

# **Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart**

## **Increasing Your Effectiveness as an Executive Coach**

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### **Preface**

I did not set out to become an executive coach. I evolved into one. As an internal consultant in a corporation, my results orientation and desire to be associated with successes made me aware that leaders were often inattentive to critical endeavors.

In my early years doing organization development work, I was also fortunate to have upper management bosses and clients that were willing to show me the business ropes while remaining open to my expertise in project management and facilitation. Therefore, I worked with these key decision makers on issues and undertakings about which they cared deeply.

Fortunately for my development, I often found myself in the executive office sitting across from a leader and talking about key issues. However, sometimes I was sitting with a leader who was disappointed with a project's progress. I had two choices: door number one--take personally what he was saying, that I and the rest of the executive team had let him down; or door number two--begin to notice a pattern in his behavior of leading that inevitably got us all to this point.<sup>1</sup> For my first year as an internal consultant, I chose door number one. Chalk it up to inexperience and a false sense of omnipotence (it must always be my fault). After a year, if I gave myself enough perspective, I noticed door number two opening quite frequently.

### **Discovering a Passion for Coaching**

So there I was, across from a disgruntled leader. I began to invite him into conversations about his frustrations, asking him what he thought the external causes were and what he may be contributing--though unintentionally--to the slowdown. These discussions were brief at first. As I became more skillful, I incorporated them into regular conversations I had with leaders regarding their business goals (Chapter Nine explores this transition to executive coaching in depth).

Another developmental thread in my coaching practice came from my work as a trainer in management development. Let me say right off that the classes I offered in leadership training were good. They were engaging, they were experiential, they were practical. However, the managers basically tolerated the training. They felt pretty smug and satisfied with their level of management skill "back on the floor"--until they got stuck. Then they would come to my office for help when they faced pressing and immediate dilemmas about high turnover, troublesome employees, low productivity, or a failed change effort. Their motivation to explore options for action increased dramatically over their interest about the same issues in my classes. When the managers came to me, I was quite willing to help them navigate through dilemmas about tasks or team challenges that they found personally daunting.

I was midstream in my own coaching practice before I thought of myself as an executive coach. It developed naturally out of organizational projects when leaders came to me for

help. I was ten years into coaching when I began to articulate the coaching method that is in this book. Now, many years later, executive coaching is over half my work.

Coaching executives continues to be a passion for me because the work is challenging, inspiring, fun, and stimulating. I have been blessed with clients willing to look to themselves for the key ingredients necessary for significant change in their organizations. This kind of enterprise requires full engagement and risk taking on the part of both the leader and the coach.

### **What This Book Is About and Who It's For**

The essence of coaching is helping leaders get unstuck from their dilemmas and assisting them in transferring their learning into results for the organization. Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart addresses the complex pulls on the coach as she manages her own challenges in her work with executives.

The coaching field has gained broad interest from people in many disciplines. Some people come with a traditional business background and are coaching from one of the following organizational roles:

- internal organization development specialist
- external consultant
- human resources staff
- staff positions that require coaching skills; for example, project leads, engineers, information systems managers

Others are entering the field of executive coaching through different routes, such as counseling. Regardless of background, if you identify with one or more of the following statements, you will find this book useful:

- I have reached a plateau in my effectiveness as a coach and I need to find my way to the next level.
- I am not sure when one-on-one executive coaching should be expanded to working with the leader's team.
- My clients don't utilize me like they could.
- I have a "gut" feel for what works when I coach, but I don't know why it works. And sometimes it doesn't.
- The leader I am coaching resists my advice.
- How can I avoid becoming as anxious as my clients, so that I can continue to be useful to them?
- I want to increase my range of coaching within different venues: one-on-one, team, behind-the-scenes, live action.
- I want to improve the way I give tough feedback.

### **How This Book Is Different**

Many books are available on coaching that describe the skills involved in coaching individuals to achieve both higher competence and greater motivation in their work. The audience for these books is managers learning how to be better coaches to their employees. Two excellent examples are Hargrove (1995) and Bell (1996). Though the writers focus on managers, business coaches in general can benefit from learning the building-block skills to coaching detailed in the literature. However, Executive Coaching

with Backbone and Heart explores a different territory.

First, this book is written for those professionals who coach leaders of organizations. These executive coaches have the privilege of working with the men and women who lead and influence the direction of today's organizations. With this privilege comes a responsibility to partner with leaders in significant ways in order to contribute to successful change efforts. The work of executive coaches deserves its own literature in the field.

Second, unlike coaching methods that use techniques to leverage change in the client, Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart focuses on the need for coaches to use their own presence with the client. Executive coaching is not about imposing skill training onto leaders. Fundamentally, it is about learning to be with leaders as they navigate through their world, finding key moments when they are most open to learning.

