

**Coach or Couch, Anybody?
The Zen of Creating High-EQ
Organizations**

by

M. Kets de Vries

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Coach or Couch, Anybody?

The Zen of Creating High-EQ Organizations

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries¹

¹ Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Clinical Professor in Leadership Development, INSEAD, France & Singapore; Director of INSEAD's Global Leadership Center.

Abstract


This article presents a review of some of the more salient aspects of leadership coaching. Suggestions are made about how to differentiate coaching from consulting, career counseling, mentoring, and short-term psychotherapy. Different forms of coaching are reviewed, and the goals of leadership coaching are explored, along with what makes coaching work and what derails it. Criteria for successful coaching are discussed. An example is given of group coaching in action. The argument is made that although one-on-one coaching can be highly effective, coaching in a group setting has a much higher payoff, because changes in leadership behavior will be more widespread. Discussion is offered to show that group leadership coaching establishes a foundation of trust, makes for constructive conflict resolution, leads to commitment, and contributes to accountability, all factors that translate into better results for the organization. The article ends by suggesting that a change methodology centered on coaching makes for high-performance teams, creates boundaryless organizations, and introduces true knowledge management.

KEY WORDS: leadership development; coaching; short-term psychotherapy; group coaching; trust; change; working alliance; knowledge management; boundaryless organizations; high-performance teams; virtual teams; 360-degree feedback.

Consult your friend on all things, especially on those with respect to yourself. His counsel may then be useful where your own self-love might impair your judgment.

—Seneca


No man is so foolish but he may sometimes give another good counsel, and no man so wise that he may not easily err if he takes no other counsel than his own. He that is taught only by himself has a fool for a master.

—Ben Johnson 

A Japanese Zen master during the Meiji era received a visitor who came to inquire about Zen. The Zen master served his guest tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, but then kept on pouring. His visitor watched the overflow with alarm until he could no longer control himself. "The cup is overfull. No more can go in it!" he cried out. "Like this cup," the Zen master replied, "you are full of your own opinions, beliefs and assumptions. How can I teach you anything unless you first empty your cup?"

As this anecdote illustrates, Zen Buddhism has as its fundamental purpose the awakening of the mind, the individual attainment of spiritual enlightenment. A Zen teacher is concerned with self-help and helping others, with wisdom and compassion. Given this mindset, Zen teachers can be seen as forerunners of leadership coaches. Like Zen teachers, such coaches provide learning opportunities by giving constructive and balanced feedback. They serve as sparring partners. They help their clients reflect on their own actions. As a way of clarifying and enhancing consciousness, coaching has become the Zen for executives. With executives finally realizing the value of coaching, the coaching market—now a multi-billion-dollar enterprise—is ballooning. Originally carried out by "one-person bands," leadership coaching has become a major activity for many large consulting firms.

Why this staggering interest in coaching? Why does every self-respecting executive now demand a coach? Various answers can be given to these questions. Perhaps the biggest reason for the coaching trend is the pace of change in our present-day global world. In many businesses and circumstances, what was an effective way of running a business five years ago is no longer valid today. Competencies that proved to be highly effective in the past have become outdated, and the new competencies threaten to be mothballed even more quickly. There is relentless pressure on executives to transform their way of thinking to accommodate present-day realities while achieving stellar bottom-line results.

With these changes, coaching and commitment cultures have replaced the command, control, and compartmentalization orientations of the past. It has not been an easy transition, because organizations that are flat, boundaryless, or virtual, and organizations that rely on networking structures, put much higher demands on the EQ of executives  on their “emotional intelligence quotient.” The emphasis on managing interpersonal relationships has grown as organizational leaders have come to realize that talent and human capital are what differentiates mediocre from high-performing organizations. The war for talent is a never-ending reality. Furthermore, people are being promoted to senior executive positions at an ever-younger age. Whatever the age, joining an executive team entails an enormous amount of stress. Top executives’ legal and corporate governance responsibilities are growing as well, adding to the pressure. As a result, being invited to take on such a role often creates enormous feelings of insecurity and loneliness. The overused complaint of “having nobody to talk to” is not just an empty statement for most fast-track executives, who learn that the higher they are in the organization, the more difficult it is to talk to others about their issues and concerns.

Because the traditional psychological contract between employer and employee has been broken through endless downsizing and reengineering, other, more creative ways of retaining and inspiring talented people need to be found. Likewise, new ways are needed to help reinvent and revitalize highly stressed executives and prevent looming burnout. Recognizing the pressures placed upon them, high-achieving executives are eager to accommodate competencies, skills, and experiences to

present-day realities. They know that without continuous learning and development, they will be left behind in our ever-changing global environment. Thus the opportunity to continue to learn and to renew oneself has become a great motivator. No wonder coaching, with its potential to establish, fine-tune, or rebuild the competencies needed to remain effective in the workplace, has become one of the most powerful strategic and tactical weapons in the executive repertoire.

Who Are the Clients?

Coaching can be viewed as a highly effective way to get additional performance out of senior people. In most coaching situations the objective is to help successful people become even better. Effective coaches go to great lengths to emphasize and develop the unique potential of the people they work with, thereby maximizing their performance. Coaches question and challenge their clients in order to help them make modifications in their behavior; coaches encourage executives to be more open to change; coaches help executives gain confidence and validation; coaches foster entrepreneurship, team behavior, accountability, and commitment; coaches help hard-charging executives deal with the everyday dilemmas and paradoxes of their work; and coaches help executives become more responsible corporate citizens. Given all these strengths, coaching contributes to the bottom line.

Though coaching has always been an asset, the image of coaching has changed. Having an executive coach used to be a professional embarrassment—an indication that something was wrong with the executive—but now the coach is a highly coveted status symbol. Every self-respecting executive wants to have a coach. Receiving coaching has become one of the indicators that top management thinks a person is worth investing in, is worth putting on the fast track. Because the basic intent of most coaching is to make highly effective people even more effective, not to help weak executives get out of a hole, it no longer carries any stigma. (“Last chance” coaching does happen occasionally, but it tends not to be very effective, largely because it’s usually recommended by a conflict-avoidant senior executive attempting to avoid dealing personally with a struggling subordinate.) With its new (and well-deserved)

cachet, coaching is now perceived as an excellent strategy to help individuals, teams, and organizations become more productive. Although coaching can be useful at all levels of the organization, it is particularly advantageous for high performers at senior levels of the organization, where maximum leverage can be achieved (Whitmore 1996; Flaherty 1999; Hudson 1999; Goldsmith, Freas et al. 2000; Kilberg 2000; O'Neil 2000; Fitzgerald and Garvey Berger 2002; Hargrove 2002).

As noted above, the image of coaching has changed dramatically. In the past, senior executives were reluctant to acknowledge the need for outside assistance to polish existing rough edges. Bringing a coach into play conflicted with a cherished self-image of self-sufficiency, autonomy, and independence. This attitude has been changing, however, largely due to the increased pressures now facing executives. These days, executive coaches are used in a variety of roles, from enhancing specific leadership skills, to creating more effective teams, to assisting key players in setting priorities, to helping executives balance work-private life concerns. While an executive may still become a laughingstock if it becomes known that he or she is visiting a psychoanalyst or psychotherapist, visiting a coach has become highly fashionable. That trend has made some cynics say that coaching is today's most acceptable way of doing psychotherapy.

