Differences in Personal and Executive Coaching

by Sandi Stewart

Personal coaching and executive coaching share many fundamentals. However, they can and do differ in their agenda setting, content, and objectives. Executive coaches also face unique challenges posed by the incorporation of the client organization into the coaching process.

In over 25 years as an organizational consultant and 17 years of personal and executive coaching, I've seen the many ways coaching can assist in both individual and organizational growth. As a board member of the International Coach Federation (ICF) Independent Review Board, I review ethical cases that highlight the challenges of coaching in various settings. As a teacher of leadership development, I am continuously reviewing the competencies and deep skills required of leaders and coaches. All of this has contributed to my understanding of the distinctions between personal and executive coaching.

What They Have in Common

Personal and executive coaching share these fundamentals:

The presumption of equality. Coaching is defined as a partnership of two equals, client and coach, who co-create a process to assist the client in exploration and action. As the International Coach Federation (ICF) states in its *Code of Ethics*: "Coaching is partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential."[i] This definition of coaching applies to all types of personal and professional coaching.

The presumption of a capable client. This underlying tenet is defined by the authors of *Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives* as the belief that:

…people are, by their very nature, creative, resourceful and whole. They are capable of finding answers; capable of choosing; capable of taking action; capable of recovering when things don't go as planned; and, especially, capable of learning.[ii]

Shared core competencies and ethics. The skills of personal and executive coaching include: a structure that supports the client agenda and results in action; deep listening skills; powerful questioning; coaching presence; and effective communication. A relationship of trust between client and coach is essential to good coaching. But solid coaching competencies alone are not enough to establish trust; ethical practices are essential. The *ICF Code of Ethics* applies across the field of coaching, whether in a personal or executive format.

Two kinds of client learning. If successful, both personal and executive coaching encourage two types of learning. The first, informational learning, broadens the client's scope of knowledge. The second, and more important, is transformational learning, a change in the client's internal understanding of how she or he makes meaning. Transformational learning is powerful in its ability to make significant change in the personal and executive clients by bringing to light the assumptions, values, beliefs or emotions that underlie their choices.

The Definition of "Executive Coaching"

Personal or life coaching has the personal growth and transformation of the client and the client's life as its primary objective. However, there is no specific, industry-agreed-upon definition of executive or leadership coaching. The varied ways I have seen coaching deployed in diverse organizations with differing goals have contributed to my understanding of what is meant by "executive coaching."

I define executive coaching as coaching individuals with the presumption that coaching will in some way impact that leader's performance in the workplace. The coaching objective of developing the client's leadership skills is the underlying agenda for at least part, if not all, of the coaching.

My definition does not go as far as stating that executive coaching agenda shared between the client and coach must have stated business outcomes as defined by the organization. As we will see in my section on *Executive Performance Coaching*, the organization business outcomes are significant - lower attrition and higher executive performance. However the agenda of the coaching is driven by the client. This is a starting point that focuses on the executive's ability to bring their strongest self to the workplace perhaps including the executive's health, life/balance and other personal concerns. In this respect I add to the conclusion of *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart*, in which Mary Beth O'Neil writes: "Being, learning and doing do not trump the need of our clients to produce business outcomes."[iii] In *Executive Performance Coaching* the executive <u>is</u> the business outcome = their retention, job satisfaction and enhanced performance.

When coaching outcomes are specifically tied to organizational strategy, the coach often must have organizational expertise. Mary Jane Knudson's article in *Executive Coaching and Business Strategy* speaks to the need of the executive coach to have "a sophisticated understanding of organizations" in order to best serve the client.[iv] I would agree an executive client is well served by a coach who has business and organizational expertise, but there are many executive coaching engagements that do not require the coach to bring these skills to bear.

Agenda-Setting is Key

Where the two practices diverge is in the setting of the coaching agenda, i.e., the goals the client and coach co-create. In personal coaching the agenda's focus is on the client and the client's personal growth. Coaching often begins with a discussion of the areas of the client's life that are either fulfilled or lacking, such as family, spirituality, health, social, fun, or finances. Personal coaching assists clients in building fulfilled lives where the clients can optimize the lives they desire and build skills in communication and connection. The goal is for the clients to have a more conscious approach to building their lives as well as address the beliefs, values and emotions that underlie their choices.

Executive coaching agendas are focused on the presumption that the coaching will in some fashion influence the client's performance in the workplace. In executive coaching, discussions often relate to strategy, team optimization, emotional intelligence, professional development and organization systems, structure, and staffing as well as culture and values. The coach may assist in the informational learning of the client by co-creating learning opportunities around best practice in these areas.

However, since personal factors are ultimately part of what hinders performance, executive coaching will also include transformational learning around values, emotions, assumptions and beliefs. Because of its transformational elements, coaching around work and leadership goals is often transferrable to the client's personal growth. And coaching around personal issues is often transferrable to the client's professional or leadership growth. The key differences reside in the setting of the agenda.

