



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STARTING SMART: CLARIFYING COACHING GOALS AND ROLES

Robert Witherspoon

Coaching is relatively new in the executive suite. So, clear goals and roles are especially crucial—both for getting started and for sustained success. Executives may use coaching for a number of reasons: to learn specific skills, to improve their effectiveness, to prevent derailment, or to prepare for career moves; or they may have a larger agenda, such as obtaining better business results. Most coaching is based on one-to-one relationships between executive and coach, typically behind closed doors. Each coaching situation is different. Yet, some distinctions are essential to recognize, both to establish focus and to foster informed choice.

My client and I begin coaching by assessing the situation and his or her felt needs. How we collaborate depends on key situational factors, starting with the executive's¹ coaching issues. Together, we define coaching goals and roles that respond to these needs. I distinguish four points along a continuum of executive coaching roles as follows.

¹ I use the terms “executive” and “client” interchangeably to mean the person being coached, which is distinct from the “customer” or “client system,” that is, the organization that contracts for the services and pays the bills. I am also mainly concerned here with one-on-one executive coaching in organizations and with formal coaching, for which regular sessions are scheduled and tangible results are expected.

- *Coaching for skills*—to focus on a client’s current project or task.
- *Coaching for performance*—to focus on a client’s effectiveness in a present job.
- *Coaching for development*—to focus on a client’s future job responsibilities and/or career.
- *Coaching for an executive’s agenda*—to focus on a client’s larger issues, including better business results.

These critical distinctions help us jointly set the coaching agenda. Unless my client and I can identify one of these coaching roles as primary, there can be confusion about expectations, the amount of time it will take, and the effort we’ll put into the relationship. Unless we contract to focus on one of these four, it is hard to check progress toward our goals. My colleagues and I have found that this coaching continuum constitutes a good conceptual framework for dealing with different (and evolving) issues that come up throughout our coaching relationships.

This chapter explores these topics from the perspective of the executive coaching practice used by me and my organization. I begin with a working definition of executive coaching and a brief overview of the Coaching Continuum Model outlined above, then discuss some practical implications for coaching executives.

Beyond a Buzzword

Coaching is a current buzzword with many different meanings in business circles. Some see coaching as part of the boss’s responsibility to develop subordinates, often in conjunction with an annual performance review. Others conceive of coaching as a manager’s efforts to modify and reinforce employee behavior—a key part of performance management. Still others have applied coaching to a certain managerial style or connect coaching with mentoring, management development, and career development that takes place over a long period of time. Moreover, a growing management literature (Evered and Seleman, 1989), along with articles from the popular press and training materials (not to mention the use of coaches in sports, the performing arts, and other areas of life), have made coaching a household word.

The main concern here is coaching executives in organizations, in which some promising new practices have evolved, such as 360° surveys and feedback; the integration of coaching into large-scale, leadership development programs; and other new coaching applications.

A Definition of Coaching

Coaching is undertaken to bring out the best in people. The first use of the word in the English language was in reference to a particular kind of carriage. Hence, the basic meaning is to “convey a valued person from where he or she is to where he or she wants to be.”

Elsewhere (Witherspoon, 1998) I have suggested the following elements of executive coaching: a professional relationship (as opposed to a managerial function) to enhance effective action and learning agility (the ability to learn from feedback and experience) through a deliberate process of observation, inquiry, dialogue, and discovery that provides—the three core values of my coaching—*valid information*, *informed choice*, and *internal commitment* (Argyris and Schön, 1974).

I also see executive coaching as a highly personal learning process: (1) it is individualized, as each person has a unique knowledge base, learning pace, and learning style, and (2) it can uncover blind spots and change one’s personal style.

So, for purposes of this chapter, let’s consider this working definition:

Executive coaching is an action-learning process to enhance effective action and learning agility. It involves a professional relationship and a deliberate, personalized process to provide an executive with valid information, free and informed choices based on that information, and internal commitment to those choices.

One outcome of this process is that the executive can accomplish more (effective action) after coaching than otherwise would have been true. Another outcome is that the executive can learn better (learning agility) after coaching—for example, by asking for feedback and reflecting before and after taking action—than otherwise would have been true.

