Executive Coaching in Organisations: The Personal is the Professional

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Coaches sometimes make the case that executive, workplace and personal (life) coaching are substantially different coaching applications. Exploring these issues it is concluded that there are indeed considerable overlaps between the personal and the professional in relation to executive coaching in organisations. To be truly effective, executive coaches must address the personal in their clients’ professional lives. The argument is illustrated with case studies and research from the peer-reviewed empirical literature. The key thesis is that, in order to maximise the probability of a successful outcome, executive coaches need to address the personal when coaching for professional and business-related issues. The person’s psychological processes impact on all aspects of life, whether business-related or private. The personal is not the domain of the counsellor or therapist alone. Rather, effective coaching requires the coach to engage with the person at the level of beliefs, emotions, values and metacognitive patterns. In order to engage with clients at these levels, clearly articulated and critically evaluated theories and models are required.

Introduction

Coaching is not therapy. This has become almost a catchcry around the coaching world, and rightly so. It has been, and remains, an important guiding principle. It is an important point of differentiation between coaching services and the services offered by counsellors, therapists and clinicians. It is also important in terms of identifying one of the key boundaries of ethical practice for coaching. Unfortunately, in the search for clarity of self definition, we can tend to approach such principles ineither/or terms. In the dichotomous world of our minds, we translate that guiding principle into statements such as “Coaching in the world of business deals with the external world, the world of the professional practice. The person’s psychological world, their inner world, is the domain of the therapist.” Life (or personal) coaching tends to occupy an uncomfortable place between these two. People working in corporate coaching sometimes look down upon life coaching as either quasi-therapeutic new age self-indulgence, or as simple goal setting around the mundane (i.e., less important) aspects of private life (e.g., domestic budgeting, work-life balance, etc.).
In reality the worlds of the private, the professional and the mundane are not so easily separated. They blur into each other, and as coaches we are often left wondering where the professional ends and the personal begins - and when the personal begins to enter into the realm of the therapeutic.

These boundaries are difficult and emotive issues. At some level, coaches hold on to the catchcry, *coaching is not therapy*, because they recognise that these boundaries are not easily drawn, and that most coaches are not trained to identify and address the impact of the person’s inner process on their professional and personal lives. Hence it feels better to keep coaching on the surface. Of course, sometimes the everyday and surface level is the best place to be. After all, it is in the everyday that the greatness of our lives is built piece by piece. As Gladstone comments, one of the most effective and common medical interventions used is the bandaid! (But used inappropriately, it can cause wounds to become septic) [1]

In this paper we explore the considerable overlap between the personal and the professional in relation to executive coaching in organisations. We argue that to be truly effective, executive coaches must address the personal in their clients’ professional lives – the client’s inner life and psychological processes. We illustrate our argument with case studies from our own coaching practices, and research from the peer-reviewed empirical literature. We further argue that the process of personal coaching (sometimes referred to as life coaching) overlaps significantly with executive coaching. Our key thesis is that, in order to maximise the probability of a successful outcome, executive coaches need to address the personal when coaching for professional and business-related issues.

Before addressing the overlap between the personal and the professional, it may be useful to briefly outline three key applications of coaching relevant to this paper: executive, workplace and life coaching.

**Differentiating Executive, Workplace, and Life Coaching with The Four C’s:**

*Context, Content, Consequences and Client*
It is possible to understand the natures of executive, workplace and life coaching by delineating the characteristics of four key categories: a) the context in which the coaching takes place, b) the content of the coaching conversation, c) the consequences of success or failure of the coaching engagement, and d) the client. Table 1 gives a brief overview of one way of differentiating across the different forms of coaching.

