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COACHING AT WORK – A METHOD OF FACILITATING SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING OR CONTROLLING IT?

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ABSTRACT

Work place coaching can no longer be considered a passing management fad. It is now a common method for senior leader development within public, private and third sector organisations and responsible for a significant proportion of the training and development budgetary spend (Jarvis, Lane, & Fillery-Travis, 2006).

It has moved from being the rescue-remedy for the poorly performing executive to being an accepted part of the learning & development strategy with an increasing emphasis on moving away from delivery by external coaches to developing coaching cultures where coaching is considered an appropriate leadership and managerial style (McComb, 2012; Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2005). This investment has led to a focus proving efficacy through outcomes research and there is now the development of a significant evidence base concentrating upon impact and return on investment (Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011). It has proven efficacy as a vehicle for embedding learning across all employee levels and as a method of team development (Brockbank & McGill, 2006). In sectors such as education, health and manufacturing over 70% of organisations are using it as a main development tool for their employees (CIPD, 2008).

The model of coaching used, its delivery, scope and duration differs according to the overt identified purpose of the intervention. The practice of coaching encompasses the relative linear process of skills development to the complexity of developmental coaching (Passmore, 2007) where the coachee can explore their concept of self, identity and practice within the workplace through improvement in the 'quality of their perception of the work environment', their awareness of their own conditioning and self-deception and how they synthesise their various models of self (Bachkirova, 2011).

In this paper we uncover and explore some of the assumptions implicit in the use of coaching within organisations. Most coaches would identify much of their role to be the facilitation of the critical reflection by the coachee on what they are seeking from their work role in terms of achievement, impact and professional development. Specifically this form of coaching is driven by the coachee's own agenda for learning and the organisation's role is simply that

of the containing environment. The coaching literature is currently grappling with two distinct voices on this issue – one from the business coaches closely aligned to a ‘managerialist’ perspective where impacts upon performance are the only criteria for effectiveness of the learning achieved (Dagley, 2006) and the second from executive coaches who see themselves as holding a difficult balance between the personal agenda of the coachee and the implicit/explicit agendas of the sponsoring organisation. Using a critical review of the literature and offering a short vignette from practice we explore how holding this tension can result in implicit compromises in the learning agreement between coaches, clients and stakeholders. Often these compromises inhibit challenge to organisational norms that is the hallmark of deeper learning. We shall offer an example of where holding and exploring the tension between individual and organisational requirements can result in a more generative resolution where new knowledge and practice might emerge.

INTRODUCTION

Work place coaching has developed significantly since it was identified by name in the 1930s (Gorby, 1937). The most recent reviews (Fillery-Travis & Passmore, 2011; Franke & Kaul, 1978; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007) and Grant and Cavanagh (2007) sketch its progression from a management practice for motivating and supporting sales teams, through to its use in organisation-wide interventions to produce 'coaching cultures' where coaching is identified as the primary mode of leadership, employee engagement and stakeholder management (Hawkins & Smith, 2006). Yet within this developing literature there is a near universal positive evaluation of its efficacy (Grant, A., Passmore, J., Cavanagh, M. J., & Parker, H., 2010). It is commonplace to find statistics identifying that over 90% of clients consider coaching to be effective as a developmental tool for the workforce (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006). Such uniformity of response is unusual in the realm of human interactions and suggests the current level of enquiry is insufficient to identify the dilemmas that will be present in complex relationships (even taking into account the Hawthorn Effect (Franke & Kaul, 1978)). To use a common metaphor: are we looking hard enough to see the necessary, but currently obscure, dark side of coaching?

In this paper we take one of the first steps to address this question by exploring the assumptions that underpin our current understanding of what is happening in work place coaching and how these assumptions may contribute to our perhaps over-positive view of the intervention. We will first present a short review of the current research on coaching including its definition, process and theoretical underpinning before identifying how the practice uses and builds upon our understanding of self-directed learning. We will then look at one of the critical areas of interest but where there is little research – the interaction between coachee, coach and the context for coaching and how that has significantly impact upon the learning that can be achieved.

