

A review of assumptions in executive coaching

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This paper is a more elaborate version of a speech given at the 3rd National Conference of the Special Group for Coaching Psychology in 2007. It looks at a diversity of definitions of coaching and executive coaching as well as reviews available research from a business perspective. The executive context has several unique features and the article concludes that executive coaching needs to be different from other types of coaching.

Keywords: executive coaching, assumptions, reflexivity, construct validity, meta-review.

EXECUTIVE COACHING has become a popular, albeit misused term. In this paper 'executive shall mean only somebody in a management position.

The basic premise for asserting that executive coaching is different from other types of coaching, is that executives are responsible for the performance and adjustment of whole organisations and complex business systems; are members of one or more management teams; and may lead large projects and/or international or culturally diverse businesses. Their role is to leverage the contributions of maybe thousands of people, often under immense pressure from competition, higher levels in the organisation, investors and/or boards of directors.

Executives are thus in addition to providing tangible results, intimately tied to and dependent on the quality of their relationships. Unfortunately, evidence for methods and impact of executive coaching still seems to come primarily from success narratives and anecdotes rather than formal research. We have no certainty that tales of coaching accurately reflect practice. Leadership theory, learning theories and common sense are routinely integrated into coaching practice and successful coaches have a wide variety of backgrounds.

Two central discussion points arise, namely (1) that an executive coach is not just any coach working with an executive (assuming that life coaching for an executive should not be called executive coaching), and (2) that successful executive coaches probably practice indeed must practice from a broader platform than other types of coaches.

This paper reviews many different kinds of assumptions, beliefs and practices, as well as promises and expectations surrounding executive coaching.

Which assumptions?

Definitions are assumptions

As professionals we seem to get naturally entrenched in sets of ideas and methods, which we share paradigmatically with others of similar professional genealogical trees (Bohm, 1996; Kuhn, 1962, Ricoeur, 1981; Senge et al., 2005). Coaching seems to be no different, at least in Norway it was not (see Olson, 2007a, 2007b).

Differences of opinion and practices are evident already from definitions of coaching, coaching psychology and executive coaching. The British Psychological Society Special Group of Coaching Psychology (SGCP, 2008) states that: 'Coaching psychology is for enhancing well-being and

performance in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult learning or psychological approaches (adapted Grant & Palmer, 2002).

The Interest Group in Coaching Psychology (IGCP, 2008) part of the Australian Psychological Society are much more specific in their definition of coaching psychology: 'Applied positive psychology, [] behavioural science to the enhancement of life experience, work performance and well-being for individuals, groups and organisations who do not have clinically significant mental health issues or abnormal levels of distress.

The International Coach Federation (ICF, 2008) uses a broad brush on their homepage: 'Personal and business coaching is an ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations. [] add value to your life.

Grant (2003) focuses on coaching as a goal-directed, results orientated, systematic process with self-directed learning and personal growth.

Goleman et al. (2002) have a more ambitious definition: 'A coach helps you discover your dreams, understand your strengths and gaps and your impact on others, and guides you through the step in your learning plan (p.1).

When Palmer and Whybrow (2006) surveyed coaching psychologists, they found that the five most frequent practices were: facilitative, cognitive, behavioural, problem solving, and solutions focused. While these approaches obviously inform practitioners, they may of course say little about what they do in practice. Indeed, the survey showed considerable overlap in terms of techniques, so instead of carrying over the terms from psychotherapy, it may be time that coaching research looks at what coaches actually do.

Broadly speaking, we arrive at our assumptions about the world, others and ourselves through very personal processes. Sometimes our differences are different

perspectives of the same thing, and sometimes we are describing different things yet using the same words. In other words, if we want to truly understand, we need to make our assumptions explicit. This is of course hugely important in counselling psychology and two examples illustrate this.

