

# **The Essential Core of Executive Coaching**

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## Introduction

Executive coaching is a discipline that is still in its early stages of development. Its scope of practice, core competencies, and optimal training models are being vigorously debated. As practitioners we are still trying to work out answers to questions about what differentiates executive coaching from other interventions and when it is the intervention of choice, what makes it effective, and what makes a good coach.

Executive coaching is both a young field and a dynamic one, subject to an array of forces promoting diversity in practice. As executive coaching has become better accepted, and I will argue, more needed, it has become more widely used. Increasingly, it has become an umbrella term that applies to a variety of one-on-one development experiences in an organizational setting. Thus, Witherspoon and White (1996) suggested that coaching assignments were really of a variety of different types, and could best be categorized as primarily coaching for skills, performance, development, or leadership. More recently, Stevens (2005) also argued that executive coaching is not a unitary pursuit, and proposed making distinctions between assignments that are primarily developmental or performance focused and those that are primarily leadership coaching per se.

Coaching is also distinctively diverse in that its practitioners come from many backgrounds – clinical and counseling disciplines, HR and training functions, and line business roles. As such, coaches bring the unique strengths of their own professional and personal experiences as well as the distinctive language of their core disciplines to the debate about the nature of executive coaching and its future. Furthermore, coaches vary widely in their theoretical frameworks and ways of understanding executive behavior and growth. Even coaches who seem to share a common background can differ very significantly in their approaches to coaching. Some attempts to order the diversity of executive coaching have focused on differentiating the underlying assumptions and procedural techniques that characterize particular practitioners. Thus, an entire issue of the *Consulting Psychology Journal* (Vol 56 #4, 2004) was devoted to describing psychodynamic, cognitive-behavioral, rational-emotive, and action frame theory approaches to executive coaching. In that issue, Kilburg (2004) provided a particularly useful framework for explaining how psychodynamic principles can be applied to the coaching setting.

With some movements afoot to promote uniformity and even standardization in the field<sup>1</sup> our challenge as coaching practitioners is to continue to express the strength,

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<sup>1</sup> Large corporate coaching programs give evidence of the value placed on coaching but run the risk of diluting effectiveness with too much process standardization. Coach training and coach certification can provide forums for productive exchange among diverse practitioners but can also be platforms for cynical commercialism and arbitrary attempts to restrict entry into the field.

vitality, and creativity of our field's diversity within an integrative framework that promotes productive dialogue about its essential characteristics. We need to think as inclusively as possible about who we are and what we do while probing the fundamental nature of the coaching experience. While valuing our diverse and distinctive strengths we also need to identify the core principles that guide our coaching.

In this article I will explore both the core principles and the key activities that I believe constitute the heart of executive coaching. In my view the growth of coaching over the past 10 years and its special power as an intervention point to a set of core principles that inform our work as coaches. Furthermore I will approach the diversity of coaching not from the perspective of the goals of the assignment or the coach's theoretical orientation but from the standpoint of the coach's spheres of activity. In my experience, most assignments call on the coach's activities in the areas of self and career management, competency development, and leadership growth. The mix of these different activities is shaped by many facets of the engagement's context, and helps define its unique nature. Furthermore, each of these spheres of activity makes use of specific tools and techniques that coaches of different backgrounds and orientations use with different degrees of familiarity and acumen. This matrix of core principles, a balance of coaching activities, and specific tools and techniques will furnish an integrative framework for the diverse and evolving endeavor of executive coaching.

## The Growth of Executive Coaching

Critics of executive coaching point to the unregulated, wide open nature of the field and the lack of data on effectiveness and outcome (ROI) to suggest that its growth has been a fad that can't last. Yet, the field continues to expand. I believe that the growth of executive coaching reflects important changes in the nature of leadership and is filling a real void in organizational life. Viewed from this perspective, coaching appears an important and robust enterprise with defining core principles.

Our economy has evolved over the past 30 years to a postindustrial (Hirschorn, 1990) or post capitalist (Drucker, 1993) system organized around "knowledge work." With an increasing emphasis on the exchange of information and on the innovation that underlies rapid change, tasks have become less routine, roles more fluid, and authority more diffuse. "Knowledge workers" function largely in teams and are part of more matrixed or networked structures rather than command and control organizations. Because the value added by intellectual capital is so unique and personal, knowledge workers' contributions to the enterprise must be motivated and encouraged as much as required. Knowledge workers look for challenge, growth, even excitement at work, and tend to draw less sharp distinctions between their work roles and the rest of their lives. Eliciting employee passion and fostering engagement as keys to enterprise success have become the bywords of many HR thought leaders and enterprise managers.

The implications of these change for leadership, and hence for executive coaching, have been profound. First, leadership depends less on positional power and more on influence and persuasion through excellence in communication. Second, leadership requires more than ever the articulation of a vision. And not just any vision but one that matches personal integrity with a compelling understanding of where the department, division, and enterprise are going. Third, leadership increasingly requires a breadth of perspective that enables the leader to articulate how work in different areas of the enterprise interrelates to the overall mission of the enterprise. Fourth and finally, leadership is a proliferating function in the postindustrial organization. If the enterprise's goal is to energize and engage the talents of its "knowledge workers" then leadership is invariably a "local" activity that often best occurs close to a particular individual. Leadership then, in the sense of eliciting, connecting to, and developing key talents and abilities can and must occur throughout the organization at all levels.

While there is a more urgent need for leadership in the postindustrial organization, there are fewer traditional structures that support the development of leaders. Greater transience and less loyalty in the executive ranks mean that there are fewer opportunities for mentoring that grow organically out of the day-to-day work. Executives in the upper echelons of the organization are facing such intense performance demands that they don't devote the time needed to grow future leaders. Additionally, because effective leadership in the postindustrial organization requires the joining of personal growth and business effectiveness, leadership development is often beyond the

scope of the typical executive mentor and is best provided by someone outside the organization who has expertise in human growth and development.

Thus, the “outsourcing” of leadership development to executive coaches, while not an unalloyed good, has compelling reasons for it. Viewed not as a fad but as a key component of contemporary organizational life we can proceed to examine the core principles of executive coaching that govern its unique contribution to individual executive and organizational development.

## **Core Principles of Executive Coaching**

The goal of every coaching engagement is to focus the executive's thinking on his or her work life and to energize growth in that domain. Coaches can use a variety of techniques to promote a powerful combination of analytical and divergent thinking *vis a vis* the executive's role functioning. In doing so, the coach aims to activate the executive's unique talents and energize his or her growth. Executive coaching draws on four core principles that guide effective practice – serving both the executive and the organization, articulating the developmental path, focusing on strengths, and fostering self and organizational awareness. Coaching based on these core principles will be most successful in energizing the executive's growth.

### ***The Coach Serves Both the Executive and the Organization***

The executive coach works to surface and integrate the development needs of both the organization and the individual executive. Indeed, the art of coaching often lies in the coach's ability to understand and manage the needs and goals of these two clients. This requires a high degree of attunement to organizational dynamics and an ability to balance the needs for confidentiality and transparency as the coaching assignment progresses.

Some early models of executive coaching emphasized strict rules of confidentiality and focused on the executive as client, reducing the organizational sponsor to a minor, background role. Organizations have rightly come to question the value of this approach, as it fails to leverage the potential for organizational development and alignment that is inherent in the coaching intervention. However, this does not obviate the need for the coach to set guidelines for confidentiality and to maintain them in a way that develops a three-way trusting relationship.

An essential component of all successful coaching engagements is the coach's integrity *vis a vis* the executive's most personal concerns. This may involve issues from the executive's past or current life outside work. It also extends to conflicts about his or her role or highly charged feelings about boss, colleagues, and subordinates. The coach uses this information, given in confidence, to help develop a plan of action that is personally meaningful to the executive and that may help him or her resolve some of these personal concerns.

Establishing confidentiality and trust with the organizational sponsor is also a critical skill for all executive coaches. The boss or organizational sponsor may share information with the coach that bears critically on the executive's future in the organization and even on the coaching assignment itself. The coach's own emotional intelligence and organizational awareness may enable him or her to pick up mixed messages and covert agendas *vis a vis* the executive. The coach's tolerance of ambiguity and willingness to wait for a situation to clarify itself are critical skills in this regard. The coach may be in a position to “connect the dots” about a delicate situation that does

not violate confidentiality but rather is based on an objective, third-party reading of the situation. Similarly, the coach needs to know when to encourage the executive and the organization to “come clean” with each other, and to speak about what has been the unspeakable. It may take time for the coach to identify the best path forward that combines the development needs of both the executive and the organization.

