

October 2001

Article on executive coaching published by

**The Journal of Organisational and Social
Dynamics**

Author Halina Brunning

The Six Domains of Executive Coaching

Abstract

Executive coaching is a complex process, which must be delivered smoothly and elegantly for it to be effective. The article argues that the coaching process is influenced by six inter-dependent domains. These domains are present, either explicitly or implicitly, acknowledged or unacknowledged, during the coaching sessions. The author proposes that behind these six domains exists an independent and substantive body of knowledge, such as psychotherapy, counselling, professional training in the chosen field etc. The executive coaching process does not directly address this body of knowledge. Some clients, however, as a result of the coaching process, may be inclined and interested to pursue these avenues.

Introduction

Executive coaching has become the approach of choice in management development and as such has established itself as a standard in some industries (Eaton, 2000).

Much has been written recently about the rationale and process of executive coaching (Gallwey, 2000) and various warnings have been issued about its application and misapplication (Noer, 2000) and Loh & Kay (2003).

In this article, I wish to argue that executive coaching is a multi-factorial process based on at least six inter-dependent domains,

which are present in the sessions. These six domains should be recognised and acknowledged as legitimate aspects of the executive coaching framework. I agree with the definition of executive coaching as a “two way process through which individuals identify new possibilities, harness resources in pursuit of specified goals and enhance their performance” (Eaton, 2000). In order to be allowed to pursue specified goals and enhance their performance, the clients need to bring into the session and make available to the executive coach at least six domains of their current situation (see diagram one).

The Six Domains of Executive Coaching - a Proposed Model

This simple model of executive coaching presupposes an interconnection between the client’s personality, life story and the choice of professional role. In support of this choice of role, as related to personality and the client’s life story, are two additional aspects: client’s skills, competencies, abilities and talents, as well as aspirations, career progression and future career options. The environment within which the client performs the current organisational role becomes the stage for the unfolding drama. And so, it would be for the reasons of challenges, doubts, insecurities within the intra-psychic environment, as well as the challenges and changes in the external working environment which may collectively give rise to a request for executive coaching (see below).

Behind each of these proposed six factors or domains (see diagram below) exists extensive body of separate knowledge which may need to be evoked in order to address salient issues that can arise out of the executive coaching process. For example, if it is concluded that client's personality seems to be the crucial factor in his/hers problems with the current organisational role, or in relation to the workplace environment, perhaps further work requires not more executive coaching, but psychotherapy. If, for instance, a recurrent theme, let's say that of loss, becomes essential for the client to unravel and acknowledge, a period of counselling may become the appropriate choice of action, rather than more executive coaching.

Conversely, if the executive coaching process uncovers that client has specific skills shortage or throws into doubt his/her career development to-date, or future career options, then additional training in the chosen or related field, or professional and career guidance may be more appropriate to undertake at this stage than to continue with executive coaching sessions.

To this effect, the proposed model of executive coaching is all-embracing and dynamic in its flexibility and sensitivity to the client's needs as they relate to his/her past, present and future. It also enables mapping out of appropriate outcomes and action beyond the immediate executive coaching framework.

Whatever the actual outcome, these six domains (the inner circles of the diagram below) are the building blocks of the executive coaching process. It has been suggested to me that there should really be a seventh circle, an additional one to denote *Home* and whatever that means for the client: partner, family, parents, children etc and the demands that this adds to workplace stress.

Rightly or wrongly, I felt that the circles denoting *Personality* and *Life-story* should contain and sufficiently address the

domestic issues. I invite the reader to consider the case study described below to check whether this is in fact so.

The Six Domain Model of Executive Coaching in Action



copyrights Halina Brunning/2000

Arising from the above description of the model I propose that these six domains are contemporaneously present during the executive coaching sessions and constitute legitimate and appropriate focus of work:

- a) the client's personality
- b) the client's life story
- c) the client's skills, competencies, abilities and talents
- d) the client's aspirations, career progression so far and future directions thereof
- e) the client's current workplace environment in which they perform
- f) their current organisational role

What often leads a client to seek help of an executive coach is an issue, a disruption, a doubt or aspiration felt, experienced, or witnessed, during the performance of their current organisational role. No organisational role is ever undertaken either consciously, or unconsciously, without good psychological reasons for choosing it (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994) and so to have to address the role performance in isolation from the other aspects of the client's life would be to impoverish the process of coaching.