Let me be clear about being, learning, and doing. I do not mean that business outcomes should be ignored. There must be business results tied to coaching executives, and coaches should be business partners with leaders (Chapter Five). That can include helping develop necessary skills. But the key difference in a change effort occurs when leaders face their own challenges in pulling off the business results and see how they get in their own way. In these pivotal moments, how a coach manages herself in the relationship to an executive facing those challenges can make the critical difference in the coaching outcome and therefore the business outcome.

Third, this book focuses on the larger systems forces at play that require the attention of the executive coach. By larger systems forces I mean an organization's "force field" that shapes and influences the individuals working within it. Individuals respond to this field with their own emotional responses, thus either helping or hindering their effectiveness. Executives act and react within this field, along with everyone else they lead. If coaches fail to see how the system affects their clients, coaches will not understand why their interventions are sometimes ineffective. When coaches use skills presented in the general coaching literature and do not incorporate a systems approach, their actions will have limited results.

A systems viewpoint allows coaches to see the executive's world in a new way. Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart explores a systems perspective and shows the implications and choices for the coach who attends to them.

Though coaches need a systems view to understand their client's system, they also need to know what effect their client's system has on them. This is the central premise and challenge of the book. Coaches must tune in to how the client's force field impacts them, so they can maintain their equilibrium within it and help the leader to do the same. When coaches hold this "bifocal" view--seeing their client in the system, and seeing themselves in the system--they can use the skill-building technologies in the coaching literature very effectively. In fact, the full power of these skills can finally be realized.

### **How This Book Is Organized**

This book navigates between two cliffs: a way of thinking about coaching, and a methodology of coaching. I imagine this book as a river that runs through the canyon created by these two cliffs, needing both for its shape and power.

Just when it may seem as though a philosophy about presence and systems will lose its

practical application, a method emerges to clarify the way. When the method becomes too rational for the topsy-turvy challenges of organizational life, a way of thinking about the use of the moment saves the method from trivialization. Perhaps the image is more like Alice through the looking glass when she finds herself in the wood of the vanishing path. When one is following a well-worn trail (the method), and that path disappears, one needs a way of attending to the forest (using one's presence in the moment) and orienting oneself within it.

Following is an overview and sequence of the content in the book.

### **Part One: Core Concepts--The Coach's Stance**

Chapter One defines executive coaching and explores three core principles that underlie the book: coach self-management, a systems perspective, and a methodology compatible with the first two principles. The chapter explains the use of backbone and heart as it relates to the principle of coach self-management.

Chapter Two addresses the need to develop a signature presence, a way of bringing forward your backbone and heart as a coach. I describe four conditions that promote a strong presence, benefiting both coach and executive.

Chapters Three and Four cover specific, systemic dynamics in how to read an executive's system and how to recognize the system created between the executive and coach. There are many systems variables to study. Chapters Three and Four focus on some of the central ones. As a coach, you will find that when you attend to these systemic ideas, you are more likely to get at the core of what can unblock a leader and an organization from the corrosive qualities of their own system.

### **Part Two: Methodology--The Four Phases of Coaching**

Chapters Five through Eight outline four essential phases to the coaching process: contracting, planning, live action intervening, and debriefing. These can help both beginning and experienced coaches provide a more in-depth service to their clients. The method, however, depends greatly upon bringing one's presence to coaching and using a systems lens. The combination of using systems thinking while bringing forward a signature presence creates a highly involving and effective process.

### **Part Three: Special Applications**

Chapter Nine is for consultants and trainers, internal or external, who facilitate processes and projects in organizations. This chapter explores the times when leaders do not seek coaching directly. Chapter Nine indicates the kinds of conversations it is necessary to have with leaders before they start to see the consultant or trainer as a potential coach.

Chapter Ten covers how a coach can help an executive who needs to coach employees. Executive coaches often work with leaders who struggle with being effective coaches themselves. This chapter explains how to assist executives in becoming more effective coaches.

### **How to Use This Book**

Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart can be viewed as a workbook for coaches. Key ideas are in boldface throughout the text so that you can quickly note the areas most

important to you. There are highlights of main ideas at the end of each chapter. You may look at the highlights first as an overview before diving into the chapter or scan them quickly for a review.

Appendix One contains the key skills of the coaching phases in a worksheet format. You can use it both to prepare for a coaching situation and as a self-assessment tool after a coaching session. Appendix Two covers key questions to ask clients during the various phases of the coaching method. Finally, Appendix Three explores the territory of combining coaching with consulting. It lists the competencies you need to have if you want to broaden your practice to include larger organizational consulting efforts.

There are stories from my coaching practice as well as typical vignettes placed throughout the book. They illustrate the coaching concepts and the method you can apply to the many challenging situations you may encounter when you coach leaders. I invite you to engage with the material in this book so that you can visit your past and future coaching experiences with new eyes.

1Throughout the book I alternate "he" and "she," using them interchangeably as pronouns for the coach, the executive, and the employee.