



# The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations

# IJCO

## *Interview with Edie Seashore: On Coaching*

Conducted By Dorothy Siminovitch

This article first appeared in the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, Issue 29 8(1), 19-39. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at [john@ijco.info](mailto:john@ijco.info) for such permission.

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*Purchases:*

**[www.pcpionline.com](http://www.pcpionline.com)**

**ISSUE 29, 8(1)**

ISSN 1553-3735

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Professional Coaching Publications, Inc.



# Interview with Edie Seashore: On Coaching

Conducted By Dorothy Siminovitch

*It is an honor to interview Edith (Edie) Seashore. Whether one considers coaching a subset of organizational development (OD) or its own distinct professional activity, Edie has been a practitioner at the forefront of it all. She has been a student of seminal thought leaders and a leader of the core concepts involved in OD and coaching. She has demonstrated a unique development journey that has allowed her to deliver outstanding practice in foundational concepts such as use of self as practitioner, articulation of feedback towards new possibilities, and guidance for professional development. Edie has brought a quality of wisdom to all her work and remained vibrant in the evolution of practice. Students looking to integrate the wisdom of OD with the excellence of coaching can learn by the choices Edie made while venturing on her professional career path. We welcome Edie's "story" as a guide for the choices many of us have yet to make for our own coaching excellence.*

**Dorothy:** Edie, I have the honor of interviewing you, with particular reference to the great Kurt Lewin who said that “there is nothing as practical as a good theory.” Long before there was research on female leadership which pointed to the practicality of women in leadership, or academic studies of mastery in practice, or the concept of generativity applied to leadership, you have embodied all these concepts.

As President of NTL [National Training Laboratory], and a steward of the OD [Organizational Development] field, you have seen the field evolve over these last fifty years. You have stood as a pillar of practice and mentored many leaders in the field of OD. You have also been witness and agent to the practice of coaching in the OD field and a pioneer in using *feedback* conceptually and practically to assist professional development of practitioners and executives. I say these large accomplishments to “set the ground” for our interview and formally ask, “From your perspective of the evolution in the applied behavioral sciences, where do you start with your understanding of coaching?”

**Edie:** We didn't know that's what we were doing, but I would say that everything that my experience as a facilitator, and even in the NTL group, was in some sense a form of coaching. I think that the fact that we were actually helping people to understand their own behavior in a group setting and the impact it had on a group was a curious form of coaching.

## MENTORING AND COACHING

**Edie:** I was a co-trainer at NTL for eight years, and I was being coached constantly by my "senior(s);" they were all older than me and more experienced than I was. They all had their PhDs

in Applied Behavioral Science, and I just had my Bachelors and getting my Masters at the time. But they were coaching me in how to become a more effective facilitator of key groups at the time and working in skill sessions.

When I went out into the field, I went with Richard Beckhard Associates, and he was clearly my coach... He was the stage manager at New York City Theater – some of the big shows in New York. During World War II, he was with USO around the world. That's how he met his wife. She was also with the USO. Richard came in through stage managing and setting up scenes. That's how NTL picked him up. They got very intrigued about the fact that he actually could help us stage manage some of the role plays that we were doing. Role playing was a big thing then. Also, some of the skill exercises that he would use. He understood the drama of it all.

His firm at that point was called “Conference Counselors.” He was changing large conferences into working conferences rather than just lectures. Richard was the one who initiated the idea of putting in round tables. In New York City, the hotels had to go out, find round tables, and bring them in for his conferences, turning them into working conferences where people actually worked together in small groups - unheard of in 1950.

When I joined his firm in 1958, it was still Conference Counselors. While I was with him, we changed it over to Richard Beckhard Associates, because he decided that he was no longer just going to do conferences. He was also going to do systemic change inside systems and see how the conferences would work into that.

So, my first few clients with him were really people who were changing their whole system – doing different kinds of conferences to work in the systems that he was introducing me to. When I left his organization, I was going out into the field on my own. I was turning about 30 at that time, and the field was becoming OD. I counted on all of my previous people who have been working with me through the NTL process to get me into organizations and then to help me. So, I was constantly being coached by them.

I didn't ever think of calling it that, but as I began to work with my clients, they were the role model I had, those who had been working with me. I began to work with my clients in the same fashion as I had been coached. I was beginning to coach my clients and work with them on what they were doing. A lot of what I did was in forming the relationship with the client. It was a collaborative relationship, so it was actually their system. I was coaching them on how to work more effectively in their system.

When coaching came along as a formal field, all of us looked at each other and said, "They have taken a fraction or a piece of

what we do as part of our whole practice and suddenly made it a certified field." I said, "We've been doing this all along. It's been part of our work—it's built into what we do. It's a natural part of what we do."

One of the things that astonished me about these early days was that people who were called *coaches* were doing it without any systems orientation. That is to say, they didn't have that as part of their repertoire—to put the person they were coaching in the systemic frame. And so, they were coaching them without ever having any real knowledge of the organization that they were in, never having met the team.

My first reaction was one of astonishment that coaching could be done effectively. When I heard that some had clients whom they had never met except on the telephone, and they were doing all the coaching of them over the telephone, I thought, 'Wow, this is pretty interesting. All the coaching I ever had was in-person and in some kind of a context. All the coaching I ever did was in a systems context. How are they doing this coaching, even though it seemed to have worked?'