Spinelli and Marshall (2001) interviewed some of our great psychotherapist gurus. They all said that they had come to practice their particular therapy because they felt at home with it over others, and from within this therapy they could understand the world. In this context, it means that they adopted or created a therapeutic model of assumptions and practices. Does this perhaps attest both to the commitment of what they are doing, but at the same time a certain distance to what they had decided not to do?

Our background also defines where in a family we belong. For example, when Haber (1996) discussed his professional genogram, he outlines that his professional 'grandparents contributed to his interest in psychotherapy. In the professional context one can choose parents and your brothers and sisters will have similar interests. From a social psychology point of view it is a biased process, but we feel at home and are willing to defend our professional identity. In my own genealogy, I have been in my international sales, management and consulting family since 1984, working with large international clients. Only a few years ago did I decide to join the family of counselling psychologists, and even more recently coaching psychology.

This uniquely defines me as an executive coach within two families: psychologists and business managers. It is conceivable that a worldwide count of coaching practices would reflect such differences in the form of a substantial number of different schools and approaches, if not quite so many as psychotherapy's 450+ versions (Corsini & Wedding, 2007). While differences in assumptions and approaches help us to make sense, they at the same time can hold us to our central perspective which we

defend with the assumption that we are on the way to eventual truth.

Specific Assumptions

Other definitions concern executive coaching specifically.

The Institute of Directors (IoD) say that executive coaching should bring out the best; provide professional and personal development; and enhance impact and performance. The time has come when executive coaching is a must for Board members, they say. From a coaching psychology perspective, we note that none of the accredited IoD coaches are psychologists.

The American Executive Coach Academy (ECA, 2007a, 2007b) quote a long list of definitions, which leaves the impression that executive coaching not only benefits, but needs elements from organizational development, transformational coaching, systems perspective, action learning, organizational consulting, etc. ECA are approved by the American Psychological Association to offer continuous education for psychologists.

The Association for Coaching (AC, 2007) see executive coaching as tailored to a 'senior management level where there is an expectation for the coach to feel as comfortable exploring business related topics, as personal development topics with the client in order to improve their *personal* [my italics] performance.

In one of the newest articles in this area Sperry (2008) defines executive coaching as: 'A form of executive consultation in which a trained professional, mindful of organizational dynamics, functions as a facilitator who forms a collaborative relationship with an executive to improve his or her skills and effectiveness in communicating the corporate vision and goals, and to foster better team performance, organizational productivity, and professional personal development. There are three types of such coaching: skill-based, performance-based, and developmental executive coaching (p.36).

Creating three types of coaching makes sense to him and his examples are probably exemplars of his own practice. Notably he also seems to be saying that coaching equals facilitation or consultation, and he seems to mean that 'facilitator is an attitude, and not a technique.

In their article 'The Executive as Coach', Waldrop and Butler (1996) state:

'The goal of (executive) coaching is the goal of good management: to make the most of an organization's valuable resources. [] (p.111).

'An effective coach knows what questions to ask when evaluating a situation, assessing problem behaviors, and calibrating his or her own coaching abilities. An effective coach also draws on a wide variety of techniques to help a manager change problem behaviours.

To identify what's really going on, it is *critical* [my italics] to observe the dynamics between the manager in question and those around him (p.111).

Client success stories for their part use words such as: draw out hidden skills or talent; reach peak performance; leadership development; personal issues; monetary payoff; blind spots; detached observer; change agents; shore up or ship out; improve performance, boost profits, make better decisions; identify missing skills or style difficulties; lasting personal change; sounding board; good management; trying to keep up; unambiguous feedback, ruthlessly results-oriented; and many other purposes in a potpourri of expectations.

Some assumptions take on the quality of popular myths. The ROI frenzy is based on assumptions in articles such as McGovern et al. (2001), later known as the 'Manchester Review' after the name of the publication. They started an ROI frenzy when they declared that a Return on Investment (ROI) of 545 per cent for a coaching programme was a conservative estimate, and compared it with the usual requirement of 25 per cent ROI. Of course there is nothing wrong about calculating payback from coaching, with Phillips (1997) as a five levels framework.

