

## My Best-Ever Coaching Experience

Whenever I think about the concepts and models of coaching that we believe work the best, I reflect on my own experience and what worked for me, and how that fits into what we are presenting in our seminars.

A particular experience that comes to mind was my relationship with Kenneth E. Boulding, Professor of Economics at the University of Colorado – Boulder. Professor Boulding was already a world presence in economics when he came to Colorado, accomplished and acclaimed in the field, winner of many distinctions in the profession and even nominated for a Nobel Prize. So his settling in Boulder at the end of his career was a mark of distinction for the economics department and a prize resource for us who were studying there.

There were, however, some anomalies: he was always called “Professor” Boulding and not “Dr.” Boulding, and word had it that although he was truly an outstanding contributor to the field, with some 25 important books to his credit and many accolades, he apparently had never finished his doctoral program at Oxford. I don’t know how this was so, but the rumor among us graduate students was that he was examined by the famous British economist, Arthur Pigou, and Pigou almost never passed anyone whom he examined. This rumor is not corroborated, since Pigou was at Cambridge and Boulding came out of Oxford.

There was another amazing thing about Professor Boulding: a tall, good-looking man with a mane of white hair in his later years, Boulding had a tremendous stutter when he was delivering a class. While we listened and marveled at his wisdom, we also wondered how this quirk came about. At the same time, Boulding was a prolific writer: in a conversation I had with him once, he was worried about a looming deadline of a month for a book he had not even started to write. However, Kenneth had the almost unbelievable ability to dictate into a voice recorder what would become a final draft of a book. The deadline that he fretted about was made.

So back to my coaching experience with this great scholar and eminent authority: it so happened that I flunked my comprehensive exams for the doctorate (taken at the end of coursework and signaling a go for the start of the dissertation process). I was able to excuse myself because my father died that year, and a number of lesser complaints, like getting ready to go to Mexico on the exchange grant that U.Colorado had with a Mexican university in Guadalajara. Nonetheless, for reasons unknown to me, the econs. department assigned none other than Professor Kenneth Boulding to be my coach and mentor on the retake of those exams. Of course, I figured he must have had some sympathy for me as a fellow flunkee of the exams (if that was, indeed, true!)

Let’s go to the Coaching Model we use in our leadership programs/experiences. Called “POEMS”, it emphasizes 5 phases in the coaching process, from identifying the problem to offering support to the coachee in solving it and measuring the results achieved. (See Figure below.)

In light of the Model, let's look at what Professor Boulding did for me over a series of months, using just one piece of correspondence which I saved. Here's what he wrote me:

"Dear Mr. Osborn:

"I think you are aware that [the head of the Econs.Dept.] has appointed me as chairman of a committee to give you another comprehensive exam for the Ph.D. in those areas in which you have not previously been successful. An examination is inevitably something of an ordeal, and my own theory of examinations is indeed that part of their function is to test the capacity of the candidate to perform under stress. Nevertheless, my feeling is that this aspect of the examination has been amply covered by your past experiences, and I am anxious that the coming examination should be as little distorted by stress as possible, and should be an opportunity for both you and your examiners to assess as accurately and objectively as possible as we can your skills as an economist. I am not pretending that an examination even under the best of circumstances can be a pleasant experience. I hope, however, that this can be an interesting and a useful one. I [also] hope, therefore, that you will be able to take the examination in a reasonably relaxed frame of mind, thinking of it as a process of mutual stocktaking, rather than a game of win or lose....."

"I should perhaps add one thing regarding my philosophy of examinations of this kind, that they should provide opportunity not only to test the candidate's knowledge of those details of vocabulary and content which every economist should know, but should also give the candidate the opportunity to show that he has thought somewhat about the larger meaning and significance of these concepts...."

Offline, Professor Boulding mentioned to me that he understood I "had some dues to pay" in order to get past this hurdle, and he offered me his support in providing help from a couple of my major professors in preparing for the re-exam. One of these was Dr. Reuben Zubrow, whom I had served as a Teaching Assistant during my Ph.D. program. I have a hand-written note signed as from "Rube", that says, in part, the following:

"A new committee has been set up....with Prof. Boulding as chair. I talked with him extensively about your situation – he is very understanding & sympathetic – and my own guess is that it will all turn out for the best. Do not despair, I know you will do very well..." [his underlining].

To make a long story short, I studied some more, got help and professional exchange of letters with a senior macroeconomist on faculty that I knew well and could demonstrate my knowledge of the "larger meaning and significance of these concepts".

