



The Foundations of a Psychological Approach to Executive Coaching

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Defining Executive Coaching

Definitions of coaching tend to group around learning and development linked to performance improvement or coaching to facilitate personal growth and change. The particular emphasis often reflects the professional background of the coach/author. A significant proportion of academics and those from HR, consultancy and organisational development tend to stress learning and development. Those from highly results-focused environments such as sport and business tend to major on the performance theme often seeing coaching as about skills development. Coaching psychologists, counsellors and therapists typically define coaching in terms of change, mainly behavioural change.

In describing executive coaching Witherspoon (1996) offers this working definition:

'Executive coaching is an action-learning process to enhance effective action and learning agility'.

The essence of this definition is the reflective process and its benefits in terms of improved effectiveness. 'Learning agility' is achieved through the ability to learn from feedback and experience.

Both Downey and Parsloe & Wray stress the same three elements; learning, development and performance and make the link between them:

'A process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve' - Parsloe & Wray (2000), and;

'The art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of others' - Downey [1999].

In a more recent book Rogers offers the following definition again highlighting the pivotal role of learning:

'The coach works with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focused learning'. Rogers, (2004).

There can be little argument about a process which promises to deliver learning and development, especially when it is said to produce improved effectiveness and performance. Most of us are relatively comfortable with the concepts of learning and development - they have a feel-good factor about them. This may not always be the case when defining coaching in terms of change. We can be touchier about the notion that there are aspects of ourselves, whether those relate to our thinking, our emotional self management or our behaviours that require attention. Nevertheless, there are many in the coaching field who define coaching

predominantly in these terms.

Zeus and Skiffington (2002) for instance insist that:

'Coaching is about change and transformation - about the human ability to grow, to alter maladaptive behaviours and to generate new, adaptive and successful actions. A coach ... supports us in the sometimes difficult process of change'.

They also refer to the coach as a 'catalyst for change', someone who 'stimulates and challenges the individual to adopt new behaviours'.

Whitworth et al (1998) put it this way:

'People come to coaching for lots of different reasons, but the bottom line is change. They no longer want things to stay the same and they see that coaching can make the change happen'.

Similarly, Greene & Grant (2003), view coaching as about 'positive, directed change'. and Galloway (2000) sees his 'Inner Game' coaching approach as a 'better way to change'.

The behavioural change focus to coaching is one of the key differentiators from those who come from the learning and development modality; and this is where the psychological agenda more strongly enters the frame. Typically, those who emphasize behavioural change as the dominant focus come from organisational or clinical psychology, psychotherapy and counselling or have added some element of psychological training such as psychometric assessment to their previous professional background.

One of the most quoted definitions of executive coaching comes from Kilburg (2000):

'a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide 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 organisation within a formally defined coaching agreement'.

Similar themes are echoed in Greene & Grant's (2003) assertion that *'the coaching process should be a systematic, goal-directed process to facilitate sustained change'* and Skiffington and Zeus (2002): *'Executive coaching is a collaborative, individualised relationship between an executive and a coach, the aims of which are to bring about sustained behavioural change and to transform the quality of the executive's working and personal life'.*

My own preference is for a broad based definition of coaching because it keeps options open and reflects the reality of my own coaching experience. Whilst coaching issues often have an 'inner game' behavioural dimension they can also be more practical, business focused and 'outer game' in character. With these factors in mind, I offer my own definition of coaching as:

'Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that is in perspective, attitude or behaviour'.

The psychological dimension to coaching

Whether coaching is defined as primarily about learning or change my contention is that coaches require a certain level of psychological skills and competence to operate effectively

across the wide range of assignments likely to come their way.

Wasylyshyn (2003) suggests the following: *interpersonal effectiveness, listening, empathy, patience, adaptability, analytical problem solving, humour, and creativity.*

Auerbach (2002) adds: *unconditional positive regard, acceptance of emotions, and being non-judgmental*, while MODOONO (2002) developed a self-assessment inventory for executive coaches which includes: *ability to read another's underlying emotions and capacity to monitor own feelings when dealing with others.*

It is important to note that these lists fall well short of the notion that only qualified psychologists should be eligible to practice as executive coaches. Indeed, many would say that they simply represent a fairly typical range of skills and attributes expected of any competent executive coach.