Coaching was now a formalized system—something that had just been an expectation we carried with us wherever we went as group trainers or group facilitators or as OD consultants. Our values as OD consultants were to some extent part of the coaching field, that is, the values of collaborating with the client; building personal and systemic support systems; working off of sound and current data; engaging recipients in the change process; contracting for continual feedback; working effectively with differences of all kinds; approaching situations with curiosity; intentional, conscious use of self; empowering myself and supporting others to empower themselves and thinking systemically.

Douglas McGregor [who wrote about theory X and theory Y] was [another one of my mentors], and he did a lot of informal coaching for me. Informal, I mean, we'd have dinner and talk. That was coaching.

**Dorothy:** Absolutely. The “coaching conversation” as the vehicle of dialogue, meaning-making and possibility.

**Edie:** Totally. And to this day, I use some of those as my marching orders. After that, Hal Kellner was another mentor [for me] when I went out in the field. Hal was a member of NTL. He and I did a lot of work together. But he was way ahead of me in the way he was able to perceive what was going on. Cathy Royal and Fred Miller coached me about the critical role of diversity and inclusion in the world.

*I think that the fact that we were actually helping people to understand their own behavior in a group setting and the impact it had on a group was a curious form of coaching.*

My African-American colleagues have taught me so much. They have coached me. “Oh, my God, Edie, how could you possibly have done that?” And just a month ago, I had a whole day with one of these colleagues. She and I were trying to write an article about the way that white women and women of color (or really African-Americans) see the world that gets us into trouble rather than collaborating. An incident came up that was very critical back in the mid-'80s, when my colleague and I were working together. She offered me an insight. If I'd had this insight during the mid-'80s, my history would have been in a different place I think.

**Dorothy:** And what was that insight?

**Edie:** She said something very interesting. She said, “I always observed that all of the African-American women you were mentoring often stayed at your house.” Then she named off about ten. She was dead right about all that. And she said, “And I was one of them.” I said, “That's true.” And she said, “So, you go from mentoring to a colleague, from mentee to a colleague to a coworker to a co-leader, and then in the end, Edie, you own the store.”

**Dorothy:** What does that mean?

**Edie:** That means that I can pull that trump card anytime I want.

**Dorothy:** Which means?

**Edie:** I'm a white woman. I'm white; it's my world. And I'm going to make sure that I still have this shop. I'll be a good person, a very good person: empathetic, colleague, understanding, everything. But if I need to be, I will do something that will remind you whose store this is. From their point of view (having been socialized to know that), and from our point of view (having not been socialized to know that), I didn't know when I was pulling that—I didn't know when I was doing that. I do now. It'll make a big difference.

**Dorothy:** So, it is provocative to hold you as accountable for an entitlement process that you are not even fully choosing. Yet, that is the existential paradox: we are born into these dynamics, and then, we *can* become accountable. And, now that you see this, from your perspective, what could the provocative question have been?

**Edie:** The question I had to ask her was, “Why didn't you bring that up then and let me have the benefit of your seeing something that I wasn't so that we could have talked about this?” She said, “I don't know. I wish I knew.” I, Edie, didn't have that much power or that much courage. You know, --she's an ENTJ<sup>1</sup> like I am. We can look like we're much more powerful than we often are.

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<sup>1</sup> Myers Briggs Type “ENTJ”



**Dorothy:** Well, of course, and “looking powerful” can also keep people from asking the question that breaks open the conversation – even for you as a pioneer – to reflect on where you did not ask the questions that mattered.

**Edie:** That's a good question because it would have made a big difference. She may have thought I wouldn't even have understood it then, though I understand it now. I'm not so sure I would have. I think I would have. I do believe I would have. But, at least I would have been curious enough to find out what was going on, but in a different way.

**Dorothy:** What I think is so interesting is this is where the power truly is of coaching others for their own voices. That's moving beyond mentorship. That was the coaching question: “Why didn't you bring that up then, and let me have the benefit of your seeing something that I wasn't, so that we could have talked about this?” And it's not your answer, it's not my answer, but it is the question that would have evoked her voice, and that voice, the voice of a gifted African-American professional, was so critical back in the 1980s, and most certainly, that voice is so important today.

**Edie:** I know. And it's a question I can ask, but answering it in retrospect is not easy – answering it 20 or 30 years later.

**Dorothy:** Well, it's a painful one to answer, “How did you stop yourself from asking the bold and needed question when it mattered?” because you paid for that with 20 or 30 years of “not having asked it.” And asking the question that evokes an answer that has not been heard, is what opens up new perspectives and, therefore, new possibilities.

**Edie:** Exactly.

**Dorothy:** That's actually the painful one, and I say that to you with my own regrets for self and certainly for others. Discipline is required to develop the strength of self to ask the bold questions just at that moment when the status quo makes the bold question risky. It is core to what “good” coaching requires. To not ask relevant but bold questions at the time that matters is remembered as opportunity that was “lost,” a status quo continued that maintains what needed to be released. Any of us remember those lost moments with regret. Paradoxically, regret reconsidered allows for wisdom and new possibilities. It is in this *seeing* possibility that new perspectives offer themselves that enlarge our ground for future actions. This is why longevity in the field is so critical, that we learn and inspire new possibilities. And your work in supporting diversity speaks to that. Your willingness to share those moments of missed opportunity serves to inspire others to what can be acted upon.