The six domains are inter-connected in relation to the current organisational role, as performed by the client. The coach needs to negotiate with the client a relatively free access to relevant

data and information, so as to deepen the discourse that takes place within the session. I would argue that a good way to start a coaching relationship is by negotiating a contract with the client with the help of and with overt references to this diagram. And so, I would bring this diagram to the first session with a prospective new client and introduce my way of working within the executive coaching framework, whilst referring to the six domains. This would enable me to invite the client to consider bringing relevant material from all the six domains of their life and work. The aim of this process is to enable the client to reach new learning, new perspective and achieve better integration of salient aspects, which have a bearing upon their role and their career. For these reasons, the diagram illustrates the inter-dependency, which exists at an individual level between the personality, life story, career choice, competencies and roles occupied within the working environment of the client. The overt aim of the executive coaching is not necessarily to reach a better personal integration, to deepen personal insight, or to change self-perception, *per se*. However, if all six domains are recognised as equally valid aspects of the executive coaching process, the client may well experience changes that go beyond improvements of their current role performance.

In order to apply this model successfully the coach would need to be knowledgeable in the sphere of psychology, organisational and group dynamics, the impact of change and individual development both psychological and professional; in other words everything that constitute the inner circles of the diagram. What is not necessarily required is in-depth knowledge or practice of psychotherapy, counselling, personality testing, career guidance, skills and professional training etc, in effect what is contained in the outer circles of the diagram.

I consider the ability to integrate conclusions and insights arising from work undertaken in each of these six domains the most important, both for the coach as well as the client. The case study below illustrates one such attempt at integration using the six domain model of coaching.

A Case Study

I wish to illustrate this point by using an example from executive coaching sessions with an NHS Manager.

Margaret¹ was a young ambitious professional, who became a manager of a large clinical service area within the NHS. Management appealed to her, she was not new to it and was keen to develop herself further in this role. She was already attending learning sets as well as various management training courses. She also negotiated a few sessions of individual executive coaching with me.

During the first session Margaret described her plans, ambitions and aspirations. The nature of the first session was rather practical and its aim was to help Margaret to gain clarity over the first few steps necessary towards reaching her own aspirations and goals.

The second session was very different; Margaret started by declaring that she did not know what we should be talking about, as apparently nothing really pressing came to her mind. After a moment, she chose to talk about her current workload. In the first instance I asked her to illustrate her current workload on the provided flipchart and to draw histograms of relative height, so as to illustrate relative aspects of her current work. I then asked her to draw corresponding histograms, but this time, to illustrate *the emotional*, as opposed to *the factual* weight, associated with various aspects of her work. The next step was to invite her to put forward possible hypothesis about any connections, which may exist between the factual and the emotional weighting she associated with various aspects of her work. Immediately, a pattern began to emerge and Margaret noted that there was a correlation between some aspects of her current work and the degree of emotional pressure that she experienced.

¹ This is not her real name. Client's permission for publication has been obtained

These were the aspects which Margaret found most emotionally exerting:

- managing conflicts where no clear line management existed
- dealing with another organisation, whilst being employed by her current organisation
- supporting and redeveloping her staff
- strategy

I asked her to consider whether there was anything which might be connecting the above four aspects of her work and Margaret identified the following:

- managing conflicts
- managing her own anxiety
- staying in control
- being strategic
- trying to stay in a “win-win” situation

Further analysis of the above enabled her to reduce the list to just one underlying issue, namely that of *trying to control her own anxiety*.

As that became the focal issue, we talked about various strategies she could adopt in order to control her anxiety; such as normalising her experiences, on the assumption that anxiety is commonplace within the NHS and is especially rife at time of organisational transition etc. Her own longing to have a strategy for everything was understood as an attempt to control her own anxiety, not just about the “here and now” situations, but also about any future events. This led us to discuss the reasons why Margaret always wanted to stay in control and was so keen not to show that she may be faltering, even if it could be fully explained by the novelty of her position and the untested management role. Margaret was clear that she did not want to show her vulnerability and uncertainty to anybody. She

understood that her need to stay in control at all costs was at times exhausting and emotionally draining to her. She did not allow herself to appear uncertain, or vulnerable, and was not clear as to the kind of behaviour she would need to exhibit in order to show either of the above.

