

The Coaching Profession: Some of the Key Challenges

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the key challenges facing the growing profession of Coaching. These include: ensuring that coaching is meeting the needs of both the coachee and the organisation, and also that there is demonstrable return on investment. To meet these needs it is necessary to ensure quality of practice through such means as supervision and review, establishing an appropriate profession, and moving beyond an individual focus to also focus on the wider systemic context. The paper is written from a personal perspective, from someone who has been involved in coaching, supervising coaches, advising companies on their coaching strategy and carrying out research in the field of Coaching Supervision. The primary focus is on coaching in the British context, but the author does also include reference to experience in other countries.

Key Words: Coaching, Coaching Supervision, Quality, Team Coaching, Coaching Culture and Professionalisation.

Introduction

Over the last twenty five years it has been a privilege to be part of and witness to the extraordinary growth in executive coaching. In this paper I have drawn upon personal direct experience as an executive coach, a supervisor of coaches, and a trainer of coaching supervisors across many different sectors and countries. Also I have drawn on work with the organisational buyers of coaching, working with them to develop their coaching strategy and to find ways to get the best value from their internal coaching community and their external panel of coaches. The third perspective in this paper is drawn from the growing research and publications in the field. In this paper I will draw on these multiple perspectives to consider the current key trends and main challenges facing the coaching profession at this interesting point in its own development. These challenges include:

- **Creating Value**
 - There is a growing requirement to demonstrate return on investment if the rapid growth in executive coaching is to be sustained.
 - The need to ensure we are serving the needs of the organisations that employ executive coaches as well as the individuals being coached.
- **Ensuring Quality:**
 - The need to ensure the quality of coaching practice through agreed professional standards and effective supervision.
 - The need for organisations actively to evolve better ways of organising and enabling their coaching services, and develop their coaching culture.
- **Establishing an Appropriate Profession:**
 - Coaching needs to further develop its own theoretical and research thinking that builds on, but is distinct from, the research in psychology, psychotherapy and counselling.
 - How to ensure effective professionalisation of coaching while avoiding the downsides of professionalism.
- **Moving Beyond the Individual focus in coaching and supervision:**
 - There is a growing focus on facilitating collective leadership, where leadership is seen to reside in relationships between people and groups. I explore how this needs to impact on coaching and how it requires more experienced team coaches and organisational coaches.

Creating Value and Ensuring Return on Investment

Over the last twenty years coaching has had a meteoric rise in popularity. In the UK in 2006 a survey of H.R. Directors, showed how 80% of respondents worked in organisations that were investing in one or more forms of coaching (CIPD. 2006). It appears that this has been driven by the growing recognition that learning and development are more effective when based on real-time challenges at work and involve the whole person, rather than sub-sets of skills. Another driver has been the need to develop leaders and managers who are far more skilled in relationships and engagement than has ever been necessary in the past. Hooper and Potter (1997) write:

The key issue facing future leaders is “unlocking the enormous human potential by winning people’s emotional support... our leaders of the future will have to be more competent, more articulate, more creative, more inspirational and more credible if they are going to win the hearts and minds of their followers”. (p.?)

Many professional services firms realise that it is becoming less and less possible to differentiate their services from the competition purely on product quality and that they need to differentiate through how they relate to their clients. This is requiring their partners and senior managers to have much higher relationship skills and Emotional Intelligence(EQ) than was previously necessary. Leaders across all sectors are finding that their employees have increasing expectations of them being more motivational and inspirational. This becomes even more critical in those sectors where there is a 'war for talent'.

Coaching provides leaders with a development process for focusing on growing the emotional and relational aspects of their leadership capacity, by addressing specific relationship challenges and how the leader might handle them differently.

According to the 2004 CIPD survey of HR professionals, the main driver of the investment in coaching in their organisations was to "Improve individual performance" (78% of survey responders). However, we are increasingly finding that organisational executives are asking for evidence that the coaching investment, is not only serving the development of the individual and improving their performance, but has an identifiable benefit to the organisation. More companies are looking for evidence that the coaching leads to organisational improvement and this requires the executive coaches to be skilled in focusing in parallel on serving the needs of the individual and the organisation.