To see the flaw in the conclusion, however, take the example of temperature. We would certainly not say that 36 degrees Fahrenheit is 12 times warmer than three degrees Celsius. Similarly, their 545 per cent payback on somebody's time is a different scale than the 25 per cent sustained yearly return on investment. Senior managers should routinely produce financial performance many times their own salary, and many business initiatives far outperform 545 per cent of somebody's cost of time or are more important for other reasons.

Executive coaching is important, but at an executive level it should help focus on what is important. Top leaders leverage the whole company system and so does the executive coach potentially. Metrics need to be used with caution. In fact, good local effects often destroy results in other places and in the overall system. Goldratt (1994), Goldratt and Cox (2004) and Bragg (2007) give good advice on how to avoid dysfunctional projects.

The definitions quoted so far show that executive coaching should help enhance the overall system, for both human capital and hard areas. Clearly the impact of coaching needs to be considered at both a systems level and an individual level. Systemic thinking is a key skill for executives, and ideally for executive coaches.

Co-construction

A space to reflect

Executives work in a dense relational field where they leverage processes in addition to their individual contributions. They manage and lead others through their decisions, strategies and teams. Theirs may be a small business or a large corporation.

I know executives who reached their limit as a manager with 30 people in one geographic location, and I know managers who run multi-billion businesses spanning the globe. One of them said that there had been little difference in managing 1000 or 30,000 employees. Of course, as an executive coach, I do not assume this to be objectively

true, and it is not likely to be even subjectively true. When coaching executives, we need to hear such assumptions, understand where they are coming from and perhaps pose a challenge.

Nisbett (2003) points out that our cultural roots in Greece have served us well with logic and deduction, but at the expense of systemic thinking. A good executive coach should, therefore, help to critically explore the psychological consequences of the change initiatives. Eli Goldratt (e.g. 1994) demonstrates this beautifully in his coaching/consulting sequel about a Theory of Constraints, which today is used as a framework on the top of lean processes and six sigma. The ROI can be enormous.

As with a therapeutic relationship the coaching relationship is in itself a valuable target for reflecting on personal relationships, personality, interests, emotional intelligence and cultural differences. An executive is part of a cultural and historical context (Ricoeur, 1981) and operate within what Kitayama (2002) has coined 'cultural affordance'. Taking time to listen to an executive as he or she reflects upon roles, relationships, norms, beliefs and assumptions, is a key task for executive coaching. This is all the more important since 70 to 80 per cent of organisational projects fail to deliver their planned goals, whether in mergers & acquisitions, joint ventures or change initiatives in general (e.g. Senge et al., 1999).

Coaching is a learning project, thus some executive coaches take advantage of theories such as Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984). Because of the intrinsic complexity of the executive role, a newer version of Lewin's (1952) force field/action research or Foulkes (1964) matrix may be needed to understand what goes on and how to approach. Fortunately, research in this area is progressing as part of organisational psychology.

Goals make us work harder

Executive coaching, to fulfil the definitions, need to help not just to specify goals, but review priorities. Goals are, of course, part

and parcel of an executive's reality and coaching normally includes the achievement of specific goals even for soft skills. Goal theories contain several assumptions of how goals should be handled.

Goals are the G of the GROW acronym, the first of many such models (Whitmore, 1996; Passmore, 2005; Palmer, 2007). Generally, realistic and clear goals help generate success. Learning theory, social cognition and cognitive dissonance theory support this (stretch goals), but more is possible with BHAGs (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals) (Collins & Porras, 1996). Daring to fail is a good thing.

Specific goals seem to be more motivating and efficient than vague goals. A study by Latham and Brown (2006) found that for MBA students, long-term (one year) goals were superior to just 'doing your best', while specific learning goals worked best. There is a lesson for coaching in this.