*All the coaching I ever did was in a systems context. How are they doing this coaching, even though it seemed to have worked?*

## OD AND COACHING: THE EARLY YEARS

**Edie:** My first “work” was with the rabbis, the Hebrew Congregation of America. I was sent in to these rabbis by Dick Beckhard, because he got a better offer to go to Hawaii with the Young Presidents Organization and began to work with them. So he said, “Edie, you take this.” And I walked in there. I thought they’d drop dead. It was all men, and they just didn’t expect to see me.

**Dorothy:** So, when we talk about using one’s presence in the role of being a coach, you were really standing at the very beginning of where that was getting identified?

**Edie:** In this case, my client was the chief rabbi who was in charge of the organization that was running this conference. I was constantly coaching him on how he could work with the people that were running the conference, and coaching him on things that he could say that would help facilitate it and make it inclusive. I didn’t consider it coaching. It was obviously part of my assignment. If he was going to be effective, he needed this kind of help.

**Dorothy:** Standing at the beginning and looking at the trajectory to now, we have phrases like “it’s a learning engagement,” “it’s collaboration,” and “it’s entering into an agreement about what’s your vision.”

**Edie:** Contracting, yeah.

**Dorothy:** Contracting. How do you define OD and its relationship to coaching from then even to now?

**Edie:** I think OD was always considered a systemic intervention, and coaching may or may not have been.

**Dorothy:** When coaching wasn’t looked at systemically, where was it valuable and where was it limited?

**Edie:** When we did coaching, it was part of the intervention, the systemic intervention. When I began to see it being done without any awareness or any concern for the larger system, I realized that it had shifted. I saw, in the ‘80s, when people started calling it “coaching” and putting the classes together and having the certificates.

**Dorothy:** Programs really started in ‘96. That’s when there started to be something called “coach training programs.” And some people say they started offering things in the ‘90s. There’s a lot of different ways of looking at that. But as I listen to you, you weren’t even calling it “coaching.” So, what was the thing that you weren’t calling coaching, but were seeing it as a subset of OD?

**Edie:** “Helping the client to use themselves more effectively” is one of the ways. And using themselves more effectively in whatever role they were in.

When I go back to where I think I was being coached, I was being coached as an assistant co-trainer. I was called a co-trainer, which meant I was not the trainer of the group, but I was working with the trainer. I was being coached in my ability to work with a T-group from the very beginning. I was being coached every year after that under a different person.

**Dorothy:** Edie, you are now identifying how coaching can be used in the training and development experience. Who are the people that you identify as your coaches? One of them, you said, is Richard Beckhard.

**Edie:** Right. Well, certainly, Jack Glidewell. Glidewell was the person who said to me, “Edie, you are now fully trained. Do not return as a co-trainer ever again to the Bethel campus. Wait till they ask you back and give you your own group.” This was after eight years of training. That was a big leap. He was coaching me through that summer, and he could see that we could call off this “co” stuff.

**Dorothy:** What was his claim, his particular expertise?

**Edie:** He was a social psychologist. He was brilliant, absolutely brilliant. And he wrote a wonderful book called *Choice Points*. Yes, called when to fight and when to walk away [with choice].

## COACHING AND CHOICE

**Dorothy:** Your particular gift that I see you giving in your OD and coaching work is to remind people that they are always at choice, which now I also trace back to your work with Glidewell.

**Edie:** Yeah.

**Dorothy:** Could you speak to that in relation to how that is a defining characteristic of coaching?

**Edie:** Absolutely. I think that one of the things a lot of people have given away is their control of their own behavior and of their own destiny. They think other people are to be blamed for what's happening to them. Also, they're not aware of how often they are still working within belief systems that were built into them at a time in which they really didn't know they had choices, because they [those belief systems] were built into them by society or by those who were guiding them, family or whatever.

These belief systems are what make us very often respond to things automatically, rather than stopping to take a look and asking, “Is

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this really a choice that will help me to go in the direction I would like to go?” and “Is it still working for me?” Recognizing that this is something that was actually built in at a time when we weren't able to choose whether to accept it or not, and now we can. Now we can take a look at some of those belief systems and get rid of them, build in a new one. We're always operating off some kind of a belief system.

For instance, when the women's movement came in, when a lot of the movements came in, I think they began to alter a lot of our belief systems and our automatic responses to what we thought society had built into us, such as “women are supposed to be seen and not heard.” Well, whose idea was that anyway? So, given a choice, would that work for us, or would we rather have a different belief system? We had to do a lot of those. Some people still have to do a lot of those, because they didn't realize yet that they can, or should, or could do these. I think that choice gives us a way to define ourselves to make the kind of impact that we want to make, to be clearer on our intentions, and to be in control of our own destiny.

**Dorothy:** Edie, such a large part of coaching is creating a space for reflection.

**Edie:** Exactly.

**Dorothy:** As I listen to you, it's interesting to see how embedded this is in your phenomenological use of yourself, where this is so in your skin that you do this. It's interesting to even hear that there was Jack Glidewell who made *choice points* a famous concept, and how you took this into the repertoire of your wisdom and delivery. It is very much part of assisting people to heighten their awareness, to look at how they, with awareness, can choose something different. That's now part of the ICF competencies.