The coach uses his own integrity and role clarity to influence both the organization and the executive. Acting as an advocate for both the organization and the executive, the coach uses his or her knowledge about the complexity of leadership and organizational life to maintain open-mindedness and avoid taking sides. This can be very challenging when the coach’s two clients are at odds with each other and try to draw the coach into their conflict by carrying messages back and forth. The coach’s integrity lies in his or her capacity to keep a clear vision of the development needs of both clients in the face of such pressures.

Organizational life is full of not only opportunity but risk and danger. An executive’s effectiveness lies in part in his or her ability to identify and respond to threat and danger. The coach may be in a unique position to observe the risk to the executive he or she is coaching; helping the executive develop the skill to read such situations may be an integral part of the coaching. Doing so may seem to bring the coach in conflict with the professed goals of the organizational sponsors and requires ongoing self-examination and role clarity on the part of the coach.

By working to energize growth in the executive role, the coach can optimize the fit between the executive and the sponsoring organization. The coach has special expertise in identifying a “best fit,” in fostering alignment between his or her two clients. The coach may work with both clients to effect changes in the executive’s role or in the organization’s response to that executive in order to facilitate that alignment. However, there are circumstances in which a good fit cannot be achieved either because of clashes of personality or culture or because the executive has just reached the end of the life cycle of energy for this particular role and/or organization. In these cases, the coach may end up working to promote the best possible separation between the executive and the organization. The coach’s stance in these circumstances is informed by the fact that it is in the best interests of both the executive and the organization to have a good fit that energizes the executive for maximum contribution to the organization’s mission. Anything short of this is a disservice to both parties.<sup>2</sup>

### ***The Coach Articulates a Developmental Path***

Effective executive coaches are experts in identifying the major developmental thrust of the executive’s career and matching it against an assessment of the executive’s

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<sup>2</sup> It may be important in some, if not all, assignments to alert the organizational sponsor at the outset that separation of the executive and the organization is one possible outcome of the coaching assignment. This needs to be done in a way that does not violate confidentiality but at the same time manages expectations.

core self in order to help identify a path forward. The critical competency for the coach is in formulating with the executive an arc of development that is faithful to the executive's deepest talents, needs, and wishes. It is based on the coach's unique mix of knowledge about human development, career dimensions, and organizational parameters. The coach and the executive together, in a continuous feedback loop, develop a picture of the "self in career" that serves not only as a template for the coaching but as a guide to functioning in the executive role.

The coach's activities to energize the executive's growth are focused on his or her organizational role. While most productive coaching engagements lead to growth in other spheres of life, this is not the coach's goal. Coaches who are primarily drawn to promoting change outside of organizational role functioning are violating the executive coaching contract and may be trying to do therapy by other means (and usually without a license).

This is not to say that there is not a psychological dimension to executive coaching, but that it is focused on the executive's work and career. To be most effective in a leadership role in the postindustrial organization, the executive must align him or herself with the organization in a deeply personal way. Coaching, in order to promote this kind of alignment, must perforce have a psychological component as well as performance and organizational components. As such it is a kind of hybrid intervention which requires psychological-mindedness if not actual psychological training on the part of the coach. Especially as psychological understanding is further absorbed and accepted by the culture, there may be a greater prevalence of this kind of hybrid intervention in arenas other than executive functioning.

### ***The Coach Focuses on the Executive's Strengths***

Whatever the intent of the coaching assignment, the coach helps energize the executive's growth primarily by working to identify and best leverage the executive's unique strengths. The coach maintains this focus even when the assignment has a strong corrective or remedial component. Widely divergent psychological and management theorists (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Kohut, 1984; Buckingham, 2001) have agreed that the process of tapping core strengths and talents is itself energizing and growth-promoting. It can be quite difficult to accurately know one's strengths and talents, let alone appreciate and use them. Coaches play a critical role in helping executives identify and find ways to act on these core strengths and talents.

The art of coaching lies in the coach's ability to meaningfully reflect back to the executive a picture of his or her strengths and to engage in an ongoing dialogue about how best to use them. In my experience, assessment tools might enrich this discussion, but usually tap more the executive's interests, attitudes, and style than actual performance ability and talent. The coach's access to the executive's performance reviews and to feedback about ongoing performance gives the coach an enormous advantage in helping to identify the executive's strengths. The coach triangulates among past and present

performance, the current role and organizational culture, and the executive's personality to arrive at a picture of the executive's strengths and talents at work. This picture of strengths and talents serves as a template for all coaching activity with that individual.

### ***The Coach Fosters the Executive's Self and Organizational Awareness***

Self-awareness, defined as an awareness of one's own personality or individuality, is at the interface of psychological health and leadership effectiveness. From the ancient Greeks to Freud, our culture has stressed the value of self-knowledge in both averting danger and maximizing opportunity. The leader's personality sets many organizational dynamics into play, for better or for worse, and is one of the most powerful tools he or she has. A leader's clarity of understanding about how others react to his or her personality can facilitate organizational change. Conversely, a lack of self-awareness leaves the executive especially vulnerable to having his or her agenda undermined.

As emphasized above, leadership in the post-industrial organization requires a deep alignment of self with the organization. This is best accomplished with a good understanding of not only strengths, weaknesses, and stylistic preferences, but also needs, motives, and attitudes toward leading.

But self awareness is not just an end-state to strive for; its process dimensions are an important part of life's journey. Psychologists have shown that the process of self-reflection that occurs in therapy is itself a major driver for the strengthening of the personality and the experience of change and growth (Fonagy, et.al., 2002). The process of self-reflection, especially as it is guided and facilitated by an expert, decreases defensiveness and promotes resilience and flexibility. Self-reflection can play an important part in freeing up energy for more productive and better adapted engagement with the world.

Self-reflection is at the core of all coaching assignments from the beginning. The very act of putting time aside to meet with a coach conveys the importance of self-reflection. Coaching's emphasis on self-reflection represents a marked departure from the executive's action and results orientation, a change that may be either welcomed or resisted. As a different mode of experiencing work life, the self reflection at the core of executive coaching leads to the expansion and strengthening of the "self in career."

As the coaching process unfolds, executives typically come to value the coach's role as a sounding board. By listening, asking questions, and offering feedback the coach offers the executive powerful opportunities to reflect on the activities, decisions, and conflicts related to the role. The executive comes away from this activity feeling that he or she has grown into a more conscious (less reflexive) experience of the leadership role; one that is a truer expression of the self.

As will be discussed in more detail in the section on "Self and Career Management" a range of assessment techniques can be used to help foster the executive's

self-awareness. I believe though that the more individualized and open-ended the approach the more opportunity there is for the executive to achieve a dynamic self-awareness, one that tracks the executive self through an array of interpersonal and business situations. 360 survey data can be the foundation for increased self-awareness and is often used to help focus the executive's learning on how he or she is perceived by others. However, feedback does not guarantee self-awareness, and the coach's help is invaluable in guiding the executive through a process that leads to real growth in self-awareness.

By helping guide the executive's reflection on the realities of his or her organization, the coach fosters greater organizational awareness. Deeper understanding of the organization's rules of the game (i.e., its culture), greater cognizance of the vicissitudes of power and influence, and fuller awareness of the impact of business realities on organizational structure and function can all free the executive for more effective action. Typically, this includes helping the executive disentangle his or her personal needs and wishes from the realities of the particular role and organization. This growing organizational awareness can be a painful and disillusioning process but ultimately one that is energizing. By helping the executive face reality, no matter how painful or disillusioning, the coach guides the executive toward the mastery and courage to act in a more impactful way.<sup>3</sup>

One powerful way that the coach helps the executive build organizational awareness is to guide his or her reflection on the motives that might be determining the behavior of certain "key players" in the organization. Coaches can use a unique mix of experience, training, and talent to help the executive best understand, and gain some perspective, on what is driving other people in the organization. Some coaches draw on formal and universal concepts of what motivates people (e.g., psychodynamic concepts) while others use more experienced-based savvy about what causes people to act the way they do in human organizations. The end result though is growth in the executive's perspective on what is happening around him or her with a corresponding increase in the range and flexibility of options for action.

Serving both the executive and the organization, identifying a unique developmental path, focusing on strengths, and fostering the executive's self and organizational awareness are the core principles that guide the coach's work regardless of background, orientation, or the type of coaching assignment. Different coaches will put these principles into practice differently, depending on their unique mix of psychological understanding, career and employment market knowledge, business savvy, and practical

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<sup>3</sup> Facing reality, whether it is about oneself or about one's work world, was one of Jack Welsh's most important business rules. In a similar vein but a very different context, Freud (1933a, p. 80) stated that one of the primary goals of psychoanalysis is to help the patient gain greater mastery of reality or strengthen the ego ("Where id was, there ego shall be.") The coaching process, standing somewhere between Welsh's dictum and Freud's lengthy psychoanalysis, guides the executive toward a more complete grasp of self and organizational realities.

life wisdom.<sup>4</sup> These four principles underlie all three spheres of coaching activity that will be described in the next sections of this article.

