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In recent years coaching has become an increasingly popular intervention used in both personal and professional development spheres. This chapter draws on industry research from scholars as well as professional organizations to map the history, definitions, and trends of executive and organizational coaching to provide clarity on a complex and still-emerging discipline.

The Emerging Field of Executive and Organizational Coaching: An Overview

Rachel Ciporen

Introduction

Coaching is a word with many connotations and applications. There are sports coaches, voice coaches, life coaches, performance coaches, spiritual coaches, peer coaches, team coaches, group coaches, coaching as part of a managerial role, health and wellness coaches, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) coaches, leadership coaches, executive and organizational coaches as well as internal and external coaches. The propagation of the term has led both to increased interest in coaching as well as conceptual confusion regarding the boundaries of what coaching is and is not.

While modern coaching approaches became popularized in the 1980s and 1990s, the practice has a much longer lineage. Brock (2010, 2013) traces what we now label as coaching to the Socratic method of asking questions to promote self-discovery, ancient athletic coaches, Eastern philosophers, and 20th-century movements such as motivational speakers, humanistic and transpersonal psychology, group work, and organization and leadership development (Brock, 2010). This chapter focuses on one-on-one executive and organizational coaching both for conceptual clarity and because, as noted in the Academic Standards of the Graduate School Alliance for Education in Coaching (GSAEC, 2013), “executive and organizational coaching is one of the more mature sectors within the wider field of coaching practice” (p. 5).

While executive coaching is still an emerging practice, it has come a long way. According to an industry study prepared by Underhill et al. (2013) and compiled by CoachSource, the executive coaching industry is estimated to reap nearly $2 billion in annual revenue and many predict that coaching’s popularity will continue to grow (International Coach Federation, 2014; Maltbia,
Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014; Tompson, Vickers, London, & Morrison, 2008). Further, Gray, Ekinci, and Goregaokar (2011), as cited in Ellinger and Kim (2014), note that executive coaching “is becoming one of the fastest growing interventions in the professional development of managers” (p. 5) and is “becoming one of the most prominent activities that serve the learning and development aims of HRD [Human Resource Development]” (Cox, Bachkirova, & Clutterbuck, 2014, p. 139).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the state of executive and organizational coaching through an exploration and discussion of definitions of coaching, statistics on common triggers for executive and organizational coaching, the current state of credentialing and coach-specific research, the relationship between adult learning theory and coaching, and challenges to this still-emerging field of research and practice. This overview provides the groundwork for understanding the usefulness of coaching and also creates a case for the importance of education, credentialing, and research to ensure value added to organizations and leaders, through an informed coaching practice.

Definitions

Like other multifaceted concepts (such as leadership, learning, and transformation) there is no one definition of coaching. Ellinger and Kim (2014) cite Grant (2008) and Grant and Zackon’s (2004) findings based on their comprehensive review of the literature that coaching falls into three major categories: executive, workplace, and life coaching.

Table 1.1 represents some key thinkers’ working definitions of coaching, some of which have an explicit focus on executive coaching and some of which look at coaching more broadly.

These definitions illustrate consensus on the following underlying assumptions: Coaching is a partnership; coaching is a process that guides an individual through development. Some of the definitions include a discussion of personal growth while others focus more exclusively on professional growth and organizational goals. As both consumers and purveyors of coaching become more sophisticated, more niche markets are developing to address different needs and assumptions about the purpose of coaching. It is important that each individual coach can articulate his or her own definition of coaching to ensure it is in alignment with the needs and intentions of the individual or organization seeking coaching.