The potential tension between individual and organisational outcomes provides a major challenge for the coaching profession. Many coaches are trained and focused on individual development and provide a non-directive, confidential, client-centered approach, where the client is seen as the individual coachee. At times this can mean that what is called executive coaching becomes in truth, more similar to counselling at work and at worst this can degenerate into the coach colluding with their coachee, particularly if the coachee is in conflict with their organisation. Sometimes a 'drama triangle' can emerge with the coachee being identified as victim, the organisation as persecutor and the coach as rescuer.

Organisations rightly demand that executive coaches need to be trained and always focussed on the dual clients of individual and organisation, even though only one may be directly in the room at the time. In my role as advisor to companies on their coaching strategy I have asked senior executives, HR professionals and those managing coaching services: "How do you harvest the learning from the thousands of coaching conversations that happen in your organisation?" To date none have been able to provide a convincing answer, but nearly all immediately recognise the need to address this question.

In response to this need we have developed a number of interventions for helping organisations: increase the focus on the organisational client; harvest the organisational learning (while at the same time preserving confidentiality); and increase the return on investment in coaching services. These are based on both our work with organisations and the research that we carried out for CIPD (Hawkins and Schwenk, 2006) and our own research for the book on Coaching Supervision (Hawkins and Smith, 2006).

These interventions include:

- Creating a strategic plan for the organisation to develop an integrated coaching culture that combines internal and external coaching provision with coaching approaches being built into all aspects of leading and managing within the organisation (Hawkins and Smith, 2006, chapter 6).
- Regular joint meetings between the external and internal groups of coaches, which can be facilitated to map some of the emerging systemic and cultural patterns of the organisation and help to feed these back to the senior executives. These sessions also give the opportunity for the coaches to be briefed on the latest strategic challenges and other initiatives of the organisation.

- The provision of individual and group supervision by those specifically trained in the supervision of executive coaching which is particularly focussed on the individual needs of the coachee and the organisational needs of the client organisation.
- Focusing coaching spend on key areas where it can make an organisational difference. For example, in one large professional services firm the coaching resources are being targeted on ensuring that newly promoted and direct entry partners have skilled transition coaching to accelerate an efficient move to full effectiveness. Another area of focus is on teams in high growth areas.

Alongside these interventions there is a need to develop criteria and methods for evaluating return on the investment of coaching and ensuring that coaching is not just a 'nice to have' for certain key executives, but an essential part of the organisation's strategic development.

Ensuring Quality

In the United States, Sherman and Freas (2004) wrote an article in the Harvard Business Review, titled "The Wild West of Executive Coaching". They describe that with the fast expansion of this new territory there was a wide range of weird and wonderful practices at the frontier. In the UK we have seen much more attention to ensuring greater clarity, professional standards and agreement on good practice in the last five years. A great deal of this has come from the professional bodies. Some good practice has come from the employers themselves instituting greater selection processes in their recruitment of executive coaches. This move towards standards has provided a foundation for research and writing on best practice (Passmore 2005; Clutterbuck, and Megginson 2005; Hawkins and Smith 2007; Shaw and Linnecar 2007).

A number of the professional bodies have played key roles in commissioning research on best practice and developing professional standards. Good examples of this include the research work by Jessica Jarvis and colleagues on the buyers' perspective on coaching (CIPD, 2004), then the work on best practice in supervision of both internal and external coaching supervision by Gil Schwenk and myself (CIPD, 2006), and most recently the research on how to organise coaching services by Ashridge Centre for Coaching (CIPD, 2007).

Jessica Jarvis' work highlighted three areas the buyers of coaching services wanted improving:

- greater clarity in defining coaching and its main components
- better quality control of the coaching provided to organisations
- less fragmentation in the profession with the major bodies working together to define standards and accredit coaches and trainings

Defining terms

When we start to look at what people mean when they use the term 'coaching', it becomes immediately obvious that there is no single agreed definition. For such a new profession, coaching has produced a plethora of definitions. In Table 1 I give a sample of some of the definitions used in current training courses and literature.