Coaching Theory: The Coaching Continuum

A key dimension for distinguishing among coaching roles is client need. Does the executive need to learn a new skill, to perform better in the present job, or to prepare for a future leadership role? Is the executive looking for a confidential sounding board and a source of constructive feedback? Coaching executives involves one or more of the following coaching roles as defined in the Coaching Continuum Model.

Coaching for Skills

“Skill” refers to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and perspectives that enable an executive to take effective action. Coaching for skills involves a dynamic interaction between executive and coach. It is distinct from teaching, which relies on one-way telling and instruction; rather, it requires a deliberate process of observation, inquiry, dialogue, and discovery. The essence of coaching executives is helping them to learn, rather than training or tutoring them. To coach in this sense is less to instruct than to facilitate (literally, “to make easy”).

When	“I need to sharpen my skills for. . . .” “I know how, but I don’t always do it well.”
Who	Any executive, manager, or individual contributor.
Why	Better skills. The primary coaching focus is to sharpen an executive’s skills for a current project or task. Coaching sessions often address one or two key skill areas.
What	Executive works with coach to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current skills; • Clarify expectations for current project or tasks; • Prioritize the executive’s needs for present project or tasks; • Plan for skill building; • Enhance effective action; and • Improve (to some extent) learning agility.

Coaching for skills usually occurs over a short term, such as one or more sessions over several weeks or months.

Coaching for Performance

“Performance” is used broadly to refer to the executive’s competencies and his or her characteristics that contribute to a current job or role. A related coaching role is “coaching to correct performance” (or “fix its”) for executives at risk. As a rule, coaching to correct performance involves interventions to remedy problems that interfere with an executive’s job performance or that risk derailing a career.

When	<p>“There’s pressure to improve.”</p> <p>“I need to do a better job at. . . .”</p> <p>“I’m not aware of my impact on. . . .”</p> <p>“I haven’t made a commitment to doing it well.”</p>
Who	Senior executives, key performers, or executives at risk.
Why	Better performance. The primary coaching focus is to improve the executive’s effectiveness in a current job or role. Coaching sessions often address one or more core competencies for the executive’s current success.
What	<p>Executive works with coach to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current competencies for present job; • Clarify expectations for present performance; • Prioritize the executive’s needs for present job performance; • Plan for continuing improvement; • Enhance effective action; and • Improve (to a noticeable extent) learning agility.

Coaching for performance usually occurs over a longer term (several months or quarters).

Coaching for Development

“Development” is used broadly to refer to the executive’s competencies and characteristics that are required for a future job or role and may entail considerable growth. Over time, an executive’s personal growth and development process is one of becoming more open (able to entertain

alternate perspectives), differentiated (able to draw from distinctions), and integrated (able to weave these differences into an increasingly complex whole).

When	<p>“I’m being groomed to advance. . . .”</p> <p>“I’m being promoted to. . . .”</p> <p>“I’m considering a career move to. . . .”</p> <p>“I’m in the succession planning pool for. . . .”</p>
Who	Promising people and high potentials.
Why	Better development. The primary coaching focus is to prepare the executive for a future position, a leadership role, or a career move. Coaching sessions often address one or more core competencies for future success.
What	<p>Executive works with coach to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess current competencies; • Clarify expectations for future performance; • Prioritize the executive’s need for future job performance; • Plan for continuing development; • Enhance effective action; and • Improve (to a significant extent) learning agility.

Coaching for development usually occurs over a longer term (several quarters or more).

Coaching for an Executive’s Agenda

“Executive’s agenda” is used broadly to refer to personal, business, and/or organizational issues or concerns. Often this coaching covers important issues for executives and their organizations that are otherwise overlooked, particularly during change initiatives, layoffs, or company downsizing. Sometimes the sessions border on life coaching, as the executive considers his or her life purpose and personal challenges.

When	<p>“It’s lonely at the top.”</p> <p>“I’m in over my head.”</p>
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“I need a talking partner for. . . .”

“I’m facing a big challenge at. . . .”