As the perceptions of coaching have changed, so has the nature of coaching itself. Originally coaching was directed toward executives who showed great promise but had one area (or even a few areas) in their behavior that hampered their career advancement. Such people were told that their "fatal flaw"—perhaps abrasive behavior, conflict avoidance, a lack of follow-up, or a tendency toward micro-management—could sidetrack their career progression. The message given to such clients was quite clear: if they didn't shape up, there would be serious consequences. Often that "fatal flaw" was a trait that showed up when someone with technical expertise was promoted into management. A common problem indeed! Who among us hasn't encountered technical and financial wizards who rose rapidly in their careers, only to hit the corporate ceiling due to a lack of emotional intelligence? Who among us hasn't dealt with executives who had difficulty progressing beyond the technical expertise of their job? The skills that served those men and women well in

the early stages of their career are typically not the right skills at the summit of the organization. Coaching, in its early days, was intended to put the career of such leaders back on track by bringing their EQ—that is, their ability to handle interpersonal relationships, teambuilding, and change management—into balance with their technical expertise.

Although such “fatal flaw” clients are still around, coaches now have as their main customers another group of executives: individuals who are quite effective in their roles but nonetheless want to improve their leadership skills. These achievement-oriented people seek help not because they have been given an ultimatum but because they want to be and do their absolute best, and they are willing to work hard to achieve that goal. Many of them recognize their weaker areas but don’t know how to strengthen them. In addition, they may want a sparring partner outside their organization’s political system to help them brainstorm critical decisions. Through such a reflective interchange they hope to improve their decision-making, acquire greater ownership of any problems that they see with their leadership style, and maximize their potential. Through coaching, these executives want to receive important feedback that will help them achieve even more outstanding performance.

What Is Coaching?

So what is coaching? Though definitions vary, I view coaching as a one-on-one or group service to (mostly) senior executives designed to create more effective, healthier organizations. This definition assumes that when senior executives improve their performance, such benefits spread throughout the organization. This contagion happens in part because exposing senior executives to successful coaching contributes to a coaching culture in the organization. As people responsive to coaching apply their newfound skills to other people in the organization, improved interaction cascades down the organization. Thus coaching can also be viewed as a set of skills used by executives in the organization on a day-to-day basis that enhance the performance of their people (Pederson and Hicks 1995; Hunt and Weintraub 2002).

As the above definition suggests, the focus of coaching can be quite broad: executive coaching concerns itself not only with the individual but also with the team and the overall organization. I have found coaching to be especially effective in transitional situations—e.g., when someone is promoted to the position of CEO or becomes a member of an executive board. Coaches are at their best when helping executives work through such transitions. Working as third parties, they become closely involved with executives and their organization, seeking ways to manage for better results. Coaches can be viewed as “insultants,” in that they challenge executives’ preconceived notions about how to become more effective; committed listeners, they play the role of the “wise fool” (Kets de Vries 2003)

One way to see what coaching is, is to rule out what it *isn't*. It isn't mere technical guidance, though coaches can have strong technical expertise. It isn't career counseling, though coaches can often help a client find the right job. Nor is it consulting, though there are quite a few similarities (and at times the boundaries between coaching and consulting are vague). While consultants typically play the role of the specialist, having the answer to any question, coaches prefer to *ask* questions. They don't pretend to have all the answers; instead, they help people think, encouraging others to come up with their own ideas and answers (Sperry 1993; Tobias 1996).

Likewise, coaching is not mentoring (Judge and Cowell 1997; Stone 1998). An executive coach is typically someone from outside the organization who is hired to improve the performance of an executive (or his or her team), while a mentor fulfills a similar function from *within* the organization, offering a form of watered-down in-house coaching. Many large companies have mentoring schemes whereby each junior executive who wants to move up in the organization is assigned a mentor, a senior person who provides professional and organizational know-how, career support, and assistance if a junior executive runs afoul of the political system of the organization. While such sponsorship by a senior executive can have a career-enhancing effect, the neutrality of the mentor is threatened when his or her interests conflict with those of the junior executive. Coaches, on the other hand, are more assuredly neutral. Less affected by the reality of the company culture, they are able to raise issues that

mentors are reluctant to bring up—the so-called undiscussables. Furthermore, coaches often have broader work experience than the typical mentor, and they are specifically trained in such matters as how to give constructive feedback.

Short-Term Psychotherapy Versus Coaching

Both the differences and the similarities between coaching and short-term psychotherapy warrant mention here. Though psychotherapy was unregulated in its earlier years, the field is now subject to much regulation. It's no longer a simple matter of putting up a shingle and calling oneself a psychotherapist. In contrast, the coaching field, still in its infancy, remains relatively unregulated and fragmented. At the moment, just about anybody call him- or herself a coach. As the field is maturing, however, certification systems are being put into place (Brotman 1998; Brotman, Liberi et al. 1998).

Though there are both detractors and proponents who deny it, executive coaching draws heavily on psychotherapeutic frameworks and skills. After all, both coaching and psychotherapy deal with behavior, emotion, and cognition (Menninger 1958; Malan and Osimo 1992). Depending on the psychological background and orientation of the coach, coaching can take on many different forms, many of which look very much like short-term psychotherapy. Many coaches go beyond mere confrontation (helping the client recognize that there's a problem) to clarification (helping the client gain a new understanding of the problem) to interpretation (mutually examining unconscious conflicts and wishes) to working through (whereby the client acquires an increased capacity for self-understanding). In coaching, as in psychotherapy, there may be discussion (depending on how deep the coach and the client are willing to go) of blind spots, defensive reactions, distorted thinking, and irrational thoughts. Not surprisingly, then, there are—or can be—rather fuzzy boundaries between short-term psychotherapy and coaching (Rogers 1961; Beck 1976; Ellis and Grieger 1977; Martin 1996; Sperry 1996; Wallace and Hall 1996; Peltier 2001).

However, executive coaches have a broader perspective than do psychotherapists. A deep understanding of the overall organizational context, and of organizations in general, is an important factor in helping coached clients (Levinson 1972; Kets de

Vries and Miller 1984; Zaleznik 1989; Tobias 1990; Kets de Vries 2001; Kets de Vries 2001). Given the importance of the context in which the client operates, coaches are expected to know not only the essentials of psychotherapy, but also the ins-and-outs of management. Most psychotherapists, on the other hand, don't have, as a supplement to their clinical experience, the training to diagnose problems of executive leadership, dysfunctional team behavior, corporate culture, and organizational strategy. Because the organizational context is so important, coaches take a holistic, not a reductionist, approach to framing problems; they take a systemic, not a piecemeal approach. While in most forms of therapy, information is principally taken from the client, coaches gather information not only from the client but also other people who have dealings with the client.

Furthermore, psychotherapy—particularly its more psychodynamic orientations—tends to be past, present, and future oriented, while coaching has a more present and future orientation (McLoughlin 1995; Levinson 1996; Levenson, Butler et al. 1997; Jacobs 1998; Mander 2001; Rawson 2002). (Psychodynamically informed therapies emphasize the importance of early development, unconscious aspects of behavior, the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client, defensive reactions, and the presence of repetitive behavior.) Furthermore, in coaching we find a more active goal-and-action orientation, while in psychotherapy the interaction is more passive and reflective. Finally, in coaching the focus is on personal growth and skill development, while in therapy the question of symptom reduction and character problems is the primary area of interest.