Table 1.

| Definitions of coaching | Author |
|---|----------------------------------|
| A process that enables learning and development to occur and thus performance to improve | Parsloe (1999) |
| Unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance | Whitmore (1996) |
| The overall purpose of coach-mentoring is to provide help and support for people in an increasingly competitive and pressurised world in order to help them: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop their skills • Improve their performance • Maximise their potential • And to become the person they want to be | CIPD coaching courses definition |
| Primarily a short-term intervention aimed at performance improvement or developing a particular competence | Clutterbuck (2003) |
| A conversation, or series of conversations, one person has with another | Starr (2003) |
| The art of facilitating the performance, learning and development of another | Downey (1999) |
| Defines the verb 'coach' – 'tutor, train, give hints to, prime with facts' | Concise Oxford Dictionary |
| A coach is a collaborative partner who works with the learner to help them achieve goals, solve problems, learn and develop | Caplan (2003) |
| Meant to be a practical, goal-focused form of personal, one-on-one learning for busy executives and may be used to improve performance or executive behaviour, enhance a career or prevent derailment, and work through organisational issues or change initiatives. Essentially, coaches provide executives with feedback they would normally never get about personal, performance, career and organisational issues | Hall et al (1999) |
| Coaching is the focused application of skills that deliver performance improvement to the executive's work in his or her <i>organisation</i> , through robust support and challenge. The coaching process should yield learning and personal development for the executive, and help them to contribute more of their potential. This collaborative relationship will be short-term and practically focused, and will be marked by clear, strong feedback | Hawkins and Smith 2006 |

Even our own integrative definition begs a number of questions. What skills are we talking about? What will robust support and challenge look like and how will it create change for the individual? What does 'short-term' actually mean in the context of a particular client? These are the questions that the professional bodies are busy addressing, in agreeing standards for accreditation of courses and individual coaches. It is important for the health of the profession that we are developing definitions and standards that are understandable to the clients and the client organisations and have some international consistency.

Supervision for ensuring quality

There has been a great deal of debate over the last few years on the place of supervision in coaching. In 2006 in the UK our research had responses from 120 organisations and 530 individual coaches. The results of this survey showed that 88% of organisers of coaching and 86% of coaches believed that coaches should have regular ongoing supervision of their coaching.

However, only 44% of coaches who responded were currently receiving regular ongoing supervision and only 23% of organisations provide regular ongoing coaching supervision. Even among the minority of coaches who were receiving supervision, 58% had only started receiving supervision within the last two years. Repeatedly the survey and the subsequent focus groups and organisational best practice studies, showed a high advocacy for the importance of supervision, but practice lagging some way behind (Hawkins and Schwenk, 2006). Our experience is that in most other countries coaching supervision is even less established.

The reasons for the gap between advocacy and practice include the shortage of trained skilled supervisors (the first full training course in supervision in the UK started in December 2003). Other factors include cost and lack of clarity of requirement for supervision from the professional bodies and employers.

There is now a marked growth in both the requirement of coaching supervision by organisational buyers and in the number of coaches partaking. In best practice studies of organisations (in Hawkins and Schwenk, 2006) some of the notable quotes from organisational heads of coaching included:

- “To open one’s work to scrutiny is important best practice in any helping activity. If you are going to invest in coaches in the workplace, this is an essential part of it – it is not an optional exercise.”

Barbara Picheta, Head of Coaching PricewaterhouseCoopers UK

- “I would expect coaches to have supervision as part of their continuous professional development and I would not employ a coach who did not have supervision.”

Shaun Lincoln, Centre for Excellence in Leadership

In the last two years in the UK the number of training courses in coaching supervision has also grown rapidly as have the number of conference workshops on this subject.

Coaching Supervision can be defined as:

- *“The process by which a Coach with the help of a Supervisor, can attend to understanding better both the Client system and themselves as part of the Client – Coach system, and by so doing transform their work and develop their craft.”* (Hawkins and Smith, 2006).
- *“Supervision sessions are a place for the coach to reflect on the work they are undertaking, with another more experienced coach. It has the dual purpose of supporting the continued learning and development of the coach, as well as giving a degree of protection to the person being coached.”* (Peter Bluckert).
- *“Coaching Supervision is a formal process of professional support, which ensures continuing development of the coach and effectiveness of his/her coaching practice through interactive reflection, interpretative evaluation and the sharing of expertise.”* (Bachkirova, Stevens & Willis 2005).