CONCISE REVIEW OF THE COACHING LITERATURE

The field has attempted to delineate coaching from other professional and leadership development interventions (Judge W.Q & Cowell J, 1997; Thach & Heinselman, 1999). It is commonly suggested that executive coaching is simply a repackaging of activities and techniques borrowed from other disciplines such as counselling, psychology; learning and consulting (Tobias, 1996). This is undoubtedly true but this 'packaging' is undertaken with deliberate choice to create a synergy with a distinct purpose - the facilitation of learning and change for individuals and teams within an organisational context (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 2005). Several papers have reviewed and debated the nature of coaching and its boundaries with counselling (Bachkirova & Cox, 2004; Passmore, 2007a), as well as the emerging domain

of coaching psychology (Stewart, O’Riordan & Palmer, 2008; (Sperry, 2008). The major psychological approaches to executive coaching interventions have also been summarised by Peltier (2001) as: psychodynamic, behaviorist, person-centered, cognitive therapeutic, and system-oriented (Feldman & Lankau, 2005). This underpinning does not place coaching within the psychological disciplines but it does identify that the coach needs to consider the behaviour, cognition and emotion of the client, and use this information to help in the process of learning and change.

There is as yet no agreed definition of coaching and the field has identified that no agreement is likely at present and indeed researchers have moved onto more interesting areas of work (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). In relation to this paper we find the following definition helpful in identifying both the process and aim of the work:

“a collaborative and egalitarian relationship between a coach, who is not necessarily a domain-specific specialist, and Client, which involves a systematic process that focuses on collaborative goal setting to construct solutions and employ goal attainment process with the aim of fostering the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the Client” (Grant & Stober, 2006)

There are three implicit assumptions working in this definition. First: that the learning for the coachee is self-directed and NOT imposed by an external player such as the organisation, second; that the coachee (the person being coached) is the client and third; that the relationship between coach and client is egalitarian and uncontaminated by power dynamics related to coach expertise and the use to which the coach is being put by the organisation. These assumptions may or may not be explicit, but they will nonetheless influence the dynamics of human relating (Cavicchia, 2009). We note these now and will consider them more fully later in this paper.

The question *what is the process of coaching?* has been answered relatively early in the literature within a PhD study by Dingman (2004) where analysis of a series of different coaching processes identified six generic stages that constituted all published models:

1. Formal Contracting
2. Relationship building
3. Assessment
4. Getting feedback and reflecting
5. Goal setting
6. Implementation and Evaluation

Our experience of coaches developing their own models of practice suggests these stages are still relevant to the conduct of coaching nearly a decade later. The relative weighting of each of these stages and their exact titles do change but in all the models reviewed each stage was present. In the next section we consider what research has identified is important in this process before we consider whether coaching works by looking at the outcome studies.

Process studies

Researchers in this arena often favour the collection of qualitative data allowing an exploration of such a multi-dimensional process. There are some quantitative studies but also in-depth case analysis using mixed methods. The aim is to discover the factors impacting upon the process of coaching by open exploration of the phenomenon. One of us clustered the potential factors operating in the coaching interaction in to the following way (Fillery-Travis & Lane, 2006): a) coach attributes, (b) client attributes, (c) context and (d) the coaching practice itself.

Coach attributes have generally been considered in terms of competencies such as interpersonal skills, communication skills and instrumental support for external coaches (Morgan, Harkins, & Goldsmith, 2006) and relationship building, empowering, facilitating and courageous leading for manager coaches (Ellinger & Bostrom, 1998; Ellinger, 2003; Ellinger, Hamlin, & Beattie, 2008; Graham, Wedman, & Kester, 1993; Wenzel, 2001). Wheeler (1978) in particular has investigated, through case study, how the adoption of such behaviours by manager coaches contributes to organisational goal achievement.

