

What makes a great Executive Coach?

MA Coaching and NLP, Action Learning Question

Against what set of competencies and capabilities will I identify the strengths in my own coaching practice and identify development opportunities?

The coaching industry is relatively new and there is much information available about coaching techniques and tools, both coaching schools and accrediting bodies are eager to publish a set of competencies that a new coach should gain. However there is relatively little advanced training or even models of excellence in coaching.

The main outcome from this ALQ is to describe clearly and concisely a model of excellence of what makes a great executive coach, the purpose is to develop a framework for evaluating and developing my own coaching practice but ultimately one that could be used by any coach.

Methodology; ALQ Outcome

A mind map of the methodology:



My approach was initially to review and consolidate the competencies and standards from the major 4 US, European and UK independent accrediting coaching bodies into a framework of excellence.

Then I tested the validity of that framework by interviewing experienced executive coaches and reviewing what they have written about excellence of executive coaching. I was particularly interested in any differences between approaches in the US and UK, as the coaching industry is more mature in the US.

I will know I have achieved this outcome when I feel that I have a suitable framework against which I can measure my own competencies (or ask my supervisor to measure)

and have received feedback from The Performance Solution that the structure and content of this ALQ is to the standard required.

I will exceed my outcome when my sponsors of this question which include very experienced coaches also give me feedback that they believe this document would have great value for themselves and other coaches.

Introduction

The UK Coaching industry is still in its infancy and growing fast. Executive Coaching is an acceptable part of personnel and professional development for senior people. The market is becoming more aware of the value that Executive coaching can deliver, but there are moves to create standards and accreditation (Tulip 2006). There is a parallel with the issues facing psychologists in the 60s and an urgent need for regulation (personeltoday.com 2005a 2006b). There is also recognition that it maybe a difficult task to define standards for executive coaching. (Hardingham 2005)

There are a number of coaching bodies that publish competency standards, the most prevalent bodies in the UK and US market are:

- AC - Association of Coaching (associationforcoaching.com 2007)
- EMCC - European and Mentoring Coaching Council (emccouncil.org 2007)
- IAC - International Association of Coaches (certifiedcoach.org 2007)
- ICF - International Coaching Federation (coachfederation.org 2007)

There are significant differences between the way the bodies go about accrediting coaches and training schools

Accreditation of	Coach	Training school	Words
AC	Yes	No	600
EMCC	No	Yes	200
IAC	Yes	No*	3,000
ICF	Yes	Yes	1750

* The IAC has it's own on line training course that prepares coaches for their accreditation.

There are significant differences in the philosophy underpinning the accreditation of these bodies, for example the EMCC standards seem to be focused on meeting the needs of academics to define how coaching is to be taught at different levels of accreditation, while the AC standards seem to be as open as possible to allow a broad church of membership.

It was interesting to note that the US originated bodies seems to have much more detail about the process of coaching than the UK bodies. For example – the ICF specifies a coach “Is able to move back and forth between the big picture of where the

client is heading, setting a context for what is being discussed and where the client wishes to go” while the AC says “The coach demonstrates good listening and clarifying skills.”

There were significant differences in the volume of information provided to support the accrediting process from the 200 words from the EMCC to the 3,000 words that the IAC uses to describe its new Coaching Masteries. It was Interesting to note that both replaced much longer documents (2,200 and 23,000 words respectively).

The first step was to create a meta-model of the competency standards. Initial analysis of the categories used by each bodies (see below: AC = blue, EMCC = green, ICF = orange, IAC = none) revealed that the AC categories seemed to be at the highest level. Then after grouping all the others categories within them resulted in the following map:



During the next stage of the analysis I concluded that two changes were necessary to the categories. The first was that there was an important dimension that the ICF called setting the foundation that together with other competencies from other bodies could be represented under a separate category called “Professional Practice”.

The second was that category the AC call “The Partnership” includes both the relationship between the coach and the client; and what occurs during a coaching session. I considered splitting this category into two but concluded that simply calling it “Coaching” made the model clearer.