Why Executive Coaches Are Hired and Utilized

While the language used to describe the top reasons executive coaches are hired and utilized varies depending on the audience asked (coaches, human resources [HR] sponsors, leaders who have received coaching), there is broad consensus that the primary goal of executive coaching is leadership
Table 1.1. Definitions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author/Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Brock (2010)</td>
<td>“Coaching is a dynamic and contextual mutual-learning process that fosters self-awareness, attention to behaviors, personal growth, and conscious choice for the highest good” (p. 16).</td>
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<td>Greene and Grant (2003)</td>
<td>“Coaching is a collaborative, solution-focused, result-oriented and systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance, life experience, self-directed learning and personal growth of individuals from normal (i.e., nonclinical) populations” (p. xii).</td>
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<td>International Coach Federation (n.d.)</td>
<td>“ICF defines coaching as partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential, which is particularly important in today’s uncertain and complex environment. Coaches honor the client as the expert in his or her life and work and believe every client is creative, resourceful, and whole” (para. 1).</td>
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<td>Kilburg (2000)</td>
<td>“Coaching is a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement” (p. 67).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maltbia, Marsick, and Ghosh (2014)</td>
<td>“Executive and organizational coaching is a developmental process that builds a leader’s capabilities to achieve professional and organizational goals” (p. 165).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011)</td>
<td>“Coaching is a Socratic based future focused dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (coachee/client), where the facilitator uses open questions, active listening, summarizes and reflections which are aimed at stimulating the self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant” (p. 74).</td>
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development and performance. Kauffman and Coutu’s (2009) analysis of 140 surveys completed by executive coaches identified the following six topics as key triggers for coaching: (1) to develop capabilities of a high-potential manager, (2) to facilitate a transition (in or up), (3) to act as sounding board on organizational dynamics, (4) to act as sounding board on strategic matters, (5) to address a “derailing” behavior, and (6) to enhance interactions of a team. An International Coach Federation (ICF) 2013 survey of 24 organizational leaders found leadership development and performance coming in first, increased levels of employee engagement second, and reduced attrition third. In the 2014 ICF Global Consumer Awareness Study, leaders who had received coaching listed optimizing individual and team performance first, expanding professional opportunities second, and increasing self-esteem/self-confidence as third. The CoachSource study (Underhill et al., 2013) noted above, which included survey results from 600 individuals (a mix of internal and external
coaches, HR professionals, and leaders who have received coaching) similarly found leadership development to be the primary reason identified for executive coaching with executive presence surprisingly coming in as the second most frequently mentioned reason for coaching.

**How Many Coaches?**

It is difficult to assess the exact number of practicing coaches. In an American Management Association report, Tompson et al. (2008) note that

'[b]ecause the field is wide open to anyone who wants to enter, it is difficult to know the exact number of people performing coaching services. Today’s coaches come from a myriad of backgrounds and professions including law, teaching, human resources, and sports (Harris, 1999; Kilburg, 2000), and they don’t necessarily join coaching organizations. (p. 2)'

Ellinger and Kim (2014) cite a 2012 study from the ICF that suggests that there are approximately 47,500 business coaches worldwide. While awareness and utilization of executive coaches is growing in many parts of the world, a 2014 report by the ICF notes that two thirds of its membership comes from only four countries: United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and Australia, respectively. While coaching is often talked about as a global phenomenon, it is important to acknowledge that theory and practice development are heavily influenced by Western cultural assumptions and values. Readers interested in cross-cultural dynamics related to coaching might find Philippe Rosinski’s books *Coaching across Cultures* and *Global Coaching* valuable sources of information.

**Types of Coaching Engagements**

In addition to the more general lack of clarity emanating from the breadth of specializations within the larger field of coaching, the areas of difference and overlap between the role of an executive coach and other helping roles create confusion for individuals and organizations that are trying to assess when coaching will be the most appropriate intervention.

To gain additional insight into these distinctions, Maltbia et al. (2014), building on the work of Williams and Anderson (2006), provide a useful table outlining the distinctions between the role of an executive and organizational coach and five other helping roles (traditional therapist, consultant, mentor, teacher, and facilitator). They chart these distinctions along the dimensions of definition of work, focus, relationship, approach to emotions, and process. Important differences include: training and licensing requirements (most stringent for therapists); stance in the relationship (an executive coach seeks to partner and empower the client, who is then responsible for execution; a consultant offers expert guidance and designs the plan for execution); focus of
the work (a coach focuses on the present state; a traditional therapist often focuses on healing and gaining insights from the past; a mentor tends to focus on career development and succession). The authors add the modifier of traditional to therapist to make clear that they compare coaching to psychologically informed therapeutic approaches versus cognitive-behavioral and positive psychology-informed modes of therapy, as the latter forms of therapy share more in common with coaching approaches than the former. Cox et al. (2014) note another distinction between executive and organizational coaching and traditional therapy, which is coaching’s emphasis on the impact of context on behaviors and outcomes. For further exploration of the distinction between various forms of therapy and executive coaching, see Schuster’s (2014) article “Therapy, Depth Psychology, and Executive Coaching.”

Role distinctions exist even within the narrower field of executive coaching. One such distinction is between internal and external coaches. Frisch (2001) provides a descriptive definition of internal coaching as

a one-on-one development intervention supported by the organization and provided by a colleague of those coached who is trusted to shape and deliver a program yielding individual professional growth. . . . Internal coaches should be outside the usual chain of command of those they coach, to differentiate from the job coaching all effective managers do. (p. 242)

The CoachSource research study (Underhill et al., 2013) noted the following differences between internal and external coaches: Internal coaches tend to have less formal coaching experience, work with clients for shorter engagements, and utilize more shadowing and fewer formal assessments than their external coaching counterparts. According to the Executive Summary of a 2013 ICF Organizational Coaching Study, respondents identified “inherent knowledge and understanding of a company culture” as the biggest strength of internal coaches and “internal politics, the potential for bias, and confidentiality” (p. 7) as the biggest potential drawbacks.

