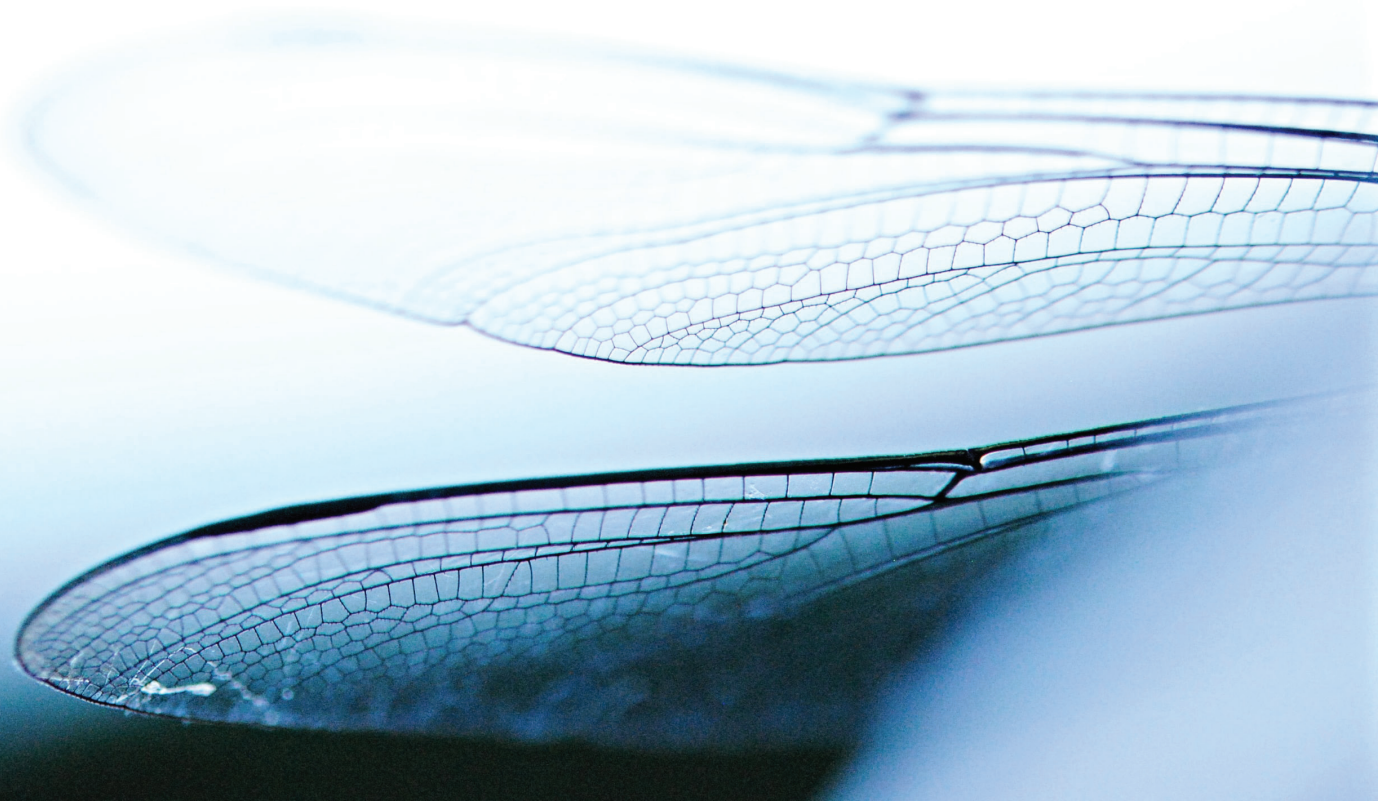


# Creating Coaching: The Quiet Revolution of Robert Dorn

HOW THE PIONEER OF ASSESSMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT CREATED EXECUTIVE COACHING

Laura Santana, PhD



Imagine you are in a training and selection process, hoping to be selected for the most important job of your life. You really want to get this job. It aligns perfectly with your values and would provide you with an opportunity to do important work in the world. For weeks, you are sequestered with your fellow trainees, far away from home. Day after day you are being observed and evaluated by a team of selection experts. They take notes. They assign rankings. You are nervous, but always do “your best” because this potential new job is very important to you. All information gathered about you is being considered by this committee which makes the decision that will dramatically impact your life. The process is shrouded in mystery. You receive no data, no progress checks, no results. You are left wondering at the end of each day: ‘how did I do?’ You await the final day of the selection process. Approaching the mailbox and opening the envelope with your name on it, you will either find an airline ticket to your new work’s destination, or you will find a return airline ticket back home.

