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An Issue of Trust in Executive Coaching: A Cross Cultural Conversation

MERYL MORITZ AND KLAUS ZEPUNTKE .

This is the fourth in a series of IJCO dialogues among senior organizational coaches. Meryl Moritz and Klaus Zepuntke are executive coaches who met at the Executive Coaching Summit in 2003 where they both signed up to work on the issue of Diversity in Executive Coaching. Moritz, a U.S. national with a smattering of German, and Zepuntke, a German national married to a Canadian and poised on the brink of dual nationality, entered into a three year peer coaching relationship to explore coaching across cultures from a new perspective…in part to study the phenomenon of diversity. This interview is an excerpt of a three year exchange of views on a host of topics.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Born in Hamburg, Germany, Klaus studied American, English and German language and literature and education in both Germany and the United States. He graduated from the University of Hamburg with the Second State Examination (comparable to a Masters degree in American and German Language and Literature). Klaus taught at the University of Cincinnati and at the Education Department of South Australia, both on a scholarship basis, before becoming a management coach and trainer with Eric Krauthammer International in Geneva.

Klaus is an independent executive and corporate coach, project manager and facilitator with international experience in a variety of industries including: banking, energy services, manufacturing, communications and health care. His special areas of interest are dealing with resistance to change processes, conflict management, analysis of a company's current culture and development of future core values and culture, implementing of newly developed core values and guidelines, change management, value-oriented leadership, goal-oriented leadership, team development, one-to-one and small group coaching in the areas of executive and corporate coaching.

Klaus is a member of the ICF (www.coachfederation.org) and ICCO - The International Consortium for Coaching in Organizations. He is MBTI and DISC licensed. Klaus works in Europe and in North America with offices in Calgary, Alberta, Canada and Hamburg, Germany. He can be reached at klazept@aol.com.

Like Klaus, Meryl studied literature – English, French, Italian, and Japanese – for her Bachelor of Arts degree, which she received from Carleton College in Minnesota. She went on to earn the Master of Science in Sociology of Organizations from Hunter College in New York City. She did her coach training through Coach U, and then earned two professional credentials (first the PCC, then the MCC) from the International Coach Federation. Meryl's career history includes a nine-year stint working for the United Nations, seven years of senior management positions in two international corporations, forming two businesses (marketing/market research and now a leadership development/coaching firm) and a three year interlude as a partner in a leadership coaching firm. She is passionate about bringing up the next generation of coaches to be even more effective than the current generation. To that end, she teaches organizational and executive coaching at New York University. Meryl's firm introduces coaching cultures to major organizations, one coaching engagement at a time. Meryl can be reached at Meryl@merylmoritzresources.com.

THE DIALOGUE

Meryl: Let's begin by defining trust.

Klaus: Basically, trust is a sense of comfort with another person that arises when both feel that they can be simply themselves in a relationship and don't feel the need to hide behind their persona or escape into their ego. The main ingredients are faithfulness and confidentiality. In the coaching relationship between client and coach, as in any other professional or private relationship, trust develops over time because everybody involved needs time to experience the other. Once trust has been established and is continually felt, it is the door opener to initiating real change (versus cosmetic change: I'll do it because my boss wants it … because everybody else seems to do it … etc.,) which roots deeply in the client and is long lasting.

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Meryl: A definition of trust which I feel pretty comfortable with is this: the flexible state of open-heartedness and open-mindedness that is created and sustained when a person can step forward to try out new ideas, being him or herself, with relatively little fear. It is achieved in coaching at the precise moment the person registers that no harm will come to him or her, and no judgment will be levied against him or her by the coach. While this trust can happen in the first few minutes of the relationship, it deepens over time as the relationship between Client and Coach is tested by challenges encountered and satisfactorily handled with support from the Coach.

But the topic of trust is many-layered and a simple definition doesn't suffice. My own views of trust have been strongly influenced by the work of Dennis and Michelle Reina (Reina and Reina, 1999). The Reinas look at the capacity an individual has to trust. They identify types of "transactional trust:" contractual (trust of character), competence (trust of capability) and communication (trust of disclosure). These three types of transactional trust must be built before a team or an organization can come to transformative trust.

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As you and I have discussed, Klaus, trust is the cornerstone for effective coaching to occur. We've seen the ICF nominate it as a critical competency for awarding any of its worldwide coaching credentials. Our colleagues who were part of the first Executive Coaching Summit in October 1999 specified a set of Advanced Proficiencies for the executive coach to be accomplished in, nearly each of which exemplifies one of the Reinas' types of transactional trust. (www.executivecoachingsummit.com) And a major study conducted by the Executive Coaching Forum (www.executivecoachingforum.org) resulted in a competency model that identifies both basic and advanced aspects of each competency, with the very first coaching skill/task named being "build and sustain trust."