A detailed analysis of the competency maps then created the complete meta-model with 13 dimensions in these four categories:

A. Professional Practice: How will a great executive coach structure their practice?

1. Professionalism
2. Contracting

B. The Coach: What is the identity of a great executive coach?

3. Identity
4. Development
- C. The Client: How does a great executive coach view the client?
 5. Positive regard
 6. Independence
- D. Coaching: What does a great executive coach do in a coaching program?
 7. Trust
 8. Presence
 9. Active Listening
 10. Questioning
 11. Feedback
 12. Approaches, Models and Process
 13. Systemic

The final step was to compare the meta model with the research and interviews with experienced executive coaches.

The Professional Practice

Professionalism

All the accrediting bodies agree that it is important to meet ethical guidelines and professional standards. The AC goes further suggesting awareness of your own philosophy, approach and ethics.

The AC and ICF agree that a clear understanding of what differentiates coaching from other modalities. However one executive coach in the US defines coaching as a euphemism for psychotherapeutic intervention and suggests the minimum time a coach should work with a client is 2-5 years. (Siegel 2005). All the professional accrediting bodies argue that an executive coach needs to know the boundaries of their practice and therefore when and how to refer clients on for psychotherapy, counselling or other intervention.

Many of the issues that I have observed executive coaches take to group supervision are around the area of integrity and ethics, they are looking to unravel the boundaries and complex issues around the sponsor (Human Resources), the stake holder (line manager) and the client (coachee) in an organisation. These ethical dilemmas and how well they are resolved seem to define the excellent executive coach and it has been suggested that ethics should be placed above both training and professional accreditation (de Jong 2006)

I have concluded that a great executive coach must have a professional philosophy and approach together with a clear vision of their ethics and having the **integrity, honesty and sincerity** to put these into practice.

Contracting

It is important to start by defining what exactly is contracting. The AC talks about the comprehensive contractual agreement that is made with all stakeholders. In more

depth it can be defined as the goals, roles and accountability of each party (Sherman and Freas 2004).

The group of experienced executive coaches (DBM Focus Group 2006) use contracting as a process that enables them to deliver value to the organisation and the individual and be recognised for this. During this process they establish the agreed outcomes, the evaluation, stakeholder management, the guidelines for how the relationship will be managed and the logistics. This is an opportunity for the coach to determine if they believe they can facilitate the client (coachee) to achieve their objectives and those of the organisation.

The EMCC and ICF both include elements of managing the commercial relationship into this area, such as fees and commercial contract. I concluded that these are dimensions of being an effective business person rather than an effective coach.

An excellent coach will know how to structure an effective coaching partnership and a number of models have been put forward to enable a coach to create a viable contract that creates the ground rules of a coaching program. (Morgan, Marshall & Goldsmith 2005) (Tulpa 2006)

The Coach

Identity

Identity is asking the question "Who am I?" and has been described as:

We answer this question by how we respond to life from moment to moment. When we are centered, present in our bodies and connected with ourselves and the world around us, we become naturally in touch with our life's purpose and meaning. (Dilts & Bacon 2007)

The EMCC describes this as "Self" encompassing self belief, self awareness, self management and integrity while the AC also talks about self awareness but goes into more depth suggesting awareness and management of one's own values, emotional intelligence and map of the world

'High Performance Coaching' is a NLP model of the most successful executive coaches (Breen & Percival 2004). They define not only the skills and behaviours of the leading executive coaches but also the attitude. They described the inner brilliance that you identify not only in clients but in yourself as the coach.

One experienced executive coach talks about a balance with the client and that a great coach must be "self aware enough that he or she can maintain a distinct identity while fully engaged at an intellectual level. The coach succeeds by seeing the client succeed while never putting his or her personality ahead of the players." (Pralhad 2005).

Another says that executive coaches must “know themselves” and that “self awareness allows a coach to step aside from his or her own needs and be fully focused on the client.” (Garfinkle 2005)

I have concluded that a great executive coach will be clear about and true to their values, identity and purpose but will be able put these aside as necessary to ensure the best possible coaching takes place for the client.