**Edie:** Exactly.

### **DEWEY, LEWIN AND ADULT LEARNING**

**Edie:** Incidentally, I also was very fortunate in another sense. I think my family had a reflective aspect. Not my father, but my mother. My father was just right out there, being an extrovert and all that. But my mother could sort of reflect even what my father was doing, which is kind of interesting.

I made choices back when people thought that was just a bratty thing to do. I would not go to the colleges that everybody wanted me to go to, because I had a college in my head, which I had never heard of—that I wanted to either put together or find somewhere on earth. And, of course, Antioch, weird and wonderful, sold to me just as I was going out of my mind trying to figure out how to get to some place that made sense. It was exactly what I had in my head, and I'd never heard of it in my life.

Something was going on with me. I had an education that was very unusual for a lot of people back in those days. I went to a John Dewey school. And John Dewey, I do believe, understood the whole notion of choice and collaborative learning. I mean, that was his thing. So, I started out for the first nine years of my life in a John Dewey school. I didn't know that's what it was then. It was a small, country day school based on John Dewey. And then I went to Antioch.

Furthermore, I landed in New York at a time in which therapy was the biggest thing for young people. It was almost more important than dating. Everybody was in therapy. I went in, thinking, 'What the hell.' So, I had a very good therapist.

**Dorothy:** What was it about those times? If those times were about therapy and these times might be about coaching, what's the difference that would call for therapy then and might be coaching now?

**Edie:** Well, I don't know whether the times did it so much—the times obviously produced the people, but we had the people who were doing it. Those were the times in which we were just getting over Freud and Jung. I mean, Jung was still very present. And all these guys were running around, including Kurt Lewin. These guys had the therapeutic concept of getting to the unconscious and helping us free ourselves for more conscious choices. I think there's a major difference between therapy and coaching, in the sense that I do think therapy still works largely with things that are out of our consciousness, whereas that's not as true of coaching.

**Dorothy:** Edie, it's so interesting, because you actually assist in the Kurt Lewin Center. If you think about Kurt Lewin in relation to coaching, how you see his influence on OD? And what would you want incoming people who want to learn and apply themselves in coaching to know about Kurt Lewin and his impact on coaching?

**Edie:** Lewin was the base for those of us at NTL—the “Father” of it all. Adult learning came along just at that time, too—Malcolm Knowles. Incidentally, my husband, Charles, just became the Fielding Graduate University's first chair. It's the Malcolm S. Knowles Chair in Adult Learning. Charles has it for three years.

**Dorothy:** Wonderful. Charles is your partner in innovation in the applied behavioral sciences and is considered the father of how to use feedback in adult learning. Can you share a few thoughts on adult learning in relation to coaching?

**Edie:** Adult learning was a whole new concept at that time: the concept that we could actually teach adults differently than we taught children; that they learn differently; and that they could

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continue to learn for the rest of their lives. The belief that "you can't teach old dogs new tricks" was no longer something to hang onto.

I think therapy and all these other activities support your notion of awareness. That is to say, self-awareness was a big beginning. Group awareness was next. Lewin brought the group awareness. His basic formula was that behavior is the function of people in their environment. Behavior isn't just random. It is actually based on the relationship between a person and their environment. Feedback is part of the way we get information to stay on target in our environment. Lewin brought feedback in as an idea, and feedback is certainly one of the baselines of coaching.

### FEEDBACK AND COACHING

**Dorothy:** Could you speak to that, Edie? People think they know so much about feedback but you're one of the authorities regarding it. People often talk about feedback without even understanding that they're not giving feedback.

**Edie:** Exactly. People think that feedback is a change tool. It could result in change, but that's only the choice of a recipient. The actual tool itself is only an information tool. And the information has to come from somewhere. This is where I think a lot of people are confused. Is there a reality out there or is it all perception. In the case of feedback, it is a *perception*, not a reality. You're getting the information of someone's perception, and that goes through their own system.

So, when I hear feedback, I have to keep in mind that this is based on *their* belief system – on the “me” that they carry inside themselves – not on me. They don't know me. They only know their experience of me (which I'm finding out) and also their belief systems about their experience of me. And that's what I'm hearing.

If I can understand that, then I can decide if their information is important to me in order to keep me on target for what I want to do and to be related to them. Is this very important information to me? If it isn't, then it's irrelevant information to me.

**Dorothy:** In terms of someone who wants to hang up the shingle of coaching or even the shingle of OD, what's the development need that you see for practitioners in relation to being able to use themselves as an instrument, knowing that feedback is colored by your perception (which is about your beliefs)?

**Edie:** I think they have to be very clear what those are. They have to reflect on their choice of feedback, for instance, as a coach—whether they're giving feedback that will actually make any sense or be useful to the person who's receiving the feedback. First of all, they have to find out what would be useful to this person. Giving feedback without having any clarity about what the recipient

would like feedback on—this is sort of a shot in the dark. In this case, you're not giving it necessarily because of a request from the coachee. You're giving it as something that is *your* choice, and maybe it's not even relevant feedback. Often we give feedback for some reason (like to suit ourselves), but with no relevance to the person who's supposedly the target of our feedback.

