

## Behind the closed doors of a coaching session: the issues that keep an executive coach up at night

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### *The attractions of coaching*

Executive coaching has developed into a legitimate human-resources development intervention for which organizations gladly pay top dollar. Moreover, companies often use the offer of a coaching programme as a signal to the employee that she or he is a valuable part of the organization, and that the organization wants to contribute to further career development of the individual concerned.

In his classic 2000 book *Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos* (American Psychological Association, Washington, DC) Richard R. Kilburg defines coaching (pp. 65-7) as “[a] helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement”.

An important part of the above definition is that coaching deals both with the “professional performance” and “personal satisfaction” of the person being coached. The interplay of the two is gaining increasing importance in today’s business world, where work can no longer be confined to the office hours and buildings and where professional and non-professional sides of life influence one another.

Some organizations recognize this and specifically rely on coaching (as opposed to other tools available to them) as the type of developmental support they offer. Many executives report that the value they get from a

series of relatively short (although usually multiple) coaching sessions is significantly higher than from other learning activities. When probing for the specific description of what was most valuable for the manager who took coaching sessions, it is no longer surprising to hear about self-reflection, understanding oneself better and exploring options for life (including work).

### *Analyzing the experiences of coaches worldwide*

In order to understand better the specific topics and themes that emerge in coaching discussions and the exploration of which seems to be particularly rewarding and valuable for the participants, we started gathering and analyzing reports of experiences of executive coaches working worldwide.

At the European School of Management and Technology (ESMT) in Berlin, Germany, we organize an annual event for the leading global coaches the ESMT Coaching Colloquium.

Unlike other coaching conferences and events, this gathering is based on the contributions of coaches who submit difficult coaching cases from their own practice for review and critique by other coaches. The cases are obviously disguised in order to protect the client organization and the person being coached, but they still present the challenge faced by the coach when working with issues presented by managers. Colloquium participants are also asked to provide a written review analysis of one or two cases submitted by other coaches.

During the colloquium, case authors and their reviewers are brought together for peer-supervision sessions. These conversations help the coaches to reflect on their practice and learn from the practice of others.

For the academics, the work with the cases is a good opportunity to have a look behind the closed doors of the coaching session in order to understand coaching as an approach that, despite its practical legitimacy mentioned above, is still in its infancy in terms of theoretical acceptance. Beyond the academic interests, such a look behind the closed doors, allows for a better dissemination of information about the use of coaching and education of client organizations and recipients of coaching services.

One result of our analysis of the cases submitted to the ESMT Coaching Colloquium in the past four years is the list of themes that often come up in an executive-coaching session. Many of those themes are not the ones that had been agreed upon at the beginning of the coaching intervention, and that have been the official reason behind bringing the



coach in. However, if ignored, they may affect the productivity and effectiveness of the manager.

### ***Themes that typically arise in a coaching session***

Below is the list of the themes distilled from the cases submitted to our coaching colloquia:

- *Understanding and managing one's career ambitions.* This theme is often reflected in the questions that the person being coached asks himself or herself and wants to explore further: "Should I be going forward, staying where I am, changing track? Do I understand the difficulties I will face if I decide to move on? Am I ready to accept the costs associated with moving on?"
- *Processing temptations.* For those who do want to move forward, the topic frequently takes the form of the following questions: "Should I jump on at that next opportunity? Do I have to stay loyal to my company (boss)? Am I ready to wait for another opportunity here? Am I really prepared for the move ahead?"
- *Cultivating resilience.* This theme is associated with the question: "Can I deal with all the things happening around me and not go crazy?" With the amount of bad news organizations have to face nowadays, managers often feel that they jump from one fire-fighting mission to another. As a result, they often feel that they lose control over the course of events taking place around them.
- *Learning to process disappointments and low points.* This theme is closely connected with the previous one, although in this case bad news is about one's own performance, feeling of achievement, self-efficacy and motivation. A typical question in the mind of the executive is usually: "Am I good enough?" Sometimes this question turns into: "Is it worth it to try further? Have I lost my battles?"
- *Raising questions of character.* As modern leadership dilemmas often require that the person makes a difficult choice or pushes forward an unpopular decision, those being coached bring forward concerns about concordance of their view of themselves with the nature of the decisions they face. For example, a manager facing the need to reduce staff or move production to another country may realize that his or her actions might harm other individuals. In such a case, a person asks: "Am I the person I consider myself to be? Am I a decent human being? Will I be able to live with the consequences of my decisions?"
- *Understanding the human dynamics in the organization.* As managers move higher in the organizational hierarchy, they often



start noticing that it is not enough to do a good job in order to get things accomplished, to be recognized and to progress. Sometimes such a discovery may be relatively dramatic, particularly for those who consider themselves to be non-political. Realizing the intricacies of human behaviour and interactions may require an effort. The person, while acknowledging the impact of human dynamics on the organization, may resist the need to understand his or her own role in the process. The questions people may ask are: "Don't we all just have to be professional? Do I really need to pay attention to all these touchy-feely things?"

- *Dealing with professional relationships challenges.* This theme is at times narrowed to more specific issues of relationships with particular individuals surrounding the manager. The question can be as specific as: "Can I handle my boss/critical colleagues/important subordinates?"
- *Managing life beyond work.* What used to be known as the theme of work-life balance is growing into a more comprehensive topic about the life that a person has, of which work is a crucially important part. This topic is often related to all of the others above. For example, a question about one's career ambitions cannot be separated from questions of family expectations about future. Making difficult decisions is something that children may be asking about many years later (and actually the decision about having or not having children may be related to the choices made about one's temptations or resilience). In addition, event questions like, "Am I with the right person? Will she/he stay with me? Am I a good parent?" are nowadays typical for coaching conversations.
- *Softening the fear of obsolescence.* This theme is about developing successors and, in a bigger sense, about leaving a legacy. The challenge is that very often modern executives feel that they do not have the time and energy to keep up with the pace of knowledge development, and that they cannot be sure in their own work future. Frequent questions coming to the mind of an executive are: "Why should I develop a successor when my future is not clear? Why should I share my knowledge? Can I acknowledge that I need help from my subordinates? Can I learn from younger people?"
- *Unleashing dreams.* Last but not least is the theme of a possibility of a radical change in one's life. It often boils down to the question of, "Do you think I really could give it all up and start something new?" which can refer to fantasies about starting one's own business, changing the country of residence, going back to college for a degree in a completely new field or other big moves in one's life.

### ***Conclusion***

The list is not exhaustive. The changes in organizational, societal and personal lives bring about more themes that affect what Kilburg, in his above-mentioned definition of coaching, called "personal satisfaction".

A coaching engagement seems to be the right environment for raising those issues and, one hopes, resolving them in a manner that is going to lead to better and more rewarding professional performance.

The challenge, however, is for the organization to accept that this is a good investment of the top dollar it pays for the coaching service. If the acceptance is there, the next thing is to make sure that the coaches that work with the people being coached raising those themes are prepared to be the right partners in the managers' journey of self-reflection, discovery and experimentation.

### ***Points for thought***

- Coaching deals both with professional performance and personal satisfaction. The interplay of the two is gaining increasing recognition in today's business world, where work can no longer be confined to the office hours and buildings and where professional and non-professional sides of life influence one another.
- Many executives report that the value they get from a series of relatively short coaching sessions is higher than from other learning activities, because coaching helps in self-reflection, understanding oneself better and exploring options for life.
- A lot of the themes that arise in coaching sessions are not the ones that had been the official reason behind bringing the coach in. However, if ignored, they may affect the productivity and effectiveness of the manager.

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