



## **The Use and Abuse of Executive Coaching**

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Executive coaching has moved beyond acceptance, to a point of prominence in contemporary management and leadership practice. Coaching is one of, if not *the*, preferred workplace intervention for a host of issues that relate to management, remedial intervention, leadership development, and role consultation to chief executives. Though not entirely driven by the theoretical foundation offered in the emotional intelligence movement, it is these ideas that are often paired with coaching as a means of understanding and influencing behavior in the workplace. Much about this development is to be lauded.

However, with the explosion in the executive coaching industry a serious organizational dilemma has evolved. Coaching is being misapplied in cases where an inappropriate diagnosis of the presenting problem, usually targeting a difficult or underperforming executive, results in a much larger problem persisting. As organizational consultants, we have increasingly responded to requests, sometimes with a decided pressure, to coach a senior executive who has begun to display difficult if not destructive behavior. The pressure that is referred to often comes from the chief executive who has decided rather emphatically that the individual behavior of his report is the nexus of his team or organization's problems. As an example, consider the following.

Allen, the CEO of his family's mid-sized, technology and consulting company (AlterNet), has ended an executive committee meeting during which his head of sales dominated the discussion with concerns ranging from the size of his office, his title, his potential payout should the company ever be bought and an embarrassingly open plea for explicit recognition of his recent sales contributions. Over the past month this report, Mike, has erupted with undeniably disruptive behavior. The team is growing sullen and meetings are far less productive than anyone wants. Trust in the overall ability of the sales force is eroding and there is the consequent unease that this will jeopardize growth at a time when the company can ill afford to lose momentum. Allan knows that he must act. His most base reaction is to want to fire Mike, which, to his credit, he ignores. But the question of how and where to act, is not nearly as obvious as one might think. Mike is certainly causing a serious management dilemma for Allen and a leadership issue for his company, but it may be that disciplining Mike will result in even greater problems. With the best of intentions and fortified by the a belief he is promoting the development of rather than dismissing an important officer in his company, one can imagine that Allen's next action would be have a trusted professional coach brought in to meet with Mike.



That would be an unfortunate choice.

The assumption behind Allen bringing in an executive coach skilled at working with a senior leader, is that Mike is the independent variable promoting the disturbance on Allen's otherwise cohesive senior team. Like Allen, one might easily assume that Mike's irrational and embarrassingly emotional reactions are due to some acute or more chronic personal disturbance in Mike that is now manifesting in the workplace. In such a case, this assumption would rightly lead to an attempt to change this behavior by offering the services of a coach. But what if Mike's is not the independent but rather the dependent variable in this equation? What if Mike's behavior is not the result of any internal conflict, struggle or character issue that is influencing the senior management team, but the other way around? What if Mike is the dependent variable reacting to a problem that is throwing off the entire team? Or, perhaps, the entire organization. Put another way, if Mike's behavior is the symptom rather than the disease, then Allen's decision to hire a coach for his report will have the same effect as when a symptom is treated but the disease is allowed to proliferate.

Jumping to the first reasonable solution may offer Allen a sense of relief, but he may eventually suffer from a far worse scenario. To avoid this, Allen needs to take the time to make a proper diagnosis. This can be hard to do for many reasons, but one of them is that we are currently working in a business environment where executive coaching is being massively promoted with little critique. The result being that when a well informed, intelligent business leader seeks assistance with the sort of challenge posed by a report like Mike, it is difficult to not be heavily influenced by the promotion of coaching.

Fortunately there are choices. One alternative is to consider another set of ideas that does not focus so exclusively on individual psychology and behavior. Systems theory has existed in different forms for centuries, but as a means of considering organizational phenomenon, this theory has gained a greater currency over the past few decades. By its nature, systems theory tends to defy easy digestion in favor of complex analysis of associations, networks and influences. As a set of ideas, it explores the expansion of meanings, e.g. "what else could be going on here?" over the sort of reductionism that has befallen many coaching models. The fundamental ideas behind systems theory are more approachable than many people imagine.

