Executive coaching explained: the beginnings of a contingency approach

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Abstract

Purpose – In this paper, we problematize the prevailing assumptions in the executive coaching literature that effective coaching is deliberative, trust-based and relational in nature, thereby requiring significant time investment before the focal leader might realize enacted benefits from the coaching. Contrary to these prevailing assumptions, we propose five contingencies wherein a more direct, performance-first approach to coaching may be more effective.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual paper reviews relevant literature to develop testable propositions regarding directive coaching contingencies.

Findings – We develop propositions that argue executive coaches will need to employ a more directive, urgent and accountable coaching relationship when the executive's career is in jeopardy, the organization is in distress, if the leader needs to signal legitimacy, if the coaching occurs within the boundaries of a high reliability organization or if the coach is working with an executive who has interim status.

Originality/value – This paper intends to advance the theory and practice of executive coaching by challenging executive coaching orthodoxy regarding the need for a deliberative, relational approach to coaching. Future research should broaden this theorizing and empirically test our propositions.

Keywords Executive coaching, Contingency-based coaching models, Organization effectiveness

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

It is difficult to argue against the dramatic rise in executive coaching services. At the beginning of the millennium, London (2002) reported that there were approximately 10,000 professional coaches worldwide. Similarly, in 2004, Johnson (2004) reported that the International Coaching Federation (ICF), alone, boasted 7,000 members across 33 nations. At the time of this writing, the ICF stakes a membership claim of over 36,000 (International Coaching Federation, 2019). Those organizations that embrace coaching seem to span the divide from the very small firms to the world's largest organizations such as Bristol Myers Squibb, Charles Schwab & Co., eBay, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Pritchard, 2016).

Remarkably, the rise of executive coaching is not matched by empirical evidence that it is, indeed, effective. For instance, while some suggest that even minimal or abridged coaching offers meaningful benefits to leaders and executives (Hernez-Broome, 2002), others strongly

disagree with that assessment and counter that "systematic evidence to objectively support the benefits of executive coaching is lacking or inconclusive" (Osatuke *et al.*, 2017, p. 172). The reasons for this divergence seem reasonable given the inherent complexity of a coaching relationship and the coaching process, which leading scholars tend to suggest are quite intimate and contextual in nature (DiGirolamo, 2015; Hackman and Wageman, 2005). Interestingly, this complexity has yet to inhibit scholars and practitioners from advancing their own, distinct models and taxonomies of executive coaching to include the process of coaching delivery (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2019; Boyce *et al.*, 2010a; de Haan *et al.*, 2010; Hooijberg and Lane, 2009; Jones *et al.*, 2016; Parker *et al.*, 2008; Taylor *et al.*, 2019).

Given these contradictions and tensions, our purpose is twofold. First, we aim to unpack and challenge the core assumptions regarding executive and leadership coaching. To do that, we will explore and revisit the elementary concepts that anchor this phenomenon to include revisiting the definition of coaching itself, and the definitions of closely related constructs, such as mentoring, that occupy a place in coaching's nomological orbit. Second, we respond to recent calls to improve our understanding of the contextual and structural factors in which coaching takes place (Hackman and Wageman, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2016). Toward that end, we offer five specific assertions that run counter to and call into question the heavily received view of coaching as a deeply intimate and relational enterprise that develops over time (Boyatzis and Jack, 2018; Boyatzis *et al.*, 2006; Parker *et al.*, 2008; Whitworth *et al.*, 2007).

Challenging assumptions
Implicit in reviews of the executive coaching literature are several reoccurring themes. First, almost universal in the coaching dialogue is this notion of trust (Feldman and Lankau, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2016; Kets de Vries, 2005; Trevillion, 2018). In particular, scholars such as Kets de Vries (2005) suggest that trust is the atomic unit of the coaching relationship and that trust and respect are necessary, but insufficient, conditions to engage in meaningful coaching. We know that from the literature on trust that it is a notoriously fragile construct (Boyce *et al.*, 2010a; Dirks and Ferrin, 2001; Fulmer and Gelfand, 2012; Guo *et al.*, 2017). Often lost in the discussion on trust is the uniquely temporal aspect of its condition. Namely, confidence and faith in another do not come easily and often involve repeated positive interactions to take hold (Alvey and Barclay, 2007). Even more, while trust may require constant investment over time to grab a toehold and grow, it can vanish quickly (Barner and Higgins, 2007; Day *et al.*, 2008). Because of this, we can begin to readily see the temporal bias in the coaching literature; *it takes time*.