So, Klaus…how do you know – cognitively and/or intuitively – that your clients trust you? What are the indicators that tell you that you can go ahead?

Klaus: Well, Meryl, this is an interesting question. The indicators for me are when the client starts taking 100% responsibility for herself or himself and is moving out of "blame mode." Why is this an indicator? I firmly believe trust always starts from within. This implies acknowledging one's own strengths and weaknesses and constantly increasing one's own awareness about one's self by continuously doing a personal SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis. If a person does not trust her/himself 100%, how can this person ever trust anybody else? Another indicator is the level of conversation. The more depth there is in a conversation, the closer the people are to one another and the more they can fearlessly relate to one another. The conversation is not empty talk anymore, where you are just being polite and repeating established patterns of communication; rather it has the capability for creative dialogue. This implies mutual, vigorous questioning to help your client move beyond the level of assumptions, and before that, to become aware of how deeply assumptions have created the issues presented. I have found that one of the key ways to create trust with a client is to constantly challenge the status quo of her/his beliefs about answers to the what and how questions.

Down the road in the development of the coaching relationship, I find that power evolves from trust. Now, how do we as coaches responsibly utilize this power? Again, the first thing is awareness. The questions we ask the client and the input we provide have an affect on her/his execution of leadership and, therefore, on other people such as direct reports, colleagues, and customers. It is important here that our thinking be process-oriented, reflective of possible effects our questions and input may have, and compatible with our own ethics. A couple of other questions come to my mind, namely when is the time and what are the indicators that tell us to pull back? The most obvious indicator is when we are being perceived as the real leaders and decision makers. For example, you coach the CEO, and her/his direct reports say say to you jokingly, "Oh, here comes our CEO." I think this is the time to pull back and to confront our client with very hard questions about her/himself with regard to ownership of responsibility and weaknesses.

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Meryl: Beyond examples you've given, Klaus, here are some "criteria" or signals that I've observed to suggest trust is burgeoning. If none of these is occurring organically, after a couple of months, I'd have to say that we are just skimming the surface and are not operating at the highest level of trust. Also, if I initiate the request in any of these areas and the answer is an unequivocal, "No!" I better examine then and there what happened to the trust along the way.

a) When clients introduce me to their peers and their subordinates as their coach rather than keeping the relationship private.
b) When they ask me to observe them in front of their teams.
c) When they give me highly confidential information and ask my counsel on how they should proceed with it.
d) When they ask me to interview their detractors, their premium customers or their board members regarding their leadership.
e) When they ask me to do conflict resolution coaching with them and a colleague or subordinate.
f) When they ask for "constructive" feedback in disproportion to positive feedback.
g) When they keep a scheduled coaching session even in a crisis to help them clarify their thinking and improve their decision making rather than leaping to

fight fires.
h) When they "share" me with members of their team.

Klaus: So, Meryl . . .How do you role model trust and responsibility in the client organization? What are your essential ingredients?

Meryl: There are three watchwords for us in terms of modeling trust and responsibility: Feedback, Results and Confidentiality. Perhaps you'll disagree with me as to the order I mention these things, Klaus.

I suppose the Number One thing we do is to establish our keen interest and openness to the Client's feedback. I am always asking for feedback on how well the organization/individual Client's expectations are being met, and treating with respect and seriousness any short falls. My coaches are also trained to ask for feedback at every juncture in the coaching relationship: from the Client at the end of every coaching session, from the Sponsor at agreed upon intervals established at the outset of the engagement, and at the completion stage of the engagement. We thank our clients for telling us the tough stuff. And we make visible our efforts to communicate and demonstrate our commitment to enhance the Client Experience.

The Number Two thing we do is to match our Client's commitment to improving business results. There are many things that will threaten a results focus in coaching and with them a tremendous temptation to "follow" the Client as he or she attempts to fight fires instead of going for the gold. We are dogs with the proverbial bone with regard to the Client/organization objective. Unless the objective is renegotiated, we can be counted on to point the Client to that goal in every session and in every designed action.

The Number Three thing we do is to be "paragons" of discretion. I put this last not because it is of less importance than the other two, but because it is a threshold requirement for any coaching. Still, of course, we set and abide by clear parameters for the protection of confidences right from the beginning of a contract. However, there are subtle challenges to our promise of confidentiality every time we communicate with anyone in the organization. For example, our invoices do not use client names but rather are coded for the contracting officer's understanding only.