In simple terms, systems theory is a theory that informs most biological and social theory and posits that various systems (individual, organization, society) are open and as such influence one another. The value of this sort of thinking for determining what action to take with a difficult employee is that it opens the possibility that the phenomenon being observed in any system may have significant influences coming from another system. If the system of the individual, in this case Mike, seems to be the source of the problem, then hiring a coach seems a worthy investment. But if it turns out that Mike is only



resonating a dynamic alive in a broader system (Mike as the dependent variable), then there is reason to believe that coaching will only distract all involved from the relevant problem.

As compelling as it may be to isolate the person who threatens to distract others from the organization's agenda, the chief executive considering this problem will be rewarded if he relies on practices that lift him from the fog of his own irritation. He must ignore those experts who offer their solutions for the "difficult employee" and instead take the time to shift his focus to what is going on beneath the surface of this irrational behavior. Indeed, it is this ability to momentarily suspend the desire to act in favor of taking the time for diagnosis that will offer the greatest return. To ask, "why this behavior now?" When the diagnosis is arrived at and fits the situation at hand, quite often the first signal is that the frustration with a difficult executive dissolves as the CEO spots the opportunity to get ahead of an incipient problem emerging in his corporation. Grief becomes "Aha!"

### **Executive Coaching: the need for caution**

Let us be explicit in our praise for executive coaching before seeming to bury the practice by this critique. Given the greater complexity of roles, management structures, the pace of change, and the need for leaders to have insight about their own character, coaching as a role consultation to senior executives, is invaluable. As a developmental opportunity for less senior executives, coaching can be very powerful. The intensity of work schedules, the challenges of diversifying organizations, the complexity of leading and managing across a global business landscape are all factors that challenge not only companies, but the individual psyches of those who work within them. Coaching offers one of the only venues where executives can work in an environment where they can admit to and safely explore what they do not know, what unsettles them and prejudices that may inhibit their effectiveness.

On the other hand, coaching as it exists today is a completely unregulated industry with not barrier to entry and few, if any, agreed upon principals to practice. Worth well over \$1 billion world-wide and expected to double within two years, the executive coaching industry is booming. In and of itself, this is not necessarily bad news. For the reasons given, the growth of coaching in the workplace is to be generally lauded, but a healthy percentage of the growth in the coaching industry is due to a misapplication of the intervention. Too often, models are sold and executed based on formulas that benefit the outside coaching consultants, but without an appropriate sensitivity to the cultures, industries, personalities and systems that impact every coaching case. The failure to make a suitable diagnosis of a problem is only one of the more serious issues. This concern is that the promise of coaching will ultimately be betrayed not by a failure of its potential, but rather by its misapplication.



## **An Alternative Intervention**

Because there can be a number of different factors impacting the person who is working from within the system and who must decide on the appropriate point and method of intervening the systems approach may seem intimidating in its complexity. By nature, systemic analysis calls upon the problem solver to think in terms of associations and complex networks, but the complexity in and of it self should not inhibit him from taking the time to explore the less obvious meanings behind what is observed. When practiced with a few fundamental guidelines, it can be surprising how easily the connections can fall into full relief before one's eyes.

1.) **For a moment, Be In It, But Not Of It:** The diagnostician must assess what is going on beneath the surface. Because he is also part of the system, he too is subjected to its effects. His place in the system provides him a privileged perspective on what is going on around him, but he must maintain enough distance to analyze what is going on. The diagnostician will need to be able to process two streams of information:

- **First Stream:** A more objective view of what is going on and why it is happening now and;
- **Second Stream:** A subjective analysis that takes advantage of the diagnostician's role in the system and how the events are making him feel. The diagnostician's way of behaving, and the feelings that are evoked in him are all important pieces of information, and are barometers of the working climate.

In Allen's situation, he originally called at a time when he was feeling angry, frustrated and, if he was honest with himself, quite worried about the potential state of his business. For the sake of illustration, it helps to imagine a caricature of Allen analyzing the state of the situation. Envision him taking a moment in his office after a difficult meeting and thinking, "Curious, Mike is making me feel angry, frustrated and frightened all at once. The intensity of these feelings is even compromising my ability to think rationally very well or for very long. I wonder if this is in any way the way that he is feeling or that others in the organization are feeling at the moment?"