Closely mirroring this notion of trust in the coaching literature is the relational and intimate aspect of the executive coaching dyad or the give-and-take between executive and coach (Baron and Morin, 2009; Boyce *et al.*, 2010a; Trevillion, 2018). One can find direct and indirect evidence to support such claims. For instance, Boyatzis *et al.* (2006) conceptualize executive coaching as almost wholly relational in nature, where feelings of competence and identity are frequently traded between coach and executive. Moreover, they contend that coaching, by its very nature, is an act and exchange of compassion (Boyatzis *et al.*, 2006). Coaching, then, is conceptualized as almost equal part feelings and emotional exchange as it is knowledge transfer (Parker *et al.*, 2008). In short, in addition to the temporal aspect needed to build trust, equally at play here is the assumption that affective, collaborative and emotional exchange is necessary in any successful coaching relationship.

Finally, there is a widely shared and evident belief that coaching should impact social and emotional experiences in addition to both critical and analytical thinking of the executive (Boyatzis and Jack, 2018; Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). Assumed in this notion is that behavior change or specific concrete action is a result or by-product of an executive's own improved critical thinking and cognition that arises from the coaching interaction. Interestingly, the

voice to this sentiment comes across in a myriad of ways to include "allowing the executive to arrive at her own conclusion," "not providing the answer, only asking the questions" and "empowering the executive to act upon her own decisions." Note that this orientation is not confined to solely academic circles. Rather, this is a shared belief in the practitioner realm as well, and can be seen in applied or trade books such as the highly popular *Co-Active Coaching* (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). The very use of the word "co-active" pre-supposes a two-way relationship in which executive cognitive changes arrive through strong listening skills partnered with curiosity from the executive coach (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, arriving at the "right" or "correct" answers, if there is even such a claim according to academic and practitioner orientations of coaching, is where the agency to make decisions, drive change and achieve results rests with the executive, and, much less so, with the coach. The International Coaching Federation, to which most of the credentialed coaches in the world belong, seems to re-affirm this orientation.

When we collapse these assumptions into a unified whole, we get the following: Executive coaching is assumed to be a relationship anchored on trust, which takes time to develop, an activity that is highly intimate and relational, and, in which, executives ought to arrive at their own answers by way of coaching skills that include listening, question asking and probing. These assumptions deserve further inquiry and scrutiny as they may not hold in all situations and scenarios.

Teaching, mentoring and coaching

Before we can meaningfully address the assumptions that provide much of the theoretical scaffolding to how we see and interpret executive coaching, our collective efforts may be better served by distinguishing what a coach is and what a coach is not. This may be particularly necessary in our case given the widespread confusion on just what constitutes a coach (Coutu and Kauffman, 2009; Joo *et al.*, 2012; Taylor *et al.*, 2019).

Namely, many contend that an executive coach is, in essence, a teacher and change agent (Bennett and Bush, 2014). On the face, this construct equivalency may seem appropriate since knowledge seems to be involved in both coaching and teaching. One of the more elementary definitions of teaching involves imparting knowledge from teacher to pupil. Also, the teacher is, typically, the one that advances the agenda for learning. While executive coaching does entail, certainly, some transfer of tacit and codified knowledge, unlike teaching, it is not anchored in this specific orientation. Rather, executive coaching assumes that the leader or executive already possesses some strong basis of knowledge in which to make decisions and operate. The role of the coach is about sharpening a skill set that has been previously developed and on how to deploy that given skill set (De Meuse *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, while teaching may involve learning, it fails, oftentimes, to directly address action or execution. That stands in rather stark difference to this notion of coaching that involves producing on-the-job behavioral changes to achieve some goal or specific outcome (Hernez-Broome, 2002; Hooijberg and Lane, 2009). Also, while the teacher establishes the learning agenda, coaching tends to embrace an executive led, not coach derived, agenda (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). Hence, while coaching may involve some aspect of teaching, it is not teaching, *per se*.

Perhaps, even more than teaching, coaching is often compared to and used as a synonym for mentoring. A comparison of these two constructs reveals some nuanced, but meaningful, differences. One of the authorities on mentoring is Kram (1983) who early specified two meta-dimensions of mentoring. The first were psycho-social activities that a mentor could, and should, undertake in the development of his or her protégé (Kram, 1983). Note that the very mention of mentor and protégé assumes some variant of a power differential between the two, which is often the case (Haggard *et al.*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2016). Importantly, a mentor can provide these psychological and psycho-social benefits to one of her charges by role-

modeling, offering acceptance and affirmation to the protégé, and developing friendship. Much like teaching, coaching may involve one or more of those activities, but that is not where the true center of coaching lies. In particular, mentoring offers these psycho-social benefits, first and foremost, for the exclusive gain of the individual and his/her development.