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You've told me about situations in coaching where you find you need to challenge conventional wisdom and rock the boat of accepted beliefs with expertise and enthusiasm. Where you put developed trust at risk. I thought I'd mention one such situation here and what we are still learning from it. In a corporation where 5-6 of us are working with 10-15 executives and their direct reports, we have a triad kick-off meeting to set up our coaching compact. This has been working extremely well (or so we thought) for 12 months. In the past weeks, I discovered from coaching one of my clients that he was unaware his direct report was undergoing coaching in the area of presence, communication and presentation, hence had no input into the direction of the coaching. Instead, my Client's boss had participated in these meetings—creating a very clandestine triangle. This was a blind spot for me. I had approved the invoices for the coaching and the triad meeting, but made an assumption that the Client knew this was going on.

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When I realized what had occurred, I went to the contracting officer and explained that I would be proposing to my Client that he either replace or accompany his own boss to future triad update meetings. This threw the contracting officer, the Client's boss and the Coach who reports to me into system anxiety, to say the least! The pattern of indirect communication in this Division of the corporation had been named and was pinned to the "specimen board" for all to see. The Client expressed tremendous gratitude for being alerted to this; however, his boss and his subordinate outright denied that these meetings had happened or that another one was slated to occur. When it was finally determined that no one was judging the past meetings as "wrong" or "bad", but rather that in the spirit of direct communication, a new behavior was called for, the denials vanished—but the sheepish expressions still remain. This incident may be a powerful springboard for the organization to unlearn a counter-productive behavior in which it has long engaged. We will try to support this change from a politically neutral stance.

You've said that in your experience, one of the key ways to create trust with a client is to constantly challenge the status quo of her/his beliefs on the answers to the what and how questions. I'd say we ask for permission to do this when we go over the logistics for coaching, but I'm not sure that folks remember this until we raise it in the situation. The way we keep the trust I suppose is through our commitment to our feedback process. When we impart the message either explicitly or implicitly that "I trust you will stand up to me as needed and you will give me straightforward feedback, feel free to disagree with my opinion, etc.," we're also planting the seed that we may respectfully disagree with the Client, stand up to him or her, and do our level best to raise awareness, expand perception and surface alternatives. When you ask me, Klaus, "Would you say this is a general experience that most executive coaches have?" I really don't know but I sure hope so.

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Klaus: Coming from a German cultural background and working mostly with German executives, I first help them to really take leadership responsibility, which simply means to lead and to feel comfortable doing it.

What do I mean by this? Well, within the German culture – and I am only relating this to Germany, not to any other German speaking countries – the German word for to lead is führen and a leader is a Führer. Now, I guess you understand what I am trying to point out here. Due to our recent German history, the word and the action of führen is still an unconscious taboo, because it is automatically related to the Third Reich experience, which was very painful to the world. As a corporate leader, you don't want to be unconsciously compared with or moved into the neighborhood of Adolf Hitler. Therefore and due to the fact that English is a Germanic language, the German corporate world "escaped" into the English language. English is free of any negative connotations with reference to the words leadership and leadership skills, in comparison with the German translation. So, part of my work is to liberate the executives from their deeply hidden guilt that to lead is something bad, and to help them slowly gain confidence in using the German word führen and more so, trust themselves to execute leadership.

Meryl: Let's go one level deeper and explore the idea of executive coaches working in alliance with other coaches. This was of particular concern at our last Executive Coaching Summit … we external coaches are keenly interested in successful partnering with our cohorts. What keeps us from doing that more often? What happens behind closed doors is my question. For example, what happens when your partner colleague is demonstrating a different level of self-awareness, and self-reflection? How does that impact the established trust and credibility you have with your client? What are the implications for the image and practice of our emerging profession when this occurs?

Klaus: Good question. As a team of coaches working with a client, we are permanent role models of high level leadership and of a high performance team. This means that the personal fit factor is the decision making criterion. In my personal experience, there are many highly qualified executive coaches, but to find the right fit is the challenge. What do we need to consider when speaking about the personal fit factor? First, you need to speak the same language, meaning you need to have the same or compatible work ethics and core values. You also need to be able to give and perceive feedback on an eye-to-eye level without your egos getting in the way. If you as a team can't do that, if you can't engage in disciplined debate and creative dialogue, you are losing the grounds for being positive role models. Let me use a metaphor here, Meryl. Let's picture a swan. How do you perceive a swan on land and a swan in water? What is the core difference? In my perception, the swan in water is in his element. As a team of coaches, you need to be the swans in the water, or it won't work. The water consists of

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- Accountability
- Commitment
- Valuing each other
- Developed feedback culture
- Diverse competencies with a complementary effect
- Functional and technical skills
- Common approach
- Monitoring and measuring performance

If you are perceived by the client as swans on land, you start losing trust. Once your words and your own activities are not compatible any more, you are out.