Although there is still contention about whether supervision is an essential requirement for all coaches, there is a general acceptance that regular review of one's work by another professional is not only a key aspect of professional quality assurance, but also a key aspect of continuing professional and personal development.

Establishing an appropriate profession

Coaching is a profession which is still in its infancy, even though aspects of its craft have ancient precedents. Buyers of coaching have frequently commented on how the confusion in terminology and definitions mentioned above is further exacerbated by the current professional fragmentation that includes:

- a number of competing professional bodies with different standards and approaches
- a proliferation of terms and their usage
- a wide variety of routes to becoming an accredited professional
- a wide variety of training programmes from very short courses to Doctorate level qualifications

The main professional bodies in the UK include Association for Coaching, Association for Professional Executive Coaching and supervision, British Psychological Society, Chartered Institute for People Development, European Mentoring and Coaching Council, International Federation for Coaching. Each holds a different place and emphasis in the spectrum of the emerging profession. More recently we have seen important dialogues happening between the bodies to align definitions and standards and provide more coherence to the collective market place.

The profession of coaching can be seen as being at a significant transition in its journey to maturity. The first phase of this journey was characterised by a great deal of separate pioneering groupings, some taking sports coaching approaches into business, some applying approaches from counselling and psychotherapy, others from organisational psychology. The second phase saw rapid growth and the emergence of specific models and trainings in coaching. Coaching has now become mature enough to have had high levels of market penetration in North America and parts of Western Europe and now it faces the social and economic challenges of being a third generation profession.

There is a recognisable socio-economic trend that when a profession nears the point that supply of professionals may become greater than the demand for their services, that the current leaders in the profession will raise the barriers to entry to protect the interests of those already in the profession. The danger is that this limits the range, diversity and innovation of the next generation that need to be taking the profession forward.

Other dangers in professionalisation can include: accreditation standards becoming over formulaic, the profession becoming over-focussed on serving its own member interests more than those of its customers, and the profession becoming institutionalised and therefore not learning and adapting fast enough.

Accreditation processes are always most valuable when they have both a high degree of person to person dialogue and have a 360 degree appraisal that starts with self appraisal and includes clients, peers, supervisors and tutors. This process is very labour intensive, and, as greater numbers need accrediting, it is all too tempting to move to electronic, tick box assessment processes, that end up measuring quantity of training and practice hours, not relationally assessing quality of practice.

A quick survey of some of the most established professions will soon reveal how easily professions can become more interested in serving the self-interest of their current members than holding in balance the needs of the present and future, the needs of the practicing professionals and the wide group of stakeholders they are there to serve.

As a preventative measure supervision, for example, can provide a key process to help a living profession or organisation breathe and learn. For too long many professions have reduced the concept of supervision to a cultural socialisation process where the elders of the professional community shape the practice, behaviours, understanding, perceptions, feelings and motivations of the apprentices and noviciates. The learning is reduced to conforming to the pre-formed professional norms and precepts – the culture’s written and unwritten rules. While recognising that both quality control and inducting new comers into the professional collective wisdom are important aspects of supervision, if supervision is reduced to just these two aspects, as is often the case, we are in danger of creating a self-reinforcing profession which ceases to learn and develop. Eventually the profession becomes ossified operating more and more within well-worn grooves of practice.

If we are to create learning professions that constantly renew their cultures, then supervision needs to become the “learning lungs” that assist the professional body in its learning, development and cultural evolution. Supervision needs to be a place of co-creative and generative thinking where new learning is being forged for the clients, coach, supervisor and for the profession. (There is a fuller discussion of this in Hawkins and Shoheit, 2000 and 2006).

Moving beyond the individual focus to team coaching

In many organisations where there has been an uptake in individual coaching of senior executives, we are discovering that the effectiveness of the senior teams can still be less than the sum of the parts. We need to help senior executive teams realise that to develop their potential through individual coaching can be useful, but will always remain limited. For the team to develop further, attention needs to be switched to the collective leadership and to coaching the team as a whole.