- Who** CEOs and heads of a business or major business function.
- Why** Better business results. The primary coaching focus is on the executive’s larger agenda, including better business results. Coaching sessions often address executive’s agenda in the broadest sense.
- What** Executive works with coach to:
- Develop more ideas and options;
 - Prioritize the executive’s needs;
 - Plan for the executive’s agenda;
 - Obtain better support for the executive’s agenda;
 - Enhance effective action; and
 - Improve (to a variable extent) learning agility.

Coaching for the executive’s agenda can be ongoing and is highly variable, depending on the issue. These distinct executive coaching roles are essential to recognize for the following reasons:

Clarity. Effective problem solving requires valid information. When people share relevant information about a situation in a way that each can understand, they are more likely to make sound decisions. Drawing distinctions among coaching roles helps provide clarity and a common language about executive coaching and can be a useful way to orient all parties to the process of contracting, assessment, and feedback.

Choice. Effective decisions require free and informed choice. When people base their choices on valid information, they are more likely to make such a free and informed choice. Recognizing the distinctions among different coaching roles helps foster informed choice by the client (and possibly family members), the client’s boss, the human resources officer, and the coach(es) providing the service.

Commitment. Effective implementation requires internal commitment. When people make free and informed choices based on valid information,

they tend to feel personally responsible for their decisions and find their choices intrinsically compelling or satisfying. Offering parties a choice of coaching responses throughout the life of the coaching relationship helps foster internal commitment.

Roles and Behavior. Each coaching role helps to define behaviorally how coaches and clients work together. So choosing the right coaching role can make the difference between meeting or missing client expectations. An open discussion of coaching roles can also help to create ground rules and a feedback system.

Coaching Practice: Openings and Contracts

Turning from theory to practice, let's consider two specific ways the Coaching Continuum Model can be applied in executive coaching situations: (1) to spot openings for coaching and (2) to contract for working together. I will explore how to spot openings and how to contract under each of the four points on the continuum: skills, performance, development, and an executive's agenda.

Three skills are essential for any person taking a situational approach to executive coaching. They are (1) *flexibility*, the ability to use more than a single coaching style and to turn down work outside of one's professional competence; (2) *diagnostic ability*, needed to determine the primary need(s) the client has for coaching (and therefore decide the most appropriate coaching response); and (3) *knowledge of contracting*, the negotiation process with an executive in a face-to-face meeting, involving both a discussion of client needs and of the coaching role most appropriate for the situation.

The following sections show how the coaching continuum can be used to diagnose coaching situations correctly and contract effectively. As Harold Hill said in *The Music Man*, "You've got to know the territory," before you decide which of your styles to use.

A general principle is to begin with the client's interests and concerns. As Herbert Shepard (1985) has said, "start where the system is." When a client is focused on a particular issue, he or she may not be able to fully at-

tend to other issues. Another assumption I make is that my client usually understands the situation better than I do, or at least has important insights, so my choice of an appropriate coaching response is guided directly by the client's manifest needs, not by any preconceived agenda.

One way to identify the client's interests and concerns is to ask. Does the executive need to learn a new skill to perform better in the present job or to prepare for a future leadership role? Does the executive understand and acknowledge these needs? Is he or she willing to seek and accept feedback and coaching? These questions suggest client need—the focus for the coaching continuum—as a key aspect of any coaching situation.

Seeing Openings for Coaching

An opening for coaching is that critical moment at which one or more relevant people notice a need for coaching and believe that change can occur. As a rule, openings result from a significant situation or event. Everyone involved should learn to recognize a coaching opening and carefully evaluate where it falls on the coaching continuum—including executives, managers, and human resource officers.

What constitutes an opening for coaching? A request for coaching by any executive is an obvious example. Other openings come during the situations that arise daily in any organization. Some are built into the time cycles of business activities (for example, annual performance reviews or the beginning of a new budget period). Some are presented by a particular circumstance (for example, difficult performance issues, complaints from customers, a new possibility in sales or marketing, or a crisis in the enterprise). Others occur around important firsts (for example, before a customer's first visit or a first board meeting).

Still other openings occur randomly. For example, openings occur when an executive decides it is time to improve performance in an important area, or the boss sees business results that are below expectations or key working relationships that are strained. Openings could be for any of the four types of coaching on the continuum.

