



How Studying Philosophy Led Me to the Executive Suite

Published on September 18, 2016 | Featured in: [Careers: The Next Level](#), [Education](#), [Leadership & Management](#)



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My long and winding road to a career in executive coaching almost never happened.

College at Yale was beyond the means of my family. Having grown up in a Jewish family on Long Island, assumptions were that money was not an issue for someone like me. In my senior year of high school, after my acceptance to Yale, I dragged my mother (who at the same age had lost the opportunity for a college education after her parents died) to New Haven to meet with the head of financial aid about a better package of scholarships and loans. I knew that I'd have to enter that meeting with confidence, clarity, and poise. My mother felt out of her depth, and as a 17-year-old I needed to persuade Yale to make a more robust investment in me. My career as an executive coach was launched.

Although at the time I knew nothing about executive coaching (and the field barely existed back then), I had chosen the right college. Yale in the mid-1980s was still a bastion of existential philosophy, although I didn't know that yet either. My initial plan was to study chemistry and continue on a well-worn path toward medical school. But then the opportunity of a lifetime presented itself -- an offer to enter Yale's [Directed Studies](#) program. Since the 1940s, this interdisciplinary program had educated a cohort of freshmen in Western philosophy, literature, and history (beginning with the ancient Greeks and continuing into the 20th century). The academic year paralleled the sweep of Western intellectual history. In the first semester, we read Plato, Sophocles, and

Thucydides at the same time. In the late second semester, we read Wittgenstein, Woolf, and Hofstadter. I renounced the plan to major in chemistry and decided instead to take the science and math classes required for medical school later. I had the hazy foresight that a humanities education would be unique and would serve me in ways that I couldn't yet anticipate.

Studying existential philosophy with [Professor Maurice Natanson](#) at Yale turned out to provide the most solid foundation I could establish for my current career as an executive coach. It continually fed my curiosity about how people think and make decisions under complex circumstances. I had the good fortune later to enhance my philosophy education by training in psychiatry. But while studying at Harvard Medical School, I realized that the philosophy bug still wasn't out of my system. I supplemented my medical education by joining a community of medical students at the University of Chicago who were pursuing doctoral degrees in the humanities and social sciences. As a graduate student in this U of C program funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, I read and wrote about everything from Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit to Paul Churchland's philosophy of mind work on "eliminative materialism," the theory that the advance of brain science will eventually eliminate the need for psychology. I earned my Ph.D. in philosophy by crafting a novel argument, based in part on my work in psychiatry, that human psychology can never be diminished or eliminated -- regardless of the status of neuroscience.

My life was on academic steroids at this point and I didn't really get a paying job until I was well into my thirties. My school loans were daunting, but I loved my work as a psychiatrist so much that I would continually work weekends and nights to make extra money to pay them off. This approach no doubt took a toll on my personal life, but I labored on. Twists and turns in my academic and personal lives taught me painful, yet valuable, lessons that continue to nourish and deepen my work as an executive coach. I came to appreciate that the human mind remains an incredible mystery, and the Western sciences and humanities only provide a limited view. It needs to be enhanced with an understanding of Asian philosophies (such as Buddhism and Taoism) and a plethora of other approaches from multiple traditions. In the end, we must learn to tolerate and embrace uncertainty. These insights later helped me to coach executives to think more strategically and develop a higher, meaningful vision of their work. And it also has helped me to coach people to maintain the healthy balance between work and personal life that for so many years eluded me in my own life.

As much as I loved psychiatry, I came to feel limited sitting in my office all day with many patients seeking symptom relief via prescribed medication, rather than a deeper understanding of how they might choose to shape their lives in a more satisfying way. I provided psychotherapy that focused on helping patients to develop greater self-awareness, think differently about their priorities, and experiment with healthier behaviors. But my concern remained that psychiatric reasoning places people in a passive role in their own lives, determined by their neurotransmitters or by early childhood trauma. Psychiatry distanced me from existential philosophy's emphasis on

people's freedom, choice, and responsibility to self-reflect, create worlds of meaning, and proactively shape their lives – even in the face of biological and other constraints. I had also become frustrated with many of the limitations and regulations on medical practice. All of these considerations provided a strong impetus to broaden my career beyond psychiatry.

Executive coaching has been a godsend. It is a rapidly growing field of professional practice, an approximately \$2 billion industry worldwide. I have started my own [executive coaching practice](#), become a Partner at a [coaching and consulting firm](#) in Boston, and co-founded (with [Ryan Stelzer](#)) a [leadership training company](#) that provides group seminars and individual coaching rooted in philosophy and the humanities. Sometimes discussing the ideas of Machiavelli or Confucius can help an executive to think outside the box and develop a new business strategy, or to develop the kind of confidence and poise that I mustered for that meeting in the financial aid office over 30 years ago. My coaching style harkens back to what I learned in Directed Studies. I ask my clients thought provoking, open-ended questions (in a structured process called Active Inquiry) designed to prompt them to self-reflect and self-determine action plans that are consistent with their self-chosen values. The positive business results of these kinds of coaching conversations continue to astonish me. It is 20th century existentialism transported directly from the Ivory Tower at Yale into the 21st century executive boardroom.



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Thank you for this great article, gave me some more motivation! Often I'm asked why Humanities for a Masters degree... and what I'm going to do with it. I just smile while not once have I doubted myself. I've always viewed it as a study guide for the big test from the best teachers! I'm currently trying to figure out what's next for the education and career path.

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Brian Gong ... 2d
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Well said! I'm frequently asked why I studied History for my undergraduate. I always answer very simply. I love reading the best stories taught by some of the best teachers!



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