The Five Stages of Executive Coaching: Better Process Makes Better Practice

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ABSTRACT. There remains a paucity of research investigating the efficacy of executive coaching. Ambiguity surrounds its definition, its methodology and outcomes. Despite this, the executive coaching remains a viable business proposition. Practitioners bring services to the business community offering services that transcend traditional performance management consultations establishing independent "performance-driven" relationships with executives. This paper examines the process of coaching suggesting that a better understanding of process will enhance practice efficacy and accelerates empirical investigations. In addition, ethical, confidential and legal issues require attention when planning to utilize an executive coach. All this implicates the need to better understand coaching – and how it typically operates. Case studies are provided in the examination of coaching consultations in Fortune 100 settings.

KEY WORDS: Executive coaching, change management, leadership, performance management, business ethics

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Introduction

A significant amount of literature explores executive coaching. These articles tend to be anecdotal rather than empirical however, and despite the wealth of apparent experience in the practice, no clear definition of the outcomes or the process of coaching is defined. This article contributes to the latter with implications for research that empirically tests the

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efficacy of coaching. Generally, these stages include: alliance check, credibility assessment, likeability link, dialogue/skill acquisition, and cue based action plans.

With this need in mind, we purport that there are well-defined, if not essential stages of coaching. In doing so, we will provide the reader with two real life cases of executive coaching to enable a clearer understanding of how each stage works and why it is vital to success.

Executive coaching began in the 1980's with Thomas J.,[1] a financial planner in Seattle who first offered his clients life planning consultations and in 1992 started Coach University, a training program for professionals.[2] In reality, there have always been coaches but they have not been formally recognized as a body of independent professionals. Rather they have been described as consultants, mentors, managers, or friends helping others to solve problems and plan for the future.

Today, executives, business owners, entrepreneurs, professionals and a host of others can and do seek the services of an executive coach to meet job requirements, to manage stress, interpersonal relationships or to improve overall business performance. Leader organizations such as Alcoa, American Red Cross, AT & T, Ford, Northwestern Mutual Life, 3M, and United Parcel Service, offer executive coaching as part of their development and productivity programs. Other organizations such as Motorola and IBM, deploy executive coaching services regularly. According to the International Coach Federation, there are 10,000 executive coaches in the United States and over 7000 internationally.[3]

The emerging profession is, however, not without its concerns and challenges (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001). The 'service' of coaching remains ill-defined and the practice itself is in its infancy. Recently, Diamante and Primavera (2004) structured the delivery of coaching using psychological principles as a mechanism to bring cohesion. This approach acknowledges that the coach and the executive may find themselves involved in behavioral dilemmas and ethical and/or legal issues in the coaching process.[4]

Behavioral challenges will appear as the coach and the executive move toward establishing a trust relationship which requires careful *mutual* exploration of the other. The executive should have appropriate information about the coach's background, experience and credentials as well as the terms of the contract. 'Credentialing' of the profes-

sion of executive coaching, however, remains a quagmire. The ICF is a coach-certification body recognized as the prominent worldwide resource for business and personal coaches, and as such, has set the ethical and professional standards for coaches.[4] However, other relevant professions are also pursuing the coaching venue and claiming ownership and legitimacy for this service sector (e.g., industrial & organizational psychologists, consulting psychologists, retired business executives).

The legal issue is whether confidentiality will be preserved and a code of ethics or the terms of a possible contract will be honored. Perhaps, coaches have the greater burden because they not only have to follow a code of ethics if certified by the ICF, for example, but also to honor the duty of confidentiality that protects the executive and any communication exchanged during the coaching. The coach has to do that while firmly respecting the terms of a possible three-party oral or verbal contract between him, the executive, and the sponsoring company.

The best practice for a successful coaching relationship is a written contract whereby the parties – executive, coach, and sponsoring company – define the terms of performance and avoid any misunderstanding. Such contract terms should have a clear confidentiality provision, a length of service agreement, minimum amount of coaching per day, method of communication between coach and executive, fees, expenses, and method of billing among other things.

A breach of any of those terms may amount to a partial or total breach of contract, giving the non-breaching party a cause of action for specific performance or/and recovery of damages at a court of law. On the other hand, there are two ethical terms the coach must always respect whether he entered a written or verbal contract; the first one is contemplated in every written contract, and the second one is nearly never mentioned but nonetheless, equally important. The first term is confidentiality; the coach has the duty to respect the confidentiality of the executive's information, and must refrain from disclosing it even to the party compensating him, except as otherwise waived or agreed by the executive, or as required by law.

The second term is conflict of interest; the coach must avoid conflicts between his and the executive's interest by always furthering the executive's interest first. If any actual conflict of interest or the potential

for a conflict of interest arises, the coach must openly disclose it and fully discuss with the executive how to deal with it always furthering the executive's best interest. Finally, the coach must disclose to the executive whether he is receiving anticipated compensation from third parties because of that particular service. If one of those two terms is breached, the executive may have a cause of action at court and file a complaint at the professional organization that certified the coach. In most of the cases, the coach will either have his license suspended or be sanctioned if he has been certified by the International Coach Federation (ICF), depending on what the Ethical Committee and Investigative Team concludes after reviewing the complaint.[5]

Executive coaching has become associated with the following benefits: achievement of both professional and personal goals, sales increase, client retention increase, higher level of employee satisfaction, promotions, productivity increase, organizational and communication effectiveness enhancement, success of team collaboration, profitability increase, transformation of individuals and teams,[6] greater effectiveness through self-knowledge – a new level of personal mastery, the ability to inspire and enable higher levels of performance and satisfaction in others, ability to initiate and lead necessary cultural change through the recognition of relationships and patterns in the organization, ability to make quick and better decisions, higher level of openness, avoiding defensive behavior and creating powerful, effective relationships,[7] and ability to move onto greater and more complex responsibilities among others.[8]

These are grand statements and there remains a paucity of evidence to back it up. Moreover, the 'process' of a coaching relationship requires navigation. This article proposes that there are Five Stages of Executive Coaching and these stages, while sequential may shift back and forth until resolution of each stage is achieved. The issues faced during each stage cross ethical, legal and professional boundaries in the context of developing people to develop an organization.