### ***The Coach's Spheres of Activity (1) – Self and Career Management***

The wide range of coaching assignments requires an artful mix of the coach's activity in the spheres of self and career management, competency development, and leadership growth. Effective coaches demonstrate competencies in each of these spheres, although coaches have very different ways of enlivening and carrying out these broad coaching activities. Most coaching engagements are built on a complex interplay of all three types of activity which can change over the course of the work with a particular executive. And although very few are uni-dimensional, a coaching engagement can usually be characterized as primarily focusing on either self and career management, competency development, or leadership growth.

All coaching assignments address the executive's self experience at work, at least to some extent. Coaches must be comfortable and skilled in tackling issues related to executives' career choices and commitments, their connection to their own talents, their degree of drive and ambition, their vulnerability to disruptive emotions, their problems regulating the pace and tempo of work and their feelings about the overall place of work in their lives.<sup>5</sup> Where this sphere of activity is a focus of the engagement, the executive typically describes a subjective sense of tension or conflict with the role. The executive may feel that either the role or the organization itself is not the right one for them, that it does not fulfill some of their basic needs and ideals. Alternatively, the executive may have come to realize that there is some internal barrier to assuming the role and performing it effectively.

Especially at the beginning of the assignment, coaching in this sphere of activity often has an open-ended, searching, and questioning quality. This is the most personal, even the most intimate sphere of coaching, and one in which the executive is most vulnerable. The coach may need to guide the executive through reflection on whether he or she is making the best use of inherent strengths and talents in the current role, whether the executive believes in the value and meaning of the work being done, whether the

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<sup>4</sup> It may be that over the course of a coaching career, the different sources of knowledge for coaching become distilled into this "practical life wisdom," such that background, training, and theoretical orientation become less important. Indeed, coaching as a discipline, highly values this competency. When clients engage executive coaches, they are at least implicitly seeking this intangible "practical life wisdom."

<sup>5</sup> I have chosen to call this sphere of activity "self and career management" to try to convey the deeper levels of integration that the coach strives for. Drawing heavily on the psychoanalytic perspective of Self Psychology, I am describing a domain of executive experience pertaining to underlying or core experiences of the self. Career management is approached from the perspective of how interests and talents that express what Heinz Kohut (1984) called the "nuclear program of the self" either do or do not get expressed. Self management issues also pertain to how the executive experiences the integrity of the self and threats to that integrity in both bodily and emotional terms.

executive has lost control of feelings and behaviors in a potentially damaging way, or whether the level of stress is exacting a major cost in the executive's life.

Handling negative emotional experiences can be a major focus for coaching in the self and career management sphere of activity. The coach may be faced with feelings of anger, hurt, disappointment, frustration, and confusion which overwhelm and immobilize the executive, compromising his or her effectiveness and the ability to identify a path forward. The coach needs to carefully and open-mindedly evaluate the contribution of situational, role, and personality factors to experiences like stress, burnout, and the loss of emotional control. Too narrow a focus can lead to misguided interventions. For example, the coach who moves too quickly to stress or anger management interventions can miss the importance of life stressors outside of work or the deeper problems of the executive's fit with the role or the organization. In my experience, an executive's chronic stress in a role usually requires a restructuring of the role or a change in the network of organizational support along with the executive's individual efforts to manage high levels of stress. As will be discussed further in the "Tools and Techniques" section, the career development interview plays a critical role in helping the coach sort out the various factors contributing to stress, burnout, and depression.

Among the most common executive self-management problems is angry and abusive behavior. A combination of a stressful, demanding role, inherently high levels of drive and irritability, and underlying feelings of inadequacy can be a potent mix that results in explosive behavior. The angry, abusive executive is frequently the executive who also has a reputation for getting excellent results, and the coach frequently becomes aware of a history of organizational ambivalence and mixed messages regarding this aggressive behavior. It is often not until there is an issue of legal liability that coaching or some other form of intervention is considered.

In cases of angry and abusive behavior the coach is working at the boundary of deep issues of self-regulation and organizational role functioning. The prospects for change are better if the behavior is reactive to situational stressors, either in the executive's personal life or at work. Early on, the coach needs to assess both the organization's appetite for change and limit-setting as well as the executive's ability to take responsibility for the problem. The coach's ability to mobilize the leadership of the organization to send clear messages and set appropriate limits gives the coach an invaluable lever for change. Another lever for change is the executive's trust in the coach as someone committed to his or her overall well-being and growth, not just to better self-regulation. As part of this developing trust, the executive may enact some form of the bullying behavior with the coach. In these situations, both the executive and the coach have the most "on the line," and the coach's courage to confront the executive can have a truly transformative impact.

Levels of drive, energy, and ambition are critical components of how an executive fills a role, and coaches must be able to assess and help the executive explore these dimensions of his or her experience. High levels of drive, energy, and ambition are

among the most important predictors of executive success. If these all important characteristics are not present, the coach should try to determine whether it is because of the executive's basic temperament, his or her conflicts regarding achievement and success, reactions to recent setbacks, or any of a number of other factors. Careful assessment of these issues early in the engagement can positively impact the goals and outcome of the coaching assignment and even the ultimate direction of a career. An executive who complains of just going through the motions at work may describe a long term lack of ambition, a recent wish to wind down a career rather than deal with the stress of organizational politics, or perhaps just a sense of having accomplished everything that can be accomplished in that particular role. The coach provides a very valuable function in clarifying and helping the executive face these and other important aspects of energy, drive, and ambition.

Problems in self-management are often evident in difficulties regulating time and activity level. Frequently, so called time management problems coexist with strong proclivities toward over-working. In our global, client-focused, 24/7 economy the overworking executive may indeed be just a symptom of a more systemic problem. But the workaholic is still identifiable as an outlier, and can suffer intense levels of stress, tension, and impoverishment of the self. The workaholic can be one of the most challenging clients to coach, both because the organization seems to benefit from the behavior and because the workaholic is frequently being driven by powerful psychological compulsions.<sup>6</sup> Based on the coach's skill set and the executive's particular needs, the coach may take a behavioral approach to the management of time and task, may try to help the executive engage the role differently, or may refer the executive for therapeutic intervention. The most effective techniques and the limits of coaching in this regard require further research and discussion in the field.

Finding what feels like the right place of work and career in one's life can be a source of conflict and struggle for executives; one that can compromise effectiveness as well as a sense of well-being. Managing what feel like competing work and personal or family commitments can go the core of an executive's self experience and may dominate the coaching assignment.

In the sphere of self and career management, the coach often helps the executive explore basic values and ideals. The coach tries to assess what the meaning of success is for a particular executive, what the place of work and career is in his or her life, and what the basic values are in relation to work. From the outset of the coaching engagement,

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<sup>6</sup> In my experience the workaholic is a Sensing rather than an Intuiting type, who is apt to plow through enormous volumes of transactional work without much perspective on the meaning and strategic framework for the work. This style of work is coupled with powerful needs for approval and even masochistic tendencies as workaholics are trying to get admiration not only for the amount of work being done, but also for the degree to which they are suffering and depleting themselves in doing so. The workaholic may also be desperately trying to insulate themselves from criticism, using the over-working as a way of appearing beyond reproach.

some executives describe a lack of meaning or purpose in their work. Others come to the awareness during the coaching process that the sense of meaningfulness which animates an executive career is missing.

The coach tries to help the executive align his or her work with the “true self,” of needs, values, ideals, and talents. The coach may challenge the executive to construct and evaluate alternative activities and career paths while also helping the executive sort out what are fantasized yearnings from realistic options. The goal is to help the executive achieve the best possible fit between self and career, a fit whose authenticity unlocks the energy for contribution to the enterprise and for personal growth.

### ***Tools and Techniques for Self and Career Management***

In this sphere of activity the coach’s most powerful tool is a thorough, probing career development interview. Coaches of different backgrounds and orientations bring different strengths to this technique. Coaches with a psychological background might pay more attention to the role of fear and conflict, self-esteem and ideals, and separation and loss as dynamic forces in the unfolding of a career. They are more likely to think in terms of how psychiatric diagnostic categories both get played out in and set parameters on a career trajectory. Coaches with more of a career counseling background might be more attuned to the different mix of skills, aptitudes, and market conditions that are expressed in the executive’s career path. In my experience, though, there is a lot of overlap in how coaches elicit and use a career history, and there are issues that any coach can inquire about and explore to good effect.