Locke and Latham (1990) shows that feedback alone is not sufficient for behaviours to change, but requires goal setting as a response to feedback. Sharing feedback with others together with public commitment is known to increase the chances that behaviour change will follow.

However, research (e.g. Miller & Wrosch, 2007) warns against too much struggling because unrealistic goals increase C-reactive proteins, a mark of systemic inflammation and a major cause for burnout, chronic fatigue and possibly ME. Their advice is: Don't struggle too much, but disengage before it gets too serious.

Again, goals should be selected with care. Executive coaching should leave enough room for deliberation and reflexivity.

Side-effects

Are there people that we should not coach?

It is definitely not easy to manoeuvre in the corporate world, and executive coaches should not be naïve about power games and become a victim of them. This has been highlighted in several papers, e.g. Berglas (2002) 'The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coach-

ing', Khurana (2003) 'The Curse of the Superstar CEO', and Sherman and Freas (2004) 'The Wild West of Executive Coaching'.

Interestingly, the higher up in the hierarchy, the more narcissists have an advantage. Maccoby (2003) gives examples of many productive narcissists, people who are movers and shakers who dare to stand alone if needed. The risk for these people is that they may not listen enough to others and decisions can then go very wrong. Also, the line to destructive narcissism is thin, as evidenced by corporate fraud. On another level, Hare (1999) warns of white-collar psychopaths, because:

thousands of lucrative opportunities exist for a fast-talking psychopath with a head for numbers and the social skills to move easily in financial circles. For these individuals, the potential for profit is so enormous, the rules so flexible, and the watchdogs so sleepy that they must feel they have found paradise (p.119).

Although it may seem contrary to common sense (but then Wittgenstein warned against commonsense, as we remember), sales people and top managers may be hindered by too much empathy on the way to success. Hierarchies always mean competition, to achieve as well as to survive, and experiments have confirmed the historic fact that our leaders in times of crisis are selected for toughness and promise, not for empathic qualities (Forsyth, 1999). Coaches should expect personality to be an important factor in executive coaching. The noble or naïve coach may become surprised.

It follows logically from the above, that executive coaching is more than just any coaching for executives. Successful executive coaches should anchor their practice outside of coaching itself, including leadership theory (e.g. House & Podsakoff, 1994), group and organizational psychology.

What evidence?

The role of success stories

Good quality research has been generally scarce although improving recently.

When the evidence for coaching has looked impressive, one of the reasons is no doubt the considerable re-use of anecdotal evidence. Most of us assume that what we read is true.

The risk is that this kind of evidence can become 'circular evidence', because convincing stories get heavily quoted and reinforces circles of believers, yet may not lead to any real evidence.

Kilburg (2004) seems to describe the current state of affairs well when he laments:

I am left to conclude that whether we like it or not, practitioners of executive coaching have seemingly become more or less permanent residents of the empirical realms of Dodoville, having never consciously established that as a goal for ourselves, because it appears that the studies done to date demonstrate positive, non-specific effects regardless of the conceptual foundations espoused by practitioners.

I do not suggest this out of cynicism. [] The majority of humans who welcome the influence of other people in their lives appear to achieve more or less permanent positive results (p.207).

Kampa-Kokesch (2001) could find only seven studies from a major review, focusing on executive coaching. Passmore and Gibbes (2007) found another 16 in the meantime, yet conclude that they must instead turn to counselling psychology research for parallels. The differences between therapies probably carry over to coaching, i.e. you need to know what works for whom and under which circumstances.

In preparing for this paper, I reviewed some additional resources. Schlosser et al. (2006) found that coaches ($N=124$, $n=70$), coachees ($N=130$, $n=56$) and the coachees managers ($N=114$, $n=14$) differ in their targets for coaching. Of the managers top 10 priorities for capabilities and behaviours, only five were shared with the coachees, and only four with the coaches. Responses did not seem to have been analysed for possible overlaps/co-variation, but one of the conclu-

sions was that managers need to be heard for executive coaching to be better tied in with targets at the next level.