**Table 1: Differentiations Across Executive, Workplace and Life Coaching**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Executive coaching</th>
<th>Workplace coaching</th>
<th>Life Coaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context</strong></td>
<td>Leadership / Management</td>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>Whole of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Coachee’s career issues and performance – guided by executive’s and organisation’s agenda</td>
<td>Job task and performance focus – guided largely by organisation’s agenda</td>
<td>Guided by client’s agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Key Consequences</strong></td>
<td>Organisational performance and personal career development</td>
<td>Personal and team performance</td>
<td>Personal satisfaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client</strong></td>
<td>Executive and organisation</td>
<td>Employee and organisation</td>
<td>Private citizen</td>
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**Executive Coaching**

There has been a significant amount written on the nature of executive coaching [2, 3], and it is not our intention to review the literature here. Rather we will identify the broad themes and foci that executive coaching encompasses. The central (and somewhat tautological) aspect of executive coaching is that the coachee is an executive – someone with managerial responsibilities and leadership commitments. Indeed, executive coaching has been defined as a “helping
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relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals …” [4]. In this context executive coaching encompasses a vast range of services and specialties: coaching for enhanced strategic planning; presentation skills; anger and stress management; executive management team building and leadership development. Such coaching tends to be held in a more formal fashion (although sometimes masquerading as “an informal chat”). The goals that executive coaching focuses on are usually related to the work of the sponsoring organisation. Even where the coachee is leaving the organisation, and the coaching is aimed at facilitating and easing such transitions, ultimately the sponsoring organisation is seeking to do better, through enhanced development, performance or improved skills of its people.

Workplace coaching
This can be understood as coaching that takes place in workplace settings with non-executive employees, and includes on-the-job coaching by line managers and supervisors with the aim of improving productivity and developing an individual worker’s skills and understandings of job requirements. Manager-conducted workplace coaching frequently involves impromptu or “corridor coaching”, rather than formal sit-down coaching sessions [5], but would also include team building [6], sales coaching [7] and communication skills [8]. Workplace coaching can also be conducted by a professional (internal or external) coach with non-executive members of organisations. This type of coaching has attracted less publicity in the popular media than executive or life coaching, and tends to primarily focus on performance or skills enhancement and transfer of training issues [9, 10].

Life Coaching
In contrast to executive and workplace coaching, life coaching is predominantly about more personal issues and tends not to be conducted in the workplace. However, anecdotal reports from Australian coaches suggest some Australian organisations are providing life coaching to their workforces as part of work/life balance initiatives. In general, life coaching takes a holistic approach in which the coachee spends time examining and evaluating their life, and then systematically making life-enhancing changes with the support of a coach [11]. Life coaching
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often focuses on issues such as work/life balance, managing finances and developing new career directions. Life coaching has suffered from poor press, partly due to the number of sensationalistic and extraordinary claims made by some life coaches about their ability to create the “perfect life” for their clients, and such claims have rightly attracted criticism and cautionary comments [12]. Anecdotal reports suggest that many executive coaches began their coaching careers as life coaches, before moving into the more lucrative corporate arena.

Using such a schematic, it is clear that there is considerable overlap between executive, workplace and life coaching. The consequences of success or failure of executive, workplace and life coaching can be loss of income, job security, or relationship deterioration. The content in all types of coaching can similarly cover work/life issues, relationships and the like. Some greater degree of differentiation appears when we consider the context. As regards context, executive and workplace coaching tends to take place within a work-related context. However, some executive coaching is conducted off-site, sometimes in a retreat-like setting.

It may be considered that the greatest level of differentiation may be clearer at the level of the client. The question of “who is the client?” is an often-set and useful topic for an academic essay on organisational coaching for trainee coaches. However, in practice the defining of the client is determined by the coach’s past professional orientation. Coaches who stem from one of the helping professions such as counselling, psychology, or therapy tend to define the primary client as the coachee – the person being coached, rather than the organisation that is paying. Coaches whose background is in organisational consulting are inclined to consider whoever pays for the coaching to be the primary client. In the majority of life coaching engagements the client and the paying authority are one and the same – although the offering of life coaching by organisations to their staff confounds this delineation also.