This reflects the experience of trainees seeking to become United States Peace Corps volunteers in the early 1960’s. After passing a thorough FBI background investigation, they were flown to a training camp in a U.S. territory. They endured a grueling two months of training and a complete psychological assessment by a clinical psychologist - with no feedback about their performance or the assessments. Only on the last day, going to the mailbox to see their airline ticket’s destination, would they learn if they were accepted as a volunteer in the Peace Corps.

It was to this environment in 1964 that Bob Dorn arrived at the camp with the job of selecting or deselecting trainees to become volunteers. He had agreed to take the job on one condition: that the Peace Corps would support him in conducting long-term scientific experiments comparing the current method of training and selection to some new ideas he had for improving the process.

Dorn’s new ideas for training and selection were derived from his experience assessing patients at a large state psychiatric hospital. Based upon his assessment, patients were granted privileges according to the level of their mental health—such as being allowed into the cafeteria, being allowed to visit home on the weekends, or even being released. However, the patients were never informed (and never knew) how they were being measured nor what behaviors were seen as good and appropriate. Dorn was troubled by this situation and felt his position was a little too God-like: passing judgment on other people without them knowing how they were being evaluated. Dorn began to share his perceptions and assessment results directly with the patients so they could understand the impact of their behavior and make adjustments. He talked with them about their goals and what they wanted to achieve and helped them understand what behaviors might help them achieve those goals vs. the behaviors that would get in their way. Dorn’s thinking was heretical and antithetical to psychiatric care in the 1950s. At that hospital “hardly anybody tells you what you’re doing that’s right, what you’re doing that’s not so right, and how, if you made some changes, you might feel about behaving differently.” (Dorn in Alexander, 1993, Issues & Observations Vol 13. No. 2). This puzzled Dorn.



Anna State Hospital in Anna, Illinois

The hospital administrators learned that Dorn was sharing information with the patients and chastised him—telling him to stop. Their reasoning was that if the patients knew how their behaviors were being perceived, they would simply change their behaviors. The hospital administrators saw themselves as the “experts” whose job it was to cure the patients. If the patients understood how they were being observed, they would simply “fool” the hospital staff by behaving differently. Despite being criticized for challenging the status quo, Dorn overturned the hospital protocol and continued sharing information and observations of patients’ behavior --and its impact-- with patients directly. He argued that maybe it would be enough if the patients could adopt more effective behaviors and, with the right support structure, stick to them long enough to adopt them permanently. He hoped it would help them think about what behaviors would facilitate the outcomes they desired. Ultimately, he demonstrated that some patients could modify behaviors enough to earn the rewards they desired. He had created and implemented a “coaching based on assessment” model of intervention in 1962.

# BRIDGING SUCCESS IN THE CLINICAL WORLD TO THE NON-CLINICAL SETTING

As he arrived at The Peace Corps Virgin Islands training camp in 1964, Dorn found himself in a similar environment. He observed that: “as an assessor, you never told the trainees anything that you learned about them. The reasoning behind this was that if you told them their mistakes, they could change, and if they changed, they might be selected to go overseas. But they might not have really changed and they would begin making their mistakes again overseas. This reasoning baffled me. I have always believed that if you tell people what they’re doing that is not effective—and if they believe it’s true that what they’re doing is actually getting in the way of their achieving their personal goals—then they will make the effort to change. If the change is a good one, it should be reinforcing by itself, and it should take. My experience had always been that really decent changes took because they were rewarding to themselves. And the program was sixteen weeks long, which is plenty of time to work with people to see that they do, in fact, change.”

(Alexander, 1993 p.1)

Dorn restructured the candidate training and selection process. He created experiential training and simulations of what life would be like as a volunteer, invited trainees to participate in the simulations, and provided feedback about what they were doing well and what might be improved (what they were doing ‘right’ and what was ‘wrong’). The assessors then watched to see if the trainees could correct the behavior that caused negative outcomes. After the simulations, assessors reminded the trainees that these conditions were realistic--close to what they might encounter on assignment. Increased self-awareness, prompted by sharing and discussing data, allowed the trainees to make decisions about the fit of their style and objectives with the reality of the work they would be doing for the Peace Corps. The trainees had a choice to resign if they thought the work was not a good fit based on what they learned about themselves from the assessment process.

