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Transformative Executive Coaching: Considerations for an Expanding Field of Research

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Abstract

Executive coaching is growing in popularity as a methodology for developing leaders in organisations. Drawing on recent experiences of the authors, being both educators and practitioners within the field of higher education and executive coaching, this paper explores how the use of transformative learning in a model of transformative executive coaching can enhance the development of the person (P) being coached, thereby augmenting their working environment (E). The purpose of this article is to consider the potential of transformative learning to increase the effectiveness of executive coaching for coaching practitioners and also consider the potential for further research and implementation within the field of transformative learning.

Keywords: coaching, executive, transformative

Executive Coaching: A Definition

Executive coaching is now one of the dominant methodologies for developing leaders and as MacKie (2014) identifies, there remains significant debate about what the effective components are, what outcomes can be achieved and what are the qualities of an effective coachee (Grant, Passmore, Cavanagh, & Parker, 2010; Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011).

Defining “Executive coaching” can be problematic for both the client requiring executive coaching, and the coaching practitioner, (Maltbia et al., 2014, p. 164; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001, p. 205), in that there are differing perceptions of what constitutes executive coaching core competences both by academic and coaching programmes, (Maltbia et al., 2014, p. 161). Contemporary academic literature identifies that there are a diverse number of definitions and distinguishing features, highlighting the benefits both directly and indirectly to the organisation and the individual, with there being some emerging themes such as those of focusing on “growth” (Sherman & Freas, 2004; Grant, 2001a). Grant (2001a), Hall, Otazo, Hollenbeck, (2000), and Kilburg (1996), use the synonyms, “optimizing,” “improving,” and “enhancement of work” and/or “personal performance.”

One of the earliest definitions of executive coaching was proposed by Kilburg (1996) who defined it 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 behavioural

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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” (Kilburg, 1996, p. 142). This definition is still widely accepted and referred to in the contemporary executive coaching literature.

The Development of Executive Coaching

The contemporary coaching literature offers some insight into the current position of executive coaching within the context of the wider coaching industry. Several authors have documented executive coaching development over the past 45 years. Cox et al. (2014), elucidate that the changes from the remedial Human Resources Development coaching of the 1970's were being driven by the breakdown of the traditional hierarchical organization, which produced a change in the relationship with authority and a desire by organisations to increase diversity at the top (Drucker, 1993; Handy, 2002). Caulkin (1995), Senge (2006), and Gray et al. (2016) identify that this is in part driven by the growth of the free market economic philosophy, particularly from the USA and the UK, which generated a social sense of urgency within industry and commerce. It also developed a climate in which individuals were driven by competitive advantage, performance objectives and league tables (Grey et al., 2016, p. 24). Executive coaching and its accompanying evolving body of empirical literature substantiated this. Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) identify that the prevalence of executive coaching is in part due to its social acceptability, and popularity, described by Coultas et al. (2011), as a popular intervention to improve the performance of middle and top level leaders.

Eggers and Clark (2000), identified that executive coaching was the fastest growing area among consultancy companies and individual management consultants, this supported by the figures provided by the largest coaching membership organisation, the International Coaching Federation (ICF) from their 2012 Global Coaching Study which was conducted independently by the International Survey Unit of PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC). Their study involved surveying 12,000 coaches from 117 countries including, Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe, North America and South America, analysis of the figures from the two studies shows that the market has grown from \$1.5 billion in 2007 to \$2.0 billion in 2015, with the number of professional coaches rising from 30,000 to 47,000 respectively. The fact that the executive coaching industry is growing at a rapid pace has been well documented, (Hamlin et al., 2008; Joo, 2005; Bacon & Spear 2003; Diedrich, 2001; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Kilburg, 1996), which is supported by the 2014 Henley Business School “Corporate Learning Priorities survey”, which canvassed the anonymous views of 359 executives from 38 countries, the respondents were made up of a 60/40 split between non-HR and HR roles; the survey identified that the most selected method of learning and development was individual coaching, with 83% of executives stating that they planned to adopt it in 2014 (Handy, 2002).