Five stages of executive coaching

There are 5 Stages to the Executive Coaching Process. They are:

1. The Alliance Check
2. The Credibility Assessment
3. The Likeability Link
4. Dialogue and Skill Acquisition
5. Cue-Based Action Plans

Stage 1: The Alliance Check

The 'alliance check' represents the executive's uncertainty regarding what is 'about to happen' and perhaps even 'why'. While coaches are engaged for various reasons this initial stage, is about resistance and identification of the circumstances that led to the coaches' presence. Executives receive coaches for a variety of reasons. They may be new to the executive role and so, are being groomed or oriented to speed their transition. Alternatively, perhaps they are experiencing turbulence in their job performance and are already placed on a 'get-well or else' ultimatum. Still, another possibility is that business strategy shifted and they are not aligned.

Regardless of the trigger for the introduction of a coach, the executive will likely need to determine whether or not this 'positive' service is a ploy (to obtain data for other purposes), is a good-faith face effort but termination is likely anyhow or is truly a developmental activity – here for the goal of improving executive performance. There is no way around this reality.

The 'alliance check' is won by being factual. The coach states what is known by all parties and what will not be known. If the executive did not voluntarily engage the work, the agreements made by the coach with others should be exposed. Concerns about confidentiality, methodology, control over the process and overall objectives should be openly discussed.

The alliance activates the conversation that will lead to the writing of a roadmap and removal of resistance. Alliance begins but never ends – it is the stage that most often re-surfaces throughout the engagement. As a coach, you increase your alliance as you earn 'credits' by being truthful, insightful and helpful. The effectiveness of such an approach to influence was elaborated upon in leadership literature (Hollander, 1978). The coaching principles, when followed, produce strong alliances with clients.

Stage 2: The credibility assessment

The 'credibility assessment' is stage two. Stage two is centered on the executive's desire to gain control and determine whether the coach has anything to offer. The coach is to be examined in terms of background, credentials and experience. Describing past success stories is a useful way to place the executive at some degree of ease. In the business setting, business experience is paramount. But, at some point the opportunity to present expertise in behavior change will appear and should be ceased. Let the client know you are a qualified professional in relevant subject matter.

The credibility assessment occurs because the executive is concerned about your impact on them. This is not about you, the coach. Patience is counseled. The coach cannot move past this stage successfully until the executive perceives the possibility that the coach might be beneficial. The executive is ready to move on when questions start to be asked about the nature of the engagement, the methods used or other operational concerns. If this stage takes time, allow it. Let it simmer before rushing on.

Stage 3: The likeability link

Stage three is the 'likeability link'. This link is established when the executive compares his preferred style with your style. At this stage, the executive is measuring your self-confidence, knowledge (or at least articulation of that knowledge) and intensity or business focus. Are you result oriented or is this about process? Are you overly structured in your methods or not structured enough?

The expertise of the coach is not so much challenged at this stage as is the coach's ability to gauge the executive preferences and behave in a manner that will connect. This is not simply a matter of similarity in style. Indeed, the executive may be deliberately seeking, something new and different.

It is often advantageous, at this point, to discuss the relationship that is to develop. This enables the coach and the executive to discover each other, talk about the process and 'air' preferred styles of engagement. It is often an opportunity for the coach to put forward the possibility that points or observations may be made that are not necessarily palat-

able to the executive. The coach can add that such a role is important if progress is to be made and that 'good relations' is not the primary goal, but business results are. Hard, business orientations hit more often than they miss. Complemented by credible experience and professional credentials, the likeability link is secured.

Stage 4: Dialogue and skill acquisition

Stage four, dialogue and skill acquisition, is focused on identification of the four factors and their integration in order to prepare the executive for change. Stage four is a stage of discovery, analysis, verification and application. The four-factor (4F) model (Diamante and Primavera, 2004) provides a taxonomy for understanding 'self' in relation to business demands (Figure 1).

Through dialogue and practice, the executive becomes more self-aware about automatic reactions (cognitive, behavioral and visceral) and acknowledges the opportunity to choose (freely) a reaction that better fits the circumstances.

Executives often respond to physical state responses by attaching or attributing significance to these sensations beyond their reality. For example, increased heart rate could mean that one feels overwhelmed or it might mean love at first sight. Attribution of physical state responses in the workplace is often overlooked while attribution of behavioral results (why results were achieved) is most often acknowledged (Hogan, 1987; Schmitt and Robertson, 1990). The cognitive attributions of the executive define (and contribute to) the executive's situation. Counseling methodologies that produce changes (realignment) of the four factors so that they 'fit' with external, business demands will likely produce more effective, literally 'better adjusted' business executives.

Consequently, individuals do indeed respond to situations physical stately and attribute cause or meaning onto this physical set of signs – rightly or wrongly. Executive coaches largely ignore attribution errors when working at the individual level. This is a miscalculation for both practical and theoretical reasons. Indeed, stage four targets skills that can identify and then enhance self-management of thoughts, feelings, behaviors and physical sensations.