I believe one of the key trends we will see in the next few years will be the growth in team coaching. Recent books (Clutterbuck, 2006; Hawkins and Smith, 2006) have begun to offer different approaches for a form of team coaching that attends not only to how the team functions when it is meeting together but also how it can be supported in improving its key relationships with its stakeholders.

It is clear that team coaching requires different capacities and skills-sets from those normally found in the individual coach. The team coach needs to have in addition to the awareness of individual psychology and development, a deep understanding of team dynamics and a systemic organisational understanding. There is a need for training that combines the development of the depth of relating found in the best executive coaches with the breadth of systemic understanding found in the best organisational development practitioners and organisational behavioural academics.

At the same time, the danger is that team coaching is reduced to attending to the internal personal and interpersonal dynamics of the team, which although important are not sufficient to make a real and sustained difference to the collective leadership provided by the whole team. An effective team coach needs to focus not only how the team engages with each other when they meet together, but how effectively they provide aligned leadership of the whole enterprise when engaging with their key stakeholders, including their customers, partners, investors and their employees.

An example of this shift in focus can be seen in the British Civil Service where there is growing change in emphasis from individual to Board and team coaching. This has often been precipitated by departmental capability reviews, the majority of which have highlighted the need for better collective leadership of the department and more joined up government. Such needs can not be met by providing different individual coaches for all the key executives, nor by providing one-off team building events, nor focussing just on how relationships work within the team when they meet together. The team coach needs to help the team analyse their current

collective strengths and weaknesses, map out their collective development journey. In order to do this the team coach needs to contract with the whole team and to support them in making collective shifts in how they work together and also how they work with their key stakeholders (politicians, staff, customers, other departments etc).

Conclusion

Finally I would like to share the overarching value system that in my view should underlie coaching process. If as a coach, I am going to create sustainable value, I must be clear about what and who my work is in service of. I would contend that as a minimum I need to ensure that my coaching is in service of the coachee, their organisation and the relationship between the two. I need to be focussed on the unrealised potential in all parties and the connections between them and assisting in that potential being realised. However, in serving the individual it is important that I am not just serving their fragmented or egoistic self, but helping the person find their calling, their service, their purpose in doing what is necessary in the world.

In serving the organisation I need to ensure that the work with the individual or team is not an end in itself, but is enabling that individual and team to more effectively lead and manage the organisation through its next phase of development. To constantly serve both the individual and team clients as well as their organisations is not an easy task, and to be effective all coaches constantly need to be reflecting on their work and expanding their coaching capacity. This requires the need to stand back from the presenting issues and see the repeating patterns in the wider system. This continual need for process reflection and systemic awareness means that all coaches should receive regular personal and professional development including quality supervision as well as other CPPD processes, supported by mature professional bodies.

What is required, at this time of transition in the whole endeavour of executive coaching, is for all parties to face the critical challenges mentioned above. The challenge of ensuring a quality service for those receiving both individual and team coaching as well as a good return on investment for those purchasing coaching services, and ways of generating organisational learning from the coaching conversations. To deliver these outcomes there needs to be a greater provision of quality supervision from people specifically trained in the supervision of coaches and effective joined up professional bodies that are together nurturing the evolution of the profession through this very exciting next transition.

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He has coached a number of Corporate Executives, Chief Executives and Chairman in both the Public and Private sectors, including: Chief Executives of Ftse 100 companies; Chief Executives of younger growing companies; International Lead Partners in PricewaterhouseCoopers, Local Authority Chief Executives and Chief Executives of international not-for-profit organisations. He is currently team coach of the executive team of one of the largest Government departments.

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His current and recent client companies include Ernst & Young, Canon, Department of Work and Pensions, IBM, Mayer Brown and the BBC.

Vested Interests

Bath Consultancy Group runs open programmes in Coaching Supervision.

Peter Hawkins is also a founding partner of the Centre for Supervision and Team Development.

Bath Consultancy Group were commissioned in 2006 by CIPD to carry out the research on Coaching Supervision.

Peter Hawkins has recently been appointed Honorary President of Association of Professional Executive Coaching and Supervision.