The attributes of the coachee have also been explored; specifically the need for an absence of any performance issues or psychopathology but also the coachee's readiness for change either for leadership (Carey, Philippon, & Cummings, 2011), or through adherence and interest in one's own development (Seamons, 2006; Wasylshyn, 2003).

There are also issues generated from the very real positionality of the coaching in relation to the organisation itself. This goes beyond the buy-in of the top team but extends into the whole organisational infrastructure. For example the role of manager coaches and how that positions the external coach (Howe, 2008). The organisation itself needs to set a strategy and implementation plan for coaching which fully supports its manager coaches by providing a robust framework within which they can act. This will be highly context specific as recently identified by Knights and Poppleton (2008).

Clearly there has, as yet, been no comprehensive study of the individual components of the coaching practice although three elements are readily identified from the literature as impactful: (1) the coach-client relationship, (2) duration of the process and (3) an identification of both purpose and model of practice. The coach-client relationship is a strong voice within the literature with contributions from de Haan particularly, using critical incident methodology (de Haan, 2008a, 2008b; de Haan & Stewart, 2011). Research in this area is also reviewed by Baron & Morin(2009) as an introduction to their field study of the relationship and its complementarity with the concept of the working alliance from the therapeutic literature. All such studies agree on the pivotal role of the relationship and indeed how it can outweigh factors such as the model of coaching itself (de Haan, Culpin, & Curd, 2011).

Outcome studies – what is the outcome of coaching and whose is it?

As we identified previously self-reporting on the efficacy of coaching returns a very high level of satisfaction but buyers of coaching are investing heavily in this intervention and looking for evidence of effectiveness that is robust. Grant Grant, A. M., Passmore, J., Cavanagh, M., and Parker, H. (2010) identified only two studies which met the criteria of full randomised controlled trials (a PhD dissertation by Deviney 1994 and Duijts et al 2008 looking at sickness leave reduction). Neither of these studies identified significant improvement on the primary measure but significant change was noted in areas such as general well being. It is only when the studies are less controlled that statistically significant effects are seen (de Han 2011). Levenson (2009), for example, reviewed outcome studies looking at behaviour change, perceived effectiveness and 'hard' performance measures. These criteria were selected on the basis that they were progressing along the 'line of sight' from the clients' own performance to a measure of the organisational impact of such performance. In general there was a positive association for the first two elements although the effect lessened as the 'hard' measures were considered. Selected examples are Evers, Brouwers and Tomic (2006) and Orenstein's (2006) measurement of leadership behaviours and Wasylshyn, Gronsky and Haas (2006) consideration of improvement in emotional competence of high potential employees. It is interesting to note that so far there are only a few studies looking at the impact of coaching specifically upon women (Starman, 2007).

Trying to formalise such measures into a return on Investment figure however is inherently difficult in human interventions – particularly so here were there are a number of factors of influence that are un-quantified or unknown. A relatively recent paper by (De Meuse & Dai, 2009) however has undertaken the first meta-analysis study. Only a very limited range of studies, six in total, were sufficiently robust for consideration (Evers, Brouwers, & Tomic, 2006; Luthans & Peterson , 2003; Peterson, 1993b; Smither et al. 2003; Togel and

Nicholson , 2005; and Wolfred, 2003) and the result was a ROI of 1.27 but with such a large range of variation it confirmed the view that we will need to wait for many more studies before really meaningful conclusions can be drawn for those looking for generalisable expectations.

BUT WHAT ARE THE ASSUMPTIONS?

In summarising the short review above it is clear that coaching can be identified as an individually facilitated, self-directed learning intervention with a rich literature of case study and some empirical work exploring both outcomes and process. The process area of research is dominated by the more mechanistic or operational factors of the setting or conduct of the coaching. There is little empirical work as to what is happening within the coaching relationship itself and there is almost no research that focuses on the coaching interaction as a learning intervention with the power to generate changes in thinking and perspective (Cox, 2013). When the relational elements of the interaction are considered (de Haan & Stewart, 2011) the context of the coaching i.e. the organisational environment and the coachee interaction with that environment, is rarely considered. When it is mentioned it is either as a stable culture, an inert container for the work (Knights & Poppleton, 2008) or as merely the provider of permission or agenda.