Intellectually, the executive 'evaluates' the circumstances and internalizes the words chosen. "I am
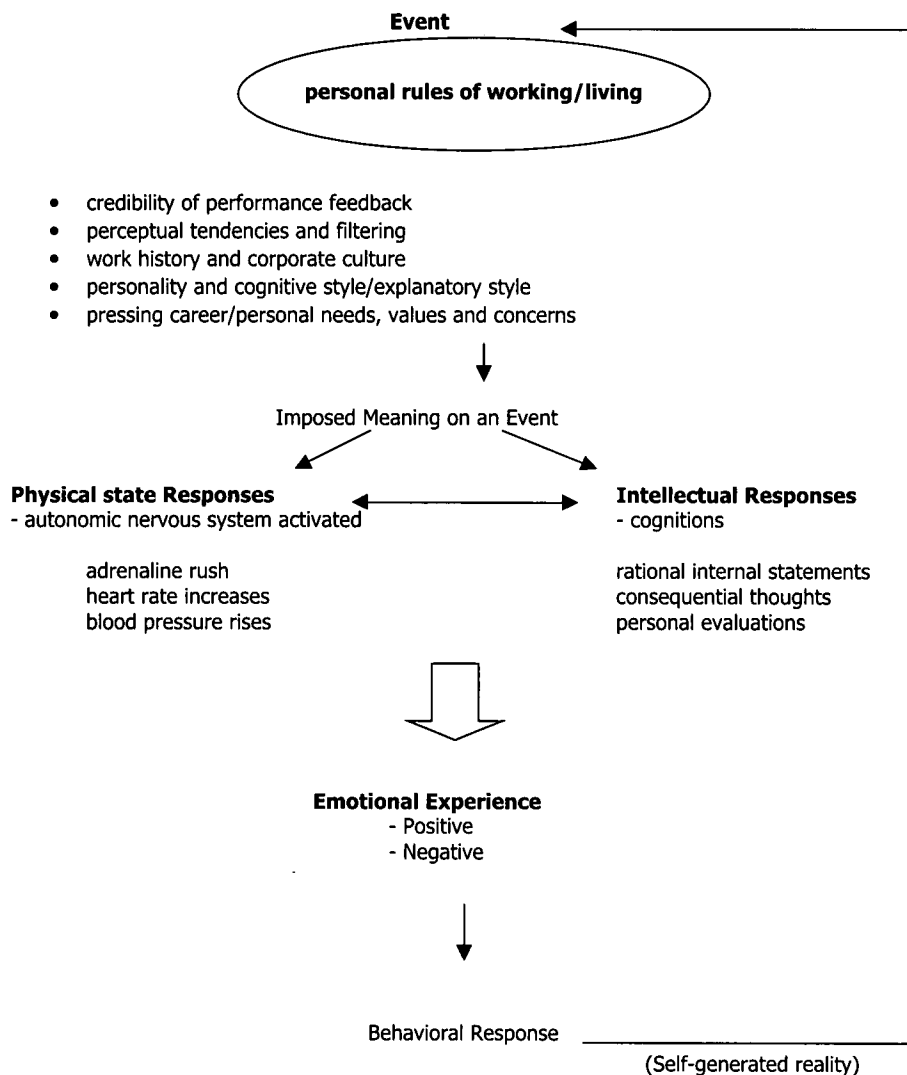
Event

personal rules of working/living

- credibility of performance feedback
- perceptual tendencies and filtering
- work history and corporate culture
- personality and cognitive style/explanatory style
- pressing career/personal needs, values and concerns

Imposed Meaning on an Event

Physical state Responses
- autonomic nervous system activated

adrenaline rush
heart rate increases
blood pressure rises

Intellectual Responses
- cognitions

rational internal statements
consequential thoughts
personal evaluations

Emotional Experience
- Positive
- Negative

Behavioral Response

(Self-generated reality)

Figure 1. The expanded four-factor model. Diamante and Primavera (2004) reprinted with permission of *International Journal of Decision Ethics*.

in trouble" is different than "I need to fix this" and "I can't do this" is different than "I can't do this under these circumstances". The cognition brings valence and direction. These characteristics drive behavioral possibilities.

Valence is the motivational force or drive that propels the characteristic of thought. Seligman's (1991) work in explanatory cognitive style is most applicable here in that the 'character of thought' is linked to behavioral outcomes. The concept of 'learned helplessness' or more positively said when cognitive style is altered, 'learned optimism' is directly related to the extent to which the executive perceives a situation as insurmountable or only an-

other hurdle. Coaches can assess the valence of the 'evaluative thought' by calibrating the intensity or 'stability, certainty and specificity' of the thought. For example, "I am doomed" brings more valence than "I need to solve this terrible problem". More valence is more energy that brings exponential power to the consequences of four factor alignment – this can be either positive or negative. It is crucial that the coachee remain reality-based when realigning their thoughts, feelings and behaviors. The goal is to improve performance based upon realism.

Direction of thought (positive or negative) is gauged in terms of impact on emotion, positively or negatively. "I am doomed" brings a strong valence

and a strong direction, a negative direction. It is a cognition that requires executive attention. "This is an exciting opportunity for me to overcome interpersonal barriers" brings strong valence and positive direction. Changing cognitions or beliefs demands expertise whether behavioral and/or cognitive approaches are deployed. The critical importance of such work brings not only issues of efficacy but also of professional ethics and organizational responsibility (Bandura and Schunk, 1982; Lowman, 1998, Mineka and Sutton, 1992).