First of all, I think coaches have to have a different frame on feedback than most people seem to have. Second, I think that people need to have an awareness of themselves, so that they can get in touch with their own perception and see how colored their perceptions may or may not be by their belief systems. Then when they give feedback, they become clear that this is where it's coming from and expect the person can take it or leave it.

While we're at it, there is considerable confusion around some of the tests that are given about how people see other people. The source of the feedback from these tests is anonymous—but you don't know from whose point of view you're getting the information. I think there is only one way that you can possibly see whether it makes any sense to you or not; you must be able to have somebody help you see it at the time when it's occurring, so that you can experience it.

If somebody says one of the problems is that I talk too much and don't know when to stop, just hearing that isn't going to help me. But, if I can say, "Show it to me at a time in which I'm actually doing it," then I can understand what it is that other people are seeing. For some people, it may be too much, and for some people it may not be enough. But at least I'll know what the behavior was that caused this response. Anonymous feedback, I think, is confusing. Also, feedback out of context (that is to say, when you can't have a clear example that you are conscious of experiencing), is abstract.

**Dorothy:** In terms of your perspective where feedback is used frequently as a tool of development, what's not really acknowledged is that it depends on whose feedback it is.

**Edie:** Exactly. It's not really *information* until you have the context.

**Dorothy:** Looking at how 360s are now used in organizations, they're used as the platform to begin so many coaching assignments.

**Edie:** I know it. And when it first came out, I went down to the Center for Creative Leadership and talked to the head guy. At the time, I was president of NTL, so this was in the '70s. They were delighted to host me down there and were very cordial about hearing my perception of their 360, which was not very friendly.

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I told them I thought it could be used more effectively. I didn't think it should be abandoned. And I made some suggestions about the "OD way of using it." I said, for one thing, if the trust in organizations isn't high enough for people to actually sit down and talk with one another, then at least let them sit down with a group of people from the same category from which they're getting the results. So, if they're getting them from peers, let's sit down with some other peers. Even if it's a facilitated discussion, let them ask questions of the peers around what it is that the feedback was about, so they understand it. Ask for help from the peers to point out to them when they're doing this. That way, they can experience it, because there's many a slip between what they hear and what they can actually see themselves doing. Our best experiences are people catching themselves in the act. Then they say, "Oh, my God. This is what it is. This is what I feel like. This is what I'm thinking, and this is why I'm doing this."

**Dorothy:** Which is really what happens in group work.

**Edie:** Yes. That was what the T-group was based on to a great extent. The feedback was in the here and now. That was the idea. And feedback in the here and now is still the most effective feedback, but if they're going to do these 360s anyway, at least get the collaboration of the people who are giving them feedback. It may not be the exact person, but it's at least the category. In other words, if they're hearing something from their peers, then let them get together with the peers and say, "Let me understand this, and let me ask you, will you please point out to me when I'm doing this so that I can experience what it is you're experiencing—what's happening at the time?" That was the basis of the T-group.

Incidentally, I have a colleague right now who has an enormous consulting project with one of the international pharmaceutical companies. He's having the time of his life, but he consults to all the head people, follows them around five days a month everywhere they go, and gives them instant feedback. Everybody seems to be loving it—but the feedback paradigm really should be changed from *giving* to *requesting* or *asking*, because I will ask people for the information I need. Then we've got something really going for us.

My colleague got the brilliant idea that this was going to be the best approach in this particular situation. He has a very receptive client for the first time in many years who said, "You tell me how this is going to make a difference. What's the best way for us to go about this?" And my colleague said, "Let's give this a shot. I think this will make the biggest difference." Make it transparent—they'll understand what feedback is. They'll understand their behavior better, and other people will be observing this. Let's see if we can get the biggest bang for our buck. So, he got consultants he thought could do this, and the consultants are beside themselves with glee, and the clients are loving it. That's what I meant by coaching



being confusing to me early on, because it was being done out of a context. This way, they see the person in their systems. They can make it a systemic intervention. That's OD.

**Dorothy:** What you're really saying is, coaching within organizations is too often *not* built into the actual context. And not built into a process for actively being able to hear verification or illustration of the points being made.

**Edie:** Not only hear it, but also see it.

**Dorothy:** Also, if the feedback given is not in relation to a request the recipient is making, then the recipient will not have the context or actual data for the feedback given, so *that* feedback from others doesn't actually connect with the recipient. The learning opportunity will be missed. The feedback doesn't connect or "land" with the recipient.

**Edie:** I think the chances of it landing more often and more effectively would be better if the feedback process initiative shifted to people seeking out the information, because they'd like to know whether they're really on target, and if not, where are they off. Even then, recognize that it may not be all of them [the respondents], either. It is the way they're being perceived that's making the difference.

### COACHING AND OD VALUES

**Dorothy:** Edie, you are suggesting that if coaching is going to be really more powerful and legitimized, then the values of OD are important for coaching?

**Edie:** I've always thought so, but I have to admit coaching is quite successful without incorporating these values. I don't go around preaching this, because it's a little bit ridiculous, but I'm impressed—I'm enormously impressed at the extraordinary hold the coaching community has in the world. Perhaps it's a substitute for what therapy was in the '50s. That's an idea I hadn't thought of until you asked the question. It may be the watered-down version of therapy.