For internal coaches, familiarity can fool a coach into thinking that he or she understands how the client (often a known colleague) sees the world and where the client wants to be. Actually taking time to formally contract with internal clients helps internal coaches leverage their existing knowledge while also ensuring that they are coaching to the client’s agenda (Ciporen, 2014).

External coaches experience the opposite problem and can often have a narrow focus on the goals of the specific engagement without taking time to understand the larger organizational context and where their coachee fits into that context. Taking time to build partnerships with HR sponsors can be an excellent aid in this process so that the coach is not limited to the client’s perspective when helping him or her view a situation.

In addition to the distinctions between executive coaching and other helping professions and internal and external coaches discussed above, Witherspoon and White (1996) articulate the roles an executive coach plays along a
continuum of four focal areas: (1) skill development (specific task), (2) performance coaching (more broad focus on person’s current role), (3) coaching for development (focused on a person’s future role), and (4) coaching for the executive’s agenda (as set by coachee and might be considered coaching for purpose). Awareness of these four focal areas, as well as other particularities related to internal versus external engagements, allows coaches to articulate a clear process and timeline for services. Skill development, for example, may have a shorter learning cycle than a more in-depth developmental goal that involves attitude and mind-set shifts. Thus, distinguishing the goals of a coaching engagement and where it fits along this continuum early on becomes an important element of contracting.

As coaching has increased in popularity, many coaches build their practices around specific topics and populations such as coaching on executive presence, team building, group coaching, coaching for emotional intelligence, coaching across cultures, coaching for performance, sales coaching, and coaching aimed at particular industries and professions (such as coaching skills for engineers, doctors, school principals). The breadth of coaching topics further complicates another important area of concern for the emerging field of coaching—what type of education and credentialing should be required for an individual to become a coach?

**State of Credentialing and Professional Associations**

As coaching has become more popular, a number of professional organizations and accrediting bodies have emerged. However, coaching remains a largely unregulated field. There is still a great deal of diversity in the amount of coach-specific training, business experience, and educational backgrounds of executive coaches. While there are strict licensing practices for other professions (for example, therapists, lawyers, teachers), at present there are no universal licensing requirements for coaches in the United States.

The Sherpa Coaching (2014) Executive Coaching Survey notes that while executive coaching’s perceived value and credibility has steadily increased since 2009, the lack of standard training, influential trade association, and licensing board leads to continued confusion about what coaching is and how it is defined. Maltbia et al. (2014) share similar concerns about the lack of uniformity in the field but note progress being made toward the creation of a more comprehensive and fair credentialing and professional development approach citing the work of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, the National Commission of Certifying Agencies, and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). The Sherpa Coaching (2014) study lists the top four executive coaching associations as the World Business and Executive Coach Summit, the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, the Association of Corporate and Executive Coaching Supervision, and the Association for Management Education and Development.
The State of Research

The preceding paragraphs discussed the state of coaching as a practice. This section looks at the state of coach-specific research. The Global Convention on Coaching Working Group’s 2008 white paper notes the critical importance of research for coaching’s future as a profession. As the report aptly notes, “In essence, a profession is defined by its shared body of knowledge, and that in turn is defined by its research” (p. iii). Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) trace back the first published study on what we now consider management coaching to a 1937 article by Gorby investigating coaching’s impact on manufacturing. Unfortunately, the research trail goes cold soon after. The 2008 Global Convention on Coaching Working Group report identifies many gaps in the state of existing research and warns that lack of reliable evidence on outcomes in coaching will hurt the reputation of the profession, especially as:

purchasers of coaching (particularly in organizations) have grown progressively more well-informed and sophisticated, are implementing more demanding coach assessment and interview processes for completing corporate coaching assignments, and are increasingly asked for the evidence basis underpinning the coaching services they are buying. (pp. 5–6)

Similarly, a comprehensive review of the literature conducted by Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) cite “concerns regarding the absence of a clear and widely accepted (a) definition, (b) standard of practice, and (c) agreement as to the appropriate service providers” (p. 223). Passmore and Fillery-Travis (2011) see coach-specific research as moving from “the exploration and definition phase . . . [to] the point where theory development and testing come to the fore” (p. 80). They hope to see future coaching studies conducted by global researchers, utilizing large sample populations, control groups, and random allocation of participants. Ellinger and Kim (2014) conclude that “although currently under-studied, academic research on coaching will continue to increase” (p. 8). While still an emerging discipline, coach-specific research seems to be moving in the right direction with several journals dedicated to encouraging theory development and disseminating empirical findings. Readers looking to track current trends in coaching research may find the following journals a good starting place: Consulting Psychology Journal: Research and Practice; Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research, and Practice; and the International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring.