In the case of therapy, help to the client stands central. Who the client is, is not in question. In the case of coaching, on the other hand, who the client is isn't always self-evident. When successful, coaching helps *both* client and organization. Well, then, is the client the person the coach works with, or is it someone in the human resources department? Is it the CEO? Or is it perhaps even an abstract entity such as contributing to the good of the organization? The question of who the client is has a major impact on confidentiality. In the case of therapy, confidentiality is absolute. That rule doesn't always apply to coaching, however. In many cases, confidentiality is much less definite, given the confusion about who it is that the coach is working for.

The setting is much more flexible in coaching than in psychotherapy. While coaching can take place in many different environments—face-to-face meetings, e-mail, telephone conversations, or group meetings—psychotherapeutic boundaries in most instances restrict interactions to the therapist’s office. The duration is likewise defined in therapy, which usually takes the form of regular 45- to 50-minute sessions. Coaching sessions, on the other hand, are often as long as two or even more hours. Interpersonal boundaries differ as well: while therapists generally avoid having social relationships with their patients, not wanting to “contaminate” future sessions, coaches may interact with a client at various company events outside of coaching sessions. These occasions give coaches a great opportunity to observe the client from another perspective.

Beyond the Quick Fix

It is often hard to predict how a coaching arrangement will evolve. What starts as a simple attempt to bring about desired changes in specific cognitive skills may turn into something far more complicated. Too often, issues that executives present require more than simple, surface interventions (Berglas 2002). Anyone who thinks of the coach as a sports trainer is likely to expect easy, quick-fix, ready-made answers, but few problems invite that sort of response. To the trained coach’s eye, surface problems often reveal deeper issues.

Thus coaches are *not* trainers. By definition, a simple training perspective is far removed from any form of reflection and introspection. Most trainers don’t have the expertise to recognize the often deeply rooted nature of specific problems. To illustrate, a coach who has not been exposed to the basics of dynamic psychotherapy would most likely not recognize the presence of a mental disorder if one lay at the bottom of a complaint about leadership style. Furthermore, a mere trainer would probably not recognize transference issues, a critical dimension of the bipersonal field (and a natural occurrence in any meaningful interpersonal relationship).

Transference refers to a situation in which the client becomes confused as to time and place, as revealed in the way he or she interacts with the coach. (*Countertransference*

results when the coach becomes similarly confused.) The psychological imprints of crucial early caregivers (particularly our parents) cause transference confusion in time and place for all of us, in many situations, making us act toward others in the present *as if* we were acting toward significant people from the past (Freud 1905; Etchegoyen 1991; Kets de Vries 2003). Though we are generally unaware of experiencing confusion in time and place, the mismatch between the reality of our work situation and our subconscious scenario—colleagues are not parents or siblings, after all—may lead to bewilderment, anxiety, depression, anger, and even aggression. All of us act out transference (or “historical”) reactions on a daily basis, regardless of what we do. Unfortunately, people who have little clinical training may not recognize such interaction patterns, and thus cannot effectively change them. Moreover, coaches unfamiliar with the power of transference may put the client in a dependency situation or otherwise unethically overstep the boundaries of the coaching relationship.

Because the coaching process often awakens deep-seated psychological problems of a characterological nature, raising issues that need much more than a simple intervention, coaches who do not have solid psychological training are woefully unequipped. They may not recognize the severity of the problem, or they may ignore the problem, assuming that it has nothing to do with the workplace. Personality problems don’t simply go away, however. A coach’s inability to recognize such problems, or the tendency to downplay them, can have detrimental results for individual and organization. Along with failing to get the best out of an individual or executive team—in the process harming the company and even potentially destroying careers—poorly trained coaches may fail to recognize mental illness, an omission that can be even more devastating for all concerned.

The Coaching Parade

What are the various forms of coaching? What kinds of distinctions can be made between them? First, as noted above, there are both external and internal coaches, each having advantages and disadvantages (Hall, Otazo et al. 1999). Although an outside coach may not have the kind of intimate knowledge of the business that an

inside coach has, he or she offers a greater assurance of confidentiality. Typically, clients find it much easier to open up to external than to internal coaches. If the internal coach is also a member of the human resources group, confidentiality is especially iffy, given that sensitive information may be forwarded to top management. With external coaches, clients have less reason to be concerned about the potential spread of confidential information. Furthermore, external coaches tend to be more objective, less likely to judge the client. In general, they have a broader range of business experience and are more prepared to discuss issues that are otherwise undiscussable in the organization.

We should also distinguish between one-on-one coaching—the most prevalent form—and group coaching (Peterson 1996; Witherspoon and White 1996). One-on-one coaching can take a variety of forms. In *shadow coaching*, a one-on-one variant, the coach follows the client when engaged at work and gives him or her feedback about what is observed. In *assimilation coaching*, the coach helps the client adjust to a new job. In *career-transition coaching*, the coach helps the client explore new career possibilities, redefining direction and assessing strengths, weaknesses, and personal values. In *life coaching*, the most general form of one-on-one intervention, the coach doesn't limit him- or herself to the work part of the client's life but also pays close attention to personal dimensions, blurring the distinction between psychotherapy and coaching.


Another way of differentiating coaching is by looking at the degree of psychological depth taken by the coach. Coaches more comfortable with staying on the surface focus on coaching that contributes to very specific cognitive-, task-, and skill-oriented learning. This so-called *competency coaching* encompasses simple how-to techniques and skill development. This type of coaching most closely resembles the work of sports trainers. Coaches trained to work at a somewhat deeper level do what's referred to as *performance coaching*, where the goal is to transform the business by transforming the person. These coaches help the client attain a determined set of stretch goals. Coaches who excavate farther still, working at the deepest level, encourage experiential, reflective learning through their *developmental coaching*. They help the client improve his or her emotional intelligence and strive for a more

effective leadership style. The emphasis is on creating a personalized plan to help the client find answers to existential dilemmas. In this case coaching really involves the whole person. The deeper coaches go into the iceberg of the mind, penetrating elusive (even unconscious) processes, the blurrier become the boundaries between coaching and psychotherapy. This differentiation by depth illustrates a major problem with much coaching: coaches may have an idea how to start the process but not know where their efforts will lead them. Those who are prepared for (and have adequate training regarding) the obstacles to be found on the way have a distinct advantage.

The Fundamentals of Coaching: Why and How

Why to Hire a Coach

There are various reasons why people or organizations ask for executive coaching, as suggested earlier. Generally, people hire coaches to help them do one (or several) of the following things:

- Become better at handling difficult relationships
- Engage in more effective career management
- Expedite goal- and priority-setting
- Develop a more effective leadership style
- Speed up personal development
- Improve self-understanding of motivation in order to facilitate decision-making
- Hone teamwork skills
- Learn conflict-management skills
- Manage more effectively upward the organization 
- Strengthen personal self-confidence, assertiveness, and/or well-being
- Make systemic gains, such as greater employee retention, enhanced customer satisfaction, and better overall results for the organization

How to Get Started: Contracting for Success

Whatever the specific agenda may be, it's important (for both coach and client) that a realistic coaching plan be put into place. Such a plan demands that the client articulate what needs changing and conceive a design for that change, a process that allows the coach to assess whether the client is truly committed to take on tough goals. It's important that the client include in that plan a number of small wins that mark progress toward the end goals. A timeframe for completion of the goals is also essential.