Given an opening for coaching, the key factors to assess are goal clarity, consensus, commitment, and control, as shown in Exhibit 15.1. For each of the factors listed, I may probe for specifics. For example, to assess goal clarity I ask about the primary focus for coaching. I may also question the parties involved in the coaching (especially the client, but also the boss and relevant others) about the extent to which:

- Coaching goals are clear and specific;
- Parties understand what is expected of them; and
- Coaching activities are well-planned and organized.

Of these four factors, goal clarity—the primary purpose of coaching—is the key to sizing up coaching needs: how to approach an opening for coaching, where to start, what to emphasize, and what to leave alone for the time being. High goal clarity may also contribute to high consensus (people agree about the need for coaching), high commitment (people are strongly committed to coaching), and high control (people believe they have a good chance of achieving their goals).

To illustrate, let's look at situations that are well-matched to each coaching role along the continuum.

EXHIBIT 15.1. SITUATIONAL FACTORS TO SIZE UP COACHING NEEDS

Clarity

The extent to which relevant parties (the executive, boss, others) understand the business reasons for coaching, the primary coaching focus, specific coaching goals, success measures, and so on.

Consensus

The extent to which relevant parties agree about the business reasons for coaching, the primary coaching focus, success measures, and so on.

Commitment

The extent to which relevant parties are committed to goal achievement and continually evaluate their own performance against these goals.

Control

The extent to which relevant parties consider the coaching goals to be realistic and achievable.

Openings for Skills Coaching

Coaching for skills helps people learn specific skills, abilities, and perspectives, often over several weeks or months. Openings well-suited to this coaching role are summarized in the list below. A coach can infer these openings from something seen or heard in organizations, such as an executive saying, “I need to learn on-the-job. . . .” In this case, it is fairly easy to see an opening because of a close match with the executive’s statement. I like to clarify such needs statements, then confirm an opening for coaching through further conversation.

Openings for Skills Coaching

1. To enhance learning on the job (for example, before or after a key “first,” such as a customer’s first visit or a first board meeting);
2. To enhance training (for example, by reinforcing learning and practical applications back on the job);
3. To enhance performance after job redesign (for example, when re-engineering introduces new or different roles and responsibilities); or
4. At key project milestones (for example, when starting with new equipment).

In these cases, coaching can be used to help an executive build skills needed for a current task or project. Sometimes, the executive’s statements indicate a need for conceptual clarity: “I’m not familiar with the basic principles” or “I don’t understand why these skills are needed or when to apply them.” Other times, the executive’s statements indicate a need to acquire a skill: “I never learned how to do it” or “I know how, but I don’t always do it well.” In these cases, coach for skills and/or recommend learning resources that are tailored to these needs. Because the needs are clear and specific, executives can start applying their new skills and behaviors promptly.

In openings to coach for skills, there is often high clarity about the skills to be learned. Executives know what is expected of them. The business reasons for coaching are clear and thoroughly understood by all.

Consequently, coaching for skills can often occur over a relatively short period of time.

Openings for Performance Coaching

By comparison, consider coaching for performance. In openings to coach for performance, there is often less clarity by key parties. The executive may have one coaching agenda and the boss another. For example, there may be a presenting issue (“He’s not getting the results we expected”), but little clear definition of actual behavior or root causes. People may be expected to improve their effectiveness, but don’t know how. In the same way, the business reasons for coaching may be less clear. Consequently, coaching for performance tends to involve more time, if only to reach clarity and consensus about the need for coaching and the desired outcomes.

Coaching for performance helps people improve their effectiveness on the job, often over several quarters or a year or more. This coaching role applies to openings such as those listed below.

Openings for Performance Coaching

1. To enhance effective action and capabilities for a current job (for example, by practicing new behaviors);
2. To clarify performance goals, when expectations about behavior are unclear or when business goals, roles, or conditions change; or
3. To orient and support a newly appointed executive or someone with significant new responsibilities in making a smooth transition.

Coaching to correct performance (“fix its”) also can help to change individual behaviors and correct problems such as these:

Openings for Performance Coaching (for “Fix Its”)

1. To confront ineffective attitudes or other motivational issues;
2. To alleviate performance problems (for example, when deficiencies jeopardize a person’s productivity, job, or career);

3. To increase confidence and commitment (for example, when seasoned players have experienced career setbacks and disappointments); or
4. To deal with blind spots that detract from otherwise satisfactory performance.

