to be annoying, but required for graduation. They go through the motions and tolerate coaching, but will get off at the first exit.
- D. Level Three: Involuntary—Coaching as Punishment
- The coaching client is compelled to participate in a coaching engagement that he or she doesn't feel is necessary, justified, or makes any sense given his or her long-term successful performance with the organization, or what he or she perceives to be long-term successful performance with the organization. Coaching clients can feel as if they are being singled out in a witch hunt and are being used as scapegoats for the poor leadership or performance of others (like maybe the boss). These coaching engagements can turn out successfully. However, highly talented and skilled coaches are required; coaches who can coach in the context of the organization and convince both the leader being coached and the organization that they are better aligned than misaligned. There can be thick ice to break through or melt.
  - Coaching is truly a CYA attempt by an organization that has pre-determined the leader is going to, as we used to say at the Magic Kingdom, "find their happiness elsewhere." No legitimate coach would knowingly participate in such a ploy. But, it does happen. And leaders being forced out often know it. This doesn't help build a positive image for executive coaching.

The point being driven home here is that coaches, managers of leaders being coached, and especially organizational sponsors of coaching must, *must, must* establish an authentic value proposition around coaching. It's the old "what's in it for me?" question, answered with a compelling case of how growing and developing as a leader is good for both the individual and good for the organization. In fact, tying the individual leader's leadership growth and development to revenue growth and profitability of the organization makes coaching a no-brainer. What reasonable person would opt out?

If the organizational sponsor is well-versed in the diagnostics of coaching or has attended Fielding Graduate University's *How to Manage the Coaching Function in an Organization* (ODL-623), he or she will be able to advise the leader, leader's manager, and any other invested stakeholder with well-articulated apologetics for why organizations get better right after their leaders do. The principle is universal. Children get better right after their parents get better. Students get better right after their teachers get better. If a person wants to be a respected, effective, legacy-leaving leader, that alone is worth the coaching investment on the part of the organization.

On the competitive rungs of the leadership ladder, any advantage should be welcomed. If a horrific-but-maniacal weekend golfer is swatting at balls on the driving range and Tiger Woods' golf coach wanders by and asks, "Would you like a free tip or two?" Would a bad golfer, but otherwise reasonably intelligent human being say, "No"? If you are the club champion and Tiger Woods' golf coach wanders by and asks, "Would you like a free tip or two?" Would even an already good golfer really say, "No"? Tiger Woods doesn't say "No." He hired the coach and pays big money for the experience.

If you are an organizational leader, leader's manager, and/or guide and manage the coaching engagements for your organization, it's important to point out to the leader about to be coached that this isn't "free" by any means. A nice chunk of EBITA is being invested in a unique and potential-packed opportunity for the leader. Free to the leader? It is free except for the blood, sweat, and tears that produce a more impressive, stronger, more agile, and resilient influencer on behalf of the organization. That is the skin- in-the-game that belongs to the leader being coached.

Note to the leader being coached: Coaching, at the core of its craft, is not about you becoming someone else. It is about becoming the best *you* possible. You, after all, are all you and your coach have to work with. So, you and your coach go to work reflecting, exploring, questioning, and practicing how to be everything you have the gifts, talents, and intelligence to be.

To derive maximum value from the organization's coaching spend, the organization and the leader being coached must mutually benefit from every coaching conversation, as well as the entire engagement. The more invested in time and attentiveness the balance of the coaching coalition is (the organizational sponsor and the leader's manager), the more powerful the outcome is for all stakeholders. That's a power proposition that's hard to say "No" to.

## Contextual Coaching™ Commandment Ten:

### *No Data Left Behind*

Coaching is heuristic at its very core. As a problem solving solution, coaching (especially in executive environments) employs self-awareness and self-discovery. If the problem is that someone in institutional authority needs to correct counter-productive executive behavior and/or simply needs a coach to help develop undeveloped potential, thus preparing the leader for expanded responsibilities, much of the growth will leverage general assumptions, rules of thumb, educated guesswork, intuitive judgment, and common sense. The behaviors coaches help leaders develop are largely axiomatic in that they seem obviously beneficial.