Nevertheless the identification of a psychological skill-set for executive coaches is clearly a worthwhile project and this author has produced a dedicated Coach Competency Inventory (CCI) focused on psychological competency. It covers both psychological theory and practice skills and is based on the proposition that psychological-mindedness is the critical foundation for working psychologically as a coach.

Psychological-mindedness

The term psychological-mindedness has found its way into coaching literature in recent years through Lee (2003) in his recent book on Leadership Coaching. There is also an increasing use of it when describing the 'higher level' competency categories of executive coaching. Psychological-mindedness alongside business knowledge and awareness, combined with coaching skills, are increasingly seen as the top level competency areas for executive coaches.

Psychological-mindedness was not invented in coaching. Like so many of coaching's concepts it has been borrowed from elsewhere - in this case psychotherapy. Its meaning is not technically exact and is more usefully seen as an umbrella term which denotes a person's capacity to reflect on themselves, others, and the relationship between. It is rooted in a curiosity about how people tick and why we behave as we do. Furthermore it is about our ability to see the past in the present and make links between current issues and what has happened previously. In essence it means to more deeply consider the causes and meanings of behaviour, thoughts and feelings. It is important to note however, that there is a significant difference between a lively curiosity about people and relationships and an obsessional rumination about self and one's psychological processes. The latter is not helpful in the coach and will certainly alienate many executive clients who will interpret it as excessive 'naval-gazing'. Nor is it a desirable state to encourage in clients some of whom may already have an unhealthy tendency towards self deprecation.

As a trainer of coaches and consultants I consider the first objective in the psychological competence journey is to help the coach develop their psychological-mindedness. People are often keen to acquire tools and techniques before building this essential platform. If they are allowed to do this then their work with clients may remain superficial, lack subtlety or, at worst, open up issues through the naïve application of exercises without sufficient knowledge of how to deal with them.

Some coaches-in-training are impatient to 'get there' and look for quick answers. They recognise that psychological-mindedness implies a deeper reflection on self yet remain reluctant to take on their own personal growth agendas out of a fear of what might be uncovered. This is perfectly understandable and not at all unusual. Many people coming into coaching have not undertaken in-depth personal development processes such as therapy and counselling. They imagine that if they 'take the lid off' they will be overwhelmed.

Experienced therapists will recognise this phenomenon as simply part of the change process. It can take a long time for someone in therapy to develop the trust and confidence in the therapist and them self to go to their most difficult of places. Some never do.

Lee [2003] is one of the present generation of executive coaches who combines a business consultancy background with psychotherapy training and practice. In making the argument for coaches to possess business and psychological-mindedness as well as coaching competence, he makes the point that *'it is quite common to encounter coaches who have particular strength in one or two competencies but a weakness in another, and this creates lopsidedness in their coaching style'*. He goes on to make the important point that coaches with a strong psychological background but who lack corporate knowledge and awareness tend to turn coaching into therapy. Conversely coaches from a corporate background who lack psychological-mindedness may fail to engage with personal issues and focus too heavily on skills acquisition and problem-solving.

He defines the term psychological-mindedness as 'the capacity of the coach to think about the cognitive and emotional states that underpin behaviour' and produces the following table to list the competencies.

The coach's psychology-mindedness

SELF-AWARENESS

Coaches demonstrate a capacity to:

- stand back from their own experiences and notice the preferences, biases, and blind spots that underpin their behaviour
- give an account of their personal history, with emotional relatedness to the meaning of key events
- reflect on their own behaviour, and surface unconscious motivations
- examine their feelings, thoughts and reactions, and distinguish those evoked by others from those deriving from their own psychology (ie working with the counter-transference)
- shift their focus of attention across different aspects of their mental and emotional experiences (eg actions, cognitions, emotions, systemic context) and entertain multiple explanations for events

AWARENESS OF OTHERS

Coaches demonstrate a capacity to:

- suspend judgement about a person's feelings, thoughts and behaviours
- evoke and build an account of a person's history, and its emotional meanings

- understand the conscious and unconscious motivation of others, and its affect on their thoughts and behaviour
- identify patterns of relating from the past that are being re-enacted in the present (ie working with the transference)
- make links between different domains of a person's experience (eg past/present: personal/organisational; actions, cognitions and emotions)

Source: From Lee, G. 2003 Leadership Coaching

These are highly useful pointers and it is certainly my own experience that psychologically-minded individuals have that capability to both stand back from their own experiencing to notice more of their internal processes and to suspend judgement about the other person's experience. These are not always apparent in coaches-in-training and indeed are not always manifested in more experienced coaches. Instead the tendency can be to get hooked by the story and jump in with premature solutions or to take up a righteous or over-zealous stance.

Later the coach often sees this, especially when the situation is reflected upon in supervision. Then he or she may recognise that they had got over-involved, lost perspective or ran out of ideas as to how to proceed. To alleviate their own anxiety or discomfort they had prematurely closed down the exploration of the issue by the client through offering practical suggestions. Or perhaps the coach recognises that they just did not want to go there with the client because it would have been emotionally difficult for them. The problem here may be the coach them self who subtly or crudely prevents the client from going where they need to go.

The positive starts when the coach owns these dynamics, acknowledges their current limitations and becomes aware of how consciously or unconsciously they affected the session. That recognition and acknowledgement can be the beginning of some very important personal development which not only benefits the coach in their professional work but also in their personal life. A common limiting factor I witness on a regular basis is the coach-in-training who is not comfortable with emotions being expressed. One female coach put it this way. "I'm OK with anger and frustration, probably because they are the feelings I'm most able to express. But when it comes to hurt, sadness and grief I withdraw into myself and then try to move them away. It's because I don't allow these feelings in myself."

This awareness on the part of the coach left her with questions for both her work and her wider life: - 'Do I want to address this?' 'Am I ready to address this?' In the event, she did, and with profound effects for both areas of her life.

The point then, is that self-awareness and awareness of others, often referred to as social awareness, are the fundamentals of psychological-mindedness and that these capacities are the underpinning components of psychological competence for coaches. If this is the case then there are obvious implications for the training of executive coaches as it suggests that the personal development of the trainee coach is every bit as important as theory and skill development.

It also begs the questions of whether psychological-mindedness can be developed, and if so, by what means. Having spent most of my professional life in the business of developing psychological-mindedness both in myself and others I have little doubt that it can be developed but that it is usually a challenging process. It involves 'opening up' and living more in the here and now than we often do. It also entails a more questioning approach to life and a

proactive engagement with others - what is known in Gestalt as 'contactful experience'. It invariably involves risk, effort and discipline as we grapple to make more sense of our own and others experience. It can also be immensely satisfying and rewarding when we break through to some more profound understandings and connections with others.

Developing psychological-mindedness

When I picture individuals who have worked to develop their psychological-mindedness I see people who are more obviously in touch with their inner experience, their interest in other people and who allow themselves to follow their curiosity. They often ask more questions and probe that bit further.

'Opening up' is also a fundamental aspect of the process. What this means in simple terms is to open our ears and eyes to hear and see more. Most of us miss a great deal of what goes on around us. It also means opening ourselves to our own inner world: what we are aware of, thinking about, feeling, saying to ourselves. But as Lee points out in his list of self-awareness competencies it is also about a growing self knowledge which enables us to *'notice the preferences, biases, and blind spots that underpin our behaviour.'* It's about recognising the inevitable patterns in our own and other people's behaviour - patterns of self doubt, submission or aggression, the need to be liked, to withdraw or be the centre of things.

All of this takes place in the here and now. Awareness is always present time. You can worry about or anticipate the future, you can reminisce about the past, but you are always doing these things in the present moment. Learning to 'be here now' is often a fundamental aspect of people's growth and development.

When we are in the here and now we tend to make more meaningful contact with our environment which is essential for personal satisfaction, relationship building and effective, appropriate action.

