Executive coaching (Zoe Gruhn, Director, PZG Insights Consultancy, zoe.gruhn@btinternet.com)

Introduction

What is coaching, and how does it benefit executives?

Coaching may be therapeutic … but it’s not therapy!

For many business leaders, coaching has a profound effect on their ability to achieve at work, and the relationship with their executive coach provides a space for reflection and decision that few other developmental methods are able to offer.

As with most successful change processes, success comes as much from the quality of the relationship involved as it does from the relevance of the models and ideas used. The unique quality of the relationship is based on the coach’s ability to understand the client’s organizational context and to bring the client to a new level of awareness about the interplay of their emotions, and behaviours, and the impact on this context.

Much of the coaching process is about helping the client to reconnect with their ‘self’ in a way which brings new insights into what they want from life and how they would like to relate to the organization in which they work. This reconnection with the self is often experienced as therapeutic and for this reason it is important to be clear about the differences between therapy and coaching.

There are of course, some similarities: the relationship between coach and client is confidential and built on trust, the session provides a space for ‘contained reflection’; the qualities of a good coach include being non-judgemental, curious and imaginative, having a high level of self awareness and a basic desire to help.

The coach will use the skills of active listening, reflection and building rapport; he or she will also give feedback and use the therapeutic interventions of exploring overt and covert meanings, interpretation, high-quality inquiry and the use of metaphor. These skills are demonstrated with a deep knowledge of business and organizations, and of the competencies required for senior management.

The therapist will use the same skills, and many more, but in the context of a considerable understanding of normal and abnormal behaviour, psychodynamic principles and an understanding of the unconscious.

There are other important differences between coaching and therapy:

- Executive coaching explicitly aims to help the client to achieve success at work, and focuses on opportunities and the future. In therapy, the aim may be much more complex, often about reaching a state of resolution of past events in order to be able to live with them; the focus is more usually on problems and on the past.

- The low to moderate frequency of coaching sessions means that the relationship between coach and client is unlikely to produce the level of intensity involved in a therapy relationship. The session frequency of therapy,
which can be as high as five times a week, is intended to encourage transference and dependency which may be critical to the psychotherapeutic goals.

- Typically, the coaching client will have experienced success at work and will be functioning well enough to have achieved and sustained a high level professional position. The therapy client is more likely to be in active distress, with physical and emotional symptoms which interfere with the ability to relate to others, work, even life itself. In coaching, where there is any indication of this type of distress, the coach must refer the client to an appropriate therapist, or encourage the client to seek help. The reason for this, apart from the type of professional skills needed to offer constructive help, is that the coaching session does not provide sufficient containment for the working through of serious or long-term psychological distress.

Coaching an executive client is different from coaching sportsmen or sportswomen, new employees, and young people at work

- The working context in which business leaders function is very specific to them and the challenges they face. Typically, business leaders work in complex and political environments that place demands on them in terms of their leadership and strategic decision-making, within fairly tight timescales. The outcomes of those decisions can have significant consequences for the business and employees. Coaching new employees will require coaching skills, but the focus would be ‘on-boarding’ into a new organization and perhaps, in the case of young people entering the world of work, mentoring could be a more appropriate mechanism of support. For example, large organizations do typically provide mentoring schemes where senior managers are expected to provide guidance and support to new graduate entrants.

- There are many arguments to support the view that coaching sportspeople is the same as coaching executives. The metaphors and analogies used such as, ‘raising the bar’, ‘being in flow’, ‘in the zone’, and ‘peak performance’ etc, are terms frequently used in sports settings. There is no doubt that these or similar terms are useful comparators for business leaders when they are reflecting on their own leadership. Where the analogy can fall short, is in relation to the working contexts that are so very different.

What are the typical objectives?

- Coaching should be offered where it provides the most business value. Coaching should ensure effective leadership development, including improving top executive teams, and should assist when executives are leading and implementing change. There are frequently benefits to clients in areas such as their sense of personal growth and their capacity to learn and to managing transitions, including promotions, new recruits and with relocation.

- The objectives vary according to the triggers associated with executive coaching. Sometimes, the organization may be going through substantive change and there is a felt need for their executives to take stock with a coach about their future leadership challenges and what behaviours need to be addressed. However, there are also many business leaders who elect themselves for coaching as they wish to develop, challenge, and change their existing styles of leadership. For example, a CEO of an asset management
company adopted this strategy. In this case, Paul’s own objective was to exercise a more rounded leadership style, which would feature more use of a ‘coaching’ style with his own team as opposed to leading mainly by exercising authority. Another example was Catherine who was a newly appointed NHS CEO. Her coaching objective was to focus not on a specific problem but to interrogate how she went about doing her job. This included building relationships with individual directors, seeking to bring out the best in them. Other typical reasons for coaching include building self-confidence, to improve work–life balance, to widen career opportunities, leadership development, and taking on a new role.

