

## Hestia and Coaching: Speaking to the 'hearth' of the matter

*"Shall we, then, begin with Hestia, according to custom?"* [Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus*, 401b]

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### Abstract

As many reasons are put forward for the rapid proliferation of executive coaching as there are sceptics who believe it is a passing fad. This paper, after analysing the results of recent research into coaching's effectiveness, proposes that it may be serving a more significant space than one would imagine. Coaching is not simply about producing pragmatic results such as peak performance, behavioural changes and improved results (although it delivers all these benefits). It is a cultural phenomenon in that it is capturing the collective psyche in a significant way, filling a deeply felt need in the unconscious lives of people in organisations. It connects with the ancient archetype of Hestia, representing hearth, centring and a sanctuary for self-focus.

**Key Words:** Executive coaching, cultural phenomenon, effectiveness research, Jungian archetypes, sanctuary.

### Introduction

Executive coaching is the fastest growing form of organisational consulting. In the United States it is an industry reportedly worth more than \$1 billion dollars a year (*Corporate Therapy*, 2003; ICF Coaching Study, 2007). Diverse reasons are given for its popularity. For example, organisational change agents view it as a highly effective leadership tool (Anna, Chesley & Davis, 2001) or as a tool for promoting peak performance (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). Some consider it the way to deal with the complexity of organisational life, or part of the ongoing attempt to move command/control organisational cultures to mentoring-coaching cultures (Armstrong, Matthews & McFarlane, 2005). Others regard it merely as a trend in a crazy search for easy answers (Frisch, 2001).

What is not considered in accounts of its popularity is executive coaching as a cultural phenomenon: that is, something transcending its usual category — creating a buzz as a "must have" — because it is profoundly reaching into the public consciousness. This paper seeks to understand this by exploring executive coaching as a space that has opened in the fabric of organisational life to fulfil a deep-seated and often unconscious need. Drawing on the results of a coaching effectiveness survey, and connecting them to Carl Jung's notions of the collective unconscious, executive coaching can be seen as representing the archetype Hestia, goddess of hearth and home.

## **Methodology**

The starting point is analysis of the coaching effectiveness research undertaken by the Institute of Executive Coaching (Armstrong & Melsner, 2005; Armstrong, Melsner & Tooth, 2007). The survey instrument used in this research utilised a number of different measures. One was a series of questions designed to inquire how people thought executive coaching produced benefits (if any). Of the 111 respondents, 92% said it was because the coach asked reflective questions that had them thinking differently; 87% said it was a safe place to talk about problems and issues outside the organisation; 86% said the coach constructively challenged their ways of thinking and the assumptions they were making; and 85% said coaching provided a sounding board for testing and expressing new ideas.

The respondents therefore indicated that they viewed executive coaching as providing time for people to reflect and talk about issues they faced. It was an opportunity to be listened to and engage in reflective dialogue. They regarded it as a "safe" place; a sanctuary detached from the everyday strivings that are part and parcel of an organisation's political landscape. Ultimately, they saw it as a place where they could receive support to re-invent themselves and, within the bounds of respect and safety, be constructively challenged to try on new ways of being.

## **The Hestia Myth**

Carl Jung, the Swiss founder of analytical psychology, coined the term 'collective unconscious' in 1916 to describe what he thought of as a pool of common human experiences arising from shared instincts and culture. The collective unconscious is manifest in, and transmitted through, myths — cultural narratives that will not go away. They are passed through the ages and peopled by archetypal, generic, idealised figures representing patterns of human experience. For example, the "great mother" archetypes, which are found in cultural narratives about perfect mothering, are similar enough for a generic ideal to emerge. These characters, although sifted by time, remain remarkably consistent and relevant. They continue to speak to us from some deep, timeless flow of common human experience. By referring back to ancient myths and stories, we can begin to make sense of something that is expressing itself in some potent way in our lives.

One such myth that connects with the experience of the coaching survey respondents is an archetype from Greek mythology: the goddess Hestia, who represented the centre of the city and home. The Hestia archetype is also found in Roman mythology, as Vesta. Interestingly, the etymology of the word "hearth" and the Latin word for "focus" are the same. The hearth (Hestia) was represented by a round stone on which a fire burned. Keeping the fire alive was central to the health and security of the family and the city's inhabitants as whole. The official seat of Hestia is in Delphi, at the Omphalos, which was considered the centre of the Earth in ancient times. Hestia was the goddess of all goddesses. She had no adventures and did not get caught up in wars. However, she was the most frequently honoured of the Gods — each day, at the beginning and end of all gatherings at home and in the city.