Types of Executive Coaching

Distinct categories of executive coaching are defined by different underlying objectives. What we see in each of these executive coaching scenarios are different levels of organizational influence on the client's goals and coaching process. This degree of influence will impact the level of sophistication required by the coach in understanding the organization.

Executive development coaching is the integration of leadership training with coaching. This may be found in many Executive MBA programs where coaching of the student is part of the curriculum. The intent is to help students integrate learning into action, to explore barriers to learning, develop communication strategies with team and cohort members, and/or to debrief assessments and enhance self-awareness. As a development coach for the EMBA program at University of Maryland's Robert H. Smith School of Business, I worked with a group of coaches to coach with the students over the course of their studies. We debriefed a number of assessments and defined and coached against development objectives. Because the students were fully employed while attending the EMBA program, the development objectives included diverse academic-inspired objectives as well as at-work objectives. For example, one client's objectives included working more effectively with a difficult team in deploying learnings from leadership competency readings and assessments that were presented in the curriculum.

Executive performance coaching occurs when the intent of the coaching relationship is to assist the client in a whole-life approach to performance enhancement. This type of executive coaching may come closest to personal coaching when as the starting point of the engagement is to optimize the executive's productivity and focus. The organization benefits from this coaching in terms of higher executive productivity as well as lower executive attrition. An example of this type of coaching is a program I work with, The *Pinnacle Program* by Corporate Balance Concepts. The *Pinnacle Program* co-creates an agenda for the executive that includes health, personal, and work goals that are designed by the client, free of organizational objectives other than enhancement of the performance of the executive. While clients focus on key work competencies, they also see tremendous benefits from coaching on life balance or health issues that, once resolved through coaching, freed the client to achieve significantly higher performance in the workplace. In fact, in one study we found that attrition was profoundly positively impacted by coaching, most likely due to the coaching intervention that allowed a safe space for the client to talk about and manage concerns about the workplace or personal issues that could have led them to leave the firm and with solutions uncovered in the coaching have provided them a path to stay with the organization. Leaders who award the *Pinnacle Program* to their people often state in the intake interview that they know something is compromising the performance of their reports, but suspect it has to do with a morale issue that they are not sharing with them or perhaps personal issues that the leader doesn't feel comfortable asking about. For example, one client was navigating a complex divorce just at the start of the engagement. By allowing the client to process the emotional and logistic demands of this event, the client was able to better manage showing up at work with greater commitment and energy. Frequently clients come to the coaching with me unclear about their future career development and ready to leave their organization. By discussing how they can be proactive in crafting their careers within their organizations, departure is often avoided.

Aligned executive coaching falls between executive performance coaching and programmatic coaching in it's balance between personal and organizational goals. In this situation, the coach is contracted by the organization, and the coaching includes alignment meetings with the client's boss and/or HR personnel. Goals can include both personal client goals and organizational goals. By aligning the executive and boss, there is often buy-in to the executive's development and increased support of the personal and professional goals that help create a more optimum performance by and partnership between the client and boss. The client and I craft the alignment meetings together before we set up the three-way meeting with the boss to determine what we want to cover. In that meeting, the client is responsible for sharing some of the client-developed objectives while the coach and boss listen. Then the coach can facilitate a

conversation with the boss to add to that list or define how they perceive those development objectives, thus giving the client a better sense of the metrics for success and what it will look like to be a good leader in the eyes of the boss. One specific technique my clients occasionally use in the meeting is having me ask questions of their bosses they wouldn't ask themselves such as, "what are the client's greatest strengths in your eyes?"

Programmatic coaching is coaching with the fundamental goal of aligning executives with organizational goals and objectives. It will often include many leaders across an organization that is undergoing significant change. To cite one example, programmatic coaching was used to help drive culture change in two newly merged entities. The project was led by coaches/consultants who worked with organization leaders to determine the desired behaviors for their leaders in the "new" culture. The coaches were instructed as a group so they would understand the goals and leader expectations from the change project. They were then assigned executives and given a set number of sessions to assist each leader with the adaptive process of integrating defined new behaviors and cultural goals into their leadership. In this context, we see the utility of coaching as a powerful tool for supporting change by addressing barriers to change that can often be different for each individual. One of the barriers can be how the clients understand the new behaviors asked of them and how they learn to integrate them into their leadership. Coaching also nurtures personal accountability and ensures that the client is committing to what they own as part of a change process. Additionally, it helps the client to look at the strategic big picture questions inherent in change such as, "how do I need to work differently?", "what mindset do I have to change?", "what systems no longer work for me?" and "what kind of leadership is required in this new organization?" Ultimately the success of the coaching engagement in programmatic coaching is the success of the organizational goals of change.

Team coaching is the coaching of a team and its leader to achieve better team performance or to achieve strategic goals. This form of coaching can involve team facilitation as well as one-on-one coaching with the leader and individual members. For example, I once worked with a technology group that was transitioning to a new leader. I conducted and summarized organizational interviews and worked closely with the team leader to design several phases of team coaching and facilitation to assist the team in setting new communication style awareness and norms. The team had been "stuck" in a mental medal of how they worked, including norms of behavior that were blaming and non-collaborative. With various facilitated exercises we were able to "name" the mental model and associated communication norms in the old way of doing business as a team. Then we were able to define what new norms and thinking were required for a better model and implement those with the collaboration of the group leaders.