In such a plan—a contract, if you will—expectations need to be clarified by both parties, and ground rules need to be set. As in many other types of contracts, specific reference points are required, to provide clear markers in terms of both parties' mutual responsibilities. Success factors for the executive's current and future roles need to be established as well. These success criteria need to be conceptualized in such a way that they can be measured, so that *both* parties will know when they are (or are not) met.

Sometimes additional opinions are helpful. Having the client ask close associates (e.g., colleagues, subordinates, superiors, family members, and/or friends) how they think he or she is doing in regard to the success criteria facilitates the change process (and the meeting of goals). Such people are often more tuned in to changes in behavior than the actual client. In addition, their input makes them a key part of the coaching process and gives them a stake in the desired changes. That stake will encourage them to nudge the client toward the desired changes.

Among the ground rules that need to be established are such details as the scheduling of appointments, the handling of cancellations, and the amount of time that coach and client will spend together. The coaching contract should also include specific information about who the client is (the executive or the organization, a distinction that impacts confidentiality, as we saw earlier) and what the financial terms are. Finally, and perhaps most important, the contract should clarify confidentiality boundaries. Although coaches always need to keep the welfare of the organization in mind, their first priority, if they hope to facilitate meaningful change, is to respect the

confidentiality of the client. Making arrangements about confidentiality up front reassures the client and lets the organization know the limits of its intrusion. If any of these conditions remain unresolved in the coaching contract, subsequent problems are all but guaranteed.

What Makes for Success?

The main precondition for effective coaching is a relationship of mutual trust and respect between coach and client. Trust and respect are the foundation of what psychologists call the working alliance. Research has shown that, as in the case of therapy, the most important factor in making coaching successful is the quality of the coach-client working alliance (Koss and Shiang 1993).

Certain psychological factors are also essential in clients if coaching is to succeed. They must have a capacity for self-reflection, along with curiosity about the way their actions are perceived and about what motivates the actions of others. A degree of what we might call psychological-mindedness—that is, the ability to see connections between present problems and the past—is also helpful, as is an empathic capacity. Another useful quality is an appreciation for people’s differences, an understanding that not everyone has the same outlook. Interpersonal connectedness also stands clients in good stead, as does emotional intelligence. The ability to deal well with frustration is also an asset, because only people who believe that they have a certain amount of control over their lives believe that they can *change* their lives.

Motivation is another key factor. Is the client ready to listen? Is the client really open to change? Is the client prepared to make changes to his or her life and schedule? Coaches are often asked to work with clients who don’t realize the seriousness of their problems and have no interest in changing. The lack of insight that such clients manifest often comes across as arrogance: obstinately denying that any help is needed, they offer a logical rebuttal to any suggestion of change, an indicator of the strength of their resistances. To such people, disturbing the status quo is just too threatening. As a result, they are often unwilling to do the “assignments.” In another group of clients, motivation exists but is no longer linked to reality. These clients

have completely unrealistic expectations about their capabilities. Having reached their level of incompetence, they simply cannot rise to the coach's expectations; they lack the capacity to follow through.

Another problem population, when it comes to coaching, is people who are too defensive to deal with challenging feedback. For coaching to progress, clients need to be willing to open up and talk honestly about themselves (Gustavson 1986; Luborsky, Crits-Cristoph et al. 1988; McCullough Vaillant 1997; Rawson 2002). Working with extremely rigid people—that is, people unwilling to try anything new or frightening—is also difficult. In order to be responsive to coaching, people need to be willing to subject themselves to demanding interventions, accept the consequences for their actions, and be willing to take risks and experiment with new ways of doing things.

Likewise, coaching rarely goes well with clients who have complex psychological problems. This group includes people with serious sociopathic tendencies; people who engage in ethical trespassing; people who have psychotic or borderline reactions, including severe depression or mood swings; people who suffer from pervasive feelings of emptiness, meaninglessness, and boredom; people who engage in acting-out, self-harming behaviors including alcohol and drug abuse; people who have a low level of frustration tolerance; people who depend excessively on primitive defenses (such as denial and projection); people who have difficulty with reality-testing; and people who suffer from identity diffusion and confusion and have a strong need to merge with others. Generally, all such people are far too needy to benefit from a coaching relationship.

It must be said, however, that stagnation in coaching is not always the client's fault. The problem can also lie on the coach's side. For example, the client may have the kind of personality for which the coach has very limited empathy, meaning that the coach has too many negative reactions to facilitate progress effectively. Similarly, the coach may feel a lack of interpersonal connectedness—perhaps as a result of a cultural or social barrier between client and coach. Generally, when interpersonal chemistry is missing, the coach should not take on the coaching assignment.

Some coaches diminish their own effectiveness by being too opinionated. Unwilling to set aside their knowledge and perspective, they fail to truly *listen* to the client and thus cannot connect. Paradoxically, the coach must be prepared *not* to know everything that's going on. Acceptance of the fact that *not* knowing is an essential part of the process is crucial, because it liberates the coach from the need for omnipotent control. Once freed of this need, the coach will be more authentic and empathic in engaging with the client.

Other coaches sabotage the coaching effort by ignoring the client's resistance. That resistance, which should tell the coach a great deal about the nature of the client's pattern of relating, can take many forms—for example, constantly rescheduling meetings or finding endless excuses for not doing the assigned “homework.” In coaching as in therapy, the coach has to *resist* the resistance. Any form of resistance needs to be immediately brought out into the open and explored, with all negative feelings and reactions acknowledged and addressed. Ignoring resistance, hoping that it will just go away, derails the coaching process.

Sometimes coaches let a client down despite their best intentions. If the problems facing the client don't really fall within a coach's expertise or interest, the intervention technique chosen by the coach may be inadequate. As the saying goes, if you don't know where you're going, you may end up somewhere else! Likewise, coaches have little chance of success if the organization is not behind them. Sometimes a company recommends coaching despite having already given up on the person to be coached, wanting the personnel record to show that all avenues have been tried. Taking on the client under such conditions is futile. Even organizations that aren't deliberately deceptive can say they support coaching but fail to do so. For example, in organizations with a blaming culture—organizations characterized by mistrust and fear (i.e., organizations where scapegoating is the norm and the making of mistakes is not tolerated)—effective coaching will be stymied. The same is true of organizations interested primarily in short-term results (where investments in people, such as through coaching, are an uphill struggle) and organizations that see people as disposable assets. In these toxic, neurotic organizational environments, coaches need to be careful not to be drawn into collusive relationships. They may be asked

(explicitly or subtly) by top management to focus on helping their client conform to patterns of behavior acceptable to the firm, even when that runs contrary to the personal growth of the client. Coaches working in such an environment may, if they resist the pull of collusive relationships, find themselves in the awkward situation of recommending to the client that he or she quit the dysfunctional organization—despite the fact that the organization is paying for the coaching.


So how does one tell whether the coaching is progressing well or has succumbed to one of these many impediments? One primary indication that the coaching process is *not* going as planned is a lack of progress (or worse, regress) toward the goals set by the client in the coaching agreement. Another indication is dissatisfaction on the part of the significant others who were co-opted to take part in the change process. Another ominous sign is a stalemate during the sessions, with coach and client going through the motions but not accomplishing much. It's time to take serious notice when the client starts to discard the terms of the coaching agreement by missing sessions, is not responsive to any suggestions for constructive change, seems to be embarking on career endangering activities, or invents endless excuses for not paying the bills. Finally, an even more dramatic indicator is deterioration in the client's psychological or physical health.