Cognitive evaluation of the coachee is not always accurate and there is a wealth of research that describes perceptual distortions and cognitive errors in a business context. The nature of thought and the nature of emotion are found to go hand in hand (Hearn et al., 1989; Tavris, 1989). Hostility, anger and resentment breeds physical ailments and leads to behavioral propensities that often exacerbate the situation (e.g., social isolation, lack of nurturance) (Williams and Williams, 1989).

The anxiety produced by the cognition is therefore a component of the emotion and in turn triggers physical state responses (i.e., autonomic nervous system or 'fight or flight' response). Described colloquially, the 'stress and strain' experienced is linked to the thoughts, feelings and physical senses. Unmanaged, these interactions implicate likely behavioral deficiencies (i.e., poor interpersonal relations, trouble focusing, physical complaints, inability to relax). The research on stress and health, based on the seminal works of Benson (1974, 1975) connect body and mind through a variety of 'skills' that can be learned. The coach can capitalize on physical state control as a means of demonstrating and enhancing how the executive can and should assume control over their feelings and behaviors. The evidence is personally compelling when the coach uses techniques such as sensory awareness induction, muscular relaxation techniques or other forms of work stress interventions (Ivancevich et al., 1990; Wallace and Benson, 1972). The feedback is personal, direct and immediate. There is no more direct way to connect behavior, cognition and emotion.

The importance of cognition on behavior is well supported in a variety of clinical, social psychological and industrial research (Ellis, 1984; Seligman, 1991; Vroom, 1964). Evidence is quite clear that behavior is mediated by thought and emotion (Goldfried and Davison, 1976; Seligman, 1991). Yet, cognitive literature remains underutilized by those providing executive coaching services as does the literature on mind-body duality; actually it is difficult to identify professional coaches that factor cognitive-behavioral modification into their intervention strategy. In addition, the linkages between thought and emotion are compelling.

Emotion, often deemed a barometer of reality, gains immediate attention when under experiencing situations that require action. Emotion, however, is a complex phenomenon. Emotions are a tangled mess of internal sensations, situational cues, cognitive attributions and personal history. Mistakenly, executives (and others) act as if emotions reflect reality and act in compliance or agreement with the defined (or self-labeled) emotion (Izard, 1977).

The executive coach needs to work with emotions, manage these emotional cues (question them) and understanding or otherwise integrate how the executive uses/misuses emotion to direct behavior or perhaps, as is often the case, to justify behavior. Skilled coaches will not shy away from feeling states and will integrate emotion (and its impact on behavior) into the coaching process. Stage four is complete at the demonstration of self-awareness that leads to 'thinking about how one is thinking' and controlling physical, emotional and behavioral outcomes. Simulations, *in vivo* exposure or imagery can be used to assess the executive's adaptive competence.

Stage 5: Cue-based action plans

The final stage, stage five, is action planning. The action plan is a delineation, in behaviorally specific or cognitively specific terms, of what the executive needs to do and when. Action-plans that delineate 'cues' are advised since they not only state the behaviors and/or thoughts that require modification but they also can be written so that the coach calibrates a 'radar' for the executive - cueing them when alternate cognitive and/or behavioral paths are required.

The 4F model articulates the important role of cognition, affect, physiology and behavior and their interactions. The four-factors suggest that dynamics within the executive affect dynamics outside the executive – thereby establishing a 'you get what you create' dynamic. Further, it assumes that to change

external behavior it is necessary to understand and (re)calibrate the mechanisms within the executive that sustain the behavior.

The alignment of internal structures (i.e., four-factors), with external business demands (i.e., instability, uncertainty or change) breeds 'adaptive congruity'. This ability to adjust or recalibrate physical state, intellectual, emotional and behavioral responses to business demands brings a powerful 'inner strength' that is characterized by Bass' definition of transformational leadership (Bass, 1990). Importantly, this adaptive characteristic is a fluid concept – yielding not only immediate returns but also long term value. As changes in the business environment erupt, the executive is capable of 'transforming' (using the 4F Model) to meet these demands.

The 4F model presents undeniable connections between how the executive manages others and how the executive manages him or herself. The model begins with the 'existence' of an event or circumstance that automatically triggers a series of responses. The model argues that the series of responses culminate in behavior (often the noticeable organizational element) and that behavior is shaped by internal dynamics – these being the thoughts, emotions and physical senses being experienced. Collectively, these elements not only control behavior but also in fact serve to define the very situation or circumstance itself to which the executive is responding.

Events or circumstances therefore are relevant only to the extent that they are perceived or understood by the executive. This triggers a chain of complex, interrelated reactions among thoughts, physiology, emotion and behavior all of which, in turn, serve to define (or define) the circumstances surrounding the executive.

The four-factors bring the individual into the equation of defining 'what exists' and this in turn defines the 'experience' of the executive. This internal experience impacts health, well-being and of course, business performance. Indeed, there is a growing body of literature connecting thoughts to physical and psychological states of well–being. The field of psychoneuroimmunology offers direct implications for methodological issues in coaching and the four-factor embraces this literature (Kiecolt-Glaser et al., 2002). Professionally, executive coaching goals are focused on improved job performance. Coaching is about improving behavior in context

(rather than self-actualizing), however the 4F model achieves behavioral excellence as a result of 'adaptive congruity' which is a state that affords behavioral, physical state and emotional balance thus enhancing not only physical well-being but emotional well-being as well. The goal of improved job performance (excellence in context), is therefore complementary of and compatibility with the goal of overall well-being. The physical state and emotional correlates of executive coaching is a ripe area for future research.