Building on the themes identified from above, of “performance” and “competitive advantage” in executive coaching, Palmer and Whybrow (2014) cite Dingman (2004) compared a series of different coaching processes and identified six generic stages, which were part of all published models:

1. Formal contracting
2. Relationship building
3. Assessment

4. Getting feedback and reflecting
5. Goal setting
6. Implementation and evaluation

The impact and evaluation of executive coaching is measured by Return on Investment (ROI) with the tangible benefits being improved performance, improved income generation and intangible benefits being for example, improved interpersonal skills and workplace dynamics, (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). Clearly the ROI emphasis is on both the person being coached (P) and the organisation environment (E), however a connotation often perceived by the coachee in practice is one of dominance of (E) over (P) with an expectation of changing the coachee's behaviour (B) to improve performance linked to organisational goals. This can be reinforced by the language of the formal contracting stage, and the imbalance of focus is often expressed by the coachee in the coaching intervention as a dissonance of personal and organisational values. Cox et al. (2014) state that effective executive coaching requires at least a three-way contract between the coach, the coachee and the organisational client (Cox et al., 2014, p. 237).

Ellerup and Nørreklit, (2009) identify that there have been studies investigating the links between coaching and control of the individual, such as the effect of management coaching on the quality of sense making (Du Toit, 2007). Others such as Barner and Higgins, (2007) describe the implicit theoretical approach adopted by the coach helping to shape the coaching practice. Ellerup and Nørreklit, (2009) in their discourse analysis of the disciplinary power of management coaching identifying that in relation to executive coaching, performance evaluation is strongly emphasised, any self-realisation project must be undertaken with a close eye on the development of business potentialities. In this respect it draws on the discourse practices of the management of corporate values and identities (Cornelissen, 2004). The view of Cornelissen (2004) is supported by Brockbank (2006) who describes how academic authors position coaching as an activity that aims at improvement only, often in an instrumental way (Brockbank, 2006, p. 1). Habermas, (cited in Crowther & Sutherland) cites instrumental learning as pertaining to learning involved in controlling or manipulating the environment, improving performance or predication (Crowther & Sutherland, 2008, p. 25).

Focusing on the (P) to Further Enhance the (E)

Wohlwill (2016), Deckers (2015), Kuhl and Beckman, (2012), Rothwell and Sullivan (2005), and Graham and Weiner (1996) provide insight into the link between the executive and their existential environment citing Lewin's classic Gestalt based formula of a person's relationship to his or her environment as being, $B = f(P \times E)$, where behaviour (B) equates to the function (f) of the person (P) multiplied by (\times) his or her environment (E). Lewin's formula implies that individuals are not isolated entities "behaving" in a vacuum; rather, they interact with and are shaped by what is going on around them, this correlates to the relationship seen between the executive their organisation and the coach, (Rothwell & Sullivan, 2005, p. 376). This is further explained through Lewin's motivational force theory that states that the motivational force on the person to reach an environmental goal is determined by three factors; tension (t) or the magnitude of a need; valence (G), or the properties of the goal object; and the psychological distance of the person from the goal (e), $Force = f(t,G)/e$, (Deckers, 2015, p. 43; Graham & Weiner, 1996, p. 64).

Lewin's formulas certainly apply to the executive coaching relationship, given that those

(P) undertaking executive coaching by definition have elected or been provided with executive coaching by the organisation (E) to improve some performance or goal. In the authors' experience this works particularly well when the story behind the coaching intervention resonates with the coachee's meaning perspective, identity, and desire for change, with a focus very much on the (P) first. However, when the coachee experiences dissonance with the coaching story the psychological distance can appear to be too great a gap to close. They could be described as experiencing what Jack Mezirow would call a "disorienting dilemma". Whilst this dilemma may present challenges to the executive coach, when seen through the lens of transformative learning it presents an opportunity for substantial personal growth in (P) and therefore greater enhancement of (E).

Linking Transformative Learning with Executive Coaching

This section will be building upon the Mezirow (1978a & 2000) ten stage process of personal transformation that causes learners to reflect on their assumptions (Mezirow, 1978a/2000; Calleja, 2014, p. 119), and linking this to executive coaching. In 1983, Kitchner makes the link between cognition and transformative learning through identifying three levels of cognitive processing, the third one being "epistemic cognition" which is concerned with reflecting on the limits of knowledge, and the criteria for knowing (Kitchner, 1983, p. 222). Transformative learning is a deep, structural shift in basic premises of thought, feelings, and actions. This has been further refined by Mezirow (2006), which he states involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built, and that learning may be defined as "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action", he goes on to say that what we perceive and fail to perceive, and what we think and fail to think are powerfully influenced by habits of expectation that constitute our frame of reference, that is, a set of assumptions that structure the way we interpret our experiences" (Mezirow, 2006, p. 26). Mezirow (1998a) describes how this develops, "critical insight pertaining to assumptions governing one's problematic feelings and related dispositions, and their action consequences ...one examines the sources, nature and effect of assumptions governing the way one feels and is disposed to act upon his or her feelings" (Mezirow, 1998a, p. 194). Within the established six generic stages of the executive coaching process there are opportunities to challenge assumptions and can be mapped to Mezirow's ten phases of transformative learning.