Development

The US accrediting bodies have little to say about this in their competencies, the IAC leave this to a paragraph in their ethics. The ICF imply a program of development with their various levels of accreditation and mastery of their range of competencies. Contrasting that with the EMCC that specifies a long list of skills and knowledge that a coach should have **communication skills** of listening, questioning, feedback, style and language, **technical skills** such as planning, systems thinking, artistic and creative skills; **knowledge** of learning theory, therapeutic approaches, psychological and psychotherapy models and **experience** of corporate life, OD theory and management/leadership. They describe in more detail for training organisations by specifying how much knowledge a coach should have at each level, for example, specifying the number of psychological models and OD theory that a “Master” coach should have.

When I contrast that with the evidence from the 100+ experienced executive coaches interviewed or studied for this paper, I noticed there was a huge diversity in the quantity and mix of knowledge they possess. I have also noticed that clients and coaching employers make their own judgements about the experience and knowledge that is most relevant for them. For some a senior executive career is a pre-requisite for delivering executive coaching, for others a psychological degree and psychotherapy background is vital.

In contrast the AC specifies that a coach should undertake personal and professional development and simply described the steps of that process and mention supervision as a critical part. A recent report by the CIPD concluded that it was “the pivotal link between theory and coaching practice”. They also concluded there are enormous benefits for organisations in getting better value from Executive Coaching. (Hawkins & Schwenk 2006) Coaching suppliers are also recognising this need and specifying that their coaches should have supervision (DBM Focus Group 2006) (Giber 2005)

Morgan, Harkins and Goldsmith (2006) put forward a very different 27 point model of the technical skills, experience & background and coaching attributes that a “best practice coach” will have. They do not mention models, theories or systems but the pragmatic observations of the top 50 executive coaches in the US. One of the most relevant here is “A best practice coach has a keen knowledge where his or her experience starts and stops and how that will match the clients needs”

I have concluded that a great executive coach will be on a continuous journey of development and learning, gaining insight through self reflection, supervision and other forms of evaluation. This will be in the context of what clients, suppliers and the market needs.

The Client

Positive Regard

This dimension encompasses competencies from all the accrediting bodies; they talk about belief in others, valuing diversity, acceptance and validation, respect for client, etc. A recurring theme is having Empathy and Belief.

Empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner (Merriam-Webster 2007)

The evidence from experienced coaches suggests going further and talk about caring more for the person than the program and honouring the humanity of the coachee (Ulrich 2005) (Sherman 2005)

Belief, but the question is belief of what. The EMCC simply suggests "others", while the AC suggests "potential and capability", the IAC also talk about the client's potential and holding them in high esteem while the ICF about respect for the client's personal being.

That is a theme that one experienced coach expanded even further on by asking the question about the 'anthropology' of a coach.

This is a deeper question than one of philosophy or technique. Is it asking "What do you believe about human beings? Where did we come from? Where do we find ourselves? and Where are we going?" (Leider 2005)

I have concluded that a great executive coach will have unconditional positive regard for their client. They will recognise their potential, believing in and empowering them while maintaining complete empathy with the whole person and seeing their world as if it was their own.

Independence

The EMCC explicitly suggests "supporting independence" while the AC and IAC go into more depth by describing how a coach should encourage self belief, inspire curiosity support self determined learning, facilitate setting and keeping clear intentions as well as provide feedback and celebration of progress.

A coach may create “not-to-do list” and action plans for their clients and hold them accountable for results but it is important not to create co-dependent relationships. (Little 2005)

There is conflicting views on whether a coach is a teacher or not. (Whitmore 2003) (Downey 2002) (Burke 2005) if the role of the teacher is to have the answers and the role of a coach to have the questions, where should a great coach sit?

The client remains independent from the coach, always keeping ownership of the content but acknowledge there are times when the coach will have something to contribute “with permission” (Bresser & Wilson 2006)

My own experience is that as I become a more experienced coach, I have found it useful to share knowledge that I possess with my clients. But I have also experienced times when this teaching even with permission has done some damage to the coaching relationship.