In these cases, I can act as a performance coach by helping clients assess their performance, obtain feedback on individual strengths and weaknesses, and enhance their effectiveness. The coaching sessions typically focus on performance in the present job, although continued improvement may lead to coaching for competencies that are needed for future advancement.

To diagnose these coaching openings, I start with a client's felt needs and consider the same situational factors as before: goal clarity, consensus about the need for coaching, commitment, and control. Then, I listen for a close match between the executive's statement and one or more characteristic wordings from the coaching continuum. Assuming the opening calls for performance coaching, I also strive for a clear understanding of what is meant by "performance" in my client's current job or role.

Few words in the management lexicon are as important as *performance*, but the word has two quite different meanings in practice:

- *Product*: What gets accomplished? Have individuals, teams, and organizations achieved their goals? Are standards being met? Are projects completed on time? Are products and services delighting customers? Have business goals been achieved? What were the business results?
- *Process*: How well do people do their work? Are they knowledgeable and skilled? How effectively do they use their skills? How well do employees interact with each other? How do people treat their customers? Are procedures effective? How is the work getting done?

Coaching for performance may involve both process and product, and in fact there is a connection between how the work is done and what gets done. However, the two meanings of performance are separate and distinct, and it's important to understand that competence—knowledge, skills, abilities, perspectives, and so forth—is only one factor among many that influences results. Strategy, structure, and culture are also at play.

Given these different meanings, it's often essential to probe further, especially in complex situations. In coaching conversations, one way to do this is to reflect on a client's action² (Argyris and Schön, 1974). I often start by asking a series of questions such as the following:³

1. Start by asking, "What's the result that concerns you? Describe concretely what is happening. What is working? What is problematic?"
2. Then ask, "What actions produced this result?" It is crucial to obtain concrete descriptions of what key players say and do.
3. Then ask, "How have you and others been framing the situations such that you acted the way you did? How do you see your task? Yourself and others? Key themes?"
4. Then ask, "What are the contextual factors that influence the behavior of you and other key players? What are your goals and roles? How are you measured? What are your loyalties?"

Coaching for Development

Coaching for development helps people prepare for advancement, often over an extended period of a year or more. In openings to coach for development, there is usually less clarity by key parties compared with when coaching for skills or performance. Because coaching for the future is involved, shared agreement about the need for development coaching can be difficult to obtain and can vary from high in some organizations with well-honed succession plans to low in organizations without them. Clear and specific goals for coaching may be lacking, or at best limited, and predicting future requirements is difficult at best. Consequently, coaching for development tends to involve considerable time, both to reach clarity and consensus and to realize potentially far-ranging changes. The business

²*Reflecting-in-action* is a core competency for executive coaching. It refers to the paradoxical ability to step outside immediate events while still in them through a process of on-the-spot reflection and experimentation. The skill is instrumental for helping clients in the moment to produce valid information, informed choice, and internal commitment.

³Adapted from Action Design, with permission. © Action Design, 1998.

examples of coaching for development include preparing an executive for a career move, often as part of succession planning, and providing support for possible promotions, lateral transfers, and so on. This coaching role applies to such openings as these:

Openings for Development Coaching

1. To enhance effective action and capabilities for a future job, sometimes after coaching for performance;
2. To clarify shared goals about success when executives and their organizations are at odds about the skills and perspectives needed for success in a future position; or
3. To encourage the long-term development of promising people by facilitating learning from challenging career experiences.

In these cases, I act as a development coach by helping clients discover their potential to advance and addressing their long-term development needs, often over several years or more. The coaching sessions typically focus on development for future jobs by helping an executive discover strengths and weaknesses, determine where growth is needed, and how to fill the gaps.

To diagnose these openings, start with a client's felt needs and consider the same factors as above: clarity, consensus, commitment, and control. Then listen for a close match between the executive's statement and one or more characteristic wordings from the coaching continuum. Assuming the opening calls for development coaching, also strive for a clear understanding of what is meant by development for a client's future jobs or roles. For example, an early step in coaching for development is often to help executives and their organizations clarify the skills and competencies for success in a future executive job or leadership role. The resulting success profile (also known as a competency model) defines the skills, abilities, and perspectives that are required for effective performance in these future situations. However, the competencies for future jobs or roles are always changing, so the foundation for future competence is to increase one's capacity to learn how to learn (that is, learning agility).

