

Coaching towards sustainability through, but not for, individual development

Sustainability initiatives in leading organisations are increasingly focusing on transformational and systemic change, rather than incremental improvements. It is this link between transformation, and the shift to new levels of individual and organisational leadership and development that highlight how can coaching is critical for innovation and sustainability.

In essence, this research identifies that:

- a) 'Inner' (personal development, organisational values and culture development) and 'outer' (organisational, business, market, sustainable) development are linked;
- b) That real innovation and transformation, and the biggest leverage points for integrating sustainability, occur in the 'interior' of mindsets, values, and culture; and
- c) Inter-subjective, developmental approaches like coaching, are the most powerful and effective way to grow leaders and support the adoption of new values and culture.

The most common association with coaching in an organisational context is with one-on-one executive coaching. This form of coaching arguable emerged in a cultural context that is very individualistic, and focused on independence, freedom and self-actualisation. This sort of culture is legitimate and important has not always been the norm; and even now it is not the norm across all cultures. A value system that directs excessive attention to the individual may best serves us in the face of sustainability challenges. The shift from seeing individuals as the primary beneficiary of coaching and primary agent in driving change, to instead focusing on the impact on the collective, collaboration and on the reality of our interdependence is aligned with sustainability.

There several different ways in which the same coaching dynamics can be used to support development that goes beyond the individual in its assessment and impact. Through our research we identified means to coach teams, communities or organisations, through individuals, but not focused on the individuals. In these cases, individual's development and enhanced performance is contextualised as a means to higher-performing or transformed teams or organisations. Examples include team coaching, whole-of-business coaching, or hosting communities of practice.

The implications of this for the detail of the coaching practice are that the focus of the inquiries, plans and dialogues would be the collective or the whole, rather than the individual. In practice this might mean that instead of inquiring into 'What do you want?' 'What motivates and attracts you?' or 'What are you grateful for, and want more of?', then the individuals are invited to ask, for example, 'What does the earth want?', 'What motivates and attracts this community?', or 'What is the organisation grateful for, and want more of?'

This type of perspective requires the individual to take attention away from their own ego and in some cases identify with something they may consider to be inanimate (e.g. the earth). But, the exercise of reflecting on how individual priorities do or don't support the health of the whole is exactly the sort of shift that enable next-level thinking and generation of creative solutions to our challenges. The appeal of this sort of self-transcendent perspective is evident in many sustainability definitions and concepts, and is one of the things that attracts people to this work.¹

When practically applying this in an organisational context, this can mean shifting the lines of inquiry to ask 'What does the customer/stakeholder/organisation/team/community value/aspire to/need to be healthy?' This starts the dialogue from a level in the system that may facilitate greater consensus amongst individual participants, and start an inquiry into any dissonance between individuals' needs and wants and what appear to be the needs of the whole.

It is inquiring into this dissonance that generates transformational and systemic change, and a shift to new levels of individual and organisational leadership. The coaching methods that can facilitate this are documented in greater detail in the full report, as are the additional benefits for individuals, teams and organisations of such approaches.

¹ Visser, W (2007), 'Corporate Sustainability and the Individual: a Literature Review' in *University Cambridge Programme for Industry Research Paper Series: No. 1, 2007* [Online]. Available: http://www.cpi.cam.ac.uk/resources/publications/sustainability_research_papers.aspx [2008, 16.06.08].