EXECUTIVE COACHING

The Need for Standards of Competence

Lloyd E. Brotman   PERISCOPE

William P. Liberi

Karol M. Wasylyshyn   Leadership Development

Psychologists working in the emerging competency area of "executive coaching" must promote a more complete understanding of what constitutes effectiveness in this arena— particularly when the expected outcome is sustained behavior change. Experienced psychologists must accept accountability for the need to inform and educate corporate decision makers about the core skills, competencies, experience, and related professional issues critical for successful outcomes. These educative efforts are essential if executive coaching for sustained behavior change is to be established as a respected consultative area adding value to organizationally based leadership development initiatives. The purpose of this article is to begin the dialogue among psychologists about the need to become more proactive in our educative efforts with these decision makers.

Executive coaching has been identified as "an emerging competency in the practice of consultation" (Kilburg, 1996a, p. 59). However, the explosive growth of this consultative specialty has been somewhat random, as coaches from various disciplines and backgrounds, with myriad competencies, identify themselves to organizations as appropriate resources to guide the development of leadership. A search of the World Wide Web with Infoseek (Infoseek, 1995–1997) identified more than 300 links with the key words *executive coach*. Former business executives, MBAs, attorneys, human resource specialists, sports coaches, and teachers, as well as psychologists, all claim to have the necessary competencies and proven approaches to address organizational needs for leadership development. And so the label "executive coach" may be defined in many ways, depending on the orientation of the coach and the needs of the organization seeking such a consultant. We believe that psychologists are uniquely qualified to define what is required to be an executive coach when sustained behavior change is the desired outcome. As psychologists, we have an obligation to delineate those required competencies both to protect the integrity of this emerging field and to provide clients with criteria for evaluating the skills of coaching candidates.

Consulting Psychology Journal devoted an entire issue (Vol. 48, No. 2, Spring 1996) to executive coaching in an effort to clarify and define this specialty. The articles discussed models using 360° feedback (Diedrich, 1996); the use of relationship building, insight, and competency development (Peterson, 1996); a systems-based, contextual approach (Tobias, 1996); a highly structured, intense systems-based approach (Kiel, Rimmer, Williams, & Doyle, 1996); an approach that focuses on the need for culture change and the promotion of diversity in the workplace (Katz & Miller, 1996); and an approach that provides support to executives based on the power of the coach, a politically savvy, psychoanalytically oriented psychologist (Levinson, 1996). Saporito (1996) pointed out that successful coaching can take place only when it is clear to organizational leaders that the process of coaching is consistent and aligned with business realities. Witherspoon and White (1996) suggested that coaches may play four different roles that need to be clarified early in the coaching process. They identified coaching (a) for skills focused on specific tasks; (b) for performance, more broadly focused on the

executive's present job; (c) for development, with the focus on the executive's future role or job; and (d) for work focused on the executive's agenda.

Kilburg's (1996b) review of the literature reveals that numerous articles have been written in the general area of coaching, especially as it pertains to athletics and special-needs populations. However, as applied to the art and practice of management, limited empirical data are available to support the techniques and approaches coaches have used with business leaders. He defined executive coaching as:

> a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client 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. (p. 142)

Regardless of the coach's background or discipline, or which set of techniques or methods is used, some behavior change on the part of the senior executive is usually the goal of an executive coaching engagement.

Teal (1996) stated that "Management is not a series of mechanical tasks but a set of human interactions" (p. 36). In a similar vein, Goleman (1995) maintained that the demands of globalization and the explosion of information technology strain even the best leaders and that the most successful executives are likely to be those who possess strong "emotional intelligence" as well as innate depth. In this context, emotional intelligence encompasses candid self-awareness, openness to learning, and competencies that foster interpersonal effectiveness.

It is not surprising, then, that executive coaching work is often focused on the interpersonal sphere. Typical assignments involve talented executives whose future success necessitates their relating to people more effectively. Although they may have risen steadily in their companies, the strengths used to achieve early success can become liabilities or weaknesses given the demands of executive leadership. Continued success necessitates that targeted behavior(s) be modified.

Despite its growing importance, executive coaching remains an unregulated, poorly defined arena. With no licensing, credentialing, or professional designation for executive coaches to achieve or maintain, the retaining party or organization would be aided by a set of guidelines to identify competent, ethical professionals when searching for an executive coach. Given the costly nature and high profile of executive coaching work, corporate decision makers must be fully informed to be able to hire competent consultants. This is especially true because sustained behavior change is frequently the desired outcome of an executive coaching assignment. Psychologists who practice in this area are in a strong position to educate and guide decision makers in this important selection process.

In this context, *sustained behavior change* is defined as follows: The executive displays a change in the targeted behavior(s). This change is consistent even under pressure or stress. The new behavior is sustained by (a) the internalization of deeper psychological insights about undesirable behavior(s) and (b) targeted coaching that converts the insights into pragmatic action steps.