**Factors Consistent Across Executive, Workplace and Life Coaching**

Regardless of the focus of the coaching engagement, executive, workplace or life coaching can be understood as a systematic goal-directed process, which aims to facilitate sustained change by fostering the on-going self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee [13]. Broadly speaking, coaching can be understood as a methodology used to improve skills, performance and
enchant and develop individuals. It is a systemised process by which individuals are helped to
define issues, set goals, develop action plans and then act, monitor and evaluate their
performance in order to better reach their goals. The coach’s role is to facilitate and guide the
cachee through this process.

To say that a coach facilitates a process of change for the client sounds fine. But what does this
really mean? We believe it means that the coach draws on both tested theories and techniques.
At the technical level, the coach must be proficient in the use of a wide range of techniques that
aid change. These include listening, challenging, probing, and didactic skills, as well as
proficiency in administering and interpreting assessment instruments and other forms of feedback.
But technical competency is not enough. The theoretical level of thinking is critical in
identifying issues and in guiding the use of these technical skills. The coach must have a coherent
and articulated theoretical perspective on the coaching issues. In order to effectively facilitate the
client’s progress through this process of change, the coach should draw on host of models and
theories about how change takes place, and how people and systems operate. Engaging a coach
who does not have an articulated and sophisticated understanding of these fundamental issues is
fraught with danger. At one level, it is something akin to giving an enthusiastic car aficionado a
set of spanners and inviting them to go to work on your prized (and only) vehicle. Effective
coaching is much more than the arbitrary application of technical tools and methodologies - what
might be called cook-book coaching.

We all know of a host of coaching service providers who operate largely in this way. To greater
or lesser degrees their coaches offer a standardised proprietary system of coaching into which
they fit their clients. Why, then, do we not see a host of disasters following unsophisticated
coaching interventions, just as we would expect if naïve car enthusiasts were suddenly entrusted
with our vehicles. We think there are two major reasons for this. Firstly, unlike cars, our clients
are often able to protect themselves against poor coaching interventions. This self protection is
enacted in a host of ways. It can be seen when clients subtly redirect the coaching process, or
pursue other directions. It can often be seen when clients terminate ineffective coaching, or when
they fail to engage with, or disengage with, aspects of the coaching.
The second reason is that, by and large, coaches are not as naïve as the uneducated car enthusiast. Unlike the car enthusiast, we all have some experiential understanding of the process of change and we are guided in the coaching enterprise by a set of implicit and explicit theories about how change takes place, how human systems operate and about how people interact effectively with the world. The fact that we share a common experience of being human means that our theories are usually more effective than the naïve car enthusiast’s understanding of the how cars work. The difference between a well meaning amateur and a professional coach is that the professional has a critical awareness of these implicit and explicit theories – an articulated awareness of their strengths, limitations and applications.

While we tend to compartmentalise our world in terms of the workplace, the community, and the home, and we tend to think of our lives in terms of discrete roles (executive, employer, worker, mother, father, friend, citizen, etc.) these distinctions can lead us astray. It is almost as if we think of ourselves as different people in these different settings and roles. (Our western habit of dichotomous thinking again!). That the person undertakes different roles in different contexts is not at question. To be sure, there has been much valuable work done exploring the development, impact and importance of the various roles we act out during the course of our daily lives[14-17]. The key issue here is that it is the self, or the person, which is the platform upon which all these specific roles are built. Furthermore, whatever happens in any of one of these roles impacts the person’s ability to operate in their other roles, precisely because it impacts the person who embodies these roles.