**Dorothy:** Or the liberated version of therapy.

**Edie:** Or liberated. Exactly.

**Dorothy:** Without having to be a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, and it can be a collaborative experience. James Hillman famously said that "we've had one hundred years of therapy, but the world isn't getting any better." Coaching has grabbed the professional *zeitgeist*, because it urgently calls for learning, but, there might be a shift in the values inherent in coaching. Could you articulate what you see as the values that would really enrich coaching?

*People think that feedback is a change tool. It could result in change, but that's only the choice of a recipient. The actual tool itself is only an information tool.*

**Edie:** Certainly. One is the concept of systems. That is, it is important for a coach to be familiar with the context in which the coachee is asking for coaching. And not just to see it through their eyes, but also to be able to experience it in other ways. The other value is to be more in tune with the actual experiential part of the work—that is, to be clearer about the “here and now data.” Rather than the experience being filtered through other people's filter systems or even the coachee's filter system, the coachee would actually understand it at the time that it's experienced. It would be much more of a contract between the coach and the coachee on seeing them in different settings, of helping them to figure out a way where they could continue to get themselves the kind of coaching that they need through feedback, and not just relying on relaying it to somebody and then getting information.

For instance, when I was coaching the Colonel at Walter Reed, I worked with her governing team and saw her there. I also observed her in other settings and was able to coach her regarding not just the things on which she needs help. In addition, I could offer things I've watched her do. Things I have been able to observe about her. I've gotten her to this point, although she was the easiest client to work with I've ever had. She got so turned on by the idea that she could get her own information. She wouldn't have to rely on somebody. So, for her, she got to asking people, “How did this interview go? Tell me what happened? What was it like for you? And how did this meeting go?” She caught on to the “check-ins and check-outs” faster than anybody I know. All of these things are what helps a person get information that will make a difference in the way they work and in the way the organization works.

**Dorothy:** Raising awareness is one of the key things?

**Edie:** It's raising awareness in an *experiential* way, not just from information, not just from tests.

**Dorothy:** So, raising awareness in the “here and now” really helps people break through their unconscious trance so they can choose.

**Edie:** Exactly. It helps them be more reflective regarding the influences of the past on them, particularly the past into which they were socialized or inherited, not just the past few months. It raises the question, “Where did that come from?”

When someone says, “I was terribly, terribly upset by what happened,” the question is whether that was an automatic upset. “I'm always upset when that happens.” Is there any way of *not* just accepting that, but asking yourself, “Is there a way I can look back on my life and think of a place where I might have been programmed to be upset when that happened, which I now no longer need to continue?”

**Dorothy:** What you're saying is that the influences of the past are kind of a safe way of offering a deep intrapsychic question on which you are helping people reflect. It's kind of a miniversion of therapy.

**Edie:** It is. Exactly. The only difference that I can see is that we're asking them to look at stuff that is enough within their consciousness so they can get it. Whereas, I think a lot of therapy was based on getting stuff that is no longer really available. We can't get it until we rearrange some things to do it.

**Dorothy:** And that actually is one of the core parts of modern day coaching. What can you access that you can then act on?

**Edie:** Exactly. That's good. But, we still don't have a chance to help them see whether they are doing it. They may actually be able to see it. Everybody can talk about doing it and have some verification that is, in fact, what they've done. Even in NTL we didn't have that. We would have people up here for three weeks in a T-group, and their behavior would change dramatically in many ways during that time in that system. Then they would go back into the old system where they couldn't hold onto this behavior. So they lost it in that system or they got the hell out of that system. They left; a lot of people left.

Also, one of the things we found out in some of the research was that there was a distinct difference between a person's internal sense that things had changed and people experiencing those that had changed. Matt Miles did a wonderful study on managers who had gone to NTL for their three-week T-group training program. They came back feeling that they were very different, and they could tell you all these things that they thought that were so different. Then the researchers asked the people with whom they were working, and these people didn't see that at all. "What do you mean he's different? Don't kid me."

**Dorothy:** So, while their internal experience was different, nothing really changed?

**Edie:** Changed with their behavior according to their colleagues. Now, at that time, we weren't very clear about feedback. The truth is that it's possible they actually had changed, but their colleagues' perceptions were very strong. These perceptions hadn't changed. They were still seeing them do things that they weren't necessarily doing.

**Dorothy:** We call these *frozen gestalts*—that is, seeing the same picture of things so the perception stays "constant" and the meaning does not change.

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**Edie:** Exactly. I didn't write on feedback until our book, *What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback*, came out in 1992. It was totally different than anything that was going on in feedback then and now. A lot of this stuff was evolving even for us. We thought we had a lot of things going for us, but we didn't have—we were learning, learning, learning, learning, and learning. And as you say, coaching could be just an evolution from what was considered difficult to get at then to helping people get to it in much easier ways today.

It didn't occur to people that they could figure these things out. So they went into therapy to find out what was wrong with them. It's possible that none of that was necessary, if we could have had the kind of opportunities that people have today in less dramatic settings than therapy. I mean, when Carl Rogers started on the West Coast, his groups were almost all feedback groups and reflective groups. NTL was not that. NTL was people in a context. What was the group like? What was going on in the group?