It is to the literature on self-directed learning - one of the underpinning theoretical frames for coaching - that we turn to explore the assumptions researchers are making in regard to context for the learning. The conflicts between organisational context and individual learning have been extensively explored within this body of work (Brookfield, 1986). It identifies that if the learning is supported or sponsored for a particular organisational purpose then the notion of placing the control of learning (content and methodology) within the hands of the learner is nonsensical. There will be some imperative or requirement to achieve organisational purpose over individual choice. The facilitator cannot therefore cede control directly to the learner – they must be able to challenge and at times direct the learning. Both learner and facilitator are, in effect, aware that contextual factors can seriously limit the extent to which an individual can introduce a model of practice or new learning into their work.

One response to such dilemmas is to be specific and transparent in terms of extent of control levied upon learners and this does much to reduce, but probably not eliminate, the inconsistencies inherent in such 'boundaried' self-direction! The role of learning agreements between organisation, individual learner and the educational institution is clearly a vehicle for such transparency.

Such dilemmas are also seen within the coaching engagement where a similar 'learning agreement' is identified as the coaching contract. The contract is identified as being three-cornered (coachee, organisation, and coach) usually and increasingly as a four-cornered contract when the line manager is not the direct manager of coaching within the organisation (Fielder & Starr, 2008). This throws into stark relief the question: When a coach is brought into an organisation to work with executives; who is the client and therefore who has the power to define the content and purpose of the learning? The sponsoring organisation, line manager or the individual coachee? In general the coach attempts to steer appropriately through this maze by maintaining transparency and appropriate ethics as in the aforementioned learning agreement. For example there may be a mismatch between the career aims of the individual and the requirements of the organisation. The coach will need to negotiate goals that leverage the common ground between these two perspectives and use the coaching intervention as a method of bringing them together.

But the contract is NOT a tool as such and one size will definitely not fit all. Specifically we cannot assume that each player in the contract has equal power in the relationship. The power of the coachee (perceived or otherwise) is relatively low compared to the other players in the contract and specifically the power of the coach may be underestimated at this point as they are seen to hold expert knowledge and have 'visitor' status (as do management consultants), coming to represent in the minds of coachees a sanctioned repository of the organisation's agendas for change. Below we consider in detail the interplay between coachee, context and coach within these learning agreements or 'coaching contracts'.

THE CONTEXT/COACH/COACHEE DYNAMIC

The context can be considered as constructed and the work of Schon (Schön, 1983) and Lefkoe (Lefkoe, 1985) introduced the concept of 'context training' and perspective transformation where learners 'are able to create a new context for themselves, a new way of seeing themselves or of defining their roles' and thereby develop a new skill base to work within this new context. This understanding has extended to complexity (Stacey, 2001) and social constructionist perspectives (Gergen 2009, 2010) that point to the dynamic interplay of individuals and context in making meaning and generating knowledge. They offer a perspective on organisational life that privileges the patterns of interaction between individuals and sees these as central to the forms organisations take and the meaning they acquire in the minds of their employees (Cavicchia 2009)

Organisations are characterised by having to manage a tension between the forces driving for homogeneity, containment and control and those forces representing difference and diversity (Pascale, 2000). Dialogue between these forces is what can catalyse creativity, change and renewal. Approaches to adult learning that are unselfconsciously aligned with the forces for control and containment are more likely to uphold the status quo which may or may not be (depending on context) desirable, functional and necessary for organisational health and effectiveness. Mechanistic and linear approaches to coaching succeed when the assumptions embedded in the approach match the assumptions of the organisation in which the coaching is taking place and the view of stakeholders commissioning the work. They are also predicated on assumptions of the coachee as a passive recipient of an intervention that has been designed by others in service of organisational change. This mirrors approaches to education where the curriculum is determined by respective authorities who ensure educational interventions are in alignment with what has been set. On the surface at least, consensus and established propositions in the dominant discourse of organisational learning and development come together to shape and attempt to control coaching and prescribe its outcomes.