It is true that the outward expression of the self may differ radically at different times and in different roles, but when we understand the drivers of behaviour in the person – their thoughts, beliefs, emotions, values concerns, hopes and fears, we are often struck by the remarkable similarity of response. For example, an executive might show significant passivity and withdrawal in the workplace, while at home they are aggressive and short-tempered. He (or she) may appear to be a different person at home and at work. In a compartmentalised world, such a person may want their executive coach to work with them on building passion and assertiveness, while they want their life coach to try and help them relax and take things more calmly. The sophisticated coach (executive or life), however, may recognise that the common thread driving
these behaviours may be feelings of inadequacy or vulnerability. To be sure, relaxation and assertiveness training are unlikely to do the client any harm, but without a clear and shared understanding of the personal processes driving the person’s behaviour, such interventions are unlikely to lead to a lasting solution for the person. Unless one engages with the client at the level of their personal psychology, key pieces of the puzzle may be missed.

**Addressing the Personal in Executive Coaching**

The solution-focused approach has been embraced in many models of coaching. This approach claims to be atheoretical in nature [18-20]. The solution-focused approach is a powerful means of avoiding the pitfalls of problem-focused, pathology-based approaches to change. Solution-focused techniques help engage the person at the level of their hopes, values, personal experience, strengths and resources. However, one of the difficulties associated with solution-focused coaching is that clients are often able to identify how they would like a situation to be, but have little effective insight into the dynamics that are stopping them from achieving that outcome.

For example, a trainee coach in our programme at the University of Sydney recently presented a very common coaching scenario in supervision. The trainee was coaching an executive client who had been a previous high achiever. The executive came to coaching because he could not seem to get his projects in on time. He was able to identify that he needed to overcome a pattern of procrastination that had plagued him for years, and he was able to articulate a detailed and realistic vision of how he would like to be operating. However, he was consistently failing in his attempts to realise this vision. Like many procrastinating clients, this executive berated himself for being lazy and disorganised, but had little insight into what was driving this self-handicapping behaviour. The trainee coach, in their attempt to remain solution-focused, had become somewhat problem-phobic. They failed to explore the emotional and cognitive facets of the person’s experience for fear of crossing the boundary between coaching and therapy. Instead, they attempted to help the client motivate himself by highlighting the importance of the projects and his previous stellar performance.
The real driver of the self-handicapping behaviour for the client was not laziness or disorganisation, but performance anxiety brought on by self-generated expectations to maintain exceptional levels of performance and an over-identification of the person’s sense of self with this performance. Focusing the client on the importance of the task and their previous high level of performance simply served to maintain and exacerbate their performance anxiety. Once this internal personal process was identified and articulated, the coach and client were able to design much more effective and successful action plans. These involved helping the client reduce performance pressure by challenging overblown perceptions of task importance, establishing more realistic performance expectations, and challenging the link between performance and perceived self-worth. At the same time, the client developed a range of strategies to deal more effectively with his anxiety and ruminative thinking style.

This case example highlights the importance of engaging with the coachee’s private sense of self – the world of emotions, beliefs, assumptions, values, mental models and metacognitive processes. An understanding of cognitive behavioural dynamics of the client can help channel and shape solution-focused interventions and help clients create effective and lasting change.

There appears to be a significant contemporary shift towards an evidence-based approach. It is perhaps an implicit recognition of the need to supplement solution-focused approaches with more sophisticated theory-based understandings that has led to the focus on evidence-based coaching. Evidence-based coaching involves the intelligent and conscientious use of best current knowledge in making decisions about how to design, implement and deliver coaching interventions to clients [21]. Best current knowledge can be understood as being current information from valid research theory and practice. Thus, evidenced-based coaching is not cook-book coaching. It requires the coach to have the ability, knowledge frameworks and skills to be able to find such information, understand it, determine its applicability, apply it and finally evaluate its effectiveness. However, at present there is little coach-specific research on which to draw [22]. Thus, in order to explore the notion that the personal is central to the professional we need to draw on knowledge outside of the coaching realm.
There is considerable evidence from within the clinical and counselling psychology domains that a holistic approach that engages the client’s emotional, cognitive and behavioural aspects is far more effective than interventions that focus purely on the doing. Combined cognitive and behavioural treatments have been found to be effective for a wide range of issues, including the treatment of depression [23], anxiety [24] and anger [25].