We believe psychologists must assume a more proactive role in educating corporate decision makers about whom to hire for this work. If psychologists are not accountable in this way, an important application of psychology could be diminished and undermined.

Psychologists who coach executives must strive to promote a more complete understanding of the coaching process by articulating the necessary skills, experience, and competencies. In this way the emerging competency of executive coaching will be established as a respected consultative process, adding real value to corporate leadership development strategies.

Core Competencies

On the basis of our collective experience, we have identified a number of core competencies that executive coaches—coaches hired to help bring about lasting behavior change—must possess. These competencies, adapted from Career Architect (1992), constitute a skill set weighted toward being a "trusted and approachable person" who can establish long-lasting relationships with a variety of people throughout an organization. The necessary competencies include:

1. *Approachability:* Is easy to approach and talk to; spends the extra effort to put others at ease; can be warm, pleasant, and gracious; is sensitive to and patient with the interpersonal anxieties of others; builds rapport well; is a good listener.

2. *Comfort Around Top Management:* Can deal comfortably with senior executives; understands how top executives think and process information; can talk their language and respond to their needs; can craft approaches likely to be seen as appropriate, efficient, and positive.

3. *Compassion:* Genuinely cares about people; is concerned about their work and nonwork problems; is available and ready to help; demonstrates real empathy with the joys, frustrations, and pain of others.

4. *Creativity:* Can formulate new and unique ideas, easily makes connections among previously unrelated notions in ways that yield novel problem solving and/or plans for the future.

5. *Customer Focus:* Is dedicated to meeting the expectations and requirements of internal and external customers, establishes and maintains effective relationships with customers and gains their trust and respect.

6. *Integrity and Trust:* Is widely trusted; is seen as a direct, truthful individual; can present the unvarnished truth in an appropriate and helpful manner; keeps confidences.

7. *Intellectual Horsepower*: Is bright and intelligent; deals with concepts and complexity comfortably; described as intellectually sharp, capable, and agile.

8. *Interpersonal Savvy:* Relates well to all kinds of people: up, down, and sideways, inside and outside the organization; builds appropriate rapport; listens; builds constructive and effective relationships; uses diplomacy and tact; truly values people.

9. *Listening:* Practices attentive and active listening, has the patience to hear people fully, can accurately restate the opinions of others even when he or she disagrees.

10. *Dealing With Paradox:* Is very flexible and adaptable; can act in ways that seem contradictory; can be both tough and compassionate, empathic and objective; can be self-confident and appropriately humble; is seen as balanced despite the conflicting demands of the situation.

11. *Political Savvy:* Can maneuver through complex political situations effectively and quietly, is sensitive to how people and organizations function, anticipates where the land mines are and plans his or her approach accordingly, views corporate politics as a necessary part of organizational life and works to adjust to that reality.

12. *Self-Knowledge*: Knows personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and limits; seeks feedback; gains insight from mistakes; is open to criticism; isn't defensive; is receptive to talking about shortcomings.

Our collective experience as executive coaches, spanning more than 20 years of work with Fortune 100 to entrepreneurial business environments, underscores the fact that executives have enormous difficulty achieving and sustaining behavior change, despite strong cues from their organizations regarding this need. We believe this resistance or barrier is primarily psychological in nature. Lasting behavior change is frustrated, eluded, and resisted by a confluence of habitual scripts, core misperceptions, unconscious defenses, and an individual's subjectivity and internal dialogue.

Therefore, executive coaching, where specific sustained behavior change is the goal, must be psychologically based. The effective executive coach will (a) identify habitual scripts and learn how the adverse elements of these scripts erode leadership effectiveness; (b) reveal truth and fresh insights about what drives the executive; (c) convert insights into observable behavior change; (d) distinguish between higher level, healthy defenses and those that are more primitive and damage to both the self and others; and (e) objectify the executive's subjective reality and internal dialogue by anchoring them in candor and a self-actualization pattern congruent with business objectives and organizational priorities as well as with an executive's aspirations.

When the desired outcome of an executive coaching assignment is sustained behavior change to improve an executive's effectiveness, the effort must be based on sound psychological principles. We agree with Tobias (1996):

> While some change is possible in the absence of an explicitly intrapsychic focus . . . in its complete absence, the consultant will just walk blindly through a mine field of psychological resistance. (p. 88)

In our view, executive coaching that fails to focus on intrapsychic factors produces a shallow result, a recapitulation of the obvious with minimal guidance for behavioral change. Although other specialists may bring important talents to the task of coaching, there are three major factors that make psychologists uniquely qualified as executive coaches. These factors are coaching tactics, psychological tools, and graduate training leading to licensure. This combination of professional tactics, tools, and training, or "Triple T" proficiency, enables the psychologist to penetrate the executive's resistance and to provide sufficient learning and structure to ensure sustained behavior change.