For three years Dorn conducted his longitudinal experiments comparing the old process to the new process which shared assessment data with trainees. After three years, the results were so striking that Peace Corps headquarters contacted him to talk about the results of his experiments. The Peace Corps identified four quantifiable indicators of Dorn’s program’s success: 1) a higher rate of trainees self-selecting out of the Peace Corps Training Program, deciding that the experience was not a good fit for them. For the trainees that remained for the duration of the training program, 2) a much higher number were accepted as volunteers into the program. Once in their host countries, 3) their effectiveness ratings were significantly higher than volunteers prior to Dorn’s experiments. Perhaps, most importantly, 4) they were also re-enlisting at a much higher rate as well. By all of the Peace Corps’ objective criteria, the results of his experiments were wildly successful. These four indicators of success were pivotal and prompted an invitation for Dorn to move to headquarters in Washington, DC, and rethink how all training and selection were done for the Peace Corps.



It was the latter 1960s and a quiet revolution was under way. Dorn had shifted the process focus from Assessment for Selection where experts use data to make decisions about the next steps in someone else's life, to one where all data are shared with the individual to make their own informed decisions about the next steps in their own life and development. As the process unfolded, Dorn found that the experiments that began in the clinical world laid the foundation for what he termed Assessment for Development:

“Assessment for Development means helping a person to see more clearly significant patterns of behavior, to understand more clearly the attitudes and motivations underlying these patterns, to reassess what makes him or her more and less effective relative to the goals he or she wishes to attain, and to evaluate alternative ways of meeting these goals more effectively. To aid in this process, many sources of information are needed, e.g., behavioral assessments, psychometrics, biographical data, peer and staff observations, and self-perceptions.” (Dorn, 1990. An Overview of Staff Feedback, p.3)

The power was removed from the “experts” (who may have used that power for decisions about a trainee), and respectfully placed in the hands of the person who would make their own decisions. This moved from the clinical expert “prescribing” next steps, into making sense of the data together. After thoughtful consideration, informed by data, a person determined their own goals and chose their own next steps and determined their own goals. Dorn termed this self-directed personal development and described its value:

“Development is not something that can be done to or for a person; he or she has to choose to do it and do it for themselves. But you can build an environment and offer experiences that motivate and support self-development by stimulating some discontent about current behavior, providing the means to alleviate it through change, and by overcoming resistance through increasing participants' confidence about making change, helping them see how to change, providing them some new tools, and expanding their understanding of how to set and achieve goals.” (ibid, p. 3)

Dorn's experience in the clinical setting—along with the Peace Corps experiments--resulted in Dorn's unflinching focus on Assessment for Development, rather than Assessment for Selection. He believed so greatly in its transformative potential for self-directed personal development that he would next use these insights to build a flagship foundational program to benefit the world well beyond the Peace Corps.



USVI Peace Corps training camp



Peace Corps trainees arrive to camp



Bob Dorn in West Africa discussing the impact of training Peace Corps Volunteers using Assessment for Development

# ASSESSMENT FOR DEVELOPMENT IN SERVICE OF LEADER DEVELOPMENT

In 1969, Dorn learned that the Smith Richardson Foundation, a think tank in Greensboro, North Carolina, sought to improve the way that leaders are selected and trained. Smith Richardson Sr. was “truly a visionary. He was willing to invest in something that was very loosely defined, and he followed through and stayed the course. The family’s impact is not much in direction of content or design, but in support and risk-taking.” (Bailey, 1999).

“It takes boldness to invest in programs of uncertain potentialities, but it is out of such support that some of the greatest discoveries have been made.” H. Smith Richardson, Sr.’s philosophy.