Links to Adult Learning

As described in the prior section, coach-specific research is a growing field of study. Ellinger and Kim (2014) describe coaching’s theoretical roots as multidisciplinary, naming psychology, education, management, social science,
philosophy, adult learning, and development and communication as key inputs. Cox et al. (2014) nicely summarize:

Coaching is not a simple intervention and its complexity derives from the combination of diverse elements that are usually studied within a range of other applied disciplines. Therefore, it is natural that the growing field of knowledge specific to coaching draws on a multitude of interdisciplinary theories and knowledge sources. (p. 146)

A May 2014 issue of Advances in Developing Human Resources devoted to coaching and human resource development (HRD) is of particular interest for those looking to further explore the theoretical links between adult learning theory and coaching. In that issue, Cox and her colleagues (2014) assert that adult learning and development theory provides a necessary theoretical underpinning for the field and name andragogy, experiential learning, and transformative learning as particularly relevant theoretical bases from which to draw. Coaching practice is based on a constructivist epistemology and a focus on the value of learning from experience, as is true for several adult learning theories, such as andragogy and situated learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Multirater feedback, which is a frequent component of many executive-coaching engagements, has the potential to create a disorienting dilemma for leaders if they find that others see them differently from how they see themselves. This disorienting dilemma has the potential to lead to transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000) and a coach can be a welcome partner on what can otherwise be a lonely journey.

Coaching with its learner focus, attention to goal setting, and egalitarian stance is in many ways a natural support for other adult learning initiatives. As widely noted throughout the literature, a key challenge for organizational learning initiatives is ensuring learning transfer (Ciporen, 2010; Holton & Baldwin, 2003). Coaching provides a valuable link from a specific learning event back to the learner's professional and perhaps even personal life along with a structured approach to reflective practice. Knowledge of adult learning theories helps coaches to understand coaching as a learning process. At the end of a coaching engagement, a coach wants a client to be more independent, more able to reflect, and to be more intentional about his or her behavior and impact. Knowledge of learning theory supports these goals within coaching engagements.

Problematizing Executive Coaching

Coaching’s roots in positive and humanistic psychology can show up in the field’s optimistic and sometimes overly simplistic view of the learning and change process. Coaching approaches are vulnerable to the many critiques aimed at other adult learning approaches including insufficient attention to context, power and positionality, overemphasis on individual learning, and
invasion of the *lifeworld* (Welton, 1995). Schein (2002) writes convincingly about the coercive elements of coaching and other organizational learning initiatives and draws attention to the boundary invasions connected to asking leaders to share personal values and reflections with an executive coach with an aim toward organizational goal attainment through the means of leadership development.

Another concern within the broader field of coaching is the lack of psychological training required to be a coach. The 2008 white paper quotes Grant and Cavanagh (2007):

> It is important to remember that the majority of coaches per se do not have any training in psychological science and, if they do have training in coaching, they tend to be trained in atheoretical, proprietary models of coaching. In contrast, coaching psychologists are formally trained in psychology and draw upon this knowledge base as a primary foundation for practice. (Global Convention on Coaching Working Group, 2008, p. 4)

Berglas (2002) similarly highlights the risks involved with having coaches without psychological training. His article “The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching” tells the story of a leader who was provided executive coaching for four years before being diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder. This misuse of coaching caused a great deal of unnecessary pain and suffering for his colleagues and direct reports as well as wasted a great deal of money. Kaufman and Coutu (2009) summarize: “The industry is fraught with conflicts of interest, blurry lines between what is the province of coaches and what should be left to mental health professionals, and sketchy mechanisms for monitoring the effectiveness of a coaching engagement” (p. 27).

Given these concerns, it is important for individual coaches to work from a strong code of ethics, which includes seeking supervision from more experienced and/or psychologically trained coaches when appropriate. Given the potential risks, coaches should be transparent about the way that they will manage potential tensions between individual leaders’ agendas and the agendas of organizations, in order to support equity and trust.

**Conclusion**

Executive coaching continues to garner attention as both a practice and research area. Coaching’s multidisciplinary roots, range of applications and background of practitioners, and lack of agreed upon theoretical frameworks or enforceable credentia ling process create enormous complexity for this increasingly popular field. As the field matures, important questions related to measurement, implications for learning and change from neuroscience, and key competencies needed to successfully perform the coaching role continue to be investigated. While clearly still a developing field, coaching holds a great deal of promise as an organizational and leadership development intervention.
Today’s leaders operate in complex and competitive environments where they are responsible for not only demonstrating quick results but also leading and developing teams and showing an ability to grow talent and work effectively across cultures. Under these multiple pressures, leaders often find themselves, in the words of Robert Kegan (1998), “in over their heads.” Coaches, by providing one-on-one and group-level support, can be an invaluable aid in supporting executives’ growth and development, which, in turn, can help support more ethical, profitable, and humane organizations.

References


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