In contrast, the primacy of coaching rests on job and organizational performance with the development of the individual being instrumental (Swart and Harcup, 2013; Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). This performance-leaning orientation is embedded in several conceptual and operationalized definitions of coaching. For instance, Hackman and Wageman (2005) contend that coaching is about helping executives perform tasks better and more efficiently. Others, such as Hooijberg and Lane (2009), see coaches as a support structure to help executive participants sharpen their action plans and commit more effort towards meeting them. Similarly, these same authors suggest that coaches help executives disrupt damaging and unproductive routines that allows them to better focus on more important action plans (Hooijberg and Lane, 2009). Whereas mentoring emphasizes the individual as a core priority, coaching seems to place the task or performance as the ultimate concern, ahead of an executive's development.

This is not to say that coaching does not involve some aspects of mentoring, which it clearly does. For instance, there are enough convergent scholarly opinions and research findings that point to the importance of executive attitudinal and cognitive change as part of the executive coaching experience, which would seem, on the face, to speak to some mentoring-like activities. However, our contention is that while career and personal development may be the ultimate goal of the mentoring process (Ragins and Kram, 2007), in and of itself, it is not that way with executive coaching. Here, performance and task completion are the ultimate objective (Swart and Harcup, 2013; Theeboom *et al.*, 2014). Indeed, Hooijberg and Lane (2009, p. 484) state this case best when they measure coaching effectiveness as "improvements back at work."

In summary, we advance the argument that the value of executive coaching lies primarily with goal attainment and performance improvement. To suggest otherwise confuses this construct with related, but distinct, constructs such as teaching and mentoring. While teaching concerns itself with knowledge and mentoring rests with an individual's emotional and professional development, coaching's ultimate, but not exclusive, focus is on performance. In other words, when one subscribes to executive coaching or it is forced upon them by senior leaders or the Board of Directors, driving this executive coaching initiative is, quite typically, a performance-first orientation. An executive's knowledge gain or emotional fulfillment are instrumental and secondary, not primary, benefits of the executive coaching endeavor.

We have uncovered some noteworthy assumptions related to coaching. First, coaching, as it is currently understood, requires trust and a sufficient amount of time to generate that trust. Second, it involves a process that is highly intimate and relational. Third, it requires substantive cognitive change, on behalf of the executive, to be rendered effective. Finally, it has been confused with teaching and mentoring constructs that advance knowledge gain and emotional fulfillment and attachment as primary goals of executive coaching. Not only have we begun to uncover many of these long-held assumptions as it relates to coaching, we propose a different orientation. Namely, coaching is and should be a "performance first" endeavor.

The performance-first frame of coaching may well be more aligned with the realities of organizational life today. This organizational life seems largely to demand a need for quick, decisive results (Stoll, 2018). We see this quite regularly in dialogue surrounding publicly traded equity markets where even the giants of commerce are questioning the ruthlessness and folly of a myopically held quarter-to-quarter focus (Dimon and Buffett, 2018; Rapoport, 2018). It certainly leads to the question – in an extremely competitive environment where

short-termism is relatively common, do executives even possess the luxury of time to engage in time consuming trust-oriented relationships that are meant to eventually trigger cognitive change and, down-the-line, result in improved performance? Or, rather, do executives need a coaching model that serves their performance orientations with more immediacy? We believe that the pendulum has swung too far and too prematurely toward a highly relational coaching model that fails to address executives' needs that are, quite often, desperately urgent in nature.

While some scholars argue that the timing of coaching is of paramount importance (Gersick, 1988, 1989; Hackman and Wageman, 2005), the timeliness of the coaching process and product, itself, has been largely ignored. We assert that there is a need to recognize a more direct or directive coaching approach that accounts for timeliness and quicker results. We begin our advocacy and our call to a greater acceptance of more directive and "performance first" coaching interventions by advancing five conditions where contemplative, relationship-first coaching is at odds with the overarching goals of the executive and associated stakeholders. Of particular note, while these propositions emerge from a conceptual view of coaching contingencies, our conceptual frame is informed by approximately 10,000 cumulative coaching hours among the authors. Perhaps, most important, we entertain a contingency orientation toward executive coaching that, until now, has yet to be seriously considered, with the prevailing assumption being that deliberative, relationship-first coaching tends to be best. While there are undoubtedly many situations where such time-intensive coaching may be desirable, our intent is to consider relatively common conditions where performance-first, directive coaching may be best and to encourage other scholars to engage in more contingency-based research that could inform practice about which approach is best in which conditions. We entirely recognize the following five contingencies are not an exhaustive account.

