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THE HEART AROUSED: A note on coaching

A few of years ago, at a business conference in California, I had the privilege of meeting David Whyte, author of *The Heart Aroused: Poetry and the Preservation of the Soul in Corporate America*, and hearing him speak. David is, above all things, a poet; so what would he be doing talking to a group of executives at a conference devoted to management performance?

David grew up in the North of England. His first incursion into the world of the American corporation was through his work on change and creativity. Over a period of time, his focus on the insights of poetic imagination brought him to consider the “soul” of the corporation -- and the souls of the denizens working therein.

It's been asked, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his soul?” Whyte would add: and how do we work in organizations without losing an important part of ourselves, selling out, as it were, our own souls for the betterment of some amorphous “soul” in our corporations, over which we have no control? How do we stay motivated, and keep others motivated, in the face of changing ownership, restated priorities, downsizing binges, and global competition?

Whyte finds an answer to the above questions in the following quote from John Sculley, formerly of Apple Computer: “The new corporate contract is that we'll offer you an opportunity to express yourself and grow, if you promise to leash yourself to our dream, at least for a while.” [My emphasis.]

In other words, if you link your dream, your soul to our corporation, your payback will be to be able to grow, develop, and express your creativity while you're here. You link your motivation to our goals, in other words, and while we're together in the corporation you'll be rewarded with an opportunity to be heard and to be a better person. Sound like a good trade-off?

Ah, but David continues with a caution: “There is something at once disturbing and realistic about this statement [John Sculley's]. If we are going to leash ourselves to others' dreams, we had better make sure they are congruent or compatible with our own. If they are not, then we may be simply enrolling ourselves in a system bent to the desires of others.... [Sculley's] statement is a call to a greater watchfulness; we ourselves had better know where we are going, too, or else we might become slaves to the desires and needs of someone else's destiny, which for all its qualities has nothing to do with our own path. When the contract does come to an end, we may be left with a lingering bad taste that causes us to wrestle with self-worth and self-esteem when we could just as well be wrestling with our next engagement.”

There it is then: How do we stay motivated at our job? Well, first we had better know where we're going, and be watchful about the place the corporation seems to be taking us. How do we motivate others? We don't motivate others, we simply check with them

on their own directions and help them evaluate if these coincide with where we're asking them to go! Do you remember the coaching module in your leadership program with TEAM International®? This is what coaching is about, in essence – how do we facilitate our colleagues' commitment and performance around company goals?

And how do we align the goals of the coachee with those we're asking him/her to take? How do we get our coachees to own the corporation's goals? By ensuring that these goals are aligned with our coachees' goals, of course!

To me, one of the most interesting aspects of Whyte's advice above lies in the phrase also included in Sculley's quote: "...at least for a while." What I hear here is an admission that the alignment mentioned in the above paragraph may not be for always and forever. If that's the case, if our alignment is more temporary than permanent, then we need to be especially watchful of the directions the company is taking. Our job as coaches, then, may be to be continually asking the question, for ourselves and our coachees, where are we going and do we really want to go there? If the direction is toxic to us, if it's not only stretching our growth potential, but leading us toward destructive ends (e.g. family disintegration, health endangerment), then we better know when the contract should end, and how to coach others in recognizing the same thing for themselves.

Coaching is a process, as we saw in the leadership program; it's a "how to" meet goals and motivate people. But when those goals don't also link to what people want for themselves, our coaching probably won't provide very positive results for either the company or the individual.