Coaching for the Executive's Agenda

Coaching for the executive's agenda helps that person realize broader purposes, such as better business results and/or well-being in life, often on an ongoing basis. In openings to coach for an executive's agenda, goal clarity is often highly variable, broad, or open-ended. In other cases, the coaching may be tied to an organization's priorities, such as to help key people implement major change initiatives successfully. Consequently, the time involved for this coaching role can be highly variable. Depending on the executive's agenda, the actual coaching sessions may take place at regular intervals over a specific time period or on an on-call basis.

The scope for this type of coaching can range considerably and often goes beyond a single person or situation. Business examples include: mergers and acquisitions, productivity and quality improvement, executive leadership transitions, turnarounds, and coping with explosive growth. Among the situations well-suited to this coaching role are these:

Openings for Agenda Coaching

1. To support better decisions when insight and perspective are needed on an executive's ideas;
2. To open up more options when creative suggestions could improve the chances for sound decisions;
3. To enhance change management by preparing an executive to implement specific change initiatives successfully; or
4. To guide an executive through unknown or unexplored areas or when the executive feels overwhelmed.

In such cases, I can act as a sounding board by offering feedback and suggestions to support or supplement a client's ideas. As the coach I am free to offer suggestions, but the coaching process ensures that executives address the issues and concerns that matter most to them.⁴

⁴Depending on the executive's agenda and the scope of the project, you may act in other capacities, such as facilitating strategic retreats or planning sessions, which are logical extensions of executive coaching.

To diagnose these coaching openings, I start with a client's felt needs and consider the same factors as above: clarity, consensus, commitment, and control. I listen for a close match between the executive's statement and one or more characteristic wordings from the coaching continuum. Because agenda coaching is typically the most open-ended coaching role, many ongoing conversations may be required to diagnose a client's need and design an appropriate intervention.

Contracting for Coaching

At the start of any coaching engagement, the coaching continuum is helpful for fostering informed choices and contracting for coaching services. Contracting is typically the first step in formal coaching. As in most relationships, the parties tend to make implicit, critical assumptions about the relationship, chiefly about its purpose, roles and responsibilities, coaching methods, the willingness of others, and so on. When these assumptions are not clarified, trouble can ensue.

Contracting for a formal coaching relationship is a way to make these assumptions explicit, and it provides three important functions:

1. Contracting establishes focus on one or more of the primary coaching roles and agreement on the desired results, as well as a common language for coaching and development activities.
2. Contracting addresses structure: the steps for realizing goals, the coaching methods employed, time frames, progress measures, and related matters.
3. Contracting models the action-learning process at the heart of coaching, including disclosure, inquiry, and commitment to one another's success.

Contracting is especially useful in determining *blended* coaching engagements—those that entail more than one coaching role. The following two cases will help to show how I determine the right mix of roles on the coaching continuum when contracting.

An executive had just received a negative performance review from her new boss, delivered as part of the organization's annual appraisal process. As her coach, I first served as a sounding board and we discussed how to "read" her new boss and interpret the results of this first review. (This work was coaching for the executive's agenda.) After the executive decided to develop better relations with the boss, she worked with me on how to repair strained working relations, starting with practice sessions to develop active listening and communication skills and to practice for her next meetings with the boss. (This was coaching for skills.)

A newly appointed leader had just received a promotion and significant added responsibilities. In this case, we started meeting frequently to help the executive address his urgent new agenda. During the first part of each four-hour coaching session, we worked on his choice of topics. Next, we focused on developing his charter for the new position: key roles, responsibilities, and relationships for a successful transition. (In this case, we agreed that both parts of these coaching sessions were for the executive's agenda.) Several months later, the focus shifted to coaching this same executive in implementing his development plan, based on 360° feedback about his effectiveness as an executive and the key success factors for his new position. (We called this coaching for development.)

In these engagements, the right mix of coaching roles was essential. And in both cases the blended coaching was successful, because key differences among coaching roles were clarified and contracted for early in each engagement.