Understanding the internal dynamics of the executive is advantageous to understanding resultant behaviors. Indeed understanding the interplay between physical state, cognitive, emotional and behavioral stimuli fills a professional discipline in the field of individual psychology (Izard, 1977) and recently gained attention in the workplace (Lord et al., 2002). The significance of this literature lies in investigating the emotional and physical health benefits accrued through coaching interventions.

It is argued here that congruity between internal dynamics and external business demands minimizes unnecessary friction or an unhealthy (i.e., unproductive) state. Said differently, congruity is the result of alignment between internal dynamics and external business realities. Misalignment is experienced as fatigue, stress and emotional exhaustion – alignment reduces these sensations and when an executive thinks, feels and behaves in a manner that is congruent with business strategy – leadership is realized.

The interaction between thoughts and feelings is the raw material of a competent coach. The end goal is to reshape this raw material or better said, to enable the executive to 'reshape self' so that with this newly learned, 'adaptive' competency, the executive can achieve congruity with business demands. The reshaping of the four factors is fluid concept. The 4F model implies a constant state of change, adaptation or re-alignment. Interestingly, the organizational systems literature addresses this very issue in the context of organizational (rather than individual) effectiveness. Nadler and Tushman (1989) wrote:

"While our model implies that congruence is a desirable state it is in fact a double-edged sword. In the short term, congruence seems to be related to effectiveness and performance. A system with high congruence however, can be resistant to change. It develops ways of insulating itself from outside influences and may be unable to respond to new situations" (p. 195).

The implications for individual 'systems' is clear and the advice is to remain vigilant to the need to change. The 4F model portrays systemic change at the individual level of analysis and is an extension of organizational systems theory.

Finally, behavior is often viewed as an automatic response to a situation and 'training' is provided to correct the poor or inadequate response (Goldstein, 1989). Our 4F model suggests the naiveté of such an approach since the four factors are implicated in sustaining a deficient behavior. While training, regardless of modality, can lead to improved performance for certain types of deficiencies (e.g., skills, knowledge acquisition) performance deficiencies of a more 'embedded' nature require a closer look (e.g., cognition is at issue, emotion is in play and/or physiology is adding complexity).

Typically, based upon professional experience, 'embedded deficiencies' lead executives to coaches because externally applied or numerically driven performance feedback interventions fail to realize results (i.e., multi source feedback, written warnings, training). The 4F Model offers a tangible, practical means of leveraging change from within. Coaching is effective when the sources of motivation for change are internalized (Bandura, 1986; Deci et al., 1989; London and Diamante, 2002).

Behavioral change produced by external tactics minimizing (if not ignoring) the need to work or shape the four factors will be short-lived, cosmetic or will otherwise not be sustained by the organization. These behavioral changes occur because of external cues not internal cues – making them dependent on the environment rather than the individual for sustenance. At management levels, that strategy is a business risk. It leaves the executive rank vulnerable to uncertainties, competitive threats other high probability, demanding business events. In sum, to sustain executive behavioral change the coach must work from the inside out.

The 4F model views the executive as being 'personally accountable' for change – not only responding to events in the business environment but also in a self-determination mode. Through self-control (physically, intellectually, emotionally and behaviorally) the executive contributes to the nature, meaning, importance and consequences of the event to which he is 'responding'. The 4F model works because it by definition, views the executive's

situation and the executive as 'one' – being connected by way of the four factors. This inextricable linkage brings enormous power and responsibility to the executive – a combination that senior executive typically embrace. In a sense, we are what we do, what we think and what we feel. This bottom-line orientation translates professional jargon into common sense, blunt language that gains enormous business buy-in with little need for a persuasive argument.

Case One: A cultural misfit

After 14 years of undeniable business success in Eastern Europe, Richard finds himself in a precarious situation. Grown to be a close friend of the President at this Fortune 100 global consumer products organization and being the top producer for Business Development in the European Union, Richard begins to experience a desire to come to the States and work in World Headquarters in New York. This apparently viewed as a strategic career move to higher positions in the company.

Richard meets with the company President. Over dinner it is agreed that Richard has indeed earned the right to work with Executive Vice Presidents and Presidents of affiliated Operating Companies and that the only way to make that happen is to transplant him to the States. However, the President, savvy about the realities of credibility at World Headquarters informs Richard that while his European success is valued, 'making it' in the domestic, U.S. market is quite different. Richard will need to earn his stripes in the U.S.A. before he makes a career move into the New York office. Without hesitation, Richard accepts the invitation to run a domestic Sales Division – and agrees, in writing, that he will be placed into an Executive Vice President role in New York once he sustains business performance for 3 years. The stage is set, or so Richard believes.

Circumstances enable the President to relocate the current Vice President, Sales from the West Coast to a lesser job in the Northeast. Richard acquires the western Sales Region as his territory and moves to Los Angeles, CA. Born and raised in Eastern Europe, 52 years of age, no marriages, no children, many relationships, Richard is quick to purchase an

ostentatious home suitable for dinner parties and glamor. It is at this home that he Richard meets his coach only 8 months into his executive role.

"So, I understand you are here to help me?" Richard remarks sarcastically upon meeting the coach. "What exactly are you going to do – are you a shrink or what?"

"What is it that you need?" the coach replies. And so the games begin.

Richard explains that he is not able to get his Senior Managers rallying behind him. Sales are dipping, a condition never seen before. He just can't seem to execute any of his promotional programs or get his Managers to "do what they are told". Richard spends the next hour or so rambling about how his senior staff is incompetent, disrespectful and he probably should just 'clean house' – "shake them all up" he says – "that'll get a rise out of them."

Richard is irritable, anxious and lacking thought about what he is saying and how he is saying it. His uncharitable commentary about his staff is mixed with barbs about the role and the presence of the coach who remains literally silent riding through this turbulence.