Group Coaching in Action

After that whirlwind tour of the basics of coaching, I would like to illustrate the kind of coaching methodology that I have found to be the most effective in helping people and organizations change: group coaching among an executive team. This form of coaching can be instrumental in creating high-performance, high-EQ teams and organizations. Over the past years, this coaching methodology has been successfully applied to many different organizations and industries. An abbreviated illustration of the process follows:

It was obvious from the small talk and the jokes that the eight members of the executive group—members of the governing board of an information technology

firm—were more than a little bit anxious. In typical meetings the board members, all self-confident and in control, had a well-rehearsed script that they happily enacted, as n automatic pilot. This time things were different, however. This was clearly not going to be business as usual. Their new CEO had invited them to participate in a high-performance teambuilding workshop facilitated by an outside coach. No wonder they were somewhat concerned! Worse yet, they had been asked to complete a number of 360-degree feedback instruments. Sitting together now—their faces revealing a mixture of curiosity and anxiety—they were wondering what their colleagues, subordinates, friends, and family members had to say about them.

For over half a year clouds had been hanging over the company because of a takeover threat. Recently a new CEO had been appointed, and given the urgency of the situation, he wanted his team to be up and running quickly. He recognized that the team needed to be in top condition to fight off the threat. The new CEO was well aware of the fact that the company, a well-established firm in its industry, was not as nimble as it should be, making a takeover threat from a much smaller competitor a truly frightening prospect. Future job security was at stake for a lot of employees. From what he had been told during the hiring process, non-executive board members had finally understood that the old CEO wasn't going to be able to stave off the threat. Realizing that new blood was required to shake the company out of its complacency—to make it less bureaucratic, more entrepreneurial, and more results-oriented—they had hired the new CEO. Now it was up to him to turn things around and bring corporate returns up on a par with the standards of the industry.

Soon after his arrival it became clear to the new CEO that his present team wasn't an exemplary decision-making body. Starting with his first encounter with the group, he observed that meetings tended to drift, priorities changed almost on a whim, accountability and follow-up were lacking, and the various executive board members had trouble arriving at closure. Under the previous CEO's leadership, there had been a lack of focus, a problem that was widely noticed (if one could believe past job satisfaction surveys) at lower levels in the organization. Many of the complaints centered on the fact that the board members seemed to be giving conflicting signals. Furthermore, the new CEO sensed the presence of a considerable amount of

underground conflict. In addition, participation during the meetings was extremely uneven. He gradually realized that over the years several fiefdoms had been established, leading to block voting at meetings. Moreover, it became clear to him that the various members of the executive group didn't feel accountable to each other.

The new CEO, who had seen similar interactions in his previous position, suspected that mutual accountability tended to be more difficult at top levels of an organization. There was always potential for conflict between corporate and line-of-business goals. Furthermore, he realized that the stakes tended to be much higher for people at the board level, given the executives' personal goals.

The executive board members were somewhat anxious not only about the prospective teambuilding exercise but also about the CEO's future plans. They knew that things had to change, but how would pending changes affect their position in the firm? These thoughts and concerns made a teambuilding exercise—with its associated feedback and self-disclosure—a much more risky and anxiety-ridden exercise than it would have been for people at lower levels of the corporation.

Breaking the Ice

The coach started the process by engaging the group in a discussion centered on effective and dysfunctional leadership. He devoted a considerable part of that opening discussion to talking about the characteristics of high-performance teams and organizations. He then asked the executives to contribute examples of what they viewed as good and bad leadership and then to talk about situations of leadership where they'd felt at their best. This led to an interesting exchange concerning the kind of competencies they felt that future leaders of their organization needed to have. What kind of selection process was needed to hire such talent? What developmental processes were required for these people, and what kind of reward system was needed to retain them?

After a break, the coach began to explain the usual difficulties associated with giving and receiving feedback. He pointed out that people (“present company excepted, of course”) tend to have an exaggerated sense of their effectiveness at work. He

explained the kind of 360-degree feedback instruments they had completed prior to the workshop. In this case *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory* had been used, an instrument that contains twelve dimensions, including such factors as visioning, empowering, energizing, designing and aligning, rewarding and feedback, teambuilding, outside orientation, tenacity, possessing a global mind-set, and emotional intelligence (Kets de Vries 2004; Kets de Vries 2004). This instrument also includes dimensions referring to stress and life balance. As an addendum to the instrument, a number of additional questions had been included, asking the kinds of behavior a particular executive needed to continue doing, what he or she should further develop, and what needed to be eliminated. These questions had the advantage of allowing respondents to make specific recommendations about how the person being rated could be more effective, and the responses gave a more individualized tone to each person's questionnaire. The members of the executive board had been asked to complete the questionnaire themselves and have seven to ten people at work (including at least one subordinate and the immediate boss) complete the questionnaire for them. The responses to all the questionnaires, turned in with no names attached, had been summarized in a report that compared the results of self-reporting with the observations of others.

In addition, to personalize the results even further, each board member had been asked to complete *The Personality Audit* (Kets de Vries 2003). This 360-degree instrument differs from the *Leadership Inventory* in that responses aren't given anonymously. This questionnaire includes personality dimensions (presented in the form of polarities) such as sense of self-esteem, conscientiousness, trust, assertiveness, extraversion, mood state, and adventurousness. The coach had asked each participant to complete the instrument him- or herself and to ask a significant other or spouse, along with two people at the office (one superior and one subordinate, both well acquainted with the person), to complete the questionnaire. The responses to this questionnaire offered participants the opportunity to see differences in their behavior from the office to home. It helped them understand how they managed their public and private selves, illustrating the level of consistency of the presentation of self. In addition, the responses revealed differences in how people managed upward versus downward.

To top off the more personal information, each participant had been told to ask a number of good friends and family members to respond to a personal feedback page that included questions such as, “What’s the first thing that comes to mind when thinking about this person?” and “What should this person change about him- or herself?” Finally, the executives had been asked to complete a short biographical sketch to help the coach better understand the general background of each person.

At the end of the first day of the teambuilding workshop, after the feedback instruments had been explained, each member of the executive team was given an envelope containing all the feedback information that had been assembled for him or her. The coach suggested that they study this feedback carefully on their own and sleep on the results, to be prepared for next day’s program. He counseled them, tongue-in-cheek, not to go on a witch-hunt to identify or retaliate against the people who had given them a low rating on any dimensions. “Killing the bastards” who had given them unpleasant feedback, he said, would not be a productive exercise. Instead, his advice was to say thank you to everyone who had worked hard on the questionnaires. As a caveat, he reminded them that all people were highly complex individuals, far too complicated to sum up via a simple questionnaire. Questionnaire results, he said, weren’t an end in themselves; rather, they offered a jumping-off point for discussion. As a final quip, he mentioned that his experience with groups of people had taught him that everyone seemed to be normal until you got to know them better—and then everyone was revealed to be *abnormal*, flawed by quirks and weaknesses.