I have concluded that a great executive coach will foster independence, empowering the client to take full responsibility for their own results. They will recognise when they have useful knowledge that can add to the client’s situation without compromising the coaching relationship.

Coaching

Trust

All the accrediting bodies talk about establishing and maintaining trust at the core of the coaching relationship. They use a range of word and concepts associated with this including mutual respect, rapport, confidentiality, safe & supportive, intimacy, firm connection, non judgemental, acceptance, values diversity, et al.

When asked in a survey of more than 100 clients; what was the quality they look for in a coach; the top rated answer is that a coach is “trustworthy and honest”. (Morgan, Harkins & Goldsmith 2005)

A critical aspect of successful coaching is that the coach will build trust quickly. (Morgan 2005) In a focus group of top UK executive coaches the view was that the key to gaining trust is through credibility, rapport and commitment to the client. (DBM Focus Group 2006)

The IAC suggests that the client feels safe to tell their deepest fears without judgement. My experience suggests that client will feel able to expose their dreams, their fears, their hopes, their weaknesses and their strengths without judgement. Or with judgement they can trust.

I have concluded that a great executive coach will be able to quickly build and develop trust with clients. They will be fully aware of the impact of their approaches on the coaching relationship.

Presence

The concept of “presence” is one that appears only in the ICF and IAC competencies, further analysis of these descriptions reveal that there are internal and external dimensions.

The internal dimension is described by the ICF as “dancing in the moment”. The IAC description is very close to that of Active Listening (see below), but with evidence from experienced coaches that maintaining focus and concentration can be a major challenge with some clients (DBM Focus Group 2006) lead me to conclude that it would be difficult if not impossible to get and maintain trust or to practice active listening if a coach was not fully present in the session.

Internal presence is more than just the attention you bring to a client, but also that you leave behind your own agenda and ego (Prahalad 2005) (Morgan 2005)

The description of the external dimension to presence given by the ICF and IAC use words such as open, flexible, confident, intuitive, lightness, energy, holistic, space et al. to describe the “place” that a coach must create for the client in order for the most effective coaching can occur.

One experienced executive coach described this as a critical dimension that a coach needs to be able to “carry the room” so that the client believes that the coaching will help (Tracy 2005).

I have concluded that a great executive coach will manage their own state to be fully present with the client at all times, leaving their own ego and agenda out of the coaching and create the most effective place for amazing coaching to occur.

Active Listening

This is the one competency that all training courses, every certification standard, every book on coaching cites as being the main core skill required for coaching. Certainly all four accrediting bodies selected for this study and all the coaches who expressed an opinion agreed.

Taking all these definitions together active listening is the combination of hearing every word that a client says – precisely as he says it, giving that meaning from both directly what has been said and what has not been said, and placing it all in context while aligning it with other non verbal signals.

It would not come as any surprise therefore that some coaches believe this is the single most important skill for a coach (Bartlett 2005) (Bolt 2005)

I have concluded that a great executive coach will gain the maximum possible insight into their clients by hearing, seeing, feeling and knowing more.

Questioning

The accrediting bodies all agree that asking powerful questions is an important competency. The AC suggests this is for the purpose of identifying areas for development, while the IAC suggests this is for the alignment of purpose, vision and mission, identify key values and needs and identify blocks. The ICF stress the importance of the connection between powerful questioning and active listening and for the purpose of evoking discovery and creating insight, commitment or action.

It is remarkably difficult to find any coach who talks much about questions. Even the 'The Queen of Powerful Questions' says "You want a coach who has the ability to not just listen well, but to listen for." (Baker 2005)

One experienced coach suggested that the skill of appreciative enquiry is useful i.e. the ability to go deep into an issue while keeping a watch for the solution. The skill of asking questions is more of an art than science that improves with experience. (Helgesen 2005)

I have concluded that great executive coaches will, not only be able to ask the right question at the right time and understand when to use feedback and challenge

Feedback

All the accrediting bodies agree that feedback is an important process to provide information, summarise, reflect, re-iterate, paraphrase or provide clarity and understanding. The IAC suggests that this should be done in clear, articulated, appropriate and respectful ways.