"Bob said you are here to lend me hand" Richard says referring to the President. "Is it true? Or, is this his way of removing guilt when he decides to dump me – perhaps he has decided that already and you are here to convey it for him?" He goes on with a personal affront, "I don't suppose you 'coaches' know what it is like to actually be employed."

With that the coach is able to find an entry point and begin to reframe Richard's view of the situation and of the professional role of the coach. The coach explains that an agreement exists (in writing) between Richard's employer and the coach stating the purpose, method and anticipated outcomes of this consultation. The consultation is for developmental purposes solely, any and all data collected or discussed is confidential, no content specific feedback to the President will be given and that Richard 'can choose to exit' the arrangement whenever he decides to. The coaching relationship is strictly a mechanism to win back revenue ... "apparently being eroded by your inability to sustain whatever was going on here before you arrived" – quipped the coach demonstrating a degree of backbone and sense of self-respect.

Richard responds with an amusing smile as if to reward the display of fortitude and surprisingly asks "tell me about your background and why I should spend time with you." The door is opened for the coach to offer business facts. Hard, indisputable evidence of competence is offered including 'real jobs' held with major organizations, relevant past consultative experience and credentials that distinguish the coach.

Sensing that the coach is 'hitting back' Richard begins to warm up. He likes the fact his coach is not afraid to throw a punch. This might work after-all!

Having overcome a degree of resistance, addressed "how" the engagement will be executed and defined desirable outcomes, the coach can now probe the thinking and the behaviors of the executive to better capture an understanding of the situation. Comparisons are made between managing the Western Sales Region encompassing 800 employees and nearly $2B in operating revenue to working as a 'broker' in Eastern Europe. This analysis becomes a thoughtful exercise distilling differences in managerial requirements, marketplace (client demands) and sales approaches.

It is realized that a 'gunslinger' style was not only accepted but effective in his old role but managing a domestic sales region is quite different. Richard admits to thinking too much about himself (and his anticipated job in World Headquarters) and little about the needs, wants and concerns of his senior staff whom he realizes will 'make or break' his success. "I've never really been this dependent upon others to get things done – I certainly never experienced the need to interact so often on so many things." "You know, your attitudes toward work, bosses and jobs here in the States is quite different."

Dialogue results in identifying thoughts and expectations Richard holds for himself and for others. Evidence is used to confirm or reject supposed 'facts' about what is right and what is wrong when managing and what works and does not work when managing teams of professionals in state-side. Information from peers, subordinates and even customers helps Richard reject assumptions he held about 'how to execute' – the coach moves into a catalytic role – finding, offering and facilitating – but the executive does the analyzing, critical thinking and infers new ways to get things done.

Importantly, change is taking place 'within' Richard. He begins to realize that his understanding

about how to execute business is not aligned with the expectations of those he intends to lead. He is smart enough to realize that he will not win by bullying them, partly because he's already tried that.

The coach connects his managerial behavior to its impact on people and its manifestation on business results. Richard takes evasive action. At first, out of a sense of being desperate but in time the new behaviors become his own. They become a part of him because they bring him what he wants – better execution. Specifically, through feedback, Richard learns to use better process to get better results in meetings, he begins to discuss decision making before making decisions on matters that impact his team and he measures his time spent listening (rather than talking). Self-monitoring becomes a skill Richard worships and he relies on the coach for feedback *in vivo* which is provided regularly and directly.

Richard begins to report feeling more comfortable in his role because he no longer 'feels at war' with his staff. Exaggerated beliefs or rules about what he 'should' or 'should not' be doing are replaced with more realistic expectations. In fact, he is no longer at war with himself. Unrealistic, unproductive rules or thoughts he held firmly are relinquished for more suitable, more realistic guidelines. For example, 'I will not be contradicted during meetings' turns into 'I need to hear others opinions or I will not be able to fully understand my management situation.' 'The chain of command is here for a reason' is replaced with 'The chain works best when all the links are in place' – these subtle alterations of thought are accompanied by more time spent listening, more time spent asking and more time spent being with senior staff. This noticeable difference in behavior leads to higher morale and business execution begins to rebound.

During consultations the coach notes 'situations' or cues that apparently spark certain (ineffective) thoughts and behaviors. These often were the impetus behind analyzing and identifying inappropriate or unrealistic expectations. As an 'alert' to Richard, the coach writes a 'cue-based' action plan. This action plan is a personalized plan detailing when the executive 'gets in trouble', how it typically manifests, why it manifests and most importantly – the easy fix – stating a modified behavior and/or a modified thought that leads to better business out-

comes. These business outcomes are stated on the cue-based action plan to bolster business relevance.

After one full year on the job – and the last quarter showing that business is back on the rise, the company President invites the coach and the Richard to dinner. "Pardon me for asking and I know I shouldn't but what really happened out there?" Richard pauses and smiles over to the coach...he pulls out a slip of paper, "a cue-based action plan" he remarks, and explains to Bob, "it's all a matter of identifying the cues that set you off in the wrong direction and then knowing how to get back on track".

Case Two: Sometimes more is less

Sandy finds herself gazing out the window wondering what went wrong. Thirty-eight-years-old, top-tier MBA and committed to her job – yet she is devastated. Her boss, her direct reports and now, Human Resources is involved too. She sees the ending to this story but can't admit it. It just all seems so...so, wrong.

A global publisher in the throws of transformation from a traditional publishing environment to a digitized workplace realizes that in addition to operations changing, senior management too must be realigned. The environment, historically, is one of security, commitment, loyalty – do what you are told and the company takes care of you.

