

EXECUTIVE COACHING AND LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

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Executive coaching has come of age both inside and outside the field of consulting psychology, and has become one of its most significant developments in the past decade. This article briefly describes this phenomenon. It also suggests that executive coaching can continue to be a defining force in consulting psychology in the coming decade, as well as its corollary, leadership assessment, provided the field is proactive in promoting both.

Keywords: executive coaching, leadership assessment, leader behavior, leadership, executive consultation

If someone had told me in 1972 that the future of psychological consultation was in executive coaching, I would have not have taken that prognostication very seriously. Actually, 1972 was the year that I began to offer psychological consultation services to corporate clients. In those first few years, the focus of my consultation efforts was on executive assessments, leadership development workshops, and executive consultation. Since then, I have worked with countless organizations and executives, and have also taught graduate courses, including a doctoral seminar on executive leadership. I have also published nine books and three special issues on leadership and organizational issues. However, it was not until 2004 that I published a book specifically on executive coaching (Sperry, 2004). That book grew out of my coaching of executives and the many conference presentations and weeklong workshops on executive coaching that I developed and presented. It seems that from 1998 onward, the demand for practicing, teaching, and writing about executive coaching has increased dramatically.

In my estimation, executive coaching is the most significant development within the field of consulting psychology over the past decade. I base this conclusion on four observations. First, the *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research (CPJ)* has published three special issues on executive coaching in the past 9 years (issue 4 in 2004; issue 1 in 2005; and issue 1 in 2008). Parenthetically, *CPJ* published its first special issue on executive coaching in 1996. No other topic has been the focus of as many *CPJ* special issues. Second, several other notable articles on executive coaching have also appeared in *CPJ* during this time frame. Third, over the past few years the midwinter meetings of the Society of Consulting Psychology (SCP) have provided training for psychologists in executive coaching. Fourth, beyond the kin of SCP and the American Psychological Association (APA), several organizations have emerged in the past decade to “certify” coaches to work in corporate settings. These include the International Coach Federation (ICF; 2013) that offers three levels of certification based on the assessment of candidates on 11 core competencies. In short,

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it is fair to say that executive coaching has come of age in the past decade both inside and outside the field of consulting psychology.

The Context of Executive Coaching Within Consulting Psychology

Over the past decade, executive coaching has become commonplace in the corporate world, and increasing numbers of consulting psychologists are engaged in such coaching. Nevertheless, there is still little consensus in the consulting psychology community on the nature of executive coaching, including its definition and functions. At the same time, it has achieved the status of a profession—outside of consulting psychology—with its own certification and code of ethics. This section briefly describes and comments on the context of executive coaching.

In the early years of consulting psychology, the term consultation prevailed. Unless clearly specified, consultation meant “organizational consultation” that is the change process wherein the consultee is the entire organization or a specific unit of it. In contrast, “executive consultation,” generally referred to the change process wherein the consultee is the executive. Although the term “executive coaching” was occasionally used in those early years, it was considered to be a specific kind of consultation intervention. It is noteworthy that [Winum \(1995\)](#) catalogued executive coaching as one of nine types of consultation interventions. [Diedrich and Kilburg \(2001\)](#) noted that executive coaching remains a “largely ill-defined competency area of consultation” (p. 204). More recently, in an article that offers a “working definition” of executive coaching, [Stern \(2004\)](#) referred to it as “an important organizational intervention” (p. 154).

Besides being a consultation intervention and a competency, executive coaching is also a role function of the consultant. In their deconstruction of the various role functions of executive coaching with regard to client need, [Witherspoon and White \(1996\)](#) indicated that an executive has four primary needs: (1) to learn a new skill, (2) to perform better in the present job, (3) to prepare for a future leadership role, and (4) to exercise the executive agenda. Accordingly, these authors identified that four role functions for executive coaching: one function for each of the executive’s needs. They described these as: (1) skill coaching, (2) performance coaching, (3) coaching for development, and (4) coaching for the executive agenda. In my opinion, these first three functions are the proper domain of executive coaching: skill, performance, and development coaching ([Sperry, 2004](#)). In contrast, the fourth role function is, particularly for the consulting psychologist, the proper domain of executive consultation. More specifically, it is the confidant and talking partner function, which is also known as the “sounding board” and “advisor” functions ([Sperry, 2002, 2004](#)). Essentially, the skill-set and experience level necessary for providing competent skill, performance, and development coaching differs significantly from the skill-set and experience level necessary to competently provide the executive consultation function of advisement on such executive agenda items as mergers and acquisitions, corporate turnarounds, hiring and terminating executives, and planning for market changes growth issues.

Outside the field of consulting psychology, coaching, including executive coaching, has been designated as a “profession” ([Auerbach, 2001](#)). Space does not permit a critical evaluation of whether coaching does, in fact, meet the criteria for a profession. Nevertheless, the [ICF \(2013\)](#) makes that claim and to support it has developed its own certification mechanism and a code of ethics. In contrast, within the context of consulting psychology, executive coaching might better be framed as a role function and set of interventions provided by professional psychologists ([Sperry, 2008](#)). Accordingly, members of the Society of Consulting Psychology would do well to represent themselves as professionals who identify themselves as consulting psychologists and provide such role functions as executive coaching and consultation, rather than identify themselves as coaches or consultants.

Leadership Assessment

Assessment is the heart of my executive coaching practice. At a minimum, this includes a 360° assessment of an executive’s leadership behaviors, skills, and competencies, as well as ongo-

ing assessment of the impact and outcomes of coaching. Accordingly, I consider leadership assessment to be a necessary ingredient in effective executive coaching. In my estimation, although leadership assessment has not attracted as much attention as executive coaching, I consider developments in leadership theory and assessment to be another significant contributions to consulting psychology in the past decade.