**Dorothy:** You know, Edie, today there is a big movement to include team coaching.

**Edie:** Yes, big. So, we're going back to the group again.

**Dorothy:** It looks like this movement is really verifying everything that you're saying—that is, it is a mistake to coach people without really looking at the impact people are making on others or creating a context where they can actively get feedback. Right?

**Edie:** Right.

**Dorothy:** And that's a place for them to have big learning shifts of seeing oneself in relation to inner experiences, feedback from others in the moment that is available for co-inquiry and exploration of what is being influenced by the context.

## THE OPPORTUNITY FOR LEARNING

**Dorothy:** Could you speak about how you now describe real learning possibilities, or what you think about that in relation to coaching opportunities? If change really requires learning, what's the relationship?

**Edie:** Well, there's no question that coaching is learning. We need to include recognizing and understanding the environmental, systemic aspects of it. That is to say, not just to think that what's going on in the setting has anything to do with me alone. It has to do with me because of the context I'm in. And put me in another context, and I might be doing something else.

So, I have to understand the context better than I do in many cases, to be much more aware of the system. My relationships with

other people also changes depending on the context. We certainly know that this is true. People say I'm not the same person at home as I am in work. Well, there has to be a reason for that.

So, the question is: In a group setting, why do we take a look at the person without looking at the context they're in and seeing if they understand what's going on in that context? Understanding that this contributes to why they're behaving as they are. Do they have the ability themselves to behave with awareness of the system that they're in? Or do they simply behave because something is a catalyst to them, and that's the way they behave without any consciousness or awareness? I don't think most people do, but I think the question is this: How conscious are they that's what they're doing? If two people aren't getting along in a group, for instance, the question is: What's going on in that group that's making it difficult for these two people to get along? Is it just the two people or is the group a valuable thing to understand as well? Do you see what I'm trying to say?

**Dorothy:** Absolutely. There are answers in the context: helping people understand the influences of their past, and helping people get in touch with past filters just so that they can more actively choose or be aware of that they can choose. Recognize that they're not the person of their parents' era or their school system or whatever that was. Then really look at the context and get some more awareness about that. [This is particularly important] within organizations that have so little time for reflection. What kind of secrets did you find that could engage people in wanting to do that—because there is such a resistance against that?

**Edie:** I know. And it's so interesting, because everybody loves the stuff that keeps coming out, but they don't know what to do, how to make it, how to build it in. I mean, they love emotional intelligence, right?

**Dorothy:** Right, they love the theory of emotional intelligence, but in practice...

**Edie:** They go, "Wow, this is it. You can't have a leader without it." Then they don't figure out how to get it from loving it. From reading the book to getting their leaders to have it or becoming more aware of it, we're missing that translation.

And everybody hates groups, right? I mean, meetings. Meeting after meeting, then another meeting. Oh, my God, we go to lousy meetings, without stopping to think, 'Is there any mechanism by which we could actually reflect on what could make this meeting better and choose to make it better?' And not wait until some magical formula comes down the pike or the leader takes responsibility for the lousy meeting. "Does this work for you?" is the question. If it isn't working for us, why do we persist on doing

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it? Why don't we become accountable for saying, "We can make a difference if we just simply stop and use some of the wisdom that we have within us."

So, why is it so hard to do? People say, "I don't have time to spend the last ten minutes of a meeting talking about how this could have been more effective or what we'd like to do next time to make it more effective. I don't have time for that." So they'd rather go back to another lousy meeting.

It's almost like the health field to me. I know it isn't good for me to eat bacon, but it's here and I love it so that's too bad. I'm eating it anyway. That's our question: Why have we chosen to persist in doing things that we know aren't working for us? In the interest of what? How do we change bad habits, even if our whole organization has a bad habit? It's very hard to do. The best thing I've experienced is when people actually can stay with it long enough to experience it and see the difference.

### THE "TRIPLE IMPACT" PROGRAM

**Dorothy:** How have you found the way of keeping people engaged?

**Edie:** It's not easy. The thing that I would do with my *triple impact* programs is we meet once a month approximately for a day. We have an online, interactive thing going in-between. Our clients have the ongoing opportunity to call us and be coached about something they're doing and then letting us know what happened, what they need to do differently, and all that. We try to build in as many support systems as we possibly can to help us go from a concept to a change of behavior to a change in a way of thinking. As a person in one of our groups says, "It's a cosmic shift."

And I think what we're doing *is* a cosmic shift. We're asking people to accept stuff that in many ways is countercultural to a lot of things that are going on today: "We don't have time," "We're too busy," all these kinds of things. We're asking people to say, "No." A few moments of taking a deep breath and saying, "What is my choice in this? How could I become accountable for what I do, not continue to blame somebody else for what they're doing for me? What do I want and what can I do to get it?" To take those few minutes could make a lifetime of difference. But, how do we get people from here to there? That is not easy.

The triple impact concept is so important to me that in the programs I do, I really say to them, "Learn this in such a way that you become transparent about it, so other people can begin to understand it and learn it. We can't seem to figure out any other way of doing it. I'm counting on you that you're taking these programs to serve as a conduit. Rather than teach them, help people live them [the concepts] by living them transparently.