At this point of the session, I asked her to think in terms of a befitting metaphor that could describe this particular attitude. Margaret was invited to illustrate her thoughts by a drawing, if she wished. Margaret drew **a swan**. She described the image of the swan as “effortlessly gliding on the surface of the water, whilst under the water the swan was furiously paddling in a way that was invisible to the spectator”.

This telling symbol of her own struggle enabled us to seek meaning in the “above the water” and “below the water surface”. These two positions correspondingly indicated “what is within the public domain and can be seen” as well as “what is within the private domain and cannot be seen”. Short discussion ensued about the significance of these two positions in Margaret’s life. I asked her why was it so risky to allow any of the private elements to be demonstrated at work, i.e. within the public domain? In other words, what was *the worst* that could have happened, should Margaret ever show her true feelings at work? Margaret pondered for a moment and offered two examples from her private life when she did show her angry feelings, a reaction that was an exception to the rule. She retold an episode from a recent life event, when she was justifiably angry with some of her friends.

At this point it became important to identify what consequences, if any, did Margaret observe as a result of her decision to show her angry feelings? She came to the conclusion that, in effect, the outcome of that particular situation was very positive, as her friends recognised the strength of her feelings and convictions, and as a result, offered her considerable help and support.

Margaret was asked whether she could expect similar effects at work, should she ever allow herself to show her real feelings? We debated whether this was more to do with her preferred personal style of interaction, or was it expected of a contemporary woman in management that “feelings were *off the agenda*”? Margaret promised to think about it in relation to her own management position and life in general.

The session was nearly at its end when Margaret looked again at her own drawing of the swan and said: “it looks more like a duck than a swan!” This led me to ask if a duck would have been a more appropriate symbol to illustrate her aspiring management role, than a swan? Margaret laughed, saying that a duck was far less “split” between the private and the public presentation of itself, than a swan. The swan, she agreed, appears to pay a heavy price for the image of superficial perfection that it tries to convey. Unexpectedly, Margaret asked “should I try to be more like a duck than a swan?” This enabled me to link up the theme of this session with the emerging meaning Margaret appeared to have ascribed to both symbols. The second session was, after all, about trying to understand how the factual workload of Margaret’s job corresponded with the emotional meaning she associated with various aspects of her management tasks. Was Margaret’s attempt to appear calm and in total control, as if unaffected and without emotions, the reason why some of her management tasks had a heavy emotional burden attached to them? I do believe that if she was able to experiment with being more “*duck-like*”, rather than “*swan-like*” she might feel less exhausted and less stressed at work. At the end of the session we agreed another date to meet.

The third and last session took place a month later. Margaret reported that the idea of “the swan”, which was later replaced by “the duck”, has been a very powerful reminder of the two positions she could occupy at work. The first position was slightly idealistic and perfectionistic, delivered at a high cost to herself, the other, much more realistic and sustainable. In the period between the second and the third session she was often

checking if her reactions at work represented the “swan syndrome”. Margaret felt that this theme also influenced her way of seeing herself in role and allowed her to question whether a full time management position was really for her. At the end of the third session she was veering more towards developing herself in a part time management role with a good balance between her public and private life. Interestingly, the original “split” between the public and the private, as described above, has been the most influential concept in the work we did together. This theme appeared to have somehow connected the six domains of her life and work and it also highlighted and integrated a number of salient issues in her life.

Analysis and Interpretation

I shall attempt to illustrate how the six domains of executive coaching, as featuring in the above diagram, were present throughout the three sessions of executive coaching with Margaret.