- Objectives and the desired results from coaching programmes should be clearly contracted at the outset: addressing the business, team, and the individual needs which should be aligned to existing leadership processes. It is essential that the ‘coachee’ writes his or her own objectives, in discussion and agreement with their manager and the coach in order to ensure that they are achievable within the agreed timescales. A written coaching contract which is signed off by key members of the coaching partnership is essential. Activities during and between coaching sessions focus specifically on achieving the agreed-upon goals for the business leader and his/her organization.

**Structuring the relationship of coach to ‘coachee’**

- The objective of the coaching relationship is to maximize the executive’s capability to deliver business results. The coach needs to build an understanding of the organizational context, with particular emphasis on those initiatives that directly impact on the executive’s business. Successful coaching links a business focus with human processes by closely aligning the executive’s development with key priorities.

- While coaching involves primarily individual work with one executive, our goal is ultimately an organizational intervention. Clearly, the executive and his/her coach are at the centre of the process, but other stakeholders are also involved as partners in the coaching process. These may include the executive’s manager, his/her direct reports, an HR business partner, and other executives. The time commitment and level of involvement will vary for each stakeholder.

**Coaching models**

- Assessment and coaching processes and tools should be integrated. Generic feedback should be collated to support the business in areas such as structure, values, innovation, ‘breakthrough’ thinking, team working, and leadership. There is a plethora of coaching models available and each has its merits. A coach will typically be able to access a range of conceptual models and tools to enhance a ‘coachee’s’ understanding and development. However, different models can help to approach different kinds of problems.

**Fitting coaching into the development strategy**

- Executive coaching can be provided through a range of different mechanisms: one-to-one coaching programmes, team coaching workshops, managers as coaches workshops, building a coach culture as well as building internal coach capability. Coaching programmes are often incorporated into other leadership initiatives. Coaching develops those behavioural capabilities that are designed
to achieve the specific business goals and longer-term strategic intent. Coaching business leaders, particularly in multinational businesses, requires both cultural diversity and sensitivity to be built into the coaching and a recognition that different styles and approaches to individual needs are essential.

Measuring the effectiveness of coaching
Examples of what have been described as successful outcomes for the recipients of coaching are:

- to demonstrate a commitment to being a visionary leader;
- a new willingness to restructure their working lives;
- a high level of accomplishment;
- the ability to think beyond what has been their typical/current thinking;
- to believe in themselves, and to assume that what is possible will happen; and
- to view people as their most valuable assets.

- When the coaching relationship is going well and the coachee believes they are getting real value from the arrangement, it is not unusual for the coach to have the coaching contract extended. This should be discussed after a review of progress to date, in discussion with the coachee and the various stakeholders, and revisions to the existing objectives made to ensure that there is continued added value and that the objectives are in alignment with business needs. All too often, the coach–coachee relationship can become very comfortable as trust has developed over time, however, a high dependency on that relationship can emerge which begins to defeat the benefits of what coaching is trying to achieve.

Improvements from coaching can be measured at an individual, team, and organizational level. From an individual and team level, this can include an evaluation of changes in behavior, which becomes apparent in response to the question: what are you doing differently that you may otherwise not have done as a result of coaching? There may also be achievements of specific objectives and changes in the results of an organizational climate and culture survey; achievement of performance and business plans; improvements in productivity; quality and customer satisfaction. From an organizational perspective, measurements could include: employee engagement and commitment data, as well as external evaluations of the company through changes in shareholder value.

Executive coaching can be a very effective leadership development tool for emerging leaders where certain conditions need to happen. These include the need to prioritize coaching where business leaders need to: invest the time and recognize that coaching can help them; be focused and committed to gain the full impact of the coach; ensure their organization is using coaches in a positive way and not for remedial purposes.

Integrity and judgement

- All coaches should operate according to a strict code of conduct. Upon entering into a coaching relationship, the executive is placing significant trust in the coach and the organization. He/she is allowing him/herself to be vulnerable and open. To ensure that the executive remains receptive to feedback, new ideas, and learning, the coach should ensure that the
organization and stakeholders establish and maintain a psychologically safe and respectful environment. It is imperative that the coach makes clear the ground rules for confidentiality, that all partners adhere to clear guidelines and rules of engagement, and that all parties function at the highest levels of integrity.

- Executive coaching is a balance of science and expert improvisation. Coaches have the capacity to step back, evaluate the situation, weigh the options, and apply good judgement for well-balanced decisions. All coaching partners offer different perspectives, which when combined with good insights and judgement aim to provide the executive with a dynamic learning experience.

**Conclusion**
Executive coaching is now a ubiquitous intervention for business leaders. This is recognition, in part, of the huge value that it can bring to an individual and their organization. Coaching is an intimate, confidential, and flexible working relationship that can enhance an individual’s performance and in turn, add real value to the organization and to its continuing success. Experienced business leaders often say ‘I wish I had a coach six years ago when I joined the company’.