I took the re-exam a few months later, and I honestly have no recollection of the examination session itself. That's how un-relaxed I was in this process of "mutual stocktaking". However, somehow I must have demonstrated a sufficient dominion over the details of vocabulary and content, as well as the larger meaning. I got the go-ahead to the dissertation, and the rest is history.

So how does this connect to the POEMS model above? In my case, it started with "stating the problem", and Professor Boulding was very clear, also offline, that my job was to do what it took to "get through the examination process" and pay the required dues to pass on to the dissertation. (P and E) The second piece was to help me access

options for solving the problem, with the help of other professors. (O) Finally, giving me support to see my way through the ordeal with some degree of calm and hope. (S). Of course the measurement (M) was a 0 -1 outcome, pass or fail, but the larger picture was, did I have what it took to be a professional economist? I really don't know if I can judge that myself, but I'll let history and offer my record if that is so....

So my learning from this remembrance is that, above all, for me there were 3 essential parts of the POEMS model: one, identify the Problem (satisfy the committee, i.e. "get the pass" to the degree. Second, know the expectations (E) and find the options (O) for access. And third, Support, with a capital "S". And of these 3, for me Support counted the most!

Boulding was sympathetic and hopeful. (He also knew, at his level of importance in the profession, that if he thought I was good enough, other lesser lights would not argue.) And Rube Zubrow, was as fine a teacher and mentor as I have ever known. (RIP). When I first went into the doctoral program, I asked him whether I should take the MA at Colorado, since I knew the department from undergraduate days, and then go somewhere else for the Ph.D. He emphatically said, "Just get the degree in the shortest time possible," i.e. go directly for the doctorate without stopping for the Masters'. (I did get an MA along the way, in case I didn't make it through the doctoral program.)

Here is a part of Professor Zubrow's memorial announcement at CU:

Reuben Zubrow, a legendary University of Colorado at Boulder professor who taught economics to more than 30,000 students, died of cancer at Boulder Community Hospital on Oct. 24 at the age of 83.

Zubrow taught economics at CU-Boulder for 43 years and won every major teaching award offered by the university.

"It's a great loss for the University of Colorado," said CU President John C. Buechner. "Reuben Zubrow was a CU institution -- a truly larger than life figure both in and out of the classroom. He embodied all the best qualities of a college professor -- a first-rate scholar, a consummate classroom lecturer, and a devoted public servant whose work as an analyst was an asset to state and federal policy makers for over 30 years.

Zubrow's former students went on to become leaders in higher education, business and government. They include Alice Rivlin, member of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, and U.S. District Judge Zita Weinshienk. He received the Boulder Faculty Assembly's Teaching Excellence Award, the Regents' University Medal, the Robert L. Stearns Alumni Award, the University Teaching Recognition Award and the University of Colorado Thomas Jefferson Award.

Zubrow specialized in the study of public finance and helped to revise the Colorado tax code under former Gov. Steve McNichols, who was governor from 1957 to 1963. He also conducted landmark studies on poverty, economic development and revenue reclamation.

Zubrow served as a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy from 1942 to 1946 and was a gunnery officer in the North Atlantic and southern Europe. He taught economics at Indiana University from 1946 to 1949 and joined the CU-Boulder faculty in 1949. He was a Fulbright Professor of Economics in Helsinki, Finland, in 1956-57.

Dr. Zubrow earned a Ph.D. in economics from Indiana University at Bloomington, a master's degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania and a bachelor's degree in business education from Trenton State College in New Jersey.

I wish for everyone that they could have coaches and mentors like Kenneth Boulding and Reuben Zubrow. Can you imagine what that could mean for our careers...?? Thank you, Ken and Rube, you will always be with me....!

POEMS Model:

- Problem – What is the concern we are dealing with, what problem area or difficulty is involved? For example, “Client X’s business, or service needs, or order issues....”
- Options – What options do we have, what do you think we should do, what can we do to solve whatever we have agreed upon as the Problem(s)?
- Expectations – What are your expectations for this business, what does the Company expect us to do, what are my expectations for you...?
- Measurement – How do we measure progress on solving the problem(s), how do we know we are getting someplace in our solution? (Usually involves “milestones” or “signposts” along the way.)
- Support – What support do you need from me, or from others, or other systems that need to be in place in order to insure forward movement...?

## **POEMS** Coaching Model