In an attempt to meld the two fields of transformative learning and executive coaching the authors propose a model of transformative coaching that works with the coaching story (see Figure 1 and Table 1 below). Table 1 maps Dingman's (2004) six generic stages of coaching to Mezirow et al. (2000) 10 phases of transformative learning, and the proposed Model of Transformative Coaching (Figure 1).

Early applications of the transformative learning coaching model in coaching interventions, particularly those where the coachee has experienced a dissonance with the organisational goals have proven positive in closing the psychological distance gap, and taking a transformative learning approach has focused the coaching intervention very much on the (P) and thereby enhanced the (E) of the organisational goals.

Table 1 Mapping Dingman (2004), Mezirow et al. (2000), and Transformative Learning Coaching

Dingmans (2004) Six Generic Stages of Coaching	Transformative Learning Model of Coaching	Mezirow (2000) Ten Phases of Transformative Learning
1. Formal contracting	Stage 1 – Rapport building and listening. Developing a safe place and trust – creating a liminal space. Allowing the coachee’s story to be heard, listening, enabling ventilation.	1. A disorienting dilemma.
2. Relationship building	Finding the coachee’s disorienting dilemma.	
3. Assessment	Stage 2 – Critical reflection. Coachee hears their own story. Suspension of normality. Critical reflection and making sense of the story.	2. A self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame. 3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions.
4. Getting feedback and reflecting	Stage 3 – Making meaning from the story. Testing problematic frames of reference critical self-reflection, exploring alternative perspectives. Meaning making, developing a clearer picture, and starting to re-frame.	4. Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.
5. Goal setting	Stage 4 – Working with meaning. Re-framing, new knowledge/skills developing new perspectives. Developing a plan for action.	5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions. 6. Planning of a course of action. 7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plans. 8. Provisional trying of new roles.
6. Implementation and Evaluation	Stage 5 – Integration and investiture. The coachee’s new story has been accepted and integrated into their world view.	9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships. 10. A reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s perspective.