The personal development of the coach

There are several means to achieve this opening up, here and now, more contactful way of being. Most involve experientially-focused work which enhances self and social awareness. The most obvious of these are counselling and therapy either in a one-one or group context. Yoga, Tai Chi, meditation and a whole range of spiritually focused activities also provide routes to greater self knowledge and deeper connectedness to self.

For the coach it is useful to supplement any personally focused activities with development opportunities in the group context. This is because the purpose of personal development work is not simply to understand oneself better and act in a more self aware manner. It is also to understand and appreciate others, to be able to connect with them and to respond appropriately. One of the most powerful vehicles for awareness-raising in the group situation has been the experiential groups' derivative of the T Group and Encounter Group movement. Although these had their heyday in the 1950s to 1970s there has been a continuation and development of these methods ever since in the form of unstructured groups, awareness-raising groups, personal development groups and so on. Though they have varied in leadership style and purpose the great value of all of these groups has been that they provide people with a live laboratory to learn more about self and 'other'. Some have stayed closer to the pure T group method of staying with the here and now experience of the group. Others have adopted more structured exercises and learning experiments. The common factor,

whatever the preferred methodology, is the feedback-rich nature of these groups. People find out more about how they are seen or indeed if they are seen, and are prompted and encouraged to reveal more about themselves. In the process, many skills pertinent to coaching are practiced and fine-tuned such as active listening, questioning, demonstrating understanding and expressing empathy. The ability to give feedback in a skilled way is also learnt as is the capacity to receive feedback in a non-defensive manner. In essence people in these sorts of groups learn the important art of how to influence and be influenced. These groups are emotional intelligence learning laboratories.

Lee quotes Casement, 1985, in making the separation between the '*observing self*' and the '*experiencing self*'. This refers to our ability to look objectively at our thoughts, feelings and behaviours as well as experience them from the inside. Kegan's '*Subject - Object*' theory (1994) speaks to a similar dynamic. Things that are Subject are experienced as unquestioned, simply a part of the self such as an assumption about the world or a pattern of behaviour. They are taken for granted because they are our reality. Object, on the other hand, means that we can see something, consider it, re-evaluate it and potentially act on it or change it.

Personal development work enables us to develop our 'observing self' and our capacity to be in Object mode. This is a vital aspect of coach development because this is what psychological-mindedness requires - an ability to notice one's own experiencing and to be able to helicopter above it to observe and reflect on it. This is equally true of the coaching conversation. The coach needs to be able to fully turn up and be present yet also to be able to step back and notice patterns and connections some of which may be to do with the relationship between the coach and client. These capabilities are important for another reason which is that they facilitate the possibility of using self as instrument of change, perhaps the highest order psychological coaching skill of all. This is where the coach taps into their own experience of being with the client and uses internal data selectively as a source of intervention.

The ultimate purpose of personal development work is to be more tuned-in both cognitively and emotionally - tuned into yourself, other people and the relationship between. It is that connectedness that enables rapport to develop, trust to be built and intelligent interventions to be made. It is the foundation of the psychological approach to coaching and may be every bit as important as good theoretical understanding and a wide coaching toolkit and skill-set.

Training and development implications

Coach training at this time is still in its infancy and varies enormously in the priority afforded to the personal development of the coach. Many programmes contain little or even no psychological theory or practice and students on these courses may barely develop their psychological-mindedness at all. Some courses are simply too short to do so and instead perpetuate the tools and techniques mentality.

The present trend in advanced coach training is towards academically-based postgraduate programmes where the accent is strongly placed on theory development. This is to be welcomed given the lack of theoretical rigour in the past. Most of these programmes also devote a good level of attention to the development of practice skills which inevitably forms the foundation of any valid coach training experience.

The message of this article, however, is that greater attention to the psychological growth and

development of the coach should also enter the training and development equation and be given equal weight. In all likelihood this will happen in the near future as a response to the growing awareness and acceptance that psychological competence, and particularly psychological-mindedness, is one of the critical competencies of executive coaching.

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