Not all members of the executive team had a restful night, given the feedback they had received. Although much of the feedback concerning their leadership of the company came as no great surprise to them, it was nonetheless disturbing to see it so clearly summarized in a report. At their level in the organization, honest feedback wasn’t usually part of the deal. All too often people told them what they wanted to hear. Now, reading a mixture of praise and condemnation, the executives began to spin out rationalizations to explain any low ratings they had received. Entering the

morning meeting the second day, they seemed quite defensive about the feedback found in the envelopes.

Group Coaching Dynamics

At the first session that second day, the coach explained the next phase: each one of the executive board members in turn would share with the group the feedback received, and the remaining group members would give their reactions to that feedback—a two-step process that would help the individual participants formulate a personal leadership development plan. After this short introduction, he asked who would like to start the process. After a moment of distinct unease, one of the executives indicated his willingness to volunteer. The coach asked the volunteer whether he was prepared to share the information he had received with the other members of his team. After receiving a somewhat reluctant affirmative, the coach used an overhead projector to display the summary data of *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory* and *The Personality Audit* on the screen.

After the participants had had time to read and absorb the material, the coach asked them how they would interpret the information summarized from *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*. After a lengthy pause, one commented that her colleague seemed to be an overestimator, rating himself higher than the others had rated him. Soon people joined in the discussion, offering comments about various variances between self-assessment and the assessment of others. To complement the presentation of the data, the coach read out some of the written comments that the person had received from the observers. The most telling dealt with the executive's need for details, his problems in delegation, his inclination to take over work from weak subordinates, his moodiness, and his tendency to work too hard and get stressed out.

When the discussion turned to *The Personality Audit*, the assertiveness dimension indicated that he was something of a tiger in the office but a “pussycat” at home, an observation that resulted in a certain degree of hilarity. Although he perceived himself as quite extravert, at home—at least according to his wife—he was rather withdrawn; she also indicated that he should be more adventurous in his dealings with her. *The*

Personality Audit also showed a high rating on conscientiousness, confirming his tendency toward micro-management. The supplemental personal feedback pages were revealing as well. The coach asked the executive to read some of the observations made by family and friends. Many expressed concern that he seemed to be under too much stress, that he should learn how to better delegate, that he should be careful about his health, and that he should set better boundaries between his private and business life. Some commented on his moodiness, on how touchy he could be. Others talked about the creative ways he was often able to tackle and solve problems that other people had given up on.

During this discussion of the various forms of feedback, the coach made sure that the observed strengths were emphasized and the weaknesses reframed in a positive way to reduce defensive reactions. He knew that reframing was a very useful technique to reinforce self-esteem and make the client more willing to engage in a change effort. In addition, he went to great lengths to present the observations in the context of the experiences of others. He knew that such an approach would take the sharp edges off the more critical behavioral observations.

After the feedback review, the coach asked the executive if he would mention a few things about his background as a way of helping the others understand his perspective. The coach helped him structure his narrative by asking him a number of questions: Can you say a few things about your personal background? Can you describe an event/situation (personal, organizational, or both) that changed your life in a significant way? Can you say something about the best/worst times in your life? What was your greatest failure/disappointment? What makes you angry, happy, mad, or sad? What regrets do you have as you look back on your life? If you could change three things in your life, what would they be? How do you look at the future? The other participants found this information extremely helpful, because it gave them a different view of a person who had been their colleague for many years.

Following this part of the session, the executive in the “hot seat” was asked to be silent and just listen to what the others had to say. The coach asked the others what thoughts had come to mind as they listened to the person. What kind of feelings did

they have listening to his narrative? What were their “fantasies”? For example, if the person were supposed to be an animal, what animal did they think he would be? This last question evoked many responses. Some mentioned a watchdog, like a German shepherd; others referred to a rat in a cage. Another person strayed from the animal motif and compared him to the mythological figure Sisyphus, endlessly pushing his rock up a hill. What stood out in the discussion were the person’s high work ethic, his driven nature, and his need for control.

Next, each member of the team was asked, “as a friend,” what advice he or she would give this person. This question prompted an intense discussion. A couple of the participants made disparaging remarks about the executive’s management team and suggested that he should stop protecting those “incompetents” and doing their work on top of his own; these respondents felt that he should take the tough step of letting some of the subordinates go. One woman suggested that he should simplify his department’s structure rather than having twelve people reporting to him. Still another participant complained about how difficult it was to approach both the executive in question and the people who reported to him. This participant said that although the company claimed to aspire to be a networking, boundaryless organization, this executive, through his territorialism and his anger when people approached his team without his consent, had created what he referred to as a “silo”—that is, a part of the organization that was extremely hard to enter. This latter comment took the executive by surprise. He had never realized that his behavior gave this impression.

During this process the coach was actively listening and trying to comprehend the key issues that the executive faced. He also offered tentative suggestions of other ways that the executive could act in certain situations, should they come up again. By reframing some of the colleagues’ suggestions, he helped the man to become more aware of conscious and unconscious influences on his behavior. He helped him see connections between critical life situations he had mentioned in his description of himself and the problems he was having in the workplace. Why did he have such a great need for control? What was behind his reluctance to delegate more? Why did he get so moody? Why did he protect incompetents? During this exchange, the coach used humor as a highly effective means of clarifying certain points.

When the discussion had reached closure after some time, the executive was asked how he felt, what he had distilled from everyone's feedback, and what had been most important to him during the discussion. He now had the opportunity to reply to the various observations. When he had said his piece, the coach summarized the major points of the discussion (which had been jotted onto a flip chart as they came up) and these were presented as part of this executive's personal leadership development plan.

This same rather intensive exercise took place for each member of the executive team in turn, with each participant receiving a personal leadership development plan. Though the *exercise* was the same, the *atmosphere* was not: people were tense and hesitant to contribute at the outset, but they gradually became more comfortable and spontaneous. The group coaching exercise created for the members of the executive team a "transitional space," a holding environment aimed at understanding and resolution, a place where they were able to play and experiment (Winnicott 1951).

As a result of the group dynamics of these discussions, the various roles played by the members of the executive team were clarified and the effects of the various leadership styles on the group as a whole became clearer. They recognized how they could complement each other, how they could build on each other's strengths to become more effective as a team. At the end of the workshop, one board member remarked to another, "We've worked together now for twenty-eight years. It's sad that I learned more about you in two days than I did in all those years together. I now have a better sense of your strengths and weaknesses, and I understand what you stand for. I think we'll be able to work together more effectively now."

At the end of the workshop, the coach asked each member of the executive team to state out loud what he or she had learned during the past two days, and which one or two areas each of them planned to work on. (The coach had learned that setting too many goals was unwise. Trying to do too many things at the same time carried the strong risk that *nothing* would get done.) He also asked them how they were going to deal with the people who had provided them with feedback. How would they involve those friends and colleagues in bringing about changes in behavior? In addition, he

asked them to put down in writing a realistic, measurable action plan (with a timeline) that would be circulated among the other members of the group. Stressing the importance of having an internal coach to monitor progress, he suggested that they ask one or two people in the executive group to help them monitor the desired changes. Finally, the coach set a date (approximately two month later) when they would have a follow-up meeting to discuss what they had done and how well they had met their set objectives. The coach knew from experience that a follow-up process was essential for successful change.

