The Leadership Edge: Responding to Inputs on “Coaching Quicksand”

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The Leadership Edge

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We would like to thank all the writers for their thoughtful and stimulating reaction to our paper. We deeply appreciate their time, their interest and their investment in the discipline. Each writer’s input raised relevant questions that can be considered at length in other papers that will no doubt be written as we collectively attempt to further clarify the processes and policies that frame the field of executive coaching. We have chosen to address two of the concerns and questions that seem to arise in each of the papers. In order, we will address: {1} the relative newness of the coaching profession, and {2} the role of the coach vs. the consultant.

Paradigm shifts occur at the boundaries of traditional disciplines where the innovators, mavericks and integrators of new knowledge and insight live. Fields emerge when there is either a strong need or a conceptual breakthrough that opens doorways to new analysis and actions. Executive coaching is a “small paradigm shift” (hopefully not an oxymoron) in progress. We have moved a significant component of our locus of “leadership development” from corporate insiders to outsiders. We increasingly give credence to individuals outside the realm of the organization’s structure to offer feedback, guidance and leadership development to our top executives.

This is very different than a few decades ago when only the chosen few in the biggest of organizations were formally given mentors to help them climb the organizational ladder. In those years, senior leaders might be assigned to help younger executives understand the dynamics of organizational life and assist them to grasp which actions would be more effective, behaviorally and politically. The fact that so few individuals would receive mentoring contributes in part to the emerging need for coaching. As the speed of change accelerated in the work world, and younger, less experienced leaders were being thrust into management roles, the obvious need for “leadership” development was seen. Yet, the senior leaders were more swamped with complex work in an increasingly uncertain world. They appeared less willing to engage in the combination of mentoring, feedback, dialogue and inquiry that seems to make up the heart of the “executive coaching” process.

Executive Coaching is a relatively new and still emerging discipline. We only need to review the publishing dates of the initial group of coaching books to see how few the offerings were only a brief decade ago. We recognize that some innovative, effective and experienced consultants/coaches are doing great work, yet the field is young and still attempting to find its legs. It was clear that somewhere in the mid 90’s, an energetic and conceptual “critical mass” occurred around the idea of executive coaching (as fuzzy as it then was). It captured many people’s imagination as “an idea whose time had come.” Free-standing coach training programs emerged, and conferences began to have workshops discussing the role of executive coaching. Individuals who had gotten excited about the ideas of “life coaching” as a career began to drift toward “business coaching” and “executive coaching” as a work setting that had the resources to pay the freight. While there has been a big rush to embrace this fledging concept, let us not confuse the hue and cry of erstwhile therapists and consultants seeking a setting to offer their wares with the genuine maturity of the coaching field.

There is a huge interest in executive coaching, but is it being created by the glut of practitioners looking for a place to practice, or does it come from the real demand of the marketplace? The concept of coaching seemed to leap into the mass media, and it became a popular way to talk about new services that might be offered to business. Many of the people showing up for executive coaching classes and conferences were not people doing executive coaching but rather “wannabee’s” who were looking for a professional home. In the past decade, thousands of people have re-titled themselves as coaches. Certifications have sprung up to meet the need to have credibility with this new coaching title as various groups joust for control of the credentialing process. However, this is a field that is still trying to find its conceptual foundation. We are still at the stage of doing “summits” to compare experiential notes to find the right roadmap about what should be included and what should not. We are in the process of discipline creation, with shakeouts yet to occur.
Our concern is that the emergent field of executive coaching is being driven more by the abundance of individuals hoping to find a coherent career in a field with economic resources than a pent up demand in the executive world. Business has its own very rigorous and precise standards for what will succeed. A relatively small percentage of individuals have the combination of life maturity, business experience, training and personal traits to contribute significantly as business or executive coaches.

What will happen when those who are truly qualified to be executive coaches look at the group that calls itself “coaches” and finds a motley mix of players with a wide range of diversity in preparation, experience, credibility and maturity? Will they worry about the credibility of the field as a whole? With no agreed-upon set of standards and helpful guidelines, we collectively run the risk of having too many pretenders in the field.

The general approach to “training coaches” appears to be a condensed modern extension of the principles and pioneering work of Dr. Carl Rogers, who was famous in the 1950’s as a developer of client-centered therapy. His key therapeutic principle was to give the individual unconditional positive regard and help them dig deeper into themselves by reflecting their own thinking and concerns back to them. Rogers trusted that the individual’s own growth process would emerge to help them find their own best direction. This non-directive approach was a slow but powerful way for individuals to listen better to themselves. Rogers’ reflective listening skills became a key part of the technique known as “active listening.”

Adaptations of the Rogerian non-directive approach seem to be at the core in many of the training and certification programs for coaches. The informal process for developing new coaches seems to be: take a few seminars that teach how to “non-directively” focus the client on his/her goals, aspirations and obstacles and voila- you are certified as a coach. It does not matter if you have had training in the social sciences or significant background in the complex issues of conducting a business. No actual expertise beyond facilitation was perceived as absolutely necessary to the process. In addition, there was no apparent limit to where this newly developed coaching training could be applied—business, life, family, career, etc.

More than ever, the idea that leaders can be assisted to address complex and challenging leadership issues makes sense at face value. Shifting our language to use the concept of coaching in organizations is a first step to recognizing the remarkable potential and opportunity that is being tapped, but it is only the initial phase of a more extended learning as a discipline. These observations are in no way a denigration of the genuine need and appropriateness of executive coaching as a method of providing essential and valuable services. They are more a concern about the evolution of the field and our willingness to honestly recognize how formative our process is and how much learning there is before us.