Triple T Proficiency Model:
Tactics, Tools, Training

Tactics

In his study of how smart people learn, Argyris (1991) concluded that the "defensive reasoning" of intelligent people posed the most significant impediment to new learning:

Because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure. . . .They become defensive, screen out criticism, and put the "blame" on anyone and everyone but themselves.

> In short their ability to learn shuts down precisely at the moment they need it most. (p. 100)

Successful executive coaching must swiftly neutralize the inevitability of defensive reasoning. In our experience, the most powerful tactic is the executive–coach relationship. This working alliance is characterized by mutual trust and respect, stabilized by confidentiality, and deepened by the coach's overt recognition of the executive's successes and strengths. It is axiomatic that little or no new learning can take place in the absence of adequate affirmation of an executive's "gifts," both intrapsychic ones and others that are skill based and experiential in nature. To ignore these gifts, or to allow them to become contaminated by an exclusive focus on what needs to change, compromises the success of executive coaching.

Another essential coaching tactic that reinforces the likelihood of new learning and change is the coach's courage to convey and confront the core reality of an executive versus his or her well-protected persona. The effective consultant can illuminate the unsettling mix of an executive's fears, anxiety, vulnerability, and defenses. This tactic requires considerable clinical skill, exquisite timing, and patience; it potentially produces the most learning and direction for change. Executives who are helped to understand and integrate this level of self-discovery ultimately transform it into another source of personal power, that is, enhanced leadership effectiveness.

Using the developmental history and testing as primary tools, competent coaches identify the themes from the executive's life stories. Together, executive and coach make linkages among the choice and crisis points in a life span. For many executives, breakthrough learning is a function of understanding how emotionally congruent and incongruent prior choices were made and then applying this knowledge to both present and future circumstances. Coaching fosters greater personal clarity and authenticity, providing a sturdy foundation for action planning and sustained behavior change with important ramifications for executives' personal and business lives.

Tools

The professional tools of the psychological consultant comprise the second "T" of Triple T coaching proficiency. Through the ethical use of carefully selected tools, including developmental history and tests of intelligence, personality, motivation, cognitive style, managerial style, interests, and aptitudes, the consultant provides a psychological study that honors the whole person and pinpoints fruitful avenues for developmental exploration. Many psychologists also use other tools, such as appraisal forms, self-development guides, attitude surveys, and 360° feedback instruments. The weaving of all these data points into an integrated and meaningful exposition distinguishes the true psychological study. As Tobias (1990) stated:

> The psychologist helps the manager become better attuned to his own subjective experience of himself, of others, and of situations, in order to better manage his inner emotional life, to free himself of subjective distortion, and to broaden his transparent consciousness of the experience of living. (p. 11)

When providing feedback, it is crucial that psychologists link psychometric data with the contextual realities of the executive's work group and organization culture. The product is an interactive loop between intrapsychic causation and outward manifestation, that is, the grist for the coaching phase of an executive coaching engagement. The coach must remain focused on how the client's personal growth can result in behavioral shifts as well as initiate and facilitate organizational change.

Training

The graduate training and subsequent licensure of psychologists comprise the third element of Triple T coaching proficiency. The philosophical foundation of this graduate training, internship rotations, and hundreds of hours of rigorous supervision prepares psychologists for distinctive, results-driven work as executive coaches.

This foundation includes:

1. Clarity about psychologists' fallibility as change agents.

2. Inner scrutiny in an attempt to maintain objectivity, guarding against the projection of the psychologist's issues onto the client.

3. Control of the urge to deliver insight rather than facilitating the courage it takes for clients to use discovered insights in the service of behavior change.

4. Maintenance of appropriate boundaries with clients, that is, avoiding dual relationships.

5. Appropriate timing for delivering the interpretive material that constitutes new learning for the client.

6. An appreciation of the critical nature of confidentiality.

7. The belief that the individual is always the client and that the needs of the organization will be met through an executive's personal growth and sustained behavior change.

Conclusion

Executive coaching has been identified as an "emerging competency" in the practice of psychological consultation to business organizations. Psychologists throughout the world are assisting talented business executives in making behavioral changes that produce stronger leadership and equip them to develop their successors. In the absence of credentialing, the practice of executive coaching needs defined standards of competency to preserve the integrity of the field and the confidence of the consumer. Because the end goal of executive coaching frequently is sustained behavior change, this is best achieved through the application of established psychological principles. Psychologists have a duty to define the competencies required to achieve sustained behavior change through the medium of executive coaching and to be proactive in conveying these standards of competence to the public. Only in this way can this fast-developing realm within psychology reach its full potential as an invaluable resource for business executives.

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