The move to a componentized database and the personalization of product requires new thinking and most importantly an openness from the staff to experiment, innovate and/or embrace better ways to get the job done. Convention will not work. Nay-sayers have no place. It is all about possibilities – right or wrong – the mission is to learn and hopefully, in time identify faster, better, cheaper ways to design and deliver product.

Eighteen months into this transformation to a digitized environment, senior management grows uncomfortable. Explaining the circumstances to the coach being interviewed for the engagement, one Senior Executive says: "There is no significant difference in the operation. Competitive activity is growing. New competitors are appearing. Emerging technologies are knocking on our doors and we still

don't know which door to open. This has got to stop. We will be crushed."

The conversation continues and the coach learns that "they cut the head off the monster 6 month ago" – yet no genuine progress is evident. The 'monster' was a long-service employee, in charge of managing publishing operations for nearly 17 years. He was deep-rooted in the organization and his staff was incredibly loyal. Seventeen years is a long time and the employees he mostly relied on were too, long service. They've spent many years together, shared much and now ... he was fired.

The removal of the Director, Publishing Operations coincided with corporate communications about 'culture change' – a new mission for the organization – and even a video to rally all to the cause. The employees, for the most part, said all the right things publicly about the transformation but privately held nothing but scorn for, as they put it, 'the new world order'.

Sandy, the new Director, Publishing Operations is interviewed, nurtured and socialized into the 'change program' focused on digitizing the workplace. Sandy, a business strategist more than a technologist, is chose for the job because of her track record turning around sales in smaller publishing enterprises owned by the firm.

"She's smart, polite and demanding – but not unfairly. She doesn't understand the word failure – I like her. Never with an excuse – always with a plan" explains the Chief Information Officer. "That is her reputation."

Subsequent to Sandy's orientation to her job in corporate headquarters (New York) she makes her way to a North Carolina where the publishing think-tank and operations resides. Sandy arrives excited, energized and even effervescent after her week in New York and in being asked to play an integral on this key mission.

Sandy immediately meets will the entire staff collectively and then had individual meetings too. In hindsight, her gut was right. This was bad from the start.

"You see, they view me as such a horrible manager" Sandy sobbed. "We are at the point of no return. What can you possibly do for me, now? Isn't it too late for advice? Didn't human resources call you in on this?"

Sandy is distraught. The coach appeals to her better side. "Sandy, when was the last time you ever gave up?" She smiles in appreciation for the kind word (as if sensing relief that finally, someone *knows* her), but remarks "I think it's over".

Sandy is offered some facts. Yes, it is true that her boss, in writing, expressed dissatisfaction for her performance. Yes, it is true that documentation is piling up suggesting that she cannot manage. Yes, it is true that her direct reports are quite open to senior management about her apparent faults.

"But Sandy, did you or anyone else, assess your organization's readiness to make the changes requested by New York?" "No" she replies "we all assumed that of course they would be on-board, it is what senior management expects."

"Has anyone spoken to your organization about the removal of your predecessor?" "I don't think so," Sandy testified realizing that that is a gaping hole in her entry.

"Did senior management play a role in communicating their expectations directly to *your* organization?" "Well, there was a brochure, a video too...and then before me I believe, maybe one year ago, there was an off-site for the entire organization, not just publishing operations."

"Sandy, how would you feel if you watched your friend/boss get fired, you were forced to change your workday when you don't want it changed and your new boss, being very different from your old boss – is now measuring your results and creating a competitive culture – and all you really want to do is come to work, do your job the way you already know how – and then go home." Astonished, Sandy looks eye-to-eye and says "What else you thinking?"

With statements of fact resistance can be overcome. Sandy and the coach soon create an alliance to analyze events transpiring – in time a case is put forward demonstrating that apparently *negative* information reaching strategic political connections is actually *positive* information – it reflects progress. For example, given the context of the changes taking place, the nature of the staff Sandy is working with and the pressures she must demand of them – is it any wonder that feedback from these employees is negative?

Sandy is now all ears. The coach offered information she did not have. It is changing her understanding of her situation. More importantly it is a start to changing her understanding of *herself*. With

newfound credibility, the coach begins to ask Sandy pointed questions about her understanding of what is going on, how it got this bad and what is getting in her way of fixing the problem. It becomes apparent that the amount of negative information coming was difficult for her to counter. Her esteem weakened – a consequence of both the pressure of generating results and the persistence of executives badgering her based on phone calls from her staff. Human resources began investigating unfounded claims against her for intimidation. The 360 degree 'leadership tool' intended to improve interpersonal relations, was soon aimed at Sandy's forehead.

With Sandy's permission and collaboration, the coach hunts for the facts among the employees themselves. Asking in subtle ways, it is realized that indeed change is not what the employees want – they want their old jobs back, preferably with the old boss. Sandy is viewed as demanding and tenacious. They don't like it – they don't like her.

While employee perceptions were unanimous, they were unanimously based upon a delusion – that life (work) should be what it once was. Moreover, the employees believed that if they were clever enough they could turn this ship around and head it in the direction they want to go. The data accumulated by human resources was indeed consistent and negative – interpreted to mean failure when in fact it meant progress.

Through dialogue with Sandy she becomes aware that the basis for her assessment (internally) was ill-founded. She no longer views herself as "incapable of managing a culture change intervention" and her self-esteem returns when she is informed that the results of her personality profile mirror that of a successful executive.

In addition, the coach now identifies situations that were very challenging to her likely because it resonated with underlying beliefs about herself and her plight. The linkages between her mishandling of key managerial situations and her thoughts about herself at the time were viewed as interesting by Sandy and were discussed. The result being the identification of evidence that her self-view is in fact, not warranted based upon evidence from the past as well as evidence put forward by the coach regarding current performance levels.