The coach should have a basic understanding of the executive’s family background and personal history. Certain factors have time-honored significance - birth order, parental occupation and career path, quality of the client’s relationship and identification with each parent, history of academic and extracurricular achievement and leadership, etc. Life traumas, such as early illnesses and hospitalizations, parental death and divorce, or major financial reversals, are critically important in shaping the executive’s career. These traumas may constitute basic psychic wounds that, paradoxically, become the sources of drive and ambition<sup>7</sup> in the client’s life. Or they may comprise unresolved issues that leave a mark on the executive’s subsequent achievements and goals.

The coach’s understanding of the basic outline of the executive’s personal past is essential for developing a coherent narrative of the unfolding and potential direction of that career. In the course of a coaching engagement, the executive may come to

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<sup>7</sup> Eisenstadt, et. al. (1989) in their book on parent loss and achievement found that an unusually high percentage of those who achieve at an extraordinary level in scientific, artistic, and political fields often suffered the early loss of a parent. From a psychoanalytic perspective they suggested that the early trauma exerts a kind of pressure on the psyche to “recapture paradise lost” and is the wellspring of the individual’s creativity and ambition.

appreciate the importance of early traumas as well as key patterns of relationships and achievement in shaping their career. Constructing with the executive a coherent narrative of self-in-career is a powerful coaching tool; it strengthens the executive's sense that he or she can actively shape and direct a career rather than being governed by mysterious and uncontrollable forces.

In reviewing the executive's career itself, the coach seeks to identify the underlying patterns and logic of the self-in-career. The coach will pay special attention to the executive's first career choices, especially whether the bar was set high or low, the area chosen expressed underlying and lasting talents and interests, etc. The goal of the coach's inquiry is to identify a line of development that provides a "best fit" between underlying needs, talents, interests, and ambitions and the organizational roles assumed. Identifying that line of development can energize the executive's role functioning and career progress. Uncovering a lack of fit between these core aspects of the self and the organizational roles assumed over time sets the stage for the coaching engagement in an equally important way.

In the career review the coach inquires about what the executive both liked and didn't like about major positions held. In the process, both the coach and the executive learn about the executive's most important needs, values, and goals and how he or she has gone about fulfilling them. To what extent does the executive seek out and make his or her own opportunities versus responding more passively to others' expectations and needs? What is the relative importance of power, financial reward, risk, security, loyalty, technical mastery, and organizational culture and mission in shaping the executive's career choices? How does the executive define success and failure, and how has he or she dealt with setbacks? Is he or she able to acknowledge and learn from setbacks or are they recounted in terms of denial and blame? What are the achievements that the executive is proudest of, both at work and in his or her life at large? A detailed career review helps both the executive and the coach determine which aspects (if any) of the executive role give that executive feelings of pleasure and pride and are important sources of motivation.

It is particularly important to inquire about formative influences in the executive's career. Who are the executive's mentors and models and how is their importance described? Is the executive able to give credit to others and describe their having had a meaningful influence on him, or is he or she more of a narcissist or "lone wolf." Do mentoring relationships continue over time and evolve into more mutual relationships or are they jettisoned or renounced? Has the executive had formative team and peer relationships and have they become a model for subsequent role functioning?

Finally, the coach will inquire about the nature of the executive's career transitions. If the executive has been terminated, how was that experienced handled? Were feelings of shame, anger, and loss acknowledged and integrated? What perspective does the executive have now on the termination and how has it shaped his subsequent career? If the executive made significant voluntary career changes how were those

decisions made and carried out? Did he or she leave in shame or anger, burning bridges in the process, or was the process a more positive and constructive one.

Along with data from the career review, structured assessment techniques can be used to foster self-awareness and to focus coaching on self and career management issues. Assessment instruments can provide useful information about the executive's interests and skills, values, interpersonal needs, and style, and are particularly useful at the beginning of an assignment as "warm up exercises" for the self-reflective dimension of executive coaching. Throughout the coaching assignment the assessment results can help deepen the conversation between the executive and the coach about critical strengths and development needs. While a consideration of assessment techniques is beyond the scope of this article, a brief example will illustrate the special power of assessment techniques in the sphere of self and career management.

Mark had been assigned a coach to help him address the brusque, angry, and insensitive behavior he had shown toward subordinates. Mark had been highly resistant to the coaching itself, especially to the possibility of obtaining 360 feedback. However, he liked to talk about himself and found the assessment results intriguing. Not surprisingly, the tests gave a true-to-life picture of a dominant, assertive, controlling executive whose lack of warmth and trust had led to resentment and hurt feelings. But the assessment results also indicated significant creative initiative and intellectual capability. Mark felt both flattered and supported by the positive test findings; these were important aspects of how he wanted others to see him. Test results also revealed high levels of anxiety, apprehension, and tension, and suggested that some of his discomfort might be related to being in "ill-defined or unpredictable situations." His needs for stability and continuity, and for a setting in which guidelines and expectations are clear, led to a very productive series of discussions about the impact on him of recent organizational upheaval and poor management. As we worked through the assessment results, the atmosphere in the coaching sessions began to shift from Mark feeling blamed to a more collaborative exploration of the range of factors, both more personal and environmental, that had contributed to his angry outbursts.

Below, two more detailed case examples will demonstrate how personal and career review data are integrated to provide a framework for working on self and career management issues.

### ***Case Example: Tommy***

Tommy was a technology executive in a financial services firm who was in his mid 40's when he began executive coaching. Tommy had been with the firm for almost 20 years, having survived and flourished through several mergers and changes in management. He had been promoted consistently during the early stages of his career, and by the time he began coaching, he was leading a group of 75-100 employees. However, over the course of the past five years and several changes in his direct manager, he had failed to gain the next promotion to the SVP level. He began a brief

coaching engagement to review the results of a recent 360 survey, and to formulate a development plan. While upbeat about the opportunity for coaching, he was frustrated and disappointed with the lack of a promotion, and was struggling to understand what was stopping his advancement.

Tommy was seen as a skillful leader of teams, someone who stimulated energy and enthusiasm across the traditional boundaries of the organization. However, he was also seen as something of a performer and a self-promoter who talked readily but didn't listen well enough, and whose pressured sociability was occasionally "over the top." It was painful for Tommy to accept this feedback and to gain the realization that this style was at odds with the more measured and reflective style associated with senior leadership in his organization. Tommy was seen as fun and a great energizer but not necessarily a senior leader.

Tommy appeared to all who came into contact with him as a cheerful but harried, over-working, always running manager. He was constantly juggling multiple projects, and regularly volunteered to take on more. Tommy subconsciously equated career success with harried over-activity, and was both puzzled and resentful that some of his peers did less but got promoted ahead of him

This voluble man spoke readily about his personal background. Tommy was the younger of two children born to lower middle class immigrant parents relatively late in life. His father was withdrawn, cold, and critical; he was rejecting and verbally abusive toward both Tommy and Tommy's mother. Early on, Tommy tried to gain his parents approval by being conscientious and neat. Not a very good student, he was thought by both parents to have considerably less promise than a male first cousin about the same age. He vividly remembers his parents warning him of many dangers in the wider world, and he learned to keep his sights low and his horizons limited.

Fearfulness, feelings of inferiority, and strong security needs that were formed early in Tommy's life had also shaped his career. Over the years, he had turned down some exciting, though risky, business opportunities to stay with the firm. He prided himself on his loyalty to the firm, and developed a familial feeling about it. He had done well in his career, far surpassing both his and his family's expectations, but his needs for security and approval made it difficult for him to disentangle himself from the organization to achieve a more authoritative position. He was taking on volumes of work without stopping to give thought to how he could have the most impact. Tommy's insecurity, need for approval, risk aversion, and problems in self management were combining to limit his career progress. Senior management had most likely come to take his contributions for granted; after all, he clearly wasn't going anywhere.

Tommy worked on how he managed himself, and tried to adopt a less frenetic and more deliberate "senior style." However, major changes in the organization were afoot, and the moment for Tommy's promotion at the firm had passed. When the firm's leadership changed and took a different approach to some major technology projects, Tommy was let go. However, his generous severance package enabled him to flirt with

some more entrepreneurial opportunities and entertain more risk and authority before eventually taking an SVP position at a competing financial institution. On follow-up, Tommy felt that he had finally been pushed to break the bonds of security, explore the risk-taking side of his personality, and enter a new position with a more mature and more developed approach to leadership.

