

Coaching in Challenging Times



We can sometimes forget that executive coaching is a young profession. The International Coach Federation, the largest global coaching body, was formed in the US in 1995. What is more, executive coaches have crafted their skills amidst a climate of strong economic growth, full employment and adventurous risk taking. John Blakey questions how the current economic downturn will shape the profession's next stage of development.

In the 'me, me, me' and the 'more, more, more' business culture of the past 10 years, executive coaches often found themselves working with 'high potentials' and senior leaders to focus on personal career visions, personal leadership skills and personal goals. It was all very 'personal'. Organisational buyers were happy because one of their key challenges was to attract and retain top talent. The principle of 'following the coachee's agenda' in a confidential setting became paramount. At its best, this did create openness, trust and facilitated self awareness. However, at its worst, this environment tempted all parties into self-interest, collusion and the accommodation of coachee prejudices at the expense of the wider organisational system. In some situations, as coaching sessions departed from their original business intent, there was a lurch into indulgent self pre-occupation and a worrying lack of accountability.

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Still, it is easy to be righteous in hindsight. The real value, now that we know what we know, lies in adapting and learning quickly, taking what has worked and building upon it a new layer of experience and expertise that will allow executive coaching to remain a robust and transformative tool in more challenging times. What then is the nature of these 'challenging times'? Well, we can expect 'risk' to be replaced by 'responsibility' in the lexicon of leadership values. We can expect 'us, us, us' to replace 'me, me, me' as our collective dependency on the wider economic and environmental agendas overtakes our self interest. And we can expect that organisational buyers will shift focus from attracting and retaining talent towards improving the performance and productivity of the grateful survivors of widespread redundancy programmes.

Over time, the impact of these factors on coaching best practice will be significant. The first 'sacred cow' to fall is likely to be 'following the coachee's agenda'. Replacing the personal perspective with the systems perspective will enable executive coaching to serve the collective as well as the individual agenda. In practice, this will require a much more thorough contracting process throughout a coaching assignment in which HR and line management are more visibly involved. The ethic of 'confidentiality' will become less 'black and white' as this shift takes place requiring sensitive negotiation with all stakeholders.

With the emphasis on performance improvement, there will be no place for coaches to collude with the client or accommodate 'blind spots' in order to avoid difficult conversations. The current International Coach Federation (ICF) competencies that focus upon accountability and feedback will come to the fore and play a much bigger role in the typical coaching discussion. These 'tough love' aspects of coaching have always been present but were too easily brushed aside amidst the boom. How many times have we coaches let our clients 'off the hook' rather

than hold them accountable? How many times have we not delivered honest, direct feedback when behaviours, actions and words were out of sync?

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Another skill that has always been featured in the coaching text books but more rarely observed 'in the field' is that of 'challenge'. The very word itself is enough to send a shiver down the spine of a profession that has yet to work out how to confront assertively whilst still 'staying friends' with the people who are paying the bill. And yet how many of us can remember people we respected, and even loved, who had the courage to challenge us hard. Yes, it hurt at the time but, if delivered from a foundation of trust and humility, it struck home and accelerated our development in a way no amount of encouragement and positive feedback could have achieved.



With a wider systems perspective, feedback, challenge and accountability playing a larger role, we can also expect that the level of tension in a coaching relationship is likely to rise. Tension, like any energy, can have a constructive or destructive presence in a relationship. The challenge for executive coaches will be to work with tension constructively to make it 'healthy tension'. Being able to 'hold the tension' will be akin to 'holding the silence' in a coaching conversation. Just as with silence, there is a temptation to feel uncomfortable in the presence of tension, to take responsibility for it and to seek to remove it as quickly as possible. In so doing, we might be denying the client a valuable opportunity to transform the tension into insight and action.

In summary, 'the times they are a-changing' and coaching will be 'a-changing' too. This young profession will face a different environment and will adapt quickly to reach a new level of maturity. In so doing, many of the 'tough love' skills will play a much larger role in the typical coaching conversation:-

- Feedback
- Accountability
- Challenge
- Tension
- Systems Perspective

For those who like a memorable acronym then these words, in a certain order, spell out the word 'FACTS'. You could say that for coaches and our clients it is now time to face the facts and to not shy away from these important aspects of the coaching role.

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