

The
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Coaching and Mentoring

What they are and how
to make the most of them

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CASE STUDY

Sir John Whitmore

Former motor racing driver Sir John Whitmore is one of the coaching industry's early pioneers. Now in his 70s, he has lost none of his crusading fire, particularly when it comes to changing what he regards as the selfish aspects of the modern corporate world, a process that should rightly begin back in the classroom.

The sporting baronet is in his element challenging the conventional wisdom of those in positions of authority. The author of *Coaching for Performance* is giving an induction in the subject to a group of 50 largely receptive head teachers of state-controlled schools in Hertfordshire in his native England.

He asks his audience, whose schools' exam results are among some of the highest in the UK, to recall their own childhoods and to think of an adult – not an immediate family member – on whom they look back with great affection and privately scribble down the qualities they possessed that engendered such fond memories. Surprisingly, the answers are ubiquitous and universal: that person made each feel special, valued and intelligent, treated them as an equal, listened avidly to them, challenged them and believed in them. Above all they made them feel that they could succeed at their chosen task, given their full attention, care, respect and trust. In short, they had just demonstrated the key ingredients of emotional intelligence (EI), which is measured by emotional intelligence quotient or EQ. He demands:

How come EQ, which has been identified as being as important as IQ – some say twice as important – to one's future success in life and work, is not taught in schools?

How many people in the workforce do you meet who display the same qualities as those of your favourite aunt or grandmother?, he asks.

Many coaches, particularly business coaches, are happy to work within the existing status quo: in other words to use coaching as a means of helping the person being coached climb higher up the

career ladder, to attain that coveted pay rise or promotion. Whitmore is not in that camp:

Coaching is a way of seeing people, don't try and use it just as a tool. If you do, you won't get any real value from it.

In a corporate world obsessed by indicators and measurements of performance and profitability, Whitmore, chairman of Performance Consultants International, an international coaching firm, has had surprisingly little difficulty in commanding a receptive audience among global business leaders. His words, which may sound harsh, appear to have struck a chord with corporate clients. He claims:

The economy was invented exclusively for the western mindset. It is inherently hierarchical and currently in the process of breakdown.

The workplace, he adds, is also an environment of fear, which needs to be challenged. There is another way, an environment of trust.

Conquering fear is something that the former racing driver clearly relishes:

Only by helping people liberate themselves from their fears can you unlock the unlimited potential that most individuals possess. That's what a good coach does.

Fear of failure rather than fear of injury or death is what leads to underperformance on the motor racing circuits and in life generally. He tells of his own brief return to the race track in 1990 after his retirement from motor racing in 1966 and the invaluable lesson learned from his son, who was then five years old. "It was a challenge I couldn't resist," he says. He was asked to drive an 8.4 litre McLaren M8F in which he came a respectable third and second in his first two races. But trouble hit just before the third race - and it wasn't of the mechanical variety. He explains:

It was in my head. There I was just too full of adrenalin, I feared not meeting my goal - to win this one.

Skulking in his hotel room until the last possible moment before going down to the race in an effort to conquer his fear of failure,

he was astounded to receive a badly spelt note from his young son. “Bleve in your self,” it read. It was a turning point for the sportsman, who went on to win the race.

His move into initially sports coaching – as opposed to traditional sports instruction – followed an influential encounter with Tim Gallwey (see page 79). Gallwey’s big idea that extraneous interference – often the orders given by an overly autocratic coach instructor – interfered with the sophisticated natural mechanisms that the human body has in place to deal with the arguably simple task, found particular resonance with Whitmore, who also suspected that sports coaches would do better to talk less and listen more to their charges.

Gallwey’s particular philosophy was centred on the core belief that the biggest obstacle of all to proficiency at sports was the negative thoughts going on within a player’s own head. The job of the coach was therefore not to instruct in the traditional sense, thereby complicating matters still further, but to help de-clutter the mind of all such unhelpful thoughts to free the person up to learn naturally.

Whitmore, who claims he has taught golf for 20 years without ever actually playing the game himself, says:

You don’t have to be an expert in a particular field of endeavour to be an effective coach. I don’t teach people anything about golf. All I do is help create awareness and self-responsibility in the person being coached. Their own high awareness is their teacher.

Many of the more progressive sports coaches have been influenced by the “inner game”, among the UK’s top sporting stars none more than Olympic Gold medallist David Hemery. However, the take-up generally has been painfully slow because it requires a major rethink.

“Traditionalists just can’t get away from imposing their long accumulated knowledge, which frequently is entirely inappropriate,” says Whitmore, who laments that while new technology is adopted at the speed of light, old habits die hard among the

sporting fraternity. He believes that this has been reflected in the state of British tennis, which with the exception of Tim Henman and Andy Murray has produced few good players for quite some time. In contrast, New Zealand is well on the way to changing much of its sports coaching to what Whitmore describes as “real coaching”.

Like Gallwey's, Whitmore's approach grew out of humanistic philosophy with its essentially optimistic view that mankind can be improved upon by focusing remedially not on what was wrong with it, but rather on its potential. He initially set up the Inner Game skiing and tennis school in Europe before branching out into other fields, particularly business, with the establishment of his coaching company.

Whitmore also realised, like Gallwey, who subsequently wrote *The Inner Game of Business*, that their respective and similar brands of coaching had a much wider application than just sport.

Transpersonal coaching is the next stage of that coaching process, addressing whole systems such as families, schools, institutions and organisations. It also addresses what Whitmore calls “whole person development”, which embraces the higher reaches of human aspiration, as well as spiritual development. As the fledgling coaching industry endeavours to impose standards and qualifications on its less-qualified practitioners, he is determined to ensure that transpersonal coaching is included in this.

Whitmore, who believes that such coaching applied to the business world would do much to engender greater social, environmental and economic responsibility, says:

Transpersonal coaching is about the qualitative rather than the quantitative. We are knowledgeable but not wise, particularly in our use of technology.

His mission is to help embed coaching into corporate management culture and link it to the entire training process by creating a team of advanced internal coaches, and by making coaching a key performance indicator as well as part of the return on investment evaluation.

But none of this can work if a company's chief executive does not believe in coaching. Whitmore recalls a series of coaching programmes that he was running for one of the five major UK clearing banks:

I insisted on a meeting with the CEO because I needed to tell him to his face that he was wasting his money. You have to believe in coaching at the very top of an organisation for it to work. Change at the top, with ongoing support and role modelling, is crucial.

The same is true for his current audience in the UK's educational establishment, with teaching methods that have relied almost exclusively on instilling knowledge into pupils with mixed success rather than unleashing a system that initiates self-learning as well as self-reliance:

We are talking about learning rather than teaching. Once you realise the principles of how people learn you can apply them to youngsters.