How do you bring this issue forward in order to sustain trust and credibility? I think we simply need to be able to have a real conversation with our team colleagues, put things clearly on the table, and execute a boldness with one another which is mutually understood as the leveraging point of the professional relationship.

Meryl: You know, Klaus, I myself have had mixed levels of satisfaction in formal and informal alliances with other executive coaches through the years. Usually, it comes down to trust. I go back to the Reina model. If contractual trust (you do what you say you will do) is missing, the thing falls apart. Many of my less than stellar experiences with other executive coaches were with coaches who do not show up with coach-like qualities outside of the coaching relationship. For example, others with whom we may "partner" in volunteering for initiatives in the various associations we belong to, may not take their commitment to heart, may miss planning meetings, may fail to deliver on assignments, or drop out without notice. I won't collaborate with someone in a profit engagement if they don't show up in a volunteer one.

You know, Klaus, I myself have had mixed levels of satisfaction in formal and informal alliances with other executive coaches through the years. Usually, it comes down to trust.

Sometimes the issue is not contractual trust but competence trust – for example, the Coach shows impatience and judgment in discussion with me about the Client or Prospect. We need to have frank discussions in order to match the Client to the Coach in temperament, but a high level of emotional intelligence is a prerequisite for work with senior management. The Coach's industry-relevant expertise may be high, but low EQ will make them a misfit for working in our engagements. But I have to say that since we spent so much time at the last Summit investigating the whole collaboration thing, I've been far more conscious of my own standards and requirements, which has opened me up to inviting six other coaches to work with me.

Klaus: What about the key success factors for us as executive coaches—such as surrounding ourselves with outstanding peers in the coaching world and from other disciplines, constantly challenging our clients' status quo, or being an expert in some area? Meryl, what would you say needs to be essentially added from a trust perspective?

Meryl: What I get from your question is the reminder that coaching, after all, is a method of inquiry, and it's not the only method of inquiry. I come from the world of the social sciences, having been trained as a sociologist. Research is my "bag." I see myself as a participant-observer when I'm coaching. As such, I am always "conducting" research with human subjects. I'm just not writing up the results as a study. I'm getting informed myself and using my experience to help my clients with new thinking. My guess is I will always be allied with the world of research and am a huge fan of our profession's annual Research Symposium.

I'm on the faculty of New York University's certificate program in coaching where we teach that coaching derives from six disciplines, so I'm committed to staying abreast of developments in each of these areas. My particular interests lie in the areas of change and systems theory. Management science also holds great appeal for me. That said, Clients do count on us, as their confidantes and "counselors", to be "with it." This is the second dimension of trust the Reinas write about… competence trust. It's not enough that we have industry-specific expertise, or that we know how to coach, or even that we know their organization well. Many times we are looked to for something that will normalize what is happening so that the Client or organization can ground him/itself and move in a new direction.

Does that make sense? What's your take on this, Klaus?

Klaus: It definitely does make sense, Meryl. In my opinion, it takes mature people with a high level of self-awareness to hold a conversation and, therefore, to continuously create trust. One needs to be able to deeply question oneself over and over again, never to take anything for granted in order to keep – and I quote you here, Meryl—the method of inquiry at a high quality level. In the end, it's the conversation that is the heart of coaching and the quality of this conversation is the basis for building trust.

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FINAL COMMENTS

Meryl: This conversation has been eye opening for me in a number of ways. The subject of trust is extremely important to me, but has been relegated to the back of my mind, where it stays unless a Client is recuperating from a "betrayal" and we must deal with it head on. Bringing trust front and center in this dialogue made me both uncomfortable and energized. Uncomfortable because it made me think and complain of the disappointments I've had with people in our profession on the trust front, and energized, because I realized that the ECS (Executive Coaching Summit) discussion in 2005 moved me to scope out my own boundaries and standards for collaboration. As a consequence, I'm really proud to say that my strategic alliances are working well and our clients love us. That's a very different scenario than you would have heard from me before the 2005 Summit.

Now it is up to you, dear reader, to have this conversation with yourself, your peers and your clients.

Klaus: Meryl, I really would like to thank you for the inspiring insights you've shared in our work together as peer coaches and again in this conversation. Now it is up to you, dear reader, to have this conversation with yourself, your peers and your clients.

REFERENCE

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