Washlyshyn et al. (2006) surveyed a group of 28 coachees ($N=33$) and a control group of 17 ($N=44$). The focus was specifically on emotional competence and required a customized programme. They recommend emotional competence as a continuous developmental focus for senior managers, irrespective of coaching method.

Unfortunately, much of the research has serious methodological flaws. For example, one of the 13 cases (NortelNetworks) in Phillipps and Mitsch (2002) assumed to be about 'The Return-on-Investment of Executive Coaching' and claimed an ROI of 529 per cent. However, a close inspection reveals that while $N=43$ and $n=30$, only 13 had direct reports, and not all 30 had received coaching! The article also seemed to have used the loose American sense of the word, i.e. where an executive is not necessarily a manager. The article is part of the ICF research library on executive coaching.

Much of the systematic research is correlational. Sometimes construct validity is spurious, or there is insufficient visual data inspection. It is sometimes overlooked that high correlations can be a symptom that variables are family related. Exceptions to the correlational approach include Kilburg and Levinson (2008) and Orenstein (2006) who represent different types of single case studies, and Turner (2006) who demonstrates a qualitative approach with three senior executives. All three provide an interesting break from anecdotes and correlations.

Worries about construct validity

Passmore and Gibbes (2007) and other authors conclude that a meta-review of executive coaching is impossible at present. This view reflects not only methodological weaknesses, but it is more worrisome that some of the constructs may not be sufficiently grounded. We should also assume a normal placebo effect.

Some concerns regarding the quality of (executive) coaching include:

Specifically in relation to NLP, Grimley (2007) sees a need for its creators to define their legacy, otherwise it will be seen as pop psychology.

For 360 approaches maybe the biggest worry is that it defines ideal behaviours explicitly. McDowall and Kurz (2008) worry that the theories behind assessments may be deficient. The result can be dysfunctional changes enforced by group pressure. As a precaution, they recommend using a method of evaluation suggested by Fletcher et al. (1998).

MBTI Myers-Brigg Type Indicators seem popular for coaching and leadership development, despite considerable problems from a personality psychology point of view. Maybe the biggest problem is caused by its dichotomy. While in the Five Factor Model (e.g. Piedmont, 1998) you are allowed to be neither introvert nor extrovert, MBTI forces you into one or the other category. It splits types in the middle of the apex of the normal curve, which means that if you are anywhere within the error margin, your type may be a total artefact. Yet it is used to interpret you as a prototypic member of that category and in contrast to somebody on the other side.

While the evidence confirms that as such coaching works, but the Dodo bird verdict is probably not correct for coaching, that 'Everybody has won and all must have prizes (Luborsky et al., 2002; Rosenzweig, 1936).

Conclusions

Executive coaching may be seen as a niche because of the different contexts and processes in which the executive is not directly involved as a worker. The impact is not the result from just their own work, but far more important are relational elements

including leadership, power and influence. Performance is often time lagged and a result of prior decisions and projects. Results are usually through groups and chained processes rather than direct influence. I have argued that their role is materially different from individual contributors.

Relationships are at the core of executive coaching as this is the way executives leverage the whole system that they are responsible for, in fact also adjoining and interconnecting systems. They are part of management teams or board of directors and influence decisions beyond their immediate responsibility. Good executive coaches can contribute heavily through systemic thinking.

It thus seems clear that executive coaching is not just coaching for executives. Executives are people like others, but they hold roles that are different from non-executives in material ways. If you do not need a business degree to coach them, at least a non-trivial understanding of business practices is necessary.

Importantly, coaching is never just an opportunity; it is also an opportunity cost because the executive might be better off doing something else!

There is nothing so practical as good theory, and it looks like it is time to go back and agree on the assumptions for both coaching and executive coaching. Whether separate techniques, eclecticism or integration is the way forward, a good foundation is important.

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