In practice, however, coaches participate in a field of human interaction where at any time multiple subjectivities, experiences and meanings are being co-created (Cavicchia, 2009; Cock, 2010). Some of these may be visible and articulated, others invisible at the level of public conversation, and yet cannot but influence behaviour.

We want here to offer a series of viewing angles which can only barely lift the lid on the dynamics which often characterise the contexts in which coaching is taking place with varying degrees of visibility, and which coaches involved in facilitating adult learning inevitably find themselves having to hold, whether this be implicit or explicit.

Public – Private

Psychoanalytic (Gould et al 2001; Hirschhorn, 1993) perspectives on organisational life point to the complex human system dynamics which operate “under the surface” in organisations and shape patterns of human interaction. When contracting with coachees and organisation stakeholders, what is said publicly may not be precisely what is meant or desired. Yet more linear and mechanistic assumptions about organisations being predominantly rational and logical would take this at face value. Coaches often have to manage the differences that exist in the public narratives that are being constructed and the more private realities that often reveal themselves in the confidential context of the coaching relationship. The principle of “do no harm” so enshrined in much coaching theory reveals itself to be problematic when in

leaning towards the organisation's agenda coaches risk harming the coachee by denying her a mind of her own. Should the coach then work in service of the coachee's agenda as if the organisation were irrelevant the risk becomes one of harming the organisation.

Control – Emergence

More managerial and “rational” approaches to OD and coaching are predicated on assumptions of cause and effect and the logical sequencing between interventions and predictable outcomes (Cavicchia, 2009). This can give rise to coaching where the coach works to maintain focus tightly within the parameters set by the organisation. This may be appropriate and useful where skills development is the focus of the work and all parties are in sufficient agreement and alignment as to the scope and objectives of the intervention. The measure of success can be predicted, sought and may even be quantified.

Such an approach becomes more problematic where the coachee may be needing to use coaching as a reflective space to explore the challenges she faces, the impacts of these on her identity, self image and efficacy, and to make sense of them in conversation with a skilled other and so develop the resources and resilience to respond to complex situations in creative and effective ways. Here it is more difficult to predict precisely what use the coachee will be able to make of the coaching intervention, as transformational learning involving a shift in internal perceptual frames, is by its very nature, relatively unpredictable.

Individual - Organisation

Coaching, by the process of being a one to one intervention in a context, raises the tension of the individual and organisation. As we have identified above the coach's agenda for development may align or diverge in varying degrees from the organisation's agenda as embodied by stakeholders, leaders and those commissioning coaching services. A number of individual-to-context relationship dynamics are possible here.

Coachee to Context

Different recipients of coaching will be differently disposed toward the intervention (Bowlby, 1977; Cavicchia, 2010; Levine, 2010; Marris, 1991). Such research identifies that early patterns of interaction with caregivers establish very strong and unconscious patterns of expectation and interaction in human relationships, which also translates over into work relationships and the relationship to the organisation itself. As a result of these psychological patternings, some coachees will be inclined to comply unquestioningly with the requirements of the context, whilst others may appear to have an almost allergic reaction to any expectation of stakeholders, experiencing them as

unacceptable demands, and reacting with passive-aggressive resistance or outright hostility.

The same possibilities (along with a myriad of graded positions between the two extremes) also apply to coaches and organisational stakeholders.

Coach to Context

Some coaches will be more inclined, with varying degrees of conscious awareness, to view the organisation as an authority to be obeyed. Others may be more inclined to surface and explore questions of power and authority and how these might be informing the way in which the coaching contract is being co-constructed in the minds of all participants involved in commissioning the work, including the coachee.