Dorn was intrigued by the bold possibility of applying some assessment for development ideas from his longitudinal studies to the domain of leader development. He moved his family to Greensboro and helped launch the North Carolina Fellows weekend program for development of undergraduate student leaders of four universities. The program was heavy in assessment feedback and goal-setting. By May 1970 Dorn was named Director of the not yet envisioned Leadership Development Program of Smith Richardson Foundation’s newly opened Center for Creative Leadership (CCL). As the Director charged with creating the program, Dorn was free to build a major developmental leadership training program grounded in his research, heavily focused on assessment and the discussion of its implications. Upon this canvas he created an experience to:

“help people be happier and more productive in their personal and work lives, and better able to lead other people to do the same. It was an opportunity to take stock, set goals, decide what it was they wanted to achieve in life, and how to achieve it better. It also aimed to help people get off the career-at-all-costs merry-go-round and buy into a values system that I believed in, which was based on Robert Kennedy’s speech in which he said the role of a leader is to make the world a better place for everyone. There was a zeitgeist to it, and there were other people who believed in the same thing.” (Alexander, 1993, p.2)

Based on the results of his research in the Peace Corps, Dorn designed the self-directed development program to include three powerful tools:

1. Experiential exercises that could simulate the work environment
2. Significant assessment data including direct observations and psychometric personality measures
3. A process by which the data could be shared and interpreted in partnership with the participant.

In Dorn's words:

"I wanted to help people clarify what it was they were trying to achieve in their personal and work lives, and then let them look very comfortably at how they were behaving and how that behavior was helping them in achieving their goals. I wanted them to look at whether they were the kind of person they wanted to be and whether they were perceived as the kind of person they wanted to be; then I would show them some alternative ways of behaving that might be better, and let them take their pick. If they decided they wanted to change, we could help them. I'm a psychologist, and psychologists know a lot about how people can change—a lot more than they do about leadership. I felt that if we added good leadership content to this mix, we'd be all right." (Alexander, 1993, p.2-3)

## BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER: THE LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

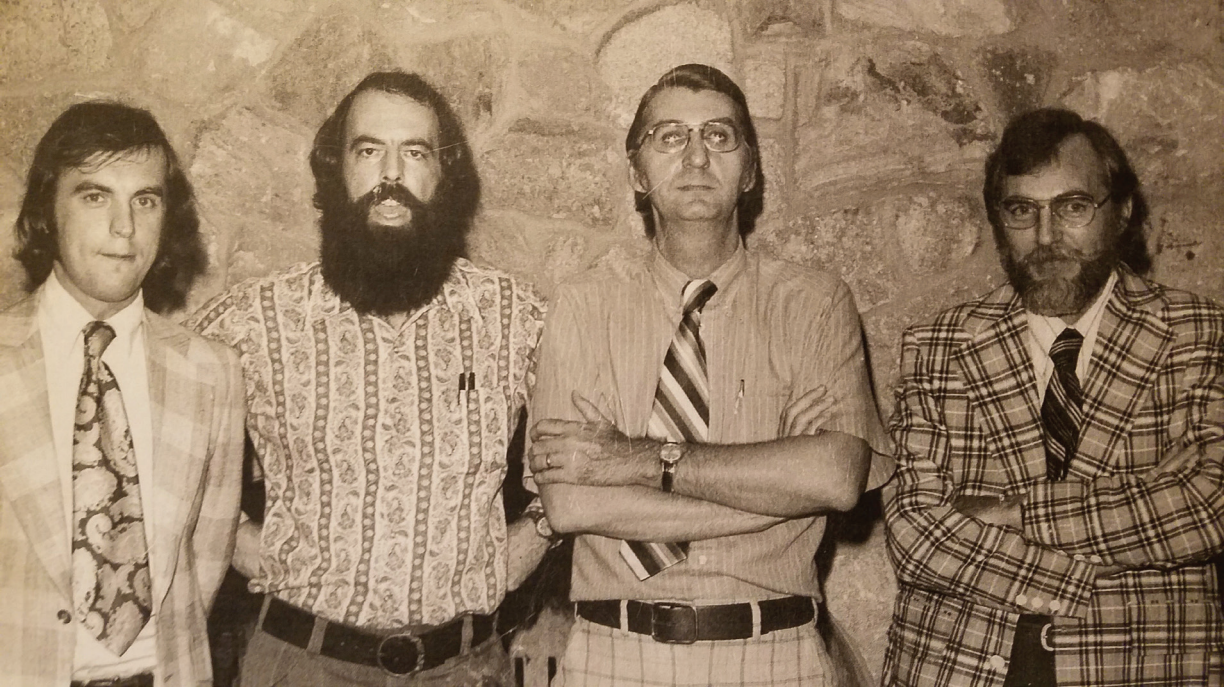
In 1971, Dorn's Leadership Development Program (LDP), based on his Assessment for Development theory, launched as a sixteen-week offering at the Center for Creative Leadership. In 1974 it was operationalized into a six-day feedback intensive program. He had imagined a truly transformative experience which went beyond enhancing performance through skill-based training. Its purpose was to "help people be happier and more productive in their personal and work lives, and better able to lead other people to do the same" (p. 2). The LDP had 17 assessments which included live observation by staff, psychometric instruments, and 360 (multi-rater) surveys. The entire program design was focused on Feedback Day.