In examining the Ten Commandments of Contextual Coaching™, it no doubt became obvious that, if executive coaching is truly conducted through an organizational lens, a great many conversations occur in the course of an engagement. That could be said of any coaching engagement to a point (the many conversations part). But, although the coaching client or leader being coached “owns” the data gathered in 360 structured interviews, in coaching sessions, and other coaching conversations, this information is the substance and basis for reports that the coach and leader being coached jointly prepare for the purpose of sharing with the coaching or stakeholder coalition (see commandment numbers three and four).

The expectation is established early on in a Contextual Coaching™ engagement that this data will be shared in a format and with the specificity that is approved for distribution by the leader being coached. If the person or department managing the coaching function in the organization has attended Fielding Graduate University’s *How to Manage the Coaching Function in an Organization* (ODL-623) or managed to themselves piece together processes and protocols in which data across all coaching engagements can be captured, compiled, and analyzed to identify enterprise-wide leadership trends and patterns—*without compromising confidentiality*—the organization will save millions paid out to Big Five consulting firms to conduct focus groups, generic interviews, and distribute surveys to reveal insights that are already articulated in executive coaching conversations. In short, you’re already gathering that data in intimate coaching engagements, richer data in fact.

Quickly review the other nine commandments of Contextual Coaching™ with an eye for what type of information will surface in the course of the coaching work:

1. *Coach in the Context of the Organization:* Alignment between leaders and corporate strategy is critical to successful executive development (*Is there alignment or not? The whole coalition should know. How can you as the organizational sponsor be sure?*)
2. *Coach with the Art of Alignment:* People, performance, and profitability; by aligning what your people do best with what your organization needs most (*How much do people in the organization routinely talk about what people do best or what your organization needs most? Much less how to align the two? In Contextual Coaching™ engagements, there things get chatted up a lot. Capture the conversations.*)
3. *Keep the voice of the organization present and alive:* Make sure the organization's vocal chords are well exercised throughout coaching engagements (*Does the organization have a deliberate, methodological practice of seeking and giving volume to its own voice as it speaks through its senior executives and the variety of internal and external stakeholders inside and outside of the coaching client's span of control?*)
4. *Coach through an organizational lens:* Establish the Coaching Coalition—coach, coaching client, coaching client's manager, and organizational sponsor (*In organizations with true coaching cultures and/or high-communication and participation cultures, this is easily done. The coaching engagement will expose if more organizational awareness and conversations are needed and where.*)
5. *Co-Create the Engagement:* The Macro perspective—Set the expectations between the coach, coaching client, and the organization (*It is amazing how many leaders were never told about the things their coaches have been hired to help them learn and/or change. Even if they are clearly told, clarifying expectations and what they mean is fundamental to meeting or exceeding them on an individual or enterprise level. Coaching engagement data will tell a huge story here.*)
6. *Co-Create the Coaching Session:* The Micro perspective—Set the expectations between the coach, coaching client, and the coaching client's manager (*As with commandment five, expectation setting at the local or interpersonal level must be aligned with the broader, overarching cultural expectations in the organization. Commandments five and six create two points in the organizational universe that can be compared.*)
7. *Establish and Maintain a Coaching Culture:* Articulate the shared values, beliefs, and expectations across the enterprise and then consistently coach to them around the world (*The capture, compilation, and analysis of data from coaching engagement conversations will inform not only what the leadership challenges are that coaching will address, but also how effective executive coaching is as a leadership development tool.*)
8. *Keep the leader and the organization as co-clients at all times:* Coach the individual and the organization simultaneously by coaching the real client - the relationship between the individual and the organization (*Success for a leader, or any employee for that matter, cannot be determined without a full understanding of the organizational context. It is the health of the leader/organization relationship that matters most. A leader being coached without the voice of the organization at the table will be the proverbial one hand clapping. Your data capture through reporting keeps all members of the coalition honest on this matter.*)
9. *Establish Co-Beneficiaries:* Derive maximum value from the coaching spend as the organization and the leader mutually benefit from every coaching conversation (*Don't forget that knowing and accepting what is in it for them is a fundamental component of*