Psychologically, the Hestia symbol is an external centre as well as an inner symbol. It expresses the importance of our internal centre, coming home to ourselves, focusing and finding our centre. Hestia, the hearth, is a quiet place; a sanctuary to converse, reflect and come back to oneself.

In the Hestia myth, she was the first of Cronos and Rhea's 10 children. Cronos, a Titan, was a fierce and jealous man who ate his first nine children at birth. Rhea finally took action at the birth of the 10th child, Zeus, who was rescued because his mother wrapped a stone in a blanket for Cronos to swallow. She then sent Zeus away to be raised elsewhere. As a grown young man, he returned and killed his father, making him regurgitate his children. Hestia was thus born again (this time fully grown). As the first devoured, she was regurgitated last and was now the youngest. Hestia, being both youngest and oldest, is an example of the paradox that is frequently present in myths. It indicates the paradoxical nature of our engagement with the world. As the hearth, Hestia is the centre of home/family/city, and also our personal centre. Neither can exist without the other. Life is paradoxical — a dance between our internal reality and the external world.

There are only three narratives that teach us about Hestia. The first tells us of her political independence, the second the need for a sanctuary, and the third her insistence on presence in everyday life. After receiving many overtures from suitors, she requested of Zeus the right to remain a virgin, which was granted. This was an unusual state for a woman in the ancient world. There are many interpretations of this, one being that she stood her ground in terms of marriage, staying strong and independent in the face of social and political pressure. Her independence meant she was not motivated by self-interest and was the only goddess who was not “manipulative or drawn into conflicts and arguments” (Philocleon in Aristophanes' *The Wasps* 846, in Graves 1957, 75). The second story is that at some point, while attending a feast, she got drowsy and slept. She was awakened by the braying of a donkey and saved herself from the rampantly sexual Priapus, who was on top of her, trying to rape her. Hestia thus represented personal security as the sacred duty of hospitality. This is expressed through the hearth as sanctuary. The last story is that, although originally listed as one of the 12 Olympian Gods, Hestia gave up her seat in favour of newcomer Dionysus to tend to the sacred fire on Mount Olympus, thus choosing to live on the Earth among mortals and bringing attention to the importance of being present in everyday life.

### **Hestia and Coaching**

So how does this myth connect to the research on coaching effectiveness? Much of the psychological symbolism connected to Hestia is present in the picture that participants fed back in the research. Five aspects of the archetype are expressed in their perceptions. These will be illustrated by direct quotes from respondent who took part in research interviews.

1. Hestia is figured by a round central stone, a place of fire and the hearth of the home. Home in this sense is not only literal, but metaphorical. It indicates peoples'

ever-present internal life and the need for stillness and intentional focus to access it. If Hestia is honoured, the warmth and glow of the smouldering coals help people focus on their internal dialogues and gain acceptance of themselves. The hearth in ancient times provided a literal space for deep, intimate communion, a warm place for people to sit silently, or quietly talking about themselves. Metaphorically, empathy and concentrated listening helps people to come home to themselves, and the ritual of executive coaching served as the metaphorical hearth for the organisation. There were a number of respondents' comments that reflect this need:

- *(Coaching) gave me time to reflect - a breather and a balance and the time to focus on myself gave me improved self-awareness.*
- *It was an awakening of self.*
- *Gave me the opportunity to focus and clarify things in my own mind.*
- *Personal development issues were the key area (for me in coaching).*
- *Opportunity to step away from the day-to-day to-do list.*
- *The difference for me was self-awareness.*
- *It is an evolving path with no start or finish... I've even taken some (learnings) into my home life.*
- *Relationships moved to a deeper level, a whole new layer of (self) exposed.*
- *I have gained more self-awareness through the framework.*
- *Better confidence in who I am.*

2. Hestia wanted to live among the mortals, so she left Olympus to live frugally, without great fame. In making this choice, she teaches of the importance of life immediately felt, as in "here and now"; the presence to steadily dwell on the matter at hand. This aspect of the archetype was strongly expressed in Hestia's Roman equivalents, who were also keepers of the salt - the salt that gives savour to the common everyday, thus symbolising the importance of attending to the "now" in order to realise its significance (Hillman, 1995). In the research interviews, people talked about the importance of the coaching in helping them gain focus and clarity, and of being more conscious of everyday relationships, and the confidence to deal with them. Respondents commented:

- *I focus now on what is important now.*
- *I work smarter, not harder.*
- *Focused on areas I knew I needed to, but was not doing.*
- *Focused on issues that were current.*
- *I'm not so muddled in my head—clear ideas.*
- *Helped me get clear about what I really want to do and where do I really want to go.*
- *Gave me a sort of clarity and guided new ways of doing things day to day.*
- *The penny dropped (when the coach was able to articulate things I was not).*
- *I'm now more conscious of how people operate, react day to day.*
- *I could talk honestly (in coaching).*

3. Hestia's story contains a warning against disrespectful treatment of (female) guests who were protected by the hearth. Her presence signals refuge for visitors, reminding us about the duty to offer warmth, sanctuary and hospitality even to strangers. Although her altars included every family hearth, there is also a power to Hestia which is beyond the family home and hearth. At the more developed level of the polis (city-state, body of citizens), Hestia symbolises the alliance between the colonies and their mother cities. Visitors from the colonies were not free in the city until they had visited its centre, the "hearth". Research participants described coaching as a sanctuary. Examples comments are:

- *Talked about many things I wouldn't talk to others about. Felt safe.*
- *The confidentiality of the sessions was important. There was a comfort level from day one.*
- *Felt safe, talked about many things I wouldn't talk to others about.*
- *Gave me the ability to be open and vulnerable.*
- *Complete openness to bring anything up with no reprisals.*
- *It worked really well as a sounding board with independence from the organisation.*
- *It was safe; like an incident debrief.*
- *It was good to be able to talk honestly.*
- *Within the first session, we established a good relationship.*
- *It was not formal. The coach was easy to talk to, like a friend, very relaxed and gave the freedom to bring anything up.*
- *The coach had the ability to sit back and listen for the gaps. Thinking through, asking questions and getting more focused, then reflecting back to me by drawing out particular models.*

4. The hearth fire of a Greek or Roman household was not allowed to go out unless it was ritually extinguished and ritually renewed. This process was accompanied by impressive rituals of completion, purification and renewal. In the interviews, participants in the research talked about the ritual and structure of executive coaching.

They commented:

- *The monthly sequence was useful and we developed a framework.*
- *Any gaps in the sequence meant loss of momentum.*
- *The coach would listen, reflect and give a model framing and helping me understand.*
- *The frameworks of thinking enabled me to think more deeply.*
- *Coaching is an approach I use now to open a conversation.*
- *It is a framework that protects against (unhelpful) emotions.*
- *I am more structured—I set objectives.*
- *It gave me tools and confidence.*
- *It is a framework that supports intuitive thinking.*
- *I learnt to focus, be prepared before every session, and set milestones.*

5. The hearth was a heap of glowing charcoal. The coals were kept alive by a covering of white ash, considered the most cosy and economical means of heating in ancient times. The fire represents conflict and wars that in the Hestia space were suppressed to enable detachment and reflection. With Hestia not getting caught up in conflicts or wars, she was detached from politics and remained an independent and trusted adviser because of it. The coach's independence from the organisation was an aspect of executive coaching that was important to many people interviewed. Also, the independence enabled the sharing and reflection on difficult conversations and difficult behavioural problems. The coach was an independent source to mull over and work through difficult situations, giving advice and strategies to undertake between sessions. Participant's comments include:

- *The coach was independent, so I could talk about political issues.*
- *Independence of the coach (was important) —not involved in any company politics.*
- *I was able to be critical of people in the company at all levels as needed. The honest environment encourages exploration of what I want to achieve.*
- *(It was important) to have a completely independent sounding board.*
- *The independence is a huge benefit... With an independent coach, there are no reprisals.*
- *It enabled me to remove myself from the emotion (of difficult issues).*
- *Helped me with fierce conversations, saying what I need to say, then sitting in silence and listening. I now have a better understanding of others, more empathy.*
- *I feel more comfortable to deal with (difficult) issues.*
- *Talking through difficult issues, coach was very good at talking through difference. I can make more sense of (people).*
- *I learnt conflict resolution.*
- *I learnt to deal with areas of conflict, political issues.*

The respondents' accounts speak to aspects of the organisational life that executive coaching is responding to. At a general level, this can be as simple as a "sanctuary" in which people will not be disturbed; a place that has a framework (or ritual) and the support to re-connect with one's centre and re-kindle one's fire. Jungian academic Bernie Neville (2003) has described contemporary organisational life as being lived through another archetype, the god Hermes, who represents the superficial marketer of fantasy. Hermes lives at a frenetic pace, connecting everyone and everything, and going nowhere and everywhere. He was a trickster and an eternal entrepreneur looking for the latest deal. Perhaps what people are looking for in a Hermes-saturated world is Hestia, the space of the hearth, a sanctuary.