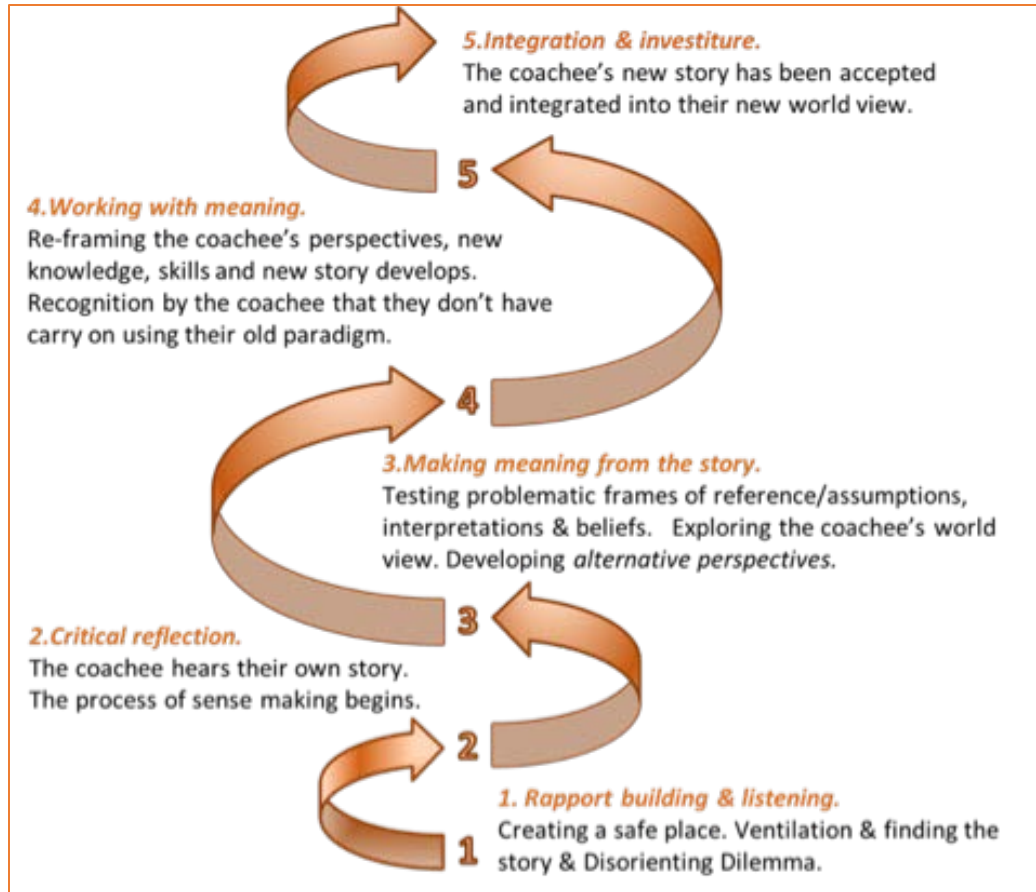


Figure 1. Proposed Transformative Learning Coaching Model

Executive Coaching Scenario using the Transformative Learning Coaching Model

A senior executive from within a National Health Service (NHS) Trust in the UK requested coaching around a work based issue that was causing them anxiety and some work stress as it had been ongoing for some time, and they were unable to see a solution or way forward. The background to this is that with a reduction in staffing resource and the consequential flattening of organisational structures through NHS efficiency savings, a work based issue around the emotional responsibility for staff and issues that were not direct line reports had developed. This coachee was holding a limiting self-belief that they were directly responsible for the actions of other managers because of the overall reduction in staffing resource, and in order to make sure the status quo of service was maintained, they would do the right thing and take responsibility for the work another manager that was not within their work remit. Utilising the above model of Transformative coaching, the coachee's story was through the coaching process, found to be based around a dissonance between the beliefs of the coach (P) and the beliefs of the organization (E) in relation to performance within constrained financial budgets. The coachee firmly held the perspective that the performance improvements being required were all their individual responsibility and they were unable to see that the other managers (actors) held responsibility for some of the required and necessary actions. By using

alternative perspectives, the coach was able to support the coachee in re-framing and containing their own area of responsibility and was able to recognise where the boundary overlaps were with other senior executives, closing the psychological distance between them and the goal of understanding the evolving workplace situation. Realising that the old paradigm was no longer required, the coachee was able to identify their own plan of action to take back into the workplace to confront and resolve the issue. In unsolicited feedback a number of weeks after the executive coaching intervention, the coachee intimated that the issue had gone away and that it was no longer a problem.

Conclusion

The literature within the field of executive coaching is predominantly focused on executive coaching for performance, with a strong emphasis on goal setting at the early stages to meet organisational requirements. From an examination of the contemporary literature there is a gap in relation to executive coaching linked to adult learning theory, specifically focusing on the transformative nature of the coaching and the impact on the coachee, prior to engaging in the goal setting and performance elements attached to executive coaching. Whilst there is an undeniable expectation that an executive coachee will be in some way transformed in a coaching intervention the use of the words transformational and transformative has throughout the literature been used interchangeably, which is problematic in understanding the actual interpretation of the underpinning theories and the inference of the authors.

The application of transformative learning theory and practice in the design of the transformative executive coaching model was intended to help overcome the challenges of disorientation and dissonance. In the spirit of approaching executive coaching as a form of adult learning to foster transformative learning, early indications show the use of the model has had a positive impact on both personal and organisational development.

Future Implementation and Research

As executive coaching grows in popularity as a methodology for developing leaders in organisations worldwide it presents opportunities to further develop the relationship between transformative learning theory and executive coaching. This melding of theory and practice must be grounded in rigorous and evidence-based research. Whilst the design and development of the transformative executive coaching model was created pragmatically to resolve a coaching challenge faced by the authors, and acknowledging early successes, it has not been fully tested to a significant level. With this in mind, the authors continue to expand this research agenda in the context of executive coach education and professional coaching practice, and invite transformative learning academics and practitioners to add to this discourse.

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