Career background and orientation also play an important part here. Coaches who have come to coaching after long corporate careers may be more identified with organisation culture and the need for compliance in service of belonging and control. Career coaches and organisation consultants who have been tasked for many years to ask provocative questions in service of organisational development and learning may find it easier to question. Professional survival, reputational anxiety and financial concern also contribute to informing the position a coach might take on the individual-organisation continuum.

Stakeholder to Context

Different stakeholders (the line manager, department head etc) may also come with different values and perspectives on learning and development. Some will be very motivated by concern for homogeneity, control and containment, where others might be more comfortable with an ontological approach, surfacing and questioning the basic assumptions that govern the construction of the organisation's reality and behaviour, and that may also be implicated in the challenges the organisation currently faces.

AN EXAMPLE

The following brief example is just one way in which such tensions were managed by coach and coachee.

A recently promoted organisational client of one of us in a very male dominated organisation had been told in an appraisal that she needed to "toughen up and be more authoritative". Every time she spoke of this her voice became almost inaudible and she would break eye contact and look down. The coach sensed that the client might be feeling vulnerable and exposed in relation to the issue of her authority and feeling some pain at the

directness of the feedback she had received. The client went on talking about feeling she needed to make progress fast and “just get on with it”, but it was clear to the coach that her heart was not in the work. At this point the coach remembered that earlier the client had also said with some distaste that she experienced many leaders in the organisation as bullying. Furthermore, organisational performance was deteriorating and employee satisfaction surveys had revealed for a number of years an alarming downward trend in employee motivation attributed to a climate of intimidation. In a gentle, clear and simultaneously matter of fact tone the coach speculated aloud.....

“I can appreciate the pressure you might be feeling to get a quick result given the pace of your organisation and the operational challenges you face. It’s tricky isn’t it? You have been told you need to be authoritative and feel this doesn’t come easily to you, added to which, you might not want use authority in the way you see others use it. I wonder if our challenge might be to explore what type of authority you might be able and willing to develop in yourself and use with your team.....how does that sound to you?”

At this point the client looked up and was able to hold eye contact as she said, “Yeah, That’s it, I know I need to be more assertive, but I really don’t want to be like my boss!” This began a fruitful conversation that ended ultimately in the client embodying a way of being authoritative that met the requirements of her role without compromising her own values and personality style. Over time this resulted in performance improvements in the client’s team that also attracted positive attention from colleagues and senior leaders. The organisation is now involved in addressing the highly pressurised culture and attempting to introduce greater equilibrium between operational imperatives and employee inclusion and engagement.

CONCLUSION OF THIS FIRST CONSIDERATION OF THE 'DARK SIDE' OF COACHING

In this paper we took a first (and almost tentative) steps towards exploring the necessary, but currently obscure, 'dark side' of coaching. Our initial and concise review of the literature has identified a number of areas where discussion is limited and where assumptions are at play that regard the coaching intervention as mechanistic and to some extent predictable. Specifically we found the role the context plays in the coaching interaction to be relatively unexplored and considered. We have therefore specifically restricted our discussion here to concentrating upon the exploration of the interplay between coaches, clients and their contexts. We have done this through consideration of the paradoxes of the public-private, the interplay between control and emergence and the needs of the individual versus that of the organisation. The coach in resisting the pull to lean too far towards either polarity, stands to generate new possibilities that reconcile sufficiently differences between all stakeholders involved in the coaching engagement and can support new perspectives, knowledge and patterns of interaction to emerge. How these variables manifest themselves (publicly and privately), the extent to which they can be surfaced, and their influence on the coaching engagement, will be different in each coach-coachee-context situation. How tensions between "alignment with" and "divergence from" are managed will determine the extent to which coaching might be used to either control or facilitate self directed learning in context.

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