*human motivation. Capturing, compiling, and analyzing executive coaching data will reveal what motivates organizational leaders individually and collectively. Priceless information you don't want to lose.)*

10. *No Data Left Behind: Capture data from coaching conversations in coaching reports for organizational analysis and talent development planning without compromising confidentiality (All data points tell a story when subjected to comparative analysis. Confidentiality is often protected by blind compilation and paraphrase of data points. The more the leader being coached discloses about the actual feedback, the higher the reliability of the analysis.)*

Unlike most focus groups and surveys, data collected in the course of an executive coaching engagement is truly Action Research in that it is a real-time and real-world study of real people engaged in the course *and in the context* of their work. People filling out employee engagement surveys might make judgments about whether or not the organization and/or those reviewing and analyzing the data can handle the truth and, thereby, soften or withhold authentic responses. Unlike static, self-reporting data gathering, coaching conversations are conducted live and/or in person. Information gathered by a skilled interviewer across the table, about a real person in real time, is far more reliable.

How much money is being lost by not capturing, compiling, and analyzing executive coaching engagement data? Ask McKinsey & Company what they will charge to come in and replicate it, which they really can't do completely because your data is being gathered by seasoned executive coaches in intimate conversations pinned directly to the leadership growth and development challenges of real executives in your organization. But, McKinsey & Company will come in and provide you with the next best thing—for a best-thing price.

If organizations are conducting coaching engagements (and thereby coaching conversations) all over the world and yet are not capturing, compiling, and analyzing the information, priceless organizational data is flowing into the gutter and washing out to sea and/or evaporating into the ether. It's inconceivable if you stop to ponder it. If for no other reason, the vast amounts of highly-critical and valuable data points that surface in coaching conversations across the enterprise must be captured, compiled, and analyzed to inform the creation of gap analyses and leadership development strategies.

One rule of data, big or small: If you lose it, you can't use it.



## Contextual Coaching™ Conclusion

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If indeed Contextual Coaching™ propels your coaching clients toward reaching their full potential within the context of the organization sponsoring the coaching; if indeed Contextual Coaching™ engenders a strong partnership between the coached leader's immediate needs, long-term career strategy, and the organization's immediate needs and long-term success strategy; why would an organization conduct a coaching engagement outside of this essential framework?

Why indeed would anyone conduct any coaching engagement for emerging, high-potential, or senior executives on an ad hoc, one-off, or disconnected manner? Contextual Coaching™ can transform a potential individual↔organizational disconnect or an actual disconnect into a thriving partnership. As mentioned in the prologue, coaching in the context of the organization or through an organizational lens can transform dissonance into resonance, contradiction into cultural compatibility, and mutual exclusivity into mutual interest.

But, remember, no amount of coaching, under any given methodology, will produce co-benefits for co-clients if only one client is engaged in the process. Coaching in the context of the organization not only brings consistency and quality assurance to enterprise-wide coaching engagements, adopting a Contextual Coaching™ framework can bring consistency and uniform standards of practice to HR and Talent Partners across the globe. Imagine if all executive coaching engagements in your organization, regardless of the desired individual coaching outcomes, are uniformly framed in your organization's established leadership principles, values, and competencies.

What better way to unify enterprise-wide expectations and perceptions of leadership? What better way to gather continuous, enterprise-wide action research data? What better way to ensure that you are receiving full value for the dollars you spend on executive coaching? That is truly the power of making a complete coaching connection between the individual and the organization.