During the first session we focused on Margaret’s current organisational role that of a newly appointed manager of a large clinical service area and we took into account the wider organisational context in which her role was performed. She, like a number of my clients, worked within a continually changing organisational environment that was in the middle of yet another major reorganisation. Some space within the first session was devoted to the analysis of the context (*domain e of the diagram*) in which she aspired to develop her management role (*domain f of the diagram*). The focus of the first session, however, was on her aspirations, career progression and its future directions (*domain d of the diagram*) with some references to her current skills and competencies and any shortfall she may have to address (*domain c*) in order to meet her aspirations. Margaret’s personality (*domain a*) and various elements of her life story (*domain b*) were implicit in the first session but became a prominent source of connections and learning in the second session.

Between the second and the last session a degree of integration appeared to have taken place within Margaret's view of herself and she came close to a decision about her future career direction. At the time we parted, there appeared a higher degree of congruence between the various aspects of her life and work. Margaret was also very clear as to what she needed to do in order to stay "on course".

Discussion

In order to allow clients to make connections between various levels of meaning (Brunning, 1998; White, 2000) as an executive coach I might use various therapeutic and counselling skills and techniques. However, at no time do I actually enter the domain of counselling or psychotherapy *per se*. Subsequently, it was of no great concern to note that there was a considerable split between "the public" and "the private" domain in the life of my client. So long as this split was noted and understood as a recurrent theme, we did not need to trace its aetiology and try to change the pattern of associated behaviour, as might have been the case in psychotherapy. Correspondingly, I may encourage my clients to take up various roles, or to experiment with different nuances to their main role in between sessions, but I do not actually engage in skills training as such. Having said that, it should not be excluded that as a result of executive coaching, the clients may not be tempted to pursue further training, counselling, or even psychotherapy, at some stage of their development.

The practitioners of executive coaching differ considerably in the extent to which they are happy to embrace various domains within the executive framework. Lionel Stapley, for instance (personal communication, 2001) starts every new executive coaching contract by inviting his new client to tell his or her life story, so that the more contemporary problems, such as those experienced within the context of the current role performance,

could be understood and seen as rooted in the client's childhood and in the relationships with parental figures.

Another of my recent clients did tell me her life story, quite spontaneously, during the first session. This was very useful to my building an understanding of the role her career has played in her life and why therefore the prospect of retirement was such a big issue for her. During the second session, however, the client fed back the effect of "having had her burden lifted off her shoulders", which she clearly ascribed to having told me her own life story. Powerful as it is, the telling of the life story may not be sufficient in itself to create the desired changes for the client. The telling of the life story needs to be empathically received, profoundly understood and connected with, both intellectually and emotionally, in a way that will allow the client to "re-author" their own life (White, 2000). This process may well belong to the domain of psychotherapy, but if it also creates new possibilities and allows new perspectives to emerge, it also fits comfortably into the domain of executive coaching.

Conclusion

I am of the view that there is no need to start each executive coaching relationship with the re-telling of the client's life story, so long as the existence of the story is openly acknowledged and access to it negotiated from the outset of the contract (see also Eaton, 2000). Additionally, attention must be given to a respectful and appropriate reception of the story, if and when it is offered within the context of executive coaching.

It is my belief, however, that if we were, as executive coaches, able and willing to address *the whole person* within the organisational and also human contexts, we would be working to our client's best interest and would also be conveying the right organisational and management principles.

Halina Brunning

References

Brunning, H. (1998) “Working Briefly with Meaning” An International Journal of Psychology and Psychotherapy, *Changes* , Vol 16 Number 4

Eaton, J. (2000) “Coaching stories”, Organisations and People Journal, Vol 7 Number 1

Gallwey, T. (2000) “The Inner Game of Work”, Orion Business Books

Noer, D. (2000) “When it doesn’t Work; the Three Derailment Factors in a Coaching Relationship”, Organizations and People Journal, Vol 7 Number 2

Obholzer A., Roberts V. Z. (1994) “The Unconscious at Work; Individual and Organisational Stress in the Human Services”. Rutledge 1994

White, M. (2000) “Reflections on Narrative Practice”, Dulwich Centre Publications

Halina Brunning is a Chartered Clinical Psychologist, Executive Coach and Organisational Consultant. She wrote a number of articles and co-wrote three books on the management of change. She is based in London and can be contacted on halina@brunningonline.net.