To recap, actual coaching engagements (and sessions) can entail more than one coaching role, but I strive to maintain these distinctions (and role clarity), as it helps in the coaching process. To this end, I find the coaching continuum especially helpful when contracting (or re-contracting). This model is also helpful in situations in which executive coaching is relatively new to the client and/or organization being served and in which clear definitions and shared expectations are lacking.

A Final Word

For decades, top athletes, public speakers, and performing artists have turned to coaches to help them perform better. For these individuals already atop their fields, the next level of performance cannot be taught, but it can be learned. Now this approach has taken hold in organizations, in which top executives are turning to coaches to help them to reach their business and personal best. Coaching executives entails a highly personalized learning process to enhance both effective action and learning agility.

I offer these distinctions and the coaching continuum as a contribution to a common language about executive coaching and to foster informed choice and internal commitment by everyone involved. Beyond informed choice and improved coaching practice, I hope that these distinctions can foster a dialogue about the roles coaches play. I see a future in which coaching is widely available in organizations and in which coaching practice is formed by insights from an evolving practice theory for coaching executives.

Earlier I distinguished between the Coaching Continuum Model (the “what”) and a larger practice theory for executive coaching (the “why”). The coaching continuum can be seen as only one element of an evolving practice theory for executive coaching (Witherspoon and White, 1997).

My approach to coaching practice theory draws on a theory of action perspective developed by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön (1974). This conceptual framework, with its emphasis on valid information, free and informed choice, and internal commitment, provides a foundation for understanding and explaining human action in my work with executives. Short-term, I believe that a useful practice theory (Argyris, Putnam, and Smith, 1985; Argyris and Schön, 1974; Weisbord, 1987) should answer at least two questions for a professional coach: “What do I say and do in this situation?” and “What are the underlying principles that explain why I do and say this?” Long-term, I believe a coaching practice theory should seek to integrate a comprehensive theory and sound practice for executive coaching, such as Schwarz (1994) proposes for group facilitation.

Looking ahead, the challenge of integrating thought with action in executive coaching is exciting! Effective action requires the generation of

knowledge that crosses the traditional disciplines with as much competence and rigor as possible. From my perspective, a useful practice theory would serve two aims: to enhance the effectiveness of those who practice it and to improve their ability to learn about their own behavior. Thus, the purpose of useful practice theory reinforces the purpose of executive coaching itself.

In closing, I look forward to a productive dialogue around an evolving practice theory for executive coaching—focused on making the premises explicit, making the inferences from the premises explicit, and having the conclusions tested by logic independent of the logic used to create the conclusions in the first place. This is difficult work, but well worth the effort.

About the Contributor

Robert Witherspoon is a coach, speaker, and author on executive coaching and development. In 1990, he founded Performance & Leadership Development Ltd. (P&L) after successful careers in business and consulting. At P&L, he helps executives and their organizations to improve their business results by developing the performance and leadership of key people. P&L clients include senior executives, professionals, middle managers, and those with high potentials in Fortune 500, professional service, and public sector organizations.

Robert assists executives and their organizations, including CEOs, boards, and senior managers, in business, government, and institutions. His primary areas of expertise include coaching and developing executives; facilitating strategic retreats, problem-solving sessions, and team building meetings; and planning and executing organizational change.

His main interest is in helping executives to lead more effective organizations and live better lives. The success of his practice is built on three strengths: his business background and orientation, his organizational change expertise, and his years of experience in helping executives confront their most difficult challenges and realize their highest potential.

Robert is the lead author of *Four Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives*, a bestseller about executive coaching from the Center for Creative Leadership. A regular speaker and recognized authority on executive coaching and development, Robert has had work appear in professional publications by the American Society for Training and Development (*Training & Development*) and the American Psychological Association (*Consulting Psychology Journal*). As a leading practitioner, he has also been quoted in *Across the Board*, *Fast Company*, *Investors' Business Daily*, *The Human Resource Executive*, and elsewhere.

Prior to founding Performance & Leadership, based in Washington, D.C., Robert was a partner at Arthur Andersen & Co. He began his professional career in 1969 with the Institute of Public Administration of New York, then served the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in Paris. Subsequently, he was a founder and principal of a national consulting firm.

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