Creating High-EQ Teams

The benefits that came out of the group coaching exercise far exceeded the expectations of the CEO who had initiated it. The members of the team became more aware of the interpersonal role in which they consciously or unconsciously had cast themselves. They recognized that just as they had taken on a particular role in the family while growing up, they now occupied a parallel role in the workplace. They identified such roles as martyr, scapegoat, cheerleader, peacemaker, hero, and clown. They also began figuring out the complementary roles that others had been placed in, and thus saw how other members of the executive team could be used more effectively. They also acquired insight into maladaptive interpersonal patterns that weakened the team, discovering how such patterns, and the collusive relationships that underlay them, contributed to the team's lack of effective conflict resolution, lack of focus, and reduced productivity. After the workshop, one of the members of the team half-jokingly said, "In the past our meetings were get-togethers where some of us said what we really didn't think, while others *didn't* say what we really *did* think!" I hope we will be able to change this pattern.

By participating in the intensive group coaching process, the members of the team learned what it meant to coach others; the group exercise helped them acquire a new interpersonal tool in their repertoire. In particular, they learned how to become better listeners. They saw that listening is a precondition for *any* meaningful relationship,

because it fosters understanding. And better relationships mean better business, because people who feel heard and understood are easier to motivate and influence.

There were many other benefits that came out of the group coaching exercise. The executive board members felt that they had become much more of a team. They noticed, during subsequent meetings, that personal objectives were more subordinated to team objectives much more than in the past. When someone strayed and resorted to the type of behavior that the team now recognized as dysfunctional, the others stepped in to remind the person of the promises made during the “infamous” teambuilding session. They were no longer willing to let such behavior slip by. In addition to having better relationships with the other team members, board members were able to use their newly acquired coaching skills to improve relationships with direct reports.

The communication within the executive team became more focused, less conflicting, and therefore less energy-draining. Endless discussions lacking real commitment became a thing of the past as the executive board members concentrated on what was really important to the organization. Furthermore, where before there had been many “silent types”—executives who rarely spoke—*all* members now participated. And they did so frankly, openly, and honestly, engaging in constructive conflict resolution and eschewing politics. As a result, the members of the team felt more accountable to each other and to the organization. They took ownership and responsibility for their decisions and behaviors and followed up on their actions. Conflict between the members of the team and other members of the organization was reduced as speaking and listening took place at a deeper level.

Keeping the feedback they had received in mind, the executives attempted to unlearn specific behavior patterns that had proved to be ineffective. With the new climate of collegiality, they now found it acceptable to ask each other for help when in a difficult situation. Likewise, with talking about personal matters no longer a taboo, they were more willing to express their concerns about their balance between work and life. Becoming, in effect, a mutual support group, they experienced more satisfaction and fulfillment in their work and personal life. What this group exercise did for them was help them become a true high-performance, high-EQ team: they shared common goals

and values, they respected (and built on) each other's differences, and they learned to use the complementarities in their leadership styles to create an effective executive role constellation.

In addition to changes that each board member initiated after the workshop, there were changes imposed from above. Encouraged by the exercise, the CEO reassigned roles to some members of the executive group so that their duties were more in line with their real talents. For example, to help one executive come to grips with his conflict-avoidant behavior, the CEO sent him to another continent to turn around a very messy situation. Another executive (the one who favored silo formation) was given a very different portfolio in the executive team—one that was less people-intensive and more future-planning-oriented. This was a restructuring effort on the part of the CEO to ensure that departmental isolation was no longer an option. Another executive, distressed by the feedback he had received at the workshop, decided shortly thereafter that he didn't really fit in the team. Feeling that he would be more effective in another organization, he resigned.

To summarize, the group coaching exercise allowed the executive team to reflect on each member's leadership style. It enabled them to deal with personal issues that had been lying dormant for a long time and to develop strong relationships based on trust and mutual respect. That foundation of trust allowed for a genuine exchange of information, breaking down barriers, exposing the "undiscussables," and promoting true conflict resolution. The discussions the board members had during the workshop, and the more open communication they practiced afterward, helped them rethink priorities, reshape the future of their organization, ward off the takeover threat, and improve financial results.

Leadership Coaching at INSEAD

INSEAD's Global Leadership Center has been very active in the leadership-coaching domain. Presently, leadership development models are found in most of the public

programs: Advanced Management Programs, Young Manager Programs, and the Executive MBA Programs. In addition, leadership coaching has become a valued module in many company-specific programs. Group coaching of senior executives from the same organization has proved to be extremely valuable in creating high-performance teams. Leadership coaching is particularly important in two more specialized programs offered by INSEAD: “The Challenge of Leadership: Developing Your Emotional Intelligence” and “Coaching and Consulting for Change.” The former, which is aimed at top executives, has leadership coaching as one of its major themes. The latter, designed for consultants, HR professionals, and senior executives engaged in a change program, has coaching as its central subject. In this coaching program, each participant uses his or her organization as the main object of analysis. The program has a strong short-term dynamic psychotherapy orientation to give participants a solid psychotherapeutic background. After graduating from this program, participants are invited to become members of the International Clinical Coaching Organization (ICCO).

A number of feedback instruments (like those used in the group coaching illustration) a central role in the various coaching modules taught at INSEAD. Multi-rater feedback, or 360-degree assessment, permits the individual to receive feedback not only from the superior, but also from peers and subordinates. Two instruments I have developed have proven highly effective: *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*, a twelve-dimension 360-degree feedback instrument, looks at the various competencies needed to be an effective executive; *The Personality Audit*, a seven-dimension personality test to be completed by the participant, his or her partner, and two people at the office (superior and subordinate), offers an opportunity to compare corporate behavior to behavior in private life and demonstrates the consistency of the executive’s behavior toward different people.

Therapeutic Factors of Coaching in Groups

I have learned from hard experience that if you want to change people, merely dealing with cognition is not enough. Changing behavior necessitates a double-pronged approach: dealing with cognition *and affect*. Such a strategy really pays off when coaching takes place in groups, especially natural working groups. That's not to say that individual coaching doesn't work. On the contrary, successful coaching is often the outcome of a one-on-one process. However, when the coached person is back in his or her "normal" environment, automatic pilot often takes over and wipes out all the relational gains. Seeing a person for one to two hours once or less a week, as in traditional one-on-one coaching, rarely has more than a limited impact. All too often, the business and private environment act as a "rubber fence," bouncing the client (who is trying to change aspects of his or her behavior) right back to the starting point. Thus the question whether people *can* change must be answered in the affirmative, but whether people *will* change has to be answered with a maybe!

I've discovered that too many people have a "dream." The "dream" goes something like this: "I will start exercising." "I will start dieting." "I will stop smoking." But in reality nothing happens. Unfortunately, having good intentions isn't enough. External pressure is needed. When a smoker says in public, "I'm going to stop smoking," that person involves others, giving them a stake in the process. They are not likely, after hearing such an announcement, to offer the person a cigarette (or even to give one up when asked). This public process changes the rubber fence into a much more robust construction. What makes group coaching so effective, then, is that participants become committed to helping each other change. The coach who sets the process in motion is eventually assisted by a number of "assistant coaches," who help each other stay on the right track.

The boundaries set by the members of the group, helping each person live up to his or her promises, are an important force in behavior change. Because shame and guilt are powerful motivating forces, people keep the group in mind any time they're tempted to fall back on old behavior patterns. It's as if the group becomes internalized within each member. The support and acceptance given by the group also facilitate change, because they instill in each participant a sense of hope about the future. The powerful emotional experiences that come out of group coaching are also change-facilitators.