## THE INVENTION OF A NEW ROLE

In order for the participant to interpret data in a meaningful way and understand its implications, Dorn created the role of the Feedback Specialist. The role of the Feedback Specialist consisted of: "Helping a person to see more clearly significant patterns of behavior, to understand more clearly the attitudes and motivations underlying these patterns, to reassess what makes him or her more and less effective relative to the goals he or she wishes to attain, and to evaluate alternative ways of meeting these goals more effectively. To aid this process, many sources of information are needed, e.g., behavioral assessments, psychometrics, biographical data, peer and staff observations, and self-perceptions." (Dorn, 1990. p. 3)

Dorn's thinking was revolutionary in yet another way. Because of his disdain for an "expert" making judgments about a patient or volunteer based on assessment data, Dorn insisted that the participant was the sole owner of his or her own data. Unlike assessments collected for typical training programs, the data would belong to participants. It was not shared with anyone else except the Feedback Specialist, and was only used for the participant's development -- not at all for evaluation.





Left to right: Stan Gryskiewicz, Bill Sternberg, Bob Bailey, and Bob Dorn.



Bob Dorn sits by the fireplace in the Center for Creative Leadership.

The Feedback process and data were entirely confidential. For instance, the data were not shared with a boss, human resource manager, nor the sponsoring organization. Incredibly, nearly five decades after initiating this practice, the question of who owns the data (who is the client: participant or organization) is still being debated by leadership development providers. But Dorn's evidence pointed to the effectiveness of leaders owning their own data to make their own choices about development.

## FEEDBACK SPECIALIST AS LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT COACH

Dorn's program addressed leadership beyond 'what one does' as leader, to "who one is" in the world. Within the context of Dorn's program, leaders reflected not only on the tasks and behaviors of leadership, but on their own well-being as they worked in organizations, sustained family connections, and lived within communities. Dorn encouraged mindful choices about how they wanted to be present for family and community--as well as colleagues at work. His feedback process invited development: it encouraged people to find meaning, purpose and happiness as they considered themselves in a holistic manner--as a person, rather than just a member of an organization.

The classroom experience was complemented by the Feedback Specialist session on the next to the last day of the program (King & Santana, 2010). Each participant received a private 3-hour one-on-one feedback session with a highly trained professional for:

"discussing the extensive data they have generated about themselves. In this highly confidential and fully collaborative session, the participant and the feedback Specialist combine their skills and knowledge to:

1. Learn as much as they can from all the available sources of information;
2. Explore the implications and areas for change suggested by the data;
3. Discuss possible action plans for any changes desired by the participant.

The session is an educational experience designed to be an exciting process of discovery and confirmation. It is founded on honesty and openness, and part of its power comes from its affirmation of the participant as a worthwhile, valuable human being with strengths and weaknesses, hopes, fears, and dreams who can make whatever changes (within reason) that he or she feels are worth the effort." (Dorn, 1990. p. 1)

The assessment data and background questionnaires provided a structure for the dialog and exploration. The Feedback Specialist provided the expertise of the assessments and could help the participant interpret the data and their implications. But the Coachee (the participant in session with the Feedback Specialist) was seen as the ‘expert’ on themselves and their own inner landscape—where thoughts and practices, values and hopes were known. The Specialist would create a safe space for exploration and dialog, between the two experts. The dialog was never prescriptive: Dorn’s Feedback Specialists helped to interpret the data, but would not tell a Coachee what to do. The dialog was structured to help the Coachee discover how to access greater fulfillment in personal and work life.

