

Multi-Level Systemic Coaching



By Lisa Murrell

Over the last 10 years, executive coaching in the traditional sense—a one-on-one intervention for the purposes of skill development or performance improvement—has become widely adopted by the corporate community. This article is about an expansion of the coaching intervention to include simultaneous coaching of individuals heading multiple organizations, individuals within the same team and teams within the same organization. This multi-level coaching approach can have a profound systemic impact on the organization through combining the methodologies of coaching and organization development for optimal individual and organization performance and results.

In my experience, most coaching done in the singular one-on-one context is only partially successful. Whereas powerful personal development occurs, rarely does the organization feel the full benefit of the coaching intervention. In fact, many of the executives that I have worked with over the years have chosen to change jobs within a particular organization, sometimes change organizations and even careers as a result of their coaching. This often comes as a result of the lack of connection between their development and that of the organization. In other words, these executives and Senior Managers 'out grow' their teams and organizations.

As an organization development consultant and executive coach, I have the opportunity to work with individuals as well as with their teams or others in their organization. From this perspective, I can see the organization system, not just the individual. Work with any one individual seldom sufficiently takes into account the larger system that triggers the initial problem situation and/or associated behaviors. Usually, the organization, as part of the system, is directly or indirectly part of the problem and therefore, should be part of the solution.

This is where systemic coaching realizes its value. Systemic coaching is similar to individual coaching in that it focuses on accountability and ownership and its impacts on results. The difference is that it is multi-level—it takes place with several individuals and groups at different levels simultaneously throughout the organization. Systemic coaching provides both the individuals and the group, and therefore the organization, the opportunity to explore how their behavior and actions impact the system and results.

The challenge for the executive in traditional coaching is in transferring the full value of the coaching work to the rest of his team/organization. These people are not exposed to the collaborative and focused performance-improvement dialogue based on disclosure and feedback, and commitment that takes place within a coaching intervention. For them, it's business as usual. At best, the executive attempts to put a separate framework on top of the current system, attempting to drive it harder to perform better. It's a bit like rearranging the furniture rather than upgrading the

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"When coaching is done in a systemic context, the feedback from those in the system is a more rich and powerful source of data to determine the direction of change than just dealing with an individual, or even the individual and their direct boss. Change and progress are much more profound when there is peer input and subsequent support."

Roland Sullivan

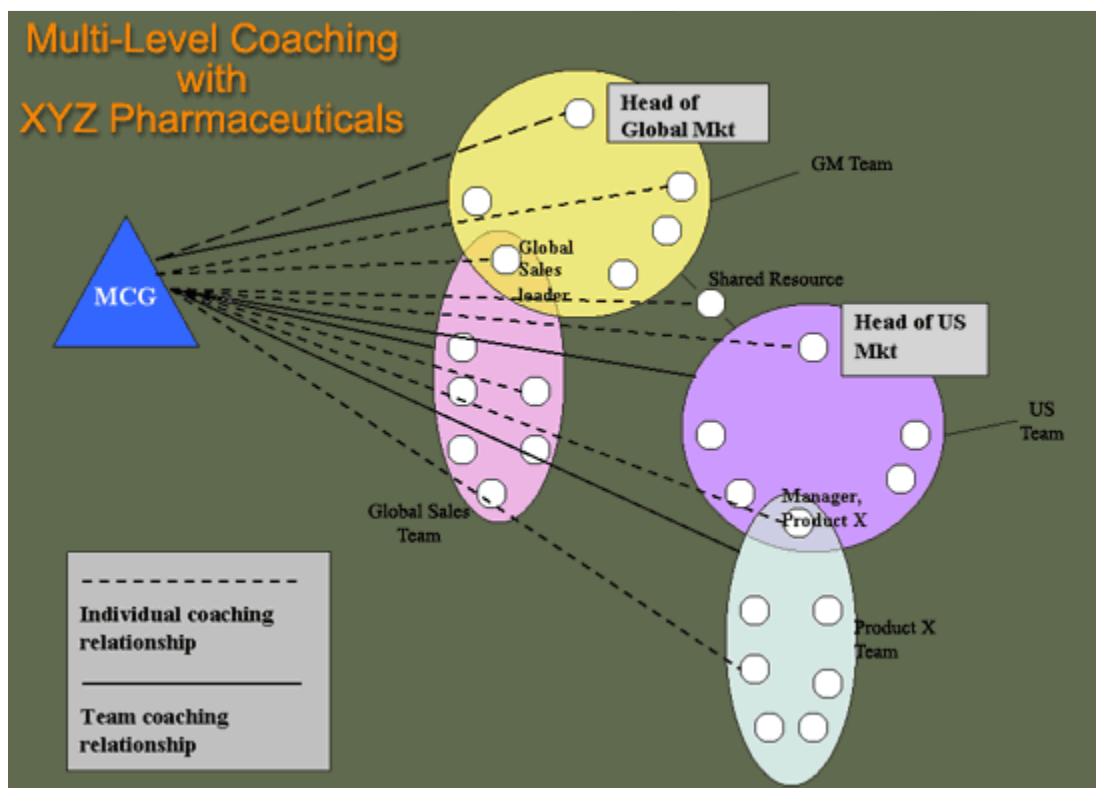
coauthor of *Practicing Organization Development: A Guide for Consultants*

dwelling. Systemic coaching works on an expanded framework of the system in a process of evolution rather than individual growth. The following is an example of how multi-level systemic coaching works.

John is a SVP at a global Pharma. Both he and his team have been involved in individual and team coaching concurrently for several years. During various interventions and off-sites, John and his coach take time away from his team to gain a different perspective, one that gives him information about the system in which he operates as well as how he, as a leader, is impacting that system. Sometimes they talk about the rest of his life and how that impacts both his leadership and the system. While this is happening, the team is empowered to act independently on a piece of work delegated by the leader.

Then the leader and coach return to the team with new information and perspective, ready to lead the team or organization to action. The team, now quite familiar with this perspective, readily engages in and acts upon the new information moving the entire business unit to yet another level of functioning. They can do this because of two things; their awareness of the entire system, and their impact on it. This awareness is the foundation of accountability and ownership. It is also the foundation of systemic coaching.

In a separate intervention, Miranda, one of John's direct reports, goes through a similar process with her team, cascading the learning and perspective deeper into John's organization, and providing important support to the objectives and vision of the organization. Meanwhile, over in Germany, Ester's team is also doing similar work — she's being coached, and so is her team. Things are happening throughout the division, creating the opportunity for synergies and systemic shift.



Multiple coaching interfaces in an organization help create an environment for a systemic shift with a common direction and context for the changes.

Organizations are non-linear, independent living systems. Multi-level systemic coaching supports the growth of these systems. Because it is multi-level, it can tap unused potential and create quantum jumps simultaneously resulting in sustainable high performance at all levels of the organization. This kind of coaching is similar to injecting a healthy virus

into a system. If enough of the virus is injected into different levels of the organization, change must occur — the higher the dose, the more rapid and sustainable the change.