### ***Case Example: Neil***

Neil was in his mid-50's, a very successful department head in a professional services firm, when he requested executive coaching to help him with the high levels of stress he was experiencing. Neil's business had grown dramatically in the past several years, and he had achieved world-wide prominence. In spite of this success, he was dissatisfied with his career and overwhelmed by the amount of work to be done. His team was chronically understaffed, stressed, and rather demoralized.

Neil was most concerned about the effects of his stress on his family. He felt ashamed of his impatience and irritability with his two children, and guilty about the way his career and child-rearing had pushed his wife's talents and goals to the side. He had difficulty sleeping, admitted that he probably drank too much, and felt a lack of pleasure and enjoyment in his life outside work. Neil was tired of working so hard and longed for retirement, but because of his family's financial needs felt he was on a treadmill and couldn't get off.

Neil felt alienated from the leadership of his firm. He resented the style and approach of the firm's chairman, and at times engaged in combative and provocative interactions with the firm's leadership. At the same time, he felt that he was not adequately consulted, listened to, or respected. Neil functioned as the rather distant head of a fiefdom, albeit a very prestigious and productive one.

Neil's personal and career history helped illuminate his current self-in-career struggles. He grew up feeling out of place and stifled; his was a liberal Jewish family in a conservative Catholic town. His parents were both highly educated, but Neil remembers his father as disappointed in his accomplishments and largely quiet and withdrawn. Without going into a lot of detail, Neil described himself as having done stupid things and lived close to the edge in high school and college. (Issues of self regulation were apparent from quite early on.) Yet he was able to hide from his parents the risks he was taking by pleasing them with good grades in school.

Neil had originally intended to act on his political sympathies by working for social change. But as a kind of lark he took a professional school entrance exam and did so well that he decided to change his career goals. After finishing graduate school, he did public-sector related work, and found that he was interested and talented in certain esoteric aspects of the work. Eventually, this became a very lucrative area of endeavor, and Neil was one of the first to occupy this niche. Even many years later he found it hard to believe that he was doing work for Wall Street.

Neil soon joined a large and prestigious New York firm, where he felt proud to become a partner with a thriving business. However, when the more senior members of his group decided to leave to join his current firm, Neil felt he had to go with them. From the beginning, he felt the new firm was a step down in prestige and he never fully “bonded” to the firm. Although he had advanced to become co-head and then head of his global group, and although he had some strong leadership characteristics, he never really embraced the leadership role.

For a number of years, Neil had felt out of place and stifled at the firm, much as he had in his town growing up. He opposed the firm’s leadership much as he opposed the school administration in high school and college. And in spite of his considerable success, he felt disappointed with his career much as his father had.

In coaching Neil, self and career management was the dominant sphere of activity although we moved in and out of some leadership growth activities. Neil first had to evaluate the feasibility of leaving the firm and the potential benefits of doing so. A detailed examination of his needs and values would be an integral part of deciding how long he would function in the present role and what options there might be for a different kind of work five or so years from now. We scrutinized not only his ambivalence toward the firm but toward leadership itself. This led to a temporary upsurge in his energy for the leadership role and a request for my help in working with him to develop his organization. During this phase of the coaching we worked on planning an offsite that would help him better communicate his vision and create the climate and resources needed to better manage the increasing demands on his organization. Although the offsite was successful, Neil was unable to sustain a focus on leadership growth and we refocused the coaching on the self management issues of stress and work-life balance.

## **The Coach's Spheres of Activity (2) - Competency Development**

The coach's work with an executive to develop key management and leadership competencies is at the heart of most coaching assignments. Increased role effectiveness via the accelerated learning of competencies is usually very much what the organization is looking for from an executive coach, and at least at the outset of the engagement there is usually good alignment among executive, coach, and organizational sponsor in this sphere of coaching activity. To sustain this alignment the coach must be able to convey to the organization a model of managerial and leadership behaviors and to describe goals and outcomes in behavioral terms.

Competency development occurs via the learning and practice of behavioral skills. While the coach can leverage a psychological understanding of the executive, the emphasis tends to be on concrete behavior. In this sphere of coaching activity, the approach may not be as personal or intimate as in the previously described sphere of self and career management, where the coach attends to broad issues of the development and expression of the self.

In some cases, the coach will use a skill-based competency approach to complement work with problems of the executive's self and career management. For example, as the coach works with an executive on better handling disruptive emotions like stress and anger, coaching conversations may oscillate between more private self experience and more "public" managerial skills. The coach and the executive may link a series of angry outbursts to sources of frustration and impatience in the executive's personal and career history. They may also discover, though, that the executive lacks certain direction-setting, delegating, and feedback skills that would provide alternative behavioral paths at times of stress or conflict. Developing skills in these areas may be essential to consolidating gains in the self-management arena

Frequently, the coach's competency development activities pertain to the executive's interpersonal world at work. Indeed, a clear mapping of the component skills (and potential learnings) in the realm of interpersonal effectiveness provides the *raison d'être* for much of executive coaching. A coach's talent lies in the ability to demystify these interpersonal competencies, encouraging and challenging the executive to learn these skills as he or she would the basics of finance, marketing, strategic analysis, etc.,. In other words, the coach turns interpersonal effectiveness into something specific and actionable.

Competency development can occur in the context of either remedial or developmental assignments; the distinction is often just a matter of degree. A specific managerial or behavioral competency may have been identified as a factor that is compromising the executive's effectiveness. Or it may be a skill that is relatively undeveloped but will be essential for future effectiveness in a role with more management responsibility. In either case, consistent with the coach's developmental and strengths orientations, interpersonal skill building should be carried out in the context

of developmental challenge rather than corrective intervention. Most executive's have never been taught either the significance or the how-to's of important "people skills," and the coaching engagement is their first significant opportunity to pay attention to and develop skills in this area.

The "meta-message" of many coaching assignments is that interpersonal skills are as essential as technical skills to executive success, and need to be attended to and developed. Typically, executives have been rewarded, especially early in their careers, for technical expertise, drive and ambition, and results orientation. It can be eye-opening for an executive to learn that such competencies as collaboration, coalition building, conflict resolution, motivating and empowering others, and giving feedback are critical components of executive effectiveness. By conveying this message with clarity and conviction the coach energizes the executive's development of interpersonal skills. In a well-adjusted and motivated executive identifying the target interpersonal competencies with behavioral specificity starts the executive down the right developmental path.

The coach attends carefully to the gap between the executive's current performance and the targeted managerial or leadership competency. Why does the gap exist? It is best to give the executive the benefit of the doubt in this regard – either the executive didn't truly understand<sup>8</sup> the importance of the competency or never had the opportunity to learn it. The art of coaching lies in how coaches bring a diversity of background, orientation, and skill to this gap between the executive's current performance and the competency required for role effectiveness. Coaches with more direct experience in business and organizational life convey a feel for the details of how these competencies are put into play, and may be most effective at prescribing a behavioral course to follow. In contrast, coaches with a more psychological background may be most effective at helping remove internal barriers to achieving a critical competency.

Effective coaches know how to diagnose and address different "learning disabilities" that executives have vis a vis competencies. A common barrier to competency development is the executive's fear of the self-exposure and risk involved in learning a new skill. The coach's support and encouragement for trying something new can go a long way toward alleviating this fear. Sometimes an executive's inhibitions and conflicts related to a specific managerial skill or competency act as a barrier to learning. The coach's psychological mindedness, i.e., his or her understanding of how motivational dynamics and personality configurations play out in an organizational setting, is invaluable in giving the executive the tools to overcome a "learning disability."

Motivational dynamics pertaining to competition and authority often underlie the gap between an executive's current behavior and the competency required for

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<sup>8</sup> It is not uncommon for an executive to be familiar with a particular competency and even be able to give a rationale for it without ever having committed him or herself to deeper emotional and experiential learning of the skill.

effectiveness in a particular role. In my experience, establishing more effective peer relationships through better skills in influence and elaboration is a central goal of many coaching assignments.<sup>9</sup> Organizational life turns to a remarkable degree on the capacity of driven, ambitious executives to channel their aggression and competitiveness to be able to cooperate with their peers. Problems managing aggressive strivings can rip the fabric of organizational life, derailing many otherwise talented executives. The coach will probably not delve into the early roots of such an issue, but must be able to identify the maladaptive pattern, clearly explain its cost and the need for change, and then guide the executive to more pro-social behavior. In doing so, the coach leverages the executive's motivation for improved role effectiveness to address in behavioral terms rather deep, narcissistic or even anti-social aspects of the executive's personality structure.<sup>10</sup>

Motivational dynamics related to authority often constitute barriers to achieving the competencies an executive needs to manage his or her boss and subordinates. The capacity to work effectively with a boss to advance a shared agenda while retaining a sense of autonomy represents a rather evolved level of authority relationships. Unresolved authority dynamics can be evident in resistance to direction and feedback, a disregard for the boss's agenda, or contrariwise, in a preoccupation with pleasing the boss at the expense of others. Exerting authority in a wise and judicious manner is an elusive goal for many executives, who either use their subordinates as tools for getting the job done or, because of their own anxiety about asserting authority, fail to give the needed direction and feedback.

