



It is mid afternoon and Bob, an executive vice president of a well known high tech company must decide what strategy to take in upcoming negotiations around a major international deal. He has scheduled a session with his 'coach' to help think it through. His coach, Nathan, is a young man from a local west coast First Nation. Unlike most executive coaching sessions, Nathan is not an executive, and the relationship is two-way – Bob shares his experience with Nathan. These two are about to embark on a real time coaching experience that could cover closing a major offshore deal to finding a way off the mean streets of Vancouver.

Executive Coaching

THE GEMINI PROJECT

Watching carefully from the sidelines and suppressing a cautious but pleased grin at the almost total implausibility of the scene is Ian Chisholm, a young man on an exceptional leadership mission.

Ian grew up in Maidstone, Saskatchewan, interned with the American Management Association while in college, and then headed to New York City in 1995 to work on a youth leadership project with the AMA and the federal post office. He led a move from working with executives' kids to working with the more challenging 'tough realities' youth. The AMA was looking for best practices and decided to have the young people interview some executives. The young people asked some tough questions not just about management, but also about life.

Ian kept notes on what these kids were learning about the fundamental principles that ground good leadership practice. But it soon became apparent the kids were, at the same time, passing on some of their wisdom and experience to the executives. The study became the seedbed for a new way of looking at leadership and the grounding for a fresh approach to coaching that connects the experience of the boardroom with the wisdom of the streets. He distilled a six-point code of responsible leadership based on:

- Awareness – leaders know what is going on
- Focus – leaders know what is most important
- Creativity – leaders know what it is they seek to create
- Integrity – leaders keep their word
- Persistence – leaders get back up when they fall down
- Service – leaders serve a purpose for the community they lead.

Meanwhile, on the remote and windswept Isle of Skye in Scotland, another visionary was pulling together an innovative leadership centre. Norman Drummond was the

founder of an international centre committed to building leadership principles and skills in youth from challenging backgrounds. Ian wanted to understand what he was doing and paid a visit. The connection between the two was unquestionable.

In August 1999, Ian was asked to be Columba 1400's first CEO, and soon his rough notes on the six principles of leadership had become the Columban Code of Responsible Leadership.

"I took a job that had me breathing air well beyond my competency level," Ian, just 27 at the time, says. "I knew these folks were onto something important, I felt a 'calling'."

Ian knew he needed help. Fortunately, the centre had connections with three executive coaches, each with differing styles. Through coaching he learned to play the long game, convincing the board and the bank that a quick fix was not the answer.

One advisor convinced him to use coaching as a daily operating system with his staff. "As a leader, I began to understand that it was my responsibility to coach my staff as much as it was for me to get good coaching."

This quickly led to the conclusion that, in fact, it may just be everyone's responsibility to coach one another. They experimented with the idea, creating a coaching culture within the centre. It was not uncommon for the newest apprentice to learn coaching skills in their orientation and within weeks find themselves coaching the CEO.

During one particularly fine conversation on a long walk to Rubha Hunish on the northeast tip of Skye, Ian and an advisor conceptualized The Gemini Project. It began with two basic tenets: leadership is not a title; and true leadership is found everywhere. The breakthrough vision was seeing the potential of what might happen in a room with ten 'tough reality' youth coaching ten executives, who in turn would coach the street kids. The Gemini Project was born from the core belief that these young people had real leadership potential and the capacity to move the community, coupled with the

desire to push out beyond the classical business mentor model.

Willie McIntosh was a young man in Glasgow struggling with depression, drugs and unemployment. A friend got him connected with Skye where he promptly walked out of a Chisholm talk on leadership. "I was pretty skeptical but that soon turned around. We did core values and I found it extremely difficult, as I never had any core values. I was paired with a bank manager and as we coached one another I realized I could help him think things through and, in turn, I thought more about what I wanted. I realized I wanted to go to college. I had learned to listen, to others and myself."

After deciding to go to college, he ended up on the bad end of a knife attack. Willie's story has other chapters and will continue to unfold but right now he is not depressed, drinking tea instead of smoking hash, and fully employed practicing leadership at Columba 1400.

The centre is thriving with a range of projects and long-term partnerships. After five years, Ian realized he was a startup specialist, not so much a management sort. So he resigned, became Columba's first Fellow and returned to Canada with the Gemini Project.

The first Canadian Gemini was run at Royal Roads University on Vancouver Island in September 2005, with an executive stream from the public and private sector and a community stream from Canadian 'tough realities', including four youth from First Nations communities.

Tyler Hallett, one of those 'tough reality' participants, was homeless, living in a tree in a local park and selling poetry on the streets to pay for food. A week later he was coaching an executive on a major re-structuring process. "It was pretty scary," he concedes, "to meet these people and to anticipate living in residence with them for a week. You have to learn to share. The coaching part, well, I'm a natural. I keep things straight. You have to basically really listen. People just need to talk."

Things have since turned around some for Tyler, although he knows it will still take a lot more work on his part. He has a place to live, is working and starting to sell his poetry with a more thoughtful, business-like approach. He spoke to over seventy senior leaders in the BC Forest Service about his experience. He is very clear that he is not willing to live under anyone's terms but his own: "I am looking long term. I am the master of my own existence. I don't know if I am a leader but I am an army of one. I have no excuses anymore."

Doug Konkin, the Deputy Minister for the BC Ministry of Forests and Range, was one of the participants in the executive stream. "I didn't know what to expect when I agreed to attend the weekend session. Frankly I was skeptical that much could be gained from the kids. Halfway through the session I realized the power of non-directional coaching was magnified by interaction with these young people. The fact these kids could pick up the skills and help you work through an important issue amplified the lessons and drove home the distinction between directive and non-directive coaching. On the flip side, I found myself personally stretched trying to coach some of the kids through very personal, important issues that can only come from a life on the street. It was eye opening and rewarding."

Dave Francis, manager for the Mackenzie Forest District in northern BC, has been working with Ian on a unique twist to the Gemini idea. For a start, they ran two coaching workshops

– one in the community of Mackenzie with 15 participants and another in the remote First Nations community of Kwadacha with another 15 participants. Francis sees a bigger picture. He imagines a community of practice model working in real communities.

"Imagine if we work together, giving a common learning experience to both the 'professionals' and the 'clients'. Right now we send people away for coaching and other such training. I'm thinking that we should bring that training right into our communities and learn together. I can imagine the chief of a local First Nation coaching a tough reality kid from our town of Mackenzie and at the same time an executive from Canfor coaching a tough reality kid from the First Nation community. I see a roomful of First Nations elders, RCMP, doctors, nurses, teachers, teenagers, public servants and parents all coaching each other in their leadership practice. I think it just might work."

And back to Bob and Nathan...an e-mail.



Ian Chisholm and Steve Siegerson (right),
centre leader of Columba 1400.

Nathan,

Just thought I would let you know, we got that deal with the guys from India, about \$3.5 million. Thanks for the coaching – we played it just like we planned based on the strategy we devised in the coaching session, having the India company people handle the India customer and we just worked the local Canadian folks. It worked like a charm.

Hope things are going well for you. Drop me a line or give me a shout when you get a second.

Thanks again coach! Bob

Bob Chartier is a manager with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and teaches leadership at Royal Roads University (chartierb@inac.gc.ca). Ian Chisholm is at ian@roygroup.net.