However, executive coaching may not simply be a place for respite. It is also regarded as a safe place. In the need for this, people are always negotiating the central contradiction that organisations, by their very nature, struggle with: the tension between a command-control, profit-driven environment and one that is cooperative, open and people-centred (Rees, 1995). In an economic rationalist environment, these two aspects are considered mutually exclusive. Organisations therefore often swing

between a focus on the bottom line to increase profits, and people-centred practices to increase customer and staff satisfaction. People at all levels are caught in the swings, often attempting to balance their personal values and the organisational practices that negate them. Interestingly, executive coaching can be employed to support either side of the pendulum. Profit-driven management thrives on practices that rely on measurement and performance management. Executive coaching can be seen as simply an intervention to help improve performance and therefore the bottom line (hence the continual push to connect coaching and ROI). However, executive coaching is also a potentially subversive space. It is a one to one process that, although funded by the workplace, has independence from it. This independence gives it safety, providing people with the opportunity to make choices that may or may not fit organisational goals or have direct connection to workplace imperatives.

Executive coaching is therefore somewhat paradoxical and a practice that can never be fully contained or controlled. Perhaps its rapid proliferation is because of this paradoxical and even whimsical aspect. The economic imperatives that drive organisations require order and control, which is why the heart of organisations — the people and relationships — can be a frustration. Executive coaching is both orderly (in that it has a structure and boundaries) and disorderly (like any people practice, it can never be fully contained or measured). Embedded in relationship, its success depends on building a trusting, collaborative relationship in which people can be challenged and stretched, or just supported, to meet their personal or the organisation's goals. Relationships occur through the building of shared meaning, and meaning-making cannot ultimately be formalised or structured. Consequently the coaching relationship, if conducted in a spirit that will determine its success, will potentially have an element of whimsy. Its fuzzy nature gives it warmth — and the fire that makes it a crucible for change (Armstrong, Matthews & McFarlane, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

As an archetype, Hestia can teach us about the importance of the more imprecise and whimsical relational aspects of coaching (which I would argue will largely determine its success) as well as the importance of the structure or ritual of coaching. The archetype represents a place to sit (the hearth) and bask in the warmth (relationships) and come back to oneself (reflect) in order to be questioned and challenged as one works towards fulfilling one's aspirations and potential. The relationality is as important as the structure and ritual. If these seemingly inconsistent aspects don't sound like executive coaching, then the paradox is not present, and I would argue that neither is good quality executive coaching.

Examining executive coaching as a cultural phenomenon is important to our understanding of the need it is responding to in organisational life. The fabric of organisations consists in the network of interactions, systems and processes, and the behaviours and relationships woven throughout the life of the organisation. The vessel and means of transmission for all these things are the people who come together and 'organise'. Historically, the personal development of the individual and the workplace have been separated — a seemingly odd practice considering the time we spend at work, but valuable in the face of increasing corporatisation and incursion on all areas

of our life. Recognising and maintaining that the separation between the personal and the professional is impossible, as well as recognising that people have a right to maintain their privacy, is grist for the practice of executive coaching.

Hestia as an archetype helps us to understand that we are working in a paradoxical environment. We need the container of coaching to create safety for open conversations, and the independence of the coach to reflect on and find ways to negotiate conflict and politics. We need the warmth of the hearth to create the intimacy and trust required for learning; the presence and focus to dare to dream; the structure and ritual to achieve our goals; and the fire to heat up the encounter for challenge and change.

It is important that we understand executive coaching in this broader sense. When a new and contagious phenomenon like executive coaching arises, key players jostle to organise and control it with systems, protocols and regulations at both macro (demanding professional standards) and micro (reducing it to simplistic prescriptions) levels. As we are invited down these paths, it is beneficial to view executive coaching as a cultural phenomenon that may be expressing the collective psyche of organisations. It is a humanising activity, and within the frenetic, impersonal, ethically challenging world of Hermes powered organisations, people have little time and space to take a breath, explore their actions, seek to change unhelpful and habitual behaviours, or nurture their relationships and look to their personal meanings and future. Executive coaching therefore becomes the 'hearth' of organisations. It provides a much needed centre in a decentred world, an intimate and warm place among what is often cold and fragmented. Hermes is staying around, and there is a lot of energy and enjoyment in his presence. But Hermes needs the balance of Hestia, and executive coaching provides this.

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