The case of Mr. G, a vice president in a corporation's food products division, illustrates how authority dynamics adversely impacted the achievement of important role competencies. Mr. G had a scientific and technical background that made him an effective sales and customer service executive with the company's customers. However, he had also been given more general management responsibilities over the years, spending more of his time managing and developing the sales and customer service personnel in his organization. Mr. G's performance in these areas was below par, and he demonstrated a combination of neglect and self-centered, sometimes arbitrary demands on his subordinates. At the same time, he spent an inordinate amount of time with the president of the division and sought his advice and approval for things he should have been able to handle independently.

Complicating the situation were cultural and gender dynamics. Mr. G came from a traditional, hierarchical culture, and was clearly uncomfortable managing and helping develop his mostly female subordinates. He gravitated toward the somewhat older,

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<sup>9</sup> Good peer relationships have been found to be a critical indicator of executive success (High Flyers?)

<sup>10</sup> It is in this sense that coaching may make a powerful impact on what appears to be the executive's rather entrenched narcissistic stance toward life.

father-figure division president, who ambivalently gratified Mr. G's needs for contact and approval.

Coaching revolved around helping Mr. G acquire competencies in developing his subordinates and in delegating and giving direction to them. He also learned that the expectations for his role required him to take more risks and make more independent decisions. Simultaneously, the coach guided the division president toward giving less time and attention to Mr. G and setting clearer expectations for independent decision-making.

### ***Tools and Techniques of Competency Development***

The coach's work in this sphere of activity is based on both a model of the competencies required for a particular role, and a method for collecting data on the executive's role functioning, usually in the form of a 360 degree survey.

In each coaching assignment, the coach works from either an implicit or explicit list of competencies. Most coaching assignments begin with a suggested focus on some combination of interpersonal skill and management/leadership competencies. The coach uses his or her own template of competencies based on a wide range of experience to guide the initial discussions with key stakeholders, and to help clarify the focal competencies for the coaching engagement.

A coach's generic model of management or leadership competencies may be fully adequate for some coaching assignments, especially those executives at the first levels of the "leadership pipeline" (Conger & Fulmer, 2003). Typical assignments in this arena focus on helping the executive see him or herself more as a leader and to develop better skills in areas such as influence, conflict management, defining roles and responsibilities, setting direction, giving feedback, motivating subordinates, etc.,. The coach matches a thorough knowledge of the executive's strengths, weaknesses, and role requirements against a template of competencies to identify the best opportunities for development.

There is no particular need for research to generate a more situation-specific competency model.

Especially if the context of the coaching assignment is one of organizational change, there may be a lack of clarity about the success criteria for a particular role. External imperatives may be as important as the inner logic of individual executive development in shaping the specific competencies for the role. In these situations the coach may first need to work with the organizational sponsors to construct a competency model that can guide the coaching.

Some form of competency model for an executive's role is the basis for collecting 360-degree survey data, an important component of most coaching assignments. Systematic feedback on different competency dimensions of an executive's role helps the coach identify gaps in performance and focus the coaching work. However, 360 surveys have limitations and potential pitfalls as well as great strengths. Levinson (1997) has

noted the dangers of 360 survey “information dumps,” especially in cases where the executive is apt to be defensive about longstanding interpersonal difficulties. He strongly recommended that in these cases, especially, the feedback needs to be given by a clinically trained person in measured doses.

I have found the usefulness of 360-degree survey data to be limited without the inclusion of at least some semi-structured interviews. In-person interviews help the coach to correct for some of the biases that result from the respondents’ roles or personalities<sup>11</sup>. Qualitative data also provide detail about how a skill deficit expresses itself, and thus on situations that provide the best opportunities for the development of that skill. Asking 360 respondents for recommendations on how the executive can improve his or her effectiveness gives valuable information for constructing a coaching plan and helps give respondents a stake in the executive’s development. Finally, the coach sometimes needs to be careful not to let the 360 survey findings hijack the coaching process. Some negative findings, while rather dramatic, may not be linked to core competencies and/or may not provide the best opportunities for change and growth.

### ***Case Example: Adam***

Adam was in his early 40’s, an SVP and valued member of a non-profit organization’s leadership team, when he began coaching. Executive coaching had been suggested by his boss, the institution’s interim head, because Adam needed to develop skills in giving feedback and managing conflict. It was mentioned, almost parenthetically, that Adam could be defensive and might be perceived as brusque and arrogant by some of his peers. Adam himself was concerned about his two most talented (and strong-willed) direct reports, who were at war with each other. He felt quite helpless and overwhelmed by the conflict, and was eager for help in building his skills in this area.

Adam’s self-admitted cluelessness about how to manage his direct reports’ conflict contrasted with his forceful, energetic, upbeat presence. He was strongly mission and vision driven, and appeared very much an innovator and change agent. But Adam was much more effective (and interested in) getting buy-in for his vision than in getting people to work effectively together. Thus, while his accomplishments were many, he had not built an effective team. He preferred meeting with all his direct reports one-to-one, in part because he wanted to avoid interpersonal conflict. When he did have team meetings, he didn’t use them effectively, and had a kind of “tin ear” for group dynamics. Adam feared his people’s dissatisfaction, tended to placate them, and shied away from giving negative feedback and setting clear expectations about their behavior. Somewhat lacking in empathy and interpersonal flexibility, Adam kept a kind of distance from “people problems” and negative emotion.

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<sup>11</sup>Even survey results based on large numbers of respondents can be biased. Group psychology or issues of mismatch between the executive and the culture can skew the ratings.

The focus for coaching was determined by both the immediate need to resolve his direct reports' conflicts and by the longer term need to develop skills in handling conflict and building teams. These were competencies that were central to his current role but would also be critical for assuming the larger role he aspired to. In coaching sessions Adam was encouraged to listen and be more receptive while at the same time taking a more active hand in getting people to talk to each other and interact more effectively. He was coached through a step-by-step conflict resolution process with his two direct reports, and was proud of what he had accomplished. He gained more confidence in having "difficult conversations" with his direct reports and in leveraging team interaction.

Adam was already well on his way to developing the focal competencies for his role when we obtained the somewhat delayed results of his 360 survey. This was an instrument-based 360 though some supplemental interviews were conducted. The results suggested that Adam needed to pay attention not only to building a team but also to being a member of a team. Some of his peers perceived him as aloof, non-collaborative, and self-interested.

Given the context of institutional divisions and turmoil following the abrupt departure of the director, it was hard to read the significance of these 360 results. Without the boss who had strongly sponsored his change efforts, Adam had withdrawn into the silo of his own organization. It was unclear how much his shortcomings in working with peers were a function of a real competency deficit or a response to specific institutional conditions. Thus, while the issues of peer relationships and institutional leadership were raised, they were "back-burnered," and the coaching remained focused on the original set of competencies.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Case Example: Chris***

Chris had recently become a Managing Director at a major financial services institution. He brought an academic background and a strong commercial orientation to his role heading up the research group of one of the firm's fastest growing divisions. Chris was making a valuable contribution to the enterprise, and plans were afoot to increase the size of his group. However, a recent performance review indicated that those who worked with him were identifying some shortcomings in developing his people. Coaching was suggested to help Chris "get to the next level" of leadership, and he readily agreed.

Chris had a raft of ideas about his own weaknesses in the areas of self-management and interpersonal relationships. He was well aware that his frustration sometimes reached the level of exasperation, leading at times to temper outbursts. He

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<sup>12</sup> Subsequent follow-up when Adam was in a similar role in a different institution suggested that he had taken seriously the feedback about peer relationships and was using it effectively in his new position. Adam not only played the role of integrator in the new leadership team but, leveraging his own executive coaching experience, became a major advocate for dealing with rather than avoiding important "people issues."

knew that he could be something of a “lone wolf” and could be hard on junior people. Chris was uncertain how to focus his development efforts, and we were unable to get any meaningful guidance in this regard from his boss. We decided that an interview-based 360 survey would help us be more specific about both the critical competencies for his role and his development needs.