Coaches and Consultants
One of the puzzling aspects of the dialogue around coaching has been the catch phrase that coaches “help the clients find their own best solutions and answers.” This is distinguished from consultants who “bring expertise and solutions to clients.” This catch phrase emerged from the coaching community that is attempting to distinguish what is unique and distinctive about coaching—as compared to counseling, mentoring, supervision, or consulting. We believe this distinction doesn’t really do justice to either coaches or consultants.

What role can expertise play in executive coaching? What do experienced and knowledgeable consultants or business leaders do with their hard won wisdom if they are in an executive coaching role? If coaches utilize a purely facilitative role, it is based upon a belief that executives have enough insight about their personal patterns and as well as the patterns of their organizational systems to be able to extricate themselves from a repetitive situation or challenge they are facing. Yet, it is often because executives are cognizant of their limitations or blind spots that they are looking for inputs, conversations and challenges to their thinking and action maps.

Additionally, sometimes the facilitative process is too slow an approach for the “real time” pressing challenge that is at hand. Executives will often want to have specific ideas or suggestions from others to bounce off. They want to have options or alternatives placed before them to review and consider as well as to self generate possibilities. Sometimes an executive wants to have these dialogues, where difficult and confusing alternatives are examined, without having their executive team present. Frequently, it is the confidential and private discussion of these issues that can allow a surfacing of concerns, doubts, fears and possibilities that might be harder to make public with other peers or direct reports.

Most executives solve the typical problems they face on a daily basis and don’t need coaches for that type of help. It is the business dilemmas—the often unending, confusing sets of difficult choices without real clarity where help is needed—both from a facilitative and an expertise sense. On these difficult issues, balanced coaching has the best chance for driving behavioral and conceptual breakthroughs. The naiveté of the “executive
coaches” who have no real experience in business and don’t recognize what they are missing can be a danger. Yet, we must not discount the beginner’s mind that has the ability to see in a fresh way (remembering the story of the “the emperor’s new clothes”).

Depending on the circumstance, one of these talents (facilitating or expertise) may be needed more than the other. It is because of the perplexing nature of the dilemmas that the mix of expertise and facilitation is called for in our experienced coaches. It is our opinion that it is a balance of these complementary skills/roles that distinguish a good executive coach. The excellent consultants who we have known are not simply distributors of answers, but rather sophisticated partners to executives, assisting them to wrestle with complex issues in the management of their business. Similarly, the successful coaches we have known are not simply questioners who help the executive understand what obstacles are in their way, etc.

The good executive coaches have been active facilitators, bringing their wealth of organizational experience and wisdom to the table as a context for deepening the examination of confusing issues and choices. What seems to exist in common is an active, engaged process with the executives that has them work as knowledge partners—individuals who have both been through challenges and trust their instincts to find a right path to pursue. They help the executives come to answers based on a combination of dialogue, option development, challenging, model testing, probing, and willingness to offer alternatives. They don’t make the choice—the executive is, at the end of the day, the maker of his or her own choices. The executive has to come up with an answer—s/he just doesn’t have to investigate the issue alone.

The executive coach reads a combination of the specific work situation as well as the content to decide on the right coaching behavior. Constraining models do nothing but trap coaches behind a set of tools that limit them from doing what is right for the situation. The most effective coaches support the analysis of the action options as a function of their trust relationship with the executive. This trust is built upon the specific intention to help that executive succeed with their specific organizational performance challenges. The executive knows that their coach is 100% committed to their success and that means “pushing the envelope” into the unknown where it is called for and supporting the disciplined execution of business basics when that is necessary. The trust is also based on an appreciation of the executive coach’s world of experience and expertise, often having faced similar issues at another time or circumstance. Coaches are effective because their expertise helps them distinguish what are workable ideas, solutions, and alternatives and to assist the executive in choosing wisely. Whether you believe in the coach as primarily a facilitator or as someone who combines facilitation and expertise, the process roadmap to performance and accountability remains consistent, containing the following elements or stages:

a. Sharpen the focus on what issue is critical to address or explore.
b. Make sure you have the most important and relevant data at hand.
c. Attempt to “make sense” or “decode” what you know and account for or manage what you don’t.
d. Create an action plan to address the issue.
e. Implement the plan in a timely fashion.
f. Track the plan as it goes forward and course correct as necessary.

While our article focused mainly on what can go wrong in the coaching process, and provided some administrative guidelines to protect companies from misusing resources and undermining their executives’ success, this response to the commentators allowed us to contribute to their rich conversation about the field of executive coaching itself. We recognize it as a far reaching conversation with much exploration and dialogue still needed to clarify and align on training and credentialing requirements to protect coaches, executives, and their sponsoring companies from insufficient, unsuccessful, or even harmful experiences. We expect the coaching profession to undergo a rich and exciting evolution, filled with surprises and learning for all involved, and we are grateful to have been given the opportunity to contribute to the process.

“Several elements [that] are present in all of the illuminating moments of the leaders we have studied. First, as theologian James Loder has observed, *knowing is an event*. A moment of meaning can best be viewed as a short-term scenario that yields long-term effects in a leader’s life. Next, it is clear that the center of an event of knowing is a *convincing insight*. And, finally, as analyst Herbert Fingarette has observed, this convincing insight can lead to a *new commitment*.”

--- B. Mackoff and G. Wenet, The Inner Work of Leaders
Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

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