**Dorothy:** What seems to be a very enduring resistance over recent years is that it is countercultural to take time for these things that really make a difference in terms of learning and, therefore, change. That is, being reflective, using your physical self, literally breathing, having a different perspective, asking and receiving feedback so that you can be reflective about new possibilities for action.

**Edie:** Information that will help you continue.

**Dorothy:** Right. Getting information that will help you; looking at what choices you do have, right?

**Edie:** Looking always for the choice that you have because if you take that *choice* notion seriously, under all conditions people have choices.

**Dorothy:** It's interesting. I see a relationship between the ROI for yourself, for the organization, for the environment, right?

**Edie:** Right.

**Dorothy:** And your triple impact is this: These are the concepts; then I coach you; and then you coach others.

**Edie:** Exactly. And they coach others. It doesn't stop there. Bev Patwell is the woman who wrote the book with me. Her triple impact notion is the individual helps the group, and the group impacts the organization. That's her triple impact. She talks about how she's done that in several Canadian companies.

**Dorothy:** Maybe that's a very good ending point just for now. Edie, you are suggesting a *coaching universal* within organizations. We coach the individual and then we can coach the group, but the group, from an OD perspective, has always been seen as the mechanism of organizations, right?

**Edie:** It's the fractal, yeah. It's the fractal of an organization. Most things get done in groups.

**Dorothy:** Most things get done in group, and yet coaching can very often start with the leader and then go to the group, which acts as the fractal power of the organization.

**Edie:** Yeah, yeah.

**Dorothy:** So, Edie, the dance between coaching and OD is becoming more obvious.

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## CONCLUSIONS

**Dorothy:** What you're saying is that bridging coaching to OD values actually serves to evolve coaching.

**Edie:** Yeah, I think so, too.

**Dorothy:** So, you should have a smile on your face.

**Edie:** Yes, because I think a lot of people are recognizing that coaching needs these values in order to be effective.

**Dorothy:** Maybe we should trust the process inherent in learning. If we trust the process and the values are good, then we're going to end up saying, "Wait a second here. We have these common set of values that support the learning and change experience." Isn't it interesting that Peter Block, a noted voice in the world of organizational consultation, was an ODN and ICF<sup>2</sup> conference keynoter for 2009?

**Edie:** Yeah. I know it.

**Dorothy:** So, I say to myself, "Which conference is this? OD at ODN conference? Or is it coaching at ICF? Where are we and what are we?"

**Edie:** Ed Schein wrote something about this in his book called *Helping*.

**Dorothy:** That's right. Otto Scharmer calls his book on helping one of the essential coaching books now.

**Edie:** It could drive you crazy actually. All those pages on helping—it's amazing.

**Dorothy:** Edie, you are a noted voice in placing feedback as the core event in coaching and OD where new learning can happen. You and Charlie have worked to teach and remind professionals about the development work that is required to know how to identify and use feedback choicefully. You have made the almost intangible concept of *use of self as instrument* the choiceful outcome of learning and development. Knowing how to use oneself effectively as an instrument of learning is key to coaches and consultants. This is one of the great gifts that you and Charlie really worked on to make practical for others. Additionally, your new work on triple impact coaching suggests that coaching across levels of the human system can also take on momentum that will assist consultants in their OD projects.

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<sup>2</sup> ODN is Organization Development Network and ICF is International Coach Federation

Despite my seeing you as a pioneer in the applied behavioral science, a role identified in *The Age of Heretics* by Art Kleiner, I am always inspired by your effervescent love of learning and the human condition. A deep thank you.

**Edie:** Wonderful. And thank you.

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## ■ ABOUT THE AUTHOR/INTERVIEWEE

### **Edith Whitfield Seashore, M.A**

**Email:** edieseashore@comcast.net

Edith Whitfield Seashore, 82, has more than fifty years of experience in training and consulting with governments and corporations in organizational development and behavior. She is a past president of the NTL Institute and has served as faculty of the Johns Hopkins Fellows Program in Change Management. She is the co-founder of the American University/NTL Institute Master's Program in Organization Development and continues as a faculty member in that program. She has co-edited *The Promise of Diversity*, as well as co-authored the books *What Did You Say? The Art of Giving and Receiving Feedback* and *Triple Impact Coaching*.

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## ■ ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

### **Dorothy E. Siminovitch, Ph.D., MCC**

**Phone:** 216-409-0585

**Email:** awareworks@aol.com

Dorothy Siminovitch, the principal of Gestalt Coaching Works, is an ICF Master Certified Coach and consultant to organizational leaders, executives, and groups worldwide. She is a faculty member of The Professional School of Psychology in California, and teaches in the ICF-approved Eurasian Gestalt Coaching Program (EGCP) in Istanbul. Dorothy received her doctorate from Case Western Reserve University's prestigious Department of Organizational Behavior. She has served as a professional faculty member at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland, where she introduced gestalt-based coaching. Her Gestalt institutional affiliation is with the Gestalt International Study Center ([www.gisc.org](http://www.gisc.org)) and the Gestalt Training Institute of Bermuda (<http://gtib.org/facultypublications.html>). She has also served as a Board member of ICCO ([www.coachingconsortium.org](http://www.coachingconsortium.org)), a dialogue and research service for coaching and leadership around the world.

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