Once the second stream of information has been processed and seems to suggest that there may be more going on here than meets the eye, Allen could have looked around and listened to see if there were other signs that more was at work than just Mike being difficult. In this case he might have noticed that there were several incidences of people taking up time with his head of HR by making unusual complaints about comparative office size and equipment upgrades. (People confused about their value and position in the organization. Not getting enough from the top of the company). Fights about titles (crude attempts to distinguish authority and value). These clues would, at the very least, suggest that Mike was not the only one disrupting the work of the senior team. Allen may



have begun to suspect that the issue had less to do with a difficult employee and more to do with organizational conflict or confusion.

2.) **Ask “Why Now?”:** In any given moment, to the person who is immersed in this situation these events may seem to be fluid, dissociated from one another and absolute; as though they were inevitable. It is only when the effort is made to step out of the stream of time that one can consider how the cluster of events that he is seeing may be related to one another by things other than their proximity to one another.

By taking the time to stand back and consider the issues percolating within his team at the time that he called for outside assistance, Allen may have had a clearer idea that there were more unsettled issues than he was aware of. Mike, as it turned out, was only offering the most obvious display of the team’s discomfort. From the perspective of the CEO as organizational diagnostician, Mike’s inability to contain his discomfort with the changes at AlterNet and the timing of his outbursts turned out to be an advantage. His behavior caught Allan’s attention and, when read appropriately, offered him a window onto the unresolved issues that were impacting AlterNet’s business.

3.) **Act and Watch:** The gestalt psychologist Kurt Lewin theorized that systems can be read, in part, by the way those components react when action, a disturbance, is taken in a distant part of the system. As a simple example; a stone is thrown into a quiet pond, ripples race across the open water and a mayfly on the other side takes flight as soon as it feels the ripple. At the same time, another mayfly is resting on the water but on the other side of a boat. Because the boat is between the second mayfly and the point at which the pebble entered the pond, the boat absorbs the ripples on the surface and the second mayfly feels nothing. The pond is a system in which an action on one side (the pebble breaking the surface) affects an entity on the other side (the first mayfly). Meanwhile another entity (the second mayfly) is unaffected by the ripples. The boat serves as a sufficient boundary for the system such that the action of the stone has no effect on the second mayfly. In just this way, the leader of an organization gains information about a system by taking action and seeing who is and is not affected by the action. The negative example of this is seen frequently within organizations in the form of siloing between workgroups. Where one would hope that communication and collaboration (actions) would travel across workgroups (systems), one find barriers that block the action from carrying across. The leader of the organization does not understand that the barriers have gone up until he sees that actions that should flow across systems are actually stifled.

In the case of AlterNet, Allen agreed on the action of holding a strategy planning session with his senior team. The intent was to clarify the vision of the company and define roles and responsibilities. The hypothesis being that settling on these definitions would in large part ameliorate Mike’s bad behavior. If this hypothesis was wrong, then the strategy session may have resolved some of the other symptoms that were popping up on the team, but Mike would have raged on. Allen acted and watched. Sure enough, Mike



came out of the strategy session energized and the disruptive behaviors began to diminish. The system had shown itself.

## **Conclusion**

The fact that executive coaching and emotional intelligence have gained credibility within the American business culture is encouraging. As the global economy continues to accelerate change and companies must respond, it is to everyone's advantage to promote leaders who benefit from greater personal insight and a greater fluency in the vernacular of emotional life. In some cases, this greater sophistication about the dynamics of human behavior will reasonably lead a chief executive to recognize the need for bringing in a coach to offer confidential one on one development. But in other cases, this same sophistication must inform an organizational leader at times when he needs to see that an individual's behavior is a variable that is not at all independent, but rather highly dependent on dynamics that are alive within the system of his organization.

As for the executive coaching industry, there is reason to be concerned that if greater care is not applied to distinguishing when and where coaching is relevant, a backlash born out of a feeling of unfulfilled promise may eventually undermine the considerable benefits that this form of consultation offers.

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