Unique Challenges of Executive Coaching

The unique challenges of executive coaching occur primarily because of the complexities introduced by the client organization and/or a coach contracting organization that subcontracts or employs the coach. These challenges include:

The need to manage across multiple relationships. The executive coaching relationship may involve multiple parties, including the client being coached, the client's organization, and potentially also a coaching or consulting firm sub-contracting or employing the coach. The *ICF Ethics Code* emphasizes the need to clearly define the roles and responsibilities of the client/coachee and sponsor. When they are the same person, they are jointly referred to as the "client." When separate, the "sponsor" is the entity paying for and/or arranging for coaching services to be provided. In all cases, contracting agreements should clearly establish the rights, roles and responsibilities. The coach must consider the contracting implications for all involved parties. It is the coach's responsibility to have agreements outlining expectations of the coaching engagement, communication channels, materials and assessments and confidentiality with all these parties.

The maintenance of confidentiality. Because of the importance of maintaining confidentiality between the coach and client in order to establish a relationship of trust, contracting is essential. The *ICF Code of Ethics* has several codes that apply to confidentiality between the coach and the sponsor and client. The most important elements of the code are that: 1) there should be clear agreement with these entities on maintaining the strictest levels of confidentiality with all client and sponsor information; 2) there should be clear agreement about how coaching information will be exchanged among coach, client and sponsor; and, 3) all entities knowingly agree in writing to that limit of confidentiality.

The executive coach can be faced with thorny issues around confidentiality. For example, if the coach coaches both a boss and the boss's direct report, is the coach confident that confidentiality can be guaranteed? Or what if the CEO asks the coach about the progress of the client in the coaching? From my experience on the IRB and in many organizations, I have seen many ethical dilemmas worthy of another article on the topic.

Contracting and organization alignment. In contrast to personal coaching, coaching the executive requires the coach and client to examine and address the organizational environment and goals as they affect the client. This means that the coach needs to work with the client to build an understanding of not just the client's goals, but also those of the organization as well. The contracting must reflect the agreements with the organization or boss before the coaching begins. With the client taking the lead and the coach partnering with the client, the organization's expectations are carefully vetted and negotiated during the contracting phase. Once those goals are established in a development plan owned by the client, it will be important to keep the client's boss or other sponsor informed of the client's progress to ensure leadership's enrollment in the client's success and to be sure there is adequate transparency that gives the organization confidence in the coaching value proposition.

The method I most often use are three meetings with the boss, with both client and coach present, held at the beginning contracting phase, at the midpoint, and then at the end of the coaching engagement. In these meetings it is the responsibility of the client to share goals, progress, and strategies with the coach present to support the client. This maintains confidentiality and client ownership.

Maintaining the role of coach as opposed to consultant or mentor.
One of the challenges of the executive coach is to hold the role of coach distinct from that of consultant, advisor or mentor. Most executive coaches have extensive backgrounds in organizational development, consulting, or as executives themselves. It is incumbent upon the coaches to make clear they must be impartial and independent of the organization in their coaching conversations. This means that it is not the coach's role to advise the client and convince them of the right action to take, but rather to assist the client in making his or her own decisions. When the executive coach begins to act on behalf of the organization as driver of a strategy or performance evaluator then they are no longer a partner to the client, but rather potentially taking on the role of manager or advocate for the organization.

Challenges of internal executive coaches. The internal executive coach is a coach who is an employee of the organization in which they coach. They may be part of an internal coaching program where leaders are selected to become part-time coaches, or they may be members of the HR department. Internal coaches face significant challenges in establishing full trust with their clients, in maintaining boundaries of confidentiality, and in moving between roles of mentor, advisor or evaluator.

Conclusion

Personal and executive coaching share many fundamentals, and coaching in one realm often improves the client's performance in the other. But executive coaching entails unique challenges and considerations that arise from the fact it takes place in an organizational setting. Multiple relationships, issues of confidentiality, and the need for sufficient transparency to earn the organization's confidence in the process require high levels of skill and an understanding of organizational dynamics. Even if they overlap,

the two practice areas should not be conflated.

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[i] *ICF Code of Ethics.* http://coachfederation.org/about/ethics.aspx?ItemNumber=854

[ii] Kinsey-House, H., Kinsey-House, K., Sandahl, P. and Whitworth, L. (2011) *Co-Active Coaching: Changing Business, Transforming Lives.* Boston and London, Nicholas Brealey Publishing. p. 3.

[iii] O'Neil, M.B. (2007. *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart.* San Francisco, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. p. xv.

[iv] Knudson, M.J. (2002). "Executive Coaching and Business Strategy," *Executive Coaching Practices & Perspectives.* Palo Alto, Davies-Black Publishing.