As people reveal something about themselves by telling their life stories, talking about the experiences that shaped them, and sharing the feedback they received through assessments, they undergo a journey of self-understanding. Telling stories is a powerful way of exploring the self. It creates a readiness for interpersonal learning and insight, lays the foundation for working through internal conflicts and crises, and helps a person arrive at meaningful, personal life integration. In other words, by telling personal stories, people rediscover themselves, obtaining a better understanding of their own life. *Listening* to stories is a powerful learning experience as well; it allows for the vicarious instruction of role modeling and gives an empathic understanding of the questions the speaker is struggling with.

Growth can come out of the telling and hearing of stories only if trust binds all the participants in the group. Unfortunately, trust building isn't easy for highly competitive people. In many organizations, trust is an extremely rare commodity. After all, relationships of trust depend on our willingness to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. For trust to exist, we need to deal with such complicated issues as openness, honesty, active listening, communication, consistency, competence, fairness, and mutual respect. Trust is a delicate flower: it doesn't take much to wilt it, and once it's crushed, it takes a very long time to nurture it back into bloom. But if trust is honored and protected, it flourishes and bears good fruit. Trust makes for constructive conflict resolution; constructive conflict resolution makes for genuine commitment; and commitment makes for accountability—all factors that have an enormous impact on the bottom line of an organization.

The case example given earlier illustrates what can happen when coaching takes place in groups. When people get to know each other better, when they understand each other's leadership styles, when they have a good sense of each other's competencies, when they understand the nature of each other's work, there is a greater likelihood that they will trust each other. In the "transitional space" of the coaching workshop, people open up and begin to share information, talking about the issues that really preoccupy them. They stop beating around the bush, they stop playing politics, and they start to support each other.

In the cyber society of today—in the virtual teams that are becoming ever more common in the global marketplace—the building of trust is even more important, and even more of an uphill battle. To make virtual teams effective, an enormous investment in relationship-building needs to be made up front. It's impossible to e-mail a smile or a handshake. It's personal relationships and face-to-face communication, not electronic communication that builds trust. And yet only when a significant degree of trust exists between various parties can one expect effective interaction between individuals and groups located in different parts of the world. Without the glue of trust, teams don't work well and virtual teams don't work at all.

Knowledge management can't take place in the absence of trust. If knowledge is power, why share it? Who would share information with someone he doesn't trust? When people trust each other, they have an incentive to share; once they open up to each other, they know what to share and how and why to do so. Thus only when there is a solid degree of trust between executives can there be true knowledge management. Unfortunately, most people who are in the knowledge management business don't seem to have figured that out! In spite of all the hoopla, knowledge management has for the most part been a failed concept. That's because its advocates focus their attention on the building of data banks and don't deal with the human factor. Setting up an extensive, state-of-the-art data bank isn't knowledge management; investing heavily in electronic management systems isn't knowledge management. Simple vehicles for storing and categorizing knowledge don't exist; it's *people* that acquire and manipulate and manage knowledge. Thus true knowledge management means creating teams and organizations in which the participants trust each other and realize the benefits of knowledge-sharing for everybody involved. True knowledge management means the creation of social networks, of communities.

The Future of Executive Coaching

In spite of all the hype about coaching these days, I would like to end this discussion by presenting a number of concerns. My first concern is the proper training of coaches. Companies looking to hire a coach need to be selective, assessing carefully

the training and experience all the candidates possess. As I have suggested, if a coach doesn't truly appreciate the problems of the client or the business, that miscalculation can prove to be extremely costly for individual and organization alike. Anybody can hang out a shingle and offer seat-of-the pants training that they call coaching, but *real* coaching is built on a solid base of psychological understanding and practice. Coaches who have education in and experience with psychological techniques and methods, in combination with a deep understanding of life in organizations, are equipped to be most effective in this domain.

A related concern—and a troubling one, given human nature—is that coaches don't always know their limits. Coaches need to learn the limits of their expertise and understand which kinds of clients they can work with and which they can't. “Hungry” coaches are the worst coaches. Wise coaches are those who follow the credo, Do what is best for the client; such coaches know what to take on and what to refuse. *Any* coach, even one with a great deal of experience, would do well to have regular supervision and/or an independent colleague to discuss clients with, so that an experienced “other” can give his or her opinion on difficult interventions.

Another concern I have—this one multi-pronged—relates to the ethical code of conduct for coaches (Keith-Spiegel and Koocher 1998; Bersoff 1999). First, as noted earlier, it isn't always clear whether the client is the person being coached or someone else in the organization—perhaps someone higher up the management ladder or someone in the human resources department. The hazy, potentially dual role that many coaches play has the potential to create serious problems. The person being coached may fear that sensitive information will go back to top management—a realistic fear, since that's often what happens. Coaches need to be clear up front, with both the person coached and anyone else they have dealings with, about how the information they receive during sessions will be used.

The issue of confidentiality extends beyond private personal data to sensitive organizational information regarding issues such as possible acquisitions or mergers, proprietary information about share price, and illegal activities. Organizations that use external coaches should set confidentiality guidelines up front to ensure the client's

(and organization's) privacy. Using that written agreement about how information will be shared, the coach can then balance the need for privacy with a focus on improved corporate results.

Another troubling ethical issue is the question of consent. Sometimes clients participate in coaching not because they believe in its value but because senior people in the organization have recommended it for career advancement. Declining such a "gift" (a word meaning *poison* in Dutch and German) isn't an option for anyone who wants to be promoted within the organization. But talk about questionable motivation! It's like the convict who enters therapy because a judge mandated it as one of the conditions of a reduced sentence. I have learned from hard experience that such scenarios do not augur well. Coaches who find themselves working with clients who are under duress must exercise great vigilance in dealing quickly with resistances.

There are ethical issues around the question of money as well. If the organization finances coaching, it should provide clear guidelines about the ways coaches are going to be used, and for how long. Because with successful coaching clients begin to grow and develop personally, they often want to extend the work beyond what was originally planned for. They may, for example, want what was intended to be a performance-improvement intervention to blossom into something of a very different nature. As with the work of the sorcerer's apprentice, the process can easily run out of control, becoming very expensive. Of course, it is another matter altogether if the coaching is financed privately by the client.

My final concern has to do with the focus of coaching. Although one-on-one coaching currently has the center stage in the coaching field, experience has shown that coaching in a group setting has the highest payoff. If we want to create high-performance organizations, if we want people who are results-oriented and accountable, if we want boundaryless organizations, if we want true knowledge management, then leadership coaching in groups must be our preferred tool for behavior change. The pressure that groups can exert in creating behavior change is formidable. Zen masters have always been well aware of the efficacy of these pressures, as the following story illustrates:

When a famous Zen master held his regular weeks of meditation, pupils from all over Japan came to attend. During one of these gatherings, one of the pupils was caught stealing. The matter was reported to the Zen master with the request that the pupil be expelled. The Zen master ignored the request. Soon after, the pupil was caught in a similar act, and again the master disregarded the matter. This lack of action angered the other pupils so much that they drew up a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief. If the master wouldn't agree, they threatened, they would all leave the temple.

When the Zen master had read the petition, he called everyone before him. "You're right, pupils," he told them. "You know what is right and what is not right. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother of ours doesn't even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if we don't? I'm going to keep him here even if all the rest of you leave."

The thief never stole again. His desire to steal had vanished!

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