"So, I'm not so bad after-all?" Sandy remarks as she leaves a meeting with senior management to restructure her organization. With Sandy at the helm, 30% of her staff are now moved into less challenging positions, 20% are opting for voluntary severance and another 10% are removed involuntarily based upon performance. "The window is now wide open, Sandy" comments her coach. Institutionalize those competitive practices with the right people and the results will come, just as they have in the past."

"The lesson on this is beware self-dialogue" Sandy shares with her Senior Vice President. "I contributed to my problems by misunderstanding myself – I misinterpreted the data just like everyone else! I viewed it as a confirmation of incompetence when in fact the opposite was true." Getting third party perspective on this was crucial.

The coach prepared a synopsis of events that transpired. Organized by 'cues' that triggered certain, ineffective beliefs or thoughts – Sandy walks away with action plans and radar for sustaining her executive competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Executive coaching is an expanding area of one-to-one executive development with the best of business, communication, consulting, sports, training, mentoring, psychology, philosophy, and social sciences. The most widely accepted definition for this approach is the one provided by the ICF, an 'ongoing professional relationship that helps people produce extraordinary results in their lives, careers, businesses or organizations.'[9]

Executive coaching is viewed as a collaborative alliance focusing on change and transformation, and is divided in five stages: alliance check stage, which involves the writing of the process roadmap and removal of the executive's resistance; credibility assessment stage, in which the coach provide the executive with his background and the later perceives that the coach may be beneficial; likeability link stage, when executive tends to compare his preferred style to the coach's style and decide whether he likes him or not; dialogue and skill acquisition stage, in which the coach integrates the executive's emotion into coaching process and ends with the executive's self-awareness; and finally, cue-based action plans stage, in

which both the coach and the executive delineate what the later needs to do and when.

The five-stages alliance involves not only the coach and the executive, but also the parties referred to as the 'key stakeholders.' The key stakeholders in this situation are the executive's manager, department of human resources, peers, direct reports and other people in the executive's life.[10,11]

Although it takes the best from social sciences, executive coaching should not be confused with psychology therapy or counseling because it deals with attainable goals and possibilities, healthy clients desiring a better situation or to move to a higher or better level of functioning, assumes that emotions are natural, and is viewed as a co-creative equal partnership. On the other hand, psychology therapy deals with pathologies, people with dysfunctions, assumes emotions are symptoms of something wrong, and is viewed as a doctor–patient relationship.[12] That said, the overlap between executive coaching and therapeutic 'talk' interventions have been delineated (Goodstone and Diamante, 1998).

Top five reasons why the world is using executive coaching approach are: Sharpening the leadership skills of high-potential individuals (86%); correcting management behavior problems such as poor communication skills, failure to develop subordinates, or indecisiveness (72%); ensuring the success, or decreasing the failure rate of newly promoted managers (64%); correcting employee relations problems such as poor interpersonal skills, disorganization, demeaning or arrogant behavior (59%); and providing the required management and leadership skills to technically oriented employees (58%).[13]

Coaches are able to meet ethical guidelines of the profession, establish a coaching agreement, establish an intimate and trusting relationship with the client, be fully present, conscious and spontaneous, express active listening, ask powerful questions, be a direct communicator, create and raise the client's awareness, design and create action plans and action behaviors, develop plans and establish goals with the client, manage the client's progress and hold him/her responsible for action.[14]

In order to maximize the executive coaching approach, it is recommended to manage the entire coaching process to ensure consistency and quality; prepare clients in advance for coaching and to not force coaching on anyone; offer clients the ability to select their coaches because chemistry is necessary; get strong organizational support from immediate managers to encourage the executive to be open to coaching, ensure coaches are grounded in the company's business and culture; allow each coaching relationship to follow its own path and build performance measurement into the coaching process.[15]

Notes

[1] Joshua Hyatt, "Thomas Leonard built an industry out of the contradictions in himself", Fortune Small Business (May, 2003).

[2] "What is Coaching?" at www.consummatecoaching. com (last visit October 8, 2004).

[3] John Bennett and Debra Martin. "The next professional wave" (September 2002) at www. Internationalcoach.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[4] ICF at www.internationalcoachfederationalcoach federation.org (last visit October 8, 2004).

[5] Id.

[6] University of British Columbia – Department of Human Resources at http://www.hr.ubc.ca (last visit October 6, 2004).

[7] Executive Coaching, "A Pathway for Leadership Mastery" at www.oberiengroup.us/executive-coaching.htm (last visit October 6, 2004).

[8] "What is Executive and Business Coaching?" at www.odysseycoaching.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[9] The ICF Code of Ethics at www.internationalcoach-federation.org (last visit October 6, 2004).

[10] "What is coaching?" at www.innovativeleader.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[11] Kenneth M. Nowack, Ph.D. "Executive Coaching: How to Successfully Change Behavior." (December 2001) at www.trainingmaq.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[12] Patrick Williams. "The Potential Perils of Personal Issues in Coaching." (2003) at www.lifecoachtraining.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[13] "Top Five Reasons for Hiring an Executive or Business Coach" at www.odysseycoaching.com (last visit October 6, 2004).

[14] Summary Findings from the International Executive Coaching Summit (October 1999) at www.internationalcoachfedration.org (last visit October 6, 2004).

[15] Merrill C. Anderson, Ph.D. "Executive Briefing: Case Study on the Return on Investment of Executive Coaching." (November 2001) at www.metrixglobal.net (last visit October 6, 2004).

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