The results of the 360 were invaluable in setting the goals and defining an approach to the coaching. Although Chris had scored quite high on the Affiliation and Social Recognition dimensions of one of the assessment instruments, several 360 respondents observed him to be aloof and lacking a personal touch. He was seen as demanding of subordinates, sometimes dismissive of people who weren’t as smart as him, and not particularly good at resolving conflicts. In sum, Chris needed to do more to develop strong relationships and to help people work more effectively together.

Our analysis of Chris’s role helped clarify and add more dimensionality to the competency based work of the coaching. His group was a cost center for the division, and to be effective Chris had to develop strong relationships with a range of internal clients. Working across internal boundaries to help better serve clients left little room for territoriality and defensiveness. Chris needed to pay particular attention to colleagues and subordinates in the sales division of the organization where his reputation for intellectual arrogance and a need for the spotlight were undermining necessary collaboration.

Coaching Chris to develop stronger relationships led to work on some of the critical component skills – reaching out more energetically and expressively, listening more actively, eliciting others needs and concerns, addressing resistance, and resolving conflicts. My knowledge of Chris’s personal history provided important leverage for addressing the insecure and defensive behavior that was a barrier to learning the essential competencies. Chris had experienced a lot of change in his childhood and went through a parental divorce in his adolescence that left him angry and disillusioned. There was a legacy of strong needs for approval, which, if disappointed, could lead to hurt feelings and withdrawal. These personal dynamics were exacerbated by an organizational culture known for its indirectness and an organizational role that lacked tangible evidence of the value added. In this organization, it was hard to know where you stood, let alone get a “pat on the back.” In the face of this organizational uncertainty or resistance to his ideas, Chris could “shut down” and appear more aloof, dismissive, and defensive.

The coaching for competency development kept a behavioral focus as we identified opportunities to be more open to and engaged with others and to expend more personal energy in helping people work effectively together. Chris’s past hurts were not an explicit part of the coaching conversations although knowledge of his personal history helped us stay focused on the how, when, and why of his insecure and defensive behavior in his role. Chris began to take real interest and pride in his ability to develop members of his group and to create more of a team environment. He learned some of the

components of resilience<sup>13</sup> and became better able to cope with resistance and setbacks. He began to collaborate better with members of the sales division, and to show more interest in sales people's success. After six months of coaching, Chris told me with obvious pleasure that what we were doing must be working because his wife had remarked on how much more receptive and less edgy he had become.

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<sup>13</sup> I have used elements of a resilience training protocol (Axelrod, 2002) to good effect in my coaching of several executives.

## **The Coach's Spheres of Activity (3) – Leadership Growth**

In the sphere of leadership growth, the coach is working with an executive who has committed to and personally identified with the leadership role. A distinctive marker of working in the realm of leadership growth is the executive's comfort with issues of power. The executive leader feels both entitled to and, hopefully, responsible for the judicious exercise of power. As has been pointed out most effectively by Bob Lee, this focus on the exercise of power can present real challenges for the executive coach, who is frequently less personally comfortable with the uses and consequences of power.

Leadership adds a distinctive dimension to an individual's life and I believe it is inextricably tied to experiences of growth and transformation. In fact, we might consider leadership a separate and distinctive stage of adult development for those who take on the leader role. As noted above, successful leadership requires the organization of the personality around issues of power – its acquisition and responsible use, and a capacity to make good use of its prerogatives and perquisites. But there are other deeply personal characteristics that are integral parts of the leader role – courage, integrity, vision, creativity, risk-taking, tenacity, etc.,. These are characteristics that, while they may not be essential in the day-to-day lives of non-leaders, must be incorporated in some way into the lives of leaders. They become traits, habits, or qualities the executive aspires to in order to better live out the leader role. The coach can play a critical role in guiding the leader along this path of growth and transformation. Indeed, the coach working in this sphere of activity will think of him or herself as accompanying and guiding the executive on a journey of growth and self-discovery.

Leaders are concerned with organizational change. A sense of their own personal change and transformation and the corresponding challenges, pain, and rewards, can give the leader a kind of template for organizational transformation. The leader who understands the process of personal change and growth can communicate an invaluable sense of his own credibility when asking others to do the hard work of organizational change.

In leading change, the executive must evaluate a complex mix of opportunities and threats in order to identify a path toward the future. This picture of the future is the leader's vision, and the leadership role is based on communicating this vision in as compelling way as possible, enabling people to align their self-interest with the interests of the organization. In this leadership function, the leader functions as an agent of evolution and adaptation, enabling groups of people to act in concert to best avoid danger and take advantage of opportunities.

The leadership role is cognitively and emotionally complex. The executive leader has to sort through an array of frequently conflicting or ambiguous ideas, observations, needs, and agendas in order to act. Making difficult decisions is an integral part of the leadership role. And while most executive leaders achieve their success based on their decisiveness, over time they are confronted with increasingly complex situations in which

the decision path is unclear. This is a major source of stress and loneliness for many leaders, as they typically have no real peers to turn to, and few who are truly disinterested and objective. For this very reason, executive leaders may seek out coaches as sounding boards whose objectivity and disinterestedness can help provide a more solid platform for decision-making.

### ***Tools and Techniques of Leadership Growth***

Acting as an effective sounding board is the coach's most effective technique in coaching for leadership growth. As listener, questioner, and clarifier the coach can help the executive better face the realities of difficult and complex situations. The sounding board function, in its most basic and generic sense, can help the executive avoid a loss of perspective that results in poor judgment and potentially disastrous consequences. The process of reflecting back to the executive concerns or anxieties he or she was not fully aware of, or of raising issues and questioning assumptions in a truly disinterested way, can be critical in helping the leader develop and communicate a vision.<sup>14</sup> The coach's function as a sounding board enables the leader to think about his or her world in new, broader ways and to increase the options for action.

Coaching for leadership growth requires a special emphasis on fostering self-awareness, helping the leader become more fully aware of his or her own unique strengths and weaknesses. Leaders are subject to inordinate degrees of scrutiny, criticism, and, at times, attack. Gaining a degree of acceptance of and comfort with who the leader is (and is not) is critical to being able to handle this particular kind of pressure. A good understanding of this strength and weakness profile is essential to being able to develop and communicate a "leadership brand," which enables the executive to act more consistently and to better identify opportunities to exert leadership.

The coach's character and personal characteristics are essential tools of coaching in the sphere of leadership growth. Leadership is a personal art, and coaching leaders makes significant personal demands on the coach. Trust is at a premium in the executive suite, and leaders typically learn a kind of wariness and a capacity to ferret out others' needs and agendas. Executive leaders are often used to getting their way and they may react in a reflexively aggressive way to shut down dialogue when they are challenged. Thus, coaching powerful and persuasive leaders can require considerable personal courage and test the coach's integrity. The coach's ability to stand his or her ground in these circumstances may be critical to being perceived as valuable and trustworthy and in helping the executive carve out space for self-reflection.

Gaining credibility in the eyes of the leader is essential for success in coaching for leadership growth. There is no one way to gain credibility but a background in business leadership can be a kind of shortcut to gaining the leader's trust. Absent this life

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<sup>14</sup> Of course, the coach is not immune to the seductions of power and prestige, and, by identifying him or herself too closely with the executive, can lose that vital impartiality and objectivity.

experience, the coach needs to draw on personal leadership experience or on powers of empathy to convey to the leader an understanding of what it is like to walk in his shoes.<sup>15</sup> While all coaching activity is enabled by the coach's business mindedness and organizational savvy, these characteristics are particularly important for building credibility in coaching leaders. The coach's role is not to give business advice per se but it is to help the leader think through his role vis a vis important business issues. This requires not only a degree of comfort but an interest in and enthusiasm about issues of products, markets, customers, strategy, reorganizations, etc. In addition to business-mindedness, the coach also needs to demonstrate to the leader good systems thinking capabilities. "Systems thinking," as described by Peter Senge (1990), is based on the ability to consider and look for patterns of interrelated action and change where only isolated parts of the system may be apparent on the surface.

Successful coaches in the sphere of leadership growth tend to take a pragmatic, eclectic, and flexible approach. Good leaders must be willing to move into a new situation and to experiment; likewise, good coaches should be able to flexibly lend themselves to the coach's agenda.<sup>16</sup> This may mean helping the leader find better ways to communicate his or her vision, or to implement organizational change. Knowledge of and skills in organizational development are important competencies in this sphere of coaching activity. Even if the coach is not the one to carry out an organizational change project, he or she should be knowledgeable about which techniques are best used to align the organization with the leader's vision.