In the management area Argyris’ concept of double loop learning draws on the clinical work of theorists such as Beck [26]. Popularised for coaches by Hargrove [27], double and triple loop learning posits that a behavioural focus alone is not sufficient for embedded long term change. Agents of change need to modify client’s behaviour (single loop), mental models (double loop) and the context (triple loop) in which they work [27, 28]. Further, there is empirical research within the management and work domains that such multifaceted approaches are effective. For example, Proudfoot found that cognitive-behavioural therapy significantly improved job-finding in non-clinical unemployed [29], and Becker, Randall and Riegel found that a multidimensional approach was more effective in predicting work-related behavioural change than a unidimensional approach [30].

Although the peer-reviewed literature on workplace coaching dates back to 1937 with Gorby’s work [31], it is only recently that researchers have begun to attempt to identify the kinds of mechanisms that facilitate long term change in coaching. Of specific relevance to this paper is the work of Grant. Investigating the impact of different types of coaching on trainee accountants’ performance, Grant found that combined cognitive and behavioural coaching was more effective than cognitive only or behavioural only coaching, and that the differences between these types of coaching was still evident at a one year follow-up [32, 33]. Grant suggested that these findings indicated that, in order for coaching to be an effective means of fostering long-term change, the coaching must impact on the coachee’s personal sense of self.

Similarly, the work of Wells [34-36] and Cavanagh [37, 38] shows that the regulation of behaviour and emotion is intimately bound up with the types of strategies people use to process information. For example, some types of metacognitive strategies such as active worry, reassurance seeking, avoidance and inappropriate attentional focussing typically lead to self-
defeating and self-maintaining cycles of behaviour designed to reduce and regulate unpleasant emotions. Understanding the dynamics of these common patterns can provide clients with a way to change behavioural patterns previously found difficult to manage.

**Conclusion**

We have tried to show the importance of engaging with the personal when coaching for the professional. The personal and the contextual are the warp and weft of the fabric of our lives. If we ignore or avoid these, then all we are left with is a pile of disparate threads that may well make no sense. Our thoughts, fears, hopes, dreams, values and habitual ways of dealing with the world and others provide the continuity that links the various roles and contexts in which we operate. Engaging with this level of the client’s experience is often a critical part of the coaching endeavour. However, in order to engage appropriately with clients at this level, coaches need both technical expertise and clearly articulated and critically evaluated theories and models. It is not enough to rely only on the quality of our tools and techniques. Without a substantial theory to guide their use, they are likely to miss the mark for the client, and can do significant damage. Similarly, it is not enough to rely only on the implicit or intuitive understandings we have developed across the course of our lives to accurately guide our coaching endeavours.

Perhaps the key challenge facing the fledgling industry of professional coaching is to raise the bar of coaching training and practice. Developing a widespread standard of practice that incorporates theoretically guided and empirically tested models and techniques is the perhaps the best way to ensure we deliver real value to our clients and secure a long term place as change agents in not only the world of work, but in all the fields of human performance.

According to the family systems authority, John Bradshaw, what is most personal is also most common [39]. In terms of our inner experience, we often think of ourselves a little like Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, adrift and alone on a vast empty sea. Thankfully, the reality is usually quite different. When we raise our awareness above the gunwales of our own experience, we see a vast flotilla of people inhabiting the same ocean, being buffeted by the same swells. While there is much that differentiates us as individuals, and no two peoples’ experience is identical, we also share much in common. We are linked by our common biology, physiology,
narratives and by substantial similarities in basic levels of social existence. We live, love, and raise families. We judge, we hope, we fear and we dream. In short, we share a common humanity. That which we consider to be our very own unique and personal secret thoughts, feelings, hopes, joys, concerns and fears, are, in reality, not so dissimilar from the unique, personal and secret thoughts of others. These factors lie at the very core of our own personal humanity, and the humanity of those around us: whatever is the most personal is indeed the most common.

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