Careers in extremis
As previously mentioned, executive coaching is a rather recent phenomenon when compared against the broader field of business management. To be sure, academic inquiry into leadership and executive coaching is nascent, leaving many important endogenous variables, to date, unexplored. Specifically, there is scant research on what factors drive a firm and its stakeholders to adopt executive coaching in the first place. Said differently, considerably little is known on what triggers a firm to bring in an executive coach.

Left without any empirical support mechanism, one can turn to individual experiences, inductive reasoning, and theory and logic. It is from this basis that we contend that executive coaches are often brought into an organization, often as a last resort, to save an executive's career. There should be little surprise as we advance this assertion. Notably, the war for talent is well-chronicled and, especially in times of low unemployment, some organizations may face an unattractive dilemma. Namely, given that the marketplace may not provide external talent to fill positions, the organization may be forced to promote an executive who is not ready for the new position. Clearly, promoting executives before they are truly ready, whether out of necessity or not, carries significant risk to both the executive and also to the organization.

The war for talent notwithstanding, there are other factors that could lead to a career *in extremis*. In particular, applied and scholarly circles have known for quite some time the ruinous effect of the Peter Principle. The essence of the Peter Principle is that executive promotion is based on prior successes. Promotion stops, the reasoning goes, when successes stop occurring. For that very reason, the Peter Principle suggests that executives are promoted to their level of incompetence (Peter and Hull, 1969). Related, it is troublesome and folly to believe that the same set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that allowed a manager to be effective in a previous position will correlate perfectly to a higher, promoted position. Put

plainly, the skills that allowed an executive to be successful in the past may not hold in her current position.

Of course, there are some assumptions built into our assertion. For instance, one may assume that executive coaches are retained in a case of last resort or when degrees of freedom are declining or exhausted. When an executive coach is called under these circumstances, it is likely that internal tools and interventions, such as a Professional Development Plan (PDP) or Performance Improvement Plan (PIP), failed to produce meaningful gains. Furthermore, internal leadership programs, workshops and training may have not yielded meaningful progress. In many cases, these low levels of utility should not be entirely unexpected as there is growing sentiment that a one-size-fits-all approach to leadership development is not effective (Moldoveanu and Narayandas, 2019). Regardless, it is important to note that when an executive coach is called to "save" an executive's career, it is reasonable to assume that other interventions were rendered ineffective.

When an executive fails, there are financial and social costs that make it expensive for the organization. For this reason, there is a sense of urgency to fix and address the executive's performance when an executive coach is contacted. Because of the additional expense of hiring an executive coach, the timeline for improvement is further abridged.

It is under these contexts that an executive coach must operate. To regain organizational and stakeholder confidence as quickly as possible, the executive coach may wish to adopt a much more direct coaching style, as opposed to the more free-form and time expansive style that has become the dominant logic (Sailer, 2017; Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). The executive coach, armed with orders to "fix" the executive, may push to drive results above all else. In particular, lengthy social or coaching processes may fall out of favor in exchange for driving immediate results. Indeed, stringing together a series of small wins may shore up the confidence of both the executive, senior management, and boards of directors (Amabile and Kramer, 2011) and, as a result, resuscitate a declining career.

We suggest that under such conditions of severe career distress, coaching may first emphasize results and, only after some gains are realized, would the coach focus on the relationship between herself and the executive. This, of course, flies in the face of conventional wisdom that calls for a patient, episodic and relational coaching–executive relationship (Boyatzis and Jack, 2018; Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). We suggest, however, that when degrees of freedom have been exhausted and patience is in short supply, there is no luxury of time and the executive coach must focus on immediate performance first and relationships second. Perhaps, in scenarios such as these, material performance gains precede affective and relational coaching relationships.

Proposition 1. Executive coaches will need to adopt a more directive and urgent coaching relationship when dealing with executives and managers whose careers are in extremis.

