

## **Executive coaching: Coaching, coaxing or counselling?**

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Expectations of senior human resources practitioners in a contemporary organisation are to actively support the achievement of business strategy by attracting and retaining talent, optimising leadership impact, and developing critical competencies in employees, such as emotional intelligence. Corporate or executive coaching has thus developed an enormous profile in organisations over the past five years, and is billed as a top-shelf retention strategy by the coaching evangelists and equally as a target for unabashed cynicism that would put most UFO sceptics to shame.

Interest in executive coaching is high and will only get bigger. Executive coaching is very unique, and the privilege, power and responsibility of it should not be taken lightly. Executive coaching requires not only exceptional interpersonal skills, but the ability to deftly navigate a three-way partnership between the psychologist-coach, the coaching client and the client's employer, to find the ethical balance in the pursuit of personal and professional goals, and to demonstrate credibility in supporting clients within a 'wellness' paradigm.

### **Why coaching (at all) and not something else?**

There are several obvious considerations of working life that must be taken into account when working with executives. Executives are time poor, are paid to get results, and have egos or 'business face' they must manage. These three contextual factors support executive coaching beautifully. The coaching is usually conducted in short units of time (typically one to two-hour sessions), is tailored and goal/outcome driven, and is discreet, if not entirely confidential, to the coach and the coaching client. Sometimes sessions are pre-planned but with licence to explore critical incidents on an as-needed basis. Within the context of agreed outcomes, the client calls the shots.

So time may be scarce and ego may be bountiful but you may have noted I did not say all executives are, by definition, open and enthusiastic learners, high on emotional intelligence or exceptional receivers of feedback. They are presumably successful according to their organisation's criteria, but they are not automatically possessing of vast insight or self-awareness to balance their intellect, their technical or business acumen or their high achievement drive. In fact so many organisations these days still structure their career progression in a way that means if someone wishes to advance, they may, of necessity have to take more and more responsibility for people management and yet may not be all that well suited to such an important responsibility.

Skilled coaching in a well-matched coaching liaison affords some compelling benefits. Firstly, this type of coaching is tailored or individualistic. It is private, and often more intimate because the client feels safe to share their innermost thoughts, feelings, fears without worrying they will be judged for weakness, inexperience or ineptitude or for playing favourites by choosing selected staff as confidantes. The private nature of the coaching means the coach can challenge (read as *really* challenge) blind spots, fears and regressive behaviour, while assisting the coaching client to differentiate between wishful intent and true intent. Coaching is more socially desirable than therapy even when it is therapy that may be required, and in parallel is often more wellness-oriented and solution- rather than problem-focused.

Thus it feels more positive and the coaching client can feel quite robust, capable, and, with deference to Bruce McAvaney the AFL football commentator, even 'special'.

While a lot of the contemporary literature asserts that coaching is being more commonly regarded as developmental than remedial, I would suggest this is as much about the way organisations wish to frame it, as it is a reflection of actual content or orientation. The fact is coaching is always about optimising performance. It's just that some coaching clients are coming from a long way back! Even 'developmental' coaching presupposes some gap between where the person is on a given competence and where they want/need to be so either way we are still talking about gaps. The key difference to me is not in whether or not a remedial frame or a development frame is put around coaching (except if it helps get them there), but in the distinction between *coaching* and *therapy*. The former assumes wellness and not illness/maladaptation in the coaching client. The client sets their own goals, focuses mostly on the future and is treated as fundamentally capable, intelligent and efficacious.

### **Who gets coached?**

My experience of coaching candidature is that it lies along a very long continuum. At one end, executive coaching appears to be offered to star employees as a reward, a talent retention strategy, and to maximise their potential. Others, perhaps the middle group, are commonly employees who have key knowledge or subject matter expertise, core competencies or specialist technical nous but aren't well rounded in their perspective. At the other end of the continuum are those for whom coaching is 'Custer's last stand' after which, if they don't measure up, then at least organisations can put their hand on their hearts and say: "We tried". This pressing remediation may be around performance but can also address conduct. I am sure I have not seen the first or last high-flying executives who are hugely talented but are wreaking havoc. We could call those our "marvellous monsters". This is made even scarier when one considers their 'reach' in organisations and the significant imprint (good or bad) they make on organisational culture, and therefore organisational health.

To a lesser extent organisations or actual coaching clients can be attracted to executive coaching because the employee is dealing with some form of crisis and the empathic and astute organisation offers coaching as opposed to a pamphlet on the Employee Assistance Program or a risky suggestion to go see a shrink! Perhaps this can be justified, as legitimate coaching content can be defined as anything and everything that impacts on the client's effectiveness at work. Why? Because work is (usually) paying.

In addition, not all the content has to be work-related, nor does work 'own' the confidential discussion even if the employer is a key stakeholder in the outcomes. I believe there are serious ethical implications in establishing a coaching relationship with someone knowing as you begin that one is really 'corporatising' psychotherapy, particularly if you're not into brief therapy and the client may just be starting to glean insights into reasons for any dysfunction and then the corporate dollars run out. Of course there is a moral obligation to provide a return of investment for the organisation that pays, and deep and persistent exploration of family of origin and couple issues, for example, are likely to have but a tenuous connection to the person's effectiveness at work. However, I am never frightened to go there if that unlocks insight and resolve to enhance personal and professional wellbeing and performance.

## **Who coaches?**

Coaches tend to fall into a few distinct categories. Some are business coaches in that their primary if not exclusive focus is in improving or re-engineering business performance. They are far less likely to be psychology-trained. Some coaches garner credibility because they have 'been there, done that' and clients want some of what they've got (or made!). Their credibility lies in their past performance and they are engaged on the basis that they can transmit their knowledge and skills to someone else through coaching so as to replicate that success. Tim Watson was spectacularly unsuccessful in his attempt to do that for St Kilda despite the fact that he was a retired legendary player for Essendon. Other coaches, if they're expert in anything, are expert in coaching itself and there are numerous examples of former players, for example in tennis who became coaches of far more successful charges; that is they enabled their protégés to achieve higher ranking and more sustained success than they were able to. So perhaps having played the game at a high level makes them credible but it is their gift as coaches that enables them to catalyse exceptional performance. Some coaches are experts in human and organisational behaviour. If intelligent, driven successful people were able to do it all by themselves, one would think they would have done it by now. That is where our profession comes into its own.

Our professional code of conduct supports the discretion and sensitivity required to manage the delicate three-way partnership. Psychologists are duty bound to operate within an ethical framework. This is our bread and butter. We understand the critical importance of being faithful to working contracts, honouring the client's intellect, their right to make choices and explore their own solutions whilst maintaining a healthy respect for their defence mechanisms. When are we challenged on these issues? Firstly in needing to differentiate between what we owe the economic buyer and what we owe the coaching client. Secondly, in negotiating achievable outcomes with both parties and how and what we will communicate and with whom. Thirdly, ensuring we don't foster dependence (even more so as funding could be cut off by a third party at any time) and also by walking the professional tightrope between challenging without belligerence, deep enquiry without voyeurism, pressing for accountability without bullying, creating intimacy and trust without disempowering.

The best case scenario is one which is truly life changing for the client and quite feasibly, given their organisational, familial and communal reach, indirectly life changing for others around them. Being part of that experience is both a formidable responsibility and a rare privilege, and one which professional psychological practice both prepares us for and provides us.

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