### ***Case Example: David***

David had become head of one of the banking groups in a prominent financial services firm when his boss was promoted to an enterprise-wide position two years ago. David had been promoted based on his strong technical skills and an excellent client service orientation, but consistent with the firm's culture, had received no training and little support for leadership development. Although David's group had thrived and was highly profitable, he felt that he had not made the necessary investment in his own and his senior team's leadership. He was concerned that he was not spending time on the right things; non-productive administrative activities were consuming a lot of time and energy, and little was being done to bring his senior people together as a leadership team.

David was also troubled by some specific issues with his senior staff. Two of his senior people seemed to be coasting, and the contrast with two recent hires from the

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<sup>15</sup> Because it is so important for the leader to know that the coach truly understands his or her world, shadow consulting can be a useful technique in this sphere of coaching activity. By shadowing the executive the coach comes closer to the executive's world of action while retaining the tools of objectivity and observation. Shadowing can give the executive a powerful sense that the coach has entered into and understood his or her world. This kind of direct observation can be invaluable in helping the executive identify opportunities for leadership and think through important interpersonal problems.

outside, both highly energetic and motivated, was striking. David needed to open up more opportunities for high performers at all levels if he was going to retain talent and have the capability to handle the increasing volume of work.

David's style was under-stated, collaborative, and non-confrontational. He had a reputation for balance and fairness, and was particularly talented in developing new and innovative deals to serve his clients' interests. However, he needed to do more to project himself as a leader, more fully articulating his vision and actively developing his organization to meet future challenges. As we began to map out a plan for how he would engage these aspects of the leadership role, he started to feel more energized and purposeful.

In early coaching conversations we identified some of the capabilities that would continue to drive growth in this increasingly popular product area. David's success had been built on his ability to combine a broad perspective on the marketplace with an openness to new possibilities and innovation around new products. Clarifying his particular strengths gave David the confidence that he could communicate his vision of the competencies needed for future growth. We began to plan for starting an "innovation lab" that would support his people's development of these competencies.

The next step in the leadership coaching was to identify some "early wins" in the organizational development arena. David took steps (reassignment, more direct salary discussions) to address some of the immediate concerns of his junior staff that threatened to create an attrition problem. With the impending arrival of four new junior people David seized the opportunity to start a mentoring program to help in their early assimilation and engagement. David also planned some group activities for the entire organization, began to meet periodically with junior and mid-level staff, and took more of the lead in acknowledging and celebrating the group's successes.

David wanted to have a series of development discussions with his senior team, but was unsure how to conduct them. We began to outline a competency model that would help guide his feedback and set appropriate expectations. As the competencies became clearer, David began to take an active role in coaching some of his lagging senior staff on his model of client service and deal innovation.

Midway through six months of coaching, David felt there had already been a major change in the quality of his leadership. He no longer felt that he was spending time on the wrong things, and was less frustrated with some of the "people issues" that had concerned him. He was beginning to implement a plan for addressing these important staff issues and for developing his organization. David had already grown from being an effective lead banker to being an active leader of his organization. He had used the opportunity for reflection on the leadership role to become energized and more outward focused as he played his part on the organizational stage.

### ***Case Example: Janet***

Janet had had a long and successful career as an executive and then a consultant when she was asked to become the interim CEO of a non-profit service institution. The previous CEO had left with a tarnished reputation; his indecisiveness, indirectness, and avoidance of conflict had led to a sense of institutional paralysis. The staff was demoralized and had lost trust in the leadership.

Janet, in contrast, relished decision making and problem solving and brought real management ability to her role. She worked energetically to get people involved, conveyed respect for their contributions, and addressed some difficult issues that had been avoided for a long time. Janet was confident that she was restoring trust, improving morale, and moving the institution in the right direction. Yet, this was a new role, and she welcomed the opportunity for leadership coaching.

Initially, the coaching focused on some dilemmas she was having with members of the senior team. Her willingness to invest time and interest in one problem performer soon began to pay off, and was acknowledged even by some of the more skeptical members of the board. In her dealings with staff at all levels, Janet demonstrated a gentle but firm touch. She knew how to get people to bring issues and concerns to the surface in a non-acrimonious way. And while she made tough decisions and set clear expectations, she also went to bat for her people and expressed confidence in them.

My role as a coach was primarily to act as a sounding board. Initially, Janet was struck by the fact that I didn't tell her what to do. In fact, Janet's unique mix of talents and leadership style were quite impressive, and I felt that I added primarily by conveying this confidence and helping her better understand her strengths as a leader. Her brand of leadership was aligned with the needs of the institution at this point of time, and she had a good intuitive sense of where she could make a difference.

As the coaching progressed, I suggested that we tackle more directly her relationship with the Board of Trustees. Janet was much less comfortable with this dimension of her leadership role than with the day to day running of the institution. We worked together to craft her periodic updates to the Board, emphasizing the importance of addressing the previous management deficiencies. We also worked on how Janet could take a more active role vis a vis the search for a new CEO. Because of her background, she herself would not be eligible for the permanent position. But she could help foster an important longer term realignment by educating and influencing the Board on some search-related issues. Janet had gained a wealth of knowledge in just 6 months as interim CEO, and she had valuable ideas to convey about the critical competencies and the major challenges facing the new CEO. As coaching helped Janet feel more comfortable with the Board-related dimension of her leadership, she began to take an active role in the transition to a permanent CEO.

## **Conclusion**

Executive coaching is first and foremost a systematic approach that focuses an executive's thinking on his or her work life in order to energize growth in that domain. I believe there has been a relative paucity of literature demonstrating how coaching actually works and what diverse coaches actually must be able to do in order to implement the overarching goal of executive coaching. In this article I have attempted to provide a roadmap for how the coach focuses the executive's thinking and energizes his growth.

The essential core of executive coaching, as I see it, is organized around four essential principles and three spheres of activity:

### ***Principles***

- The coach serves both the executive and the organization
- The coach articulates a developmental path
- The coach focuses on the executive's strengths
- The coach fosters the executive's self and organizational awareness

### ***Spheres of Activity***

- Self and career management
- Competency development
- Leadership growth

In describing the essential core of executive coaching I have tried to stay true to what excites me most about the field – it is comprised of varied activities practiced by coaches of diverse backgrounds. The most effective coaches are resourceful and pragmatic, and apply their own synthesis of coaching activities as called for to a particular assignment. Because the field has not been rigidly professionalized, coaches can, and indeed must, transcend their specific background training to absorb key knowledge into a flexible approach to helping executives grow and become more effective. At times, it can be a challenge for coaches to grapple with their own territorial and proprietary inclinations. But I strongly believe that our clients will continue to benefit as we work to forge an open and non-doctrinaire approach to executive coaching.

The three spheres of coaching activity – self and career management, competency development, and leadership growth – were separated for the sake of exposition in this article. By describing in detail what coaches actually do, my aim was not to create a rigid hierarchy. While it is true that assignments can be differentiated by which sphere of activity is primary, there are few cases that don't include some measure of activity in all

three spheres. The art of coaching lies in being able to move flexibly from one sphere of activity to another as the coaching assignment requires it.

In a similar vein, the coach makes flexible use of the tools and techniques of executive coaching. I have linked the different tools and techniques to different spheres of coaching activity based on the conceptual fit and the spirit that informs them. In reality the tools and techniques are used in combination as the assignment requires. For example, some version of the career development interview will be used with most coaching clients and the coach's sounding board function will come into play at some time with most clients.

My aim in writing this article was to provide a broad audience of coaches and organizational sponsors with a detailed overview of coaching across a range of assignments. I have tried to convey what coaches of different backgrounds need to be able to do in the course of meeting the challenges of a range of assignments. In this sense, I have articulated a preliminary competency model for executive coaches.

It has been my wish to provide a unifying framework that will further the dialogue among a wide range of executive coaches. In this article I could only mention in passing some of the specific approaches that coaches with different backgrounds take to the spheres of self and career management, competency development, and leadership growth. A next step might be to take a more detailed, "compare and contrast" approach among mental health practitioners, career development specialists, HR and training professionals, and line executives to how activities are carried out in the three spheres of coaching activity. As coaches with different backgrounds and orientations describe the implementation of these activities in different contexts, the competency model would achieve more of the required behavioral specificity.

An additional step toward advancing the field might be to explore the boundaries of executive coaching through the lens of alternative interventions "favored" by the separate core disciplines. As a psychologist, I have paid special attention to both the overlap and the distinctions between psychotherapy and executive coaching. This distinction is especially critical during the assessment phase of an assignment when a coach must have a broad perspective on different interventions to make the best possible recommendation for how to intervene. Likewise, coaches who come from other core disciplines have valuable information about where coaching stops or has limited utility, and where other interventions such as training, career counseling, or broad based organizational interventions are most valuable. Sharing this information from diverse disciplines will serve to further enrich the vital and growing field of executive coaching.

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