Dorn’s list of critical requirements for a Feedback Specialist included:

- Demonstrated respect for others.
- A caring orientation.
- Ability to establish rapport rapidly.
- Ability to handle serious information in a short time frame.
- Ability to deal with emotionally-laden situations in a helpful, therapeutic way without turning the session into therapy.
- Mission-oriented, values compatible with Center for Creative Leadership values.
- Willingness to invest the time and energy in learning the process and in continuous improvement

Although there were therapists and psychologists assuming the role of Feedback specialist originally, Dorn guided the role away from therapy and towards a forward focus to create a happy and fulfilling life. Over time, effective Feedback Specialists came from varied and numerous backgrounds. Dorn’s work opened the doors beyond the world of psychologists, and invited others to support the self-directed development experience. His Feedback Specialist role predated--and helped birth--the practice and industry we refer to as Executive Coaching today. In 1998 the Feedback Specialist title was changed to Executive Coach. In Dorn’s mind, a development coach should not be prescriptive, telling the coachee what to do, as was practice with performance coaching (or sports coaching popular in the 1920s). He believed that lasting change was best arrived at through appreciative inquiry and deep dialog. As early as the 1960s Dorn’s insistence on differentiating Executive Coaches from sports coaches emphasized coaching for human development--transcending coaching for mere performance.



## GLOBAL REACH

Seeking to grow the reach and impact of his leadership development program, Dorn sought and established partnerships with select organizations around the world. The Licensees of the strictly standardized LDP included Ashridge Management College (UK), Eckerd College (USA), Hartford Graduate Center (USA), Mt. Eliza Australian Mgmt. College (Australia), Personnel Decisions, Inc. --PDI (USA), TEAM (Mexico), TEAM (USA), The Niagara Institute (Canada), University of Maryland (USA), and U.S. Government (USA). In most, if not all cases, Dorn personally supervised the rigorous training and certification of the program delivery and feedback coaches for delivery. This ensured that these trusted partners maintained the standards necessary for a true feedback intensive assessment for self-directed development experience. Decades later, many coaches still state proudly that they were certified by Robert (Bob) Dorn.

## WORLDWIDE IMPACT

Between 1974 and 1992 alone his quiet revolution touched the lives of more than 25,000 executives in the leadership programs provided in five countries around the world (Alexander, 1993). With the increased delivery and outreach of the program, there was an increased demand for more Feedback Specialists. Today more than a thousand coaches worldwide have been through the rigorous certification process to become a Feedback Specialist/ Executive Coach. Fifty years later most of CCL's self-directed development programs still include a confidential session with a Feedback Specialist/ Executive Coach. These assessment for development sessions have sustained Dorn's vision of supporting happier, more productive people—and helping them lead others to be the same.





# LATER DEVELOPMENTS IN THE EVOLUTION OF COACHING

Dorn's thinking was ahead of his time: in the late 1960s he empirically proved the effectiveness of assessment for development. In the same manner, he challenged "leader development" to attend to the whole person feeling happy and productive, not just attend to their performance in a workplace. Much like Dorn challenged assessment to focus on an individual's happiness and effectiveness in the late 1960s, Positive Psychology challenged psychology and psychiatry to focus on health and happiness rather than pathology in the late 1990s.

Many consider the 'birth' of the Coaching industry alongside the emergence of Positive Psychology (Seligman) in 1998. However, we have documented how Dorn's evidence-based experiments in clinical and non-clinical settings challenged protocols since the late 1960s to serve people's wellbeing. The emergence of Positive Psychology contributes yet another step in rethinking how psychology and 'experts' might help people thrive. Its focus is described as: "the scientific study of the strengths that enable individuals and communities to thrive. The field is founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play." (Seligman, 1998)

Dorn's quiet revolution that removed experts' decision-making power and squarely placed it in the hands of a collaborative relationship with a supportive coach, led to Coaching for Development as we know it today. His groundbreaking work paved the way for the industry of assessment for development based executive coaching. Coaching has further evolved and now includes life coaches, work coaches, team coaches, integral nutrition coaches, spiritual coaches—each with a different entry focus, but with a common goal of supporting the person who seeks to overcome obstacles to leading their own happy and fulfilling lives. Coaching is done within the context of a development program and also outside of a program, sometimes using assessment to discuss development. It is increasingly done without assessment. Modalities have evolved from face-to-face coaching, telephone coaching, virtual coaching, web platform coaching, text coaching--even artificial intelligence providing automated coaching of a problem. However, the essence of coaching remains as Robert Dorn envisioned: allowing people to be experts about their own life and supporting them in making choices to be happier and more productive, along with helping others to be so as well.

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Robert Dorn  
1929-2020