In 40 years of consultation experience it has been my privilege to have been both an observer and participant in the evolution of leadership theory and practice. As I was beginning to consult, the “leadership behavior paradigm” was just emerging. It operationalized leadership as a set of specific behaviors that effective leaders manifest (House & Aditya, 1997). As a student in a graduate organizational behavior course, I vividly remember learning about the Managerial Grid (Blake & Mouton, 1964) in class one day and that weekend flipping through a binder from a leadership workshop that my father had just attended. In it was a section on the Grid with his leadership profile. Not surprisingly, in the leadership workshops that I subsequently facilitated, the participant’s scores on the Grid were a key part of the workshop content and process.

A few years, later I relocated to a faculty position at what is now Alliant International University in Southern California. There I was invited by Paul Hersey, the new dean of the school of management, to participate, with some other faculty, in a private workshop on situational leadership. Situational leadership soon emerged as another leader behavior theory. This was my introduction to what was later known as the *Leader Effectiveness and Adaptability Description*¹ (*LEAD*) (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). That instrument would become a central part of my consulting, coaching, and teaching. As good as it was, there was something missing with *LEAD* and situational theory. The missing element was that *LEAD* did not differentiate leadership behaviors from managerial behaviors. While, the *Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ)* (Avolio, Bass, B., & Jung, 1999) assessed both transformational leader behaviors it also assessed transactional managerial behaviors (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999). While *MLQ* was useful in my executive coaching, I was really searching for a theory and measure that focused primarily on leadership behaviors that could inform my executive consultation and coaching.

Recently, two such leadership measures emerged: the *General Inventory of Lasting Leadership (GILL)* (Gill, 2006, 2012; Rupprecht, Waldrop, & Grawitch, 2013), and the *360° Refined* (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012). Gill’s theory (Gill, 2006) greatly expanded the leadership behavior paradigm. While excluding managerial behaviors, it also accounts for the follower and the context of leadership. Five facets of leadership behavior are specified: identifying a vision and mission; creating a strategy; building shared values among the group; empowering followers; and engagement (influencing, motivating, and inspiring followers) (Gill, 2012). With 48 self-report items, *GILL* assesses these five facets. In addition to having robust psychometric properties, this instrument is in the public domain (Rupprecht, Waldrop, & Grawitch, 2013). The *360° Refined* (Bradberry & Greaves, 2012) measures 22 leadership skills in 7 subscales: strategy, action, results, emotional intelligence, character, organizational justice, and development. It is now an Internet-based self-report measure of 75 items, and was validated on 70,000 leaders from organizations of varying sizes. Because I consider emotional intelligence an important leadership attribute, I find this instrument particularly valuable since one of its subscales measures emotional intelligence.

Initiatives for Consulting Psychology

The trajectories of both executive coaching and leadership assessment have made their mark on consulting psychology in the past decade, and both seem poised to continue into the next decade as well. Consulting psychology can ensure this future with a proactive stance. I recommend that the Society of Consulting Psychology and *CPJ* seriously consider, and commit resources, to the following initiatives.

¹ *LEAD* was formerly known as the *Leader Adaptability and Style Inventory (LASI)*. *LEAD* is available from the Center for Leadership Studies, Escondido, CA 92025.

1. Specify and promulgate a consensus definition of executive coaching practice within the context of consulting psychology. Because the Society of Consulting Psychology has a major stake in the future and direction of executive coaching as performed by consulting psychologists, it would be in the Society's best interest to define and delimit executive coaching in terms of specific role functions. Such distinctions have important consequences for theory and research as well as for professional practice.

To foster this consensus I offer the following definitions that distinguish executive coaching from executive consultation. Executive consultation is a "form of organizational consultation in which a trained professional, mindful of organizational dynamics, functions as a sounding board and expert adviser in a collaborative relationship with an executive to address a broad range of professional and personal issues germane to that executive and his or her corporate responsibilities" (Sperry, 2008, p. 36). Executive coaching is a "form of executive consultation in which a trained professional, mindful of organizational dynamics, functions as a facilitator who forms a collaborative relationship with an executive to improve his or her skills and effectiveness in communicating the corporate vision and goals, and to foster better team performance, organizational productivity, and professional—personal development" (Sperry, 2008, p. 36).

2. Develop and promulgate core competencies for executive coaching. APA has already developed 15 core competencies for the general education of psychologists (Fouad et al., 2009). Likewise, the National Council of Schools and Programs of Professional Psychology has developed seven core competencies for the professional practice of psychology (Kenkel & Peterson, 2010). Similarly, six core competencies and 20 clinical competencies for the practice of psychotherapy have been described (Sperry, 2010). As already noted, the ICF has identified what it considers to be the core competencies necessary for effective coaching. Another challenge for consulting psychology is to specify competencies for psychologists who practice executive coaching.
3. Develop and promulgate practice guidelines for executive coaching. This should include indications and contraindications for executive coaching; intervention guidelines. In this current era of practice guidelines, the Society would do well to specify such guidelines.
4. Expand the scientific basis of executive coaching and leadership assessment. At a minimum this would include the Society and CPJ encouraging more research on all aspects of executive coaching. Of particular importance are outcomes studies, meta-analyses of existing studies, as well as critical reviews of the executive coaching literature. It would also include undertaking additional validity studies of leadership assessment devices like GILL and the development of other psychometrically sound measures of leadership behavior.

Conclusions

In the past decade, executive coaching has been a significant force within the field of consulting psychology. There are indications that executive coaching, as well as its corollary, leadership assessment, will continue to be, and become even more, influential in the coming decade. For this to happen, several initiatives have been identified that the field of consulting psychology can undertake to ensure these outcomes.

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Received October 31, 2013

Latest revision received November 18, 2013

Accepted November 18, 2013 ■