Both ICF and IAC talk about feedback that challenge and the focus group talked about how to create the right level of distress for the comfortable (DBM Focus Group 2006) and as one coach quoting John Gardner said:

"Pity the leader caught between unloving critics and uncritical lovers" What leaders need are 'loving critics' (Kouzes 2005)

Another successful coach stressed the need for coaches not to be afraid to confront leaders with difficult feedback (Barnes 2005)

There is little said about the situation where a coach does none of this and says nothing at all! Only the IAC talks about "productive silence" allowing silence to give the client space for discovery. And what about non verbal communication? Most of the accreditation bodies talk about being aware of a clients' non verbal communication but only the IAC talks about using non verbal communication in return.

I have concluded that a great executive coach will be able to find the right balance between challenge and respect, provide the appropriate feedback, use productive silence and have the appropriate style in the moment.

Bringing together Active Listening, Questioning and Feedback

The IAC encompass the whole process of active listening, questioning and feedback as "Inviting Possibilities" - a process of exploring and discovering by curiosity, courage, openness and trust.

One experienced coach helps leaders discover their purpose and build on strengths while managing weaknesses" (Leider 2005) Another says "In the most mature coaching relationship the coaching flows from a continuous creative conversation." (Anderson 2005)

I have concluded that a great executive coach will have mastered these three essential skills and have integrated them together seamlessly.

Approaches, Models and Process

The coaching industry brings together an eclectic mix of many disciplines in one place; there is NLP, personal development, psychological and therapeutic modalities, sports coaching, counselling et al. In talking to and reading about experienced and successful coaches I have observed that each has collected a mix of favourite tools, techniques and models that they use in their practice.

The EMCC and ICF talk about the understanding and management of a client's goals, attitudes, beliefs, values, behaviours, motivation and actions. The High Performance Coaching model (Breen & Percival 2005) takes most of these elements and maps them to a visual guide that guides a student through a coaching process. However my experience has been that it rapidly becomes something you refer to as a diagnostic and other experienced coaches have commented that models become internalized, so that they become an unconscious process (Alexander 2006).

I have concluded that a great executive coach will have approaches, models and processes developed to be a seamless part of their practice.

Systemic approach

There is relatively little said by the accrediting bodies about a systemic approach that acknowledges that executive coaching takes place in the context of a complex system, i.e. the organisation. The EMCC suggests that a business focus and political awareness are important competencies coupled with corporate knowledge and organisational development theory.

It is perhaps an obvious pre-supposition of executive coaching that the primary objective should be to deliver the maximum value to the organisation. Perhaps it is not so obvious. One coaching supplier interviews over 100 coaches a year and only finds a handful who continually asks themselves "Why am I in this room?" (DBM Focus Group 2006)

An experienced and very successful coach now spends most of his time with key stakeholders around his clients and as a result gets dramatically better outcomes (Goldsmith 2005).

I have concluded that a great executive coach will be aware of the systemic influence on their clients and the coaching program. They will look for ways that they can engage with stakeholders in the organisation to make them an integral part of the intervention.

Conclusions

In my research and interviews I have found much that has been written about the science of executive coaching, but less about the art. For example how would intuition fit into this model and what other factors are missing that could make up the art?

I have concluded that a great executive coach recognises that it is a journey towards mastery! But it is not about **recognising** the journey but about **taking** the journey.

"A coach, like a leader, can be developed if she/he possesses the original passion. But this is a personal journey more than an educational attainment. Coaching accreditation programs probably can't teach the art of coaching any more that golf instruction can teach the art of golf. Skills can be learned and techniques replicated, but true understanding only comes from carefully honed practice in real-world situations" (Morgan, Harkins and Goldsmith 2005)

I will use these 13 competencies as useful markers on the chartered paths that lie ahead in my development as an executive coach. But I also believe there will be uncharted water too – in our understanding of human capability, creativity and purpose and in the practice of how we, as great executive coaches, make them work for our clients better.

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