Organizations in crisis
There are other factors that may force the hand of the executive coach to assume a more urgent, direct coaching style. Just as individual executives may find their careers in distress, organizations, themselves, could be in jeopardy. Under these conditions, the executive coach will need to adapt to provide immediate value.

Before discussing true organizational crises, we contend that environmental turbulence, alone, may spur the executive coach to adjust the urgency and delivery of her coaching style. Environmental turbulence is characterized both by high rates and high volumes of change (Ansoff, 1980; Emery and Trist, 1965). Firms that compete in hyper-competitive markets and within competitively turbulent environs must deal with heightened complexity (Mintzberg, 1973) and must tighten their response times to remain at par with rivals (Ansoff, 1985; Smith

et al., 1989). These conditions demand a different type of executive. Of particular note, executives need to be transformational and skilled at information processing and must build flexible and adaptable teams and mental models (Jansen *et al.*, 2009; Osborn *et al.*, 2002). As the environment forces executives to adjust mental models more quickly, it is likely that executive coaches will need to do so, in turn. Slowly developing the relationship and waiting for the executive to arrive at their own solutions – common logic in many traditional coaching models (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007) – may not always be tenable for coaches in these scenarios. Instead, the executive coach may need to speed up the coaching relationship to match the pace and rate of change in the environment. Put simply, the marketplace may demand a more immediate solution and the executive coach will need to help the senior manager seize upon such opportunities through quicker sense-making. Waiting or embracing the "slow cooking" of traditional coaching models, where we wait for both relationships and epiphanies to emerge (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007), may just not be tenable in highly turbulent contexts.

This, of course, says nothing of organizations that find themselves in a true crisis. A crisis is characterized, at its worst, as putting the survival of the firm at risk, while also demanding a short response time from the top management team (Burnett, 2002; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007). Of course, concurrent with the rise of executive coaching over the last 15 or so years, we have also witnessed no shortage of organizational crises. The BP Deepwater Horizon spill, the Wells Fargo crisis of signing up customers for accounts that they never asked for, and Volkswagen's attempt to deceive Federal emissions testing are just but a few. Crises may be acute or chronic, or a combination of both. In the crises named above, there was an acute stage followed by a longer chronic stage. In fact, one can argue that these same firms are still in crisis response mode now – years after the triggering event.

Like a turbulent environment, but even more so, a short response time is demanded in a crisis situation. Executive coaches, to ensure their own efficacy, must be willing to match the tempo of a crisis or of environmental turbulence. When time is a factor and temporal periods are shortened, executive coaches may be forced into providing more direct, less consultative, guidance and feedback. Broadly speaking, we contend that this will require the executive coach to match their tempo with the tempo emanating from the surrounding environment. Again, the luxury of time to build this deep, intimate and highly affective coach-to-executive relationship, as most models suggest (Boyatzis and Jack, 2018; Lally *et al.*, 2010; Whitworth *et al.*, 2007), may not be feasible. This assertion may be even more true today in the world of social media which tends to aggravate, and shorten, response times of firms facing a crisis (Coombs, 2002, 2007). For these reasons, we advance the following:

Proposition 2. Executive coaches will need to adopt a more directive and urgent coaching relationship when dealing with firms in highly turbulent environs or that are facing a crisis.

Signaling leadership legitimacy
Another condition whereby an executive coach would need to focus on immediate task accomplishment rather than long-term relationship building is when there is a need to signal legitimacy to stakeholders. This situation could very well occur when either the leader's career or their organization is *in extremis* – as noted in the previous two conditions – but those are not the only conditions we need to consider. Whereas in the midst of critical incidents, immediate and actionable executive coaching is about remedying the immediate crisis, here we are concerned with the need to communicate to stakeholders that the incumbent has legitimacy (Donaldson and Preston, 1995).

Organizations are routinely faced with make-versus-buy decisions (Williamson, 1981), whether they pertain to input materials or lines of business. The same analysis applies when dealing with human capital or when filling leadership positions: should the organization tap a

leader with potential for growth (i.e. "make" a leader) or should the organization hire a leader with a robust track record (i.e. "buy" a leader). In the latter case, legitimacy is communicated through the leader's resume and lists of previous accomplishments. In the former case, however, there may be more uncertainty for the internally made hire, leaving legitimacy in the balance (Shen and Cannaella, 2002). The leader, then, must intentionally work to signal legitimacy and find her place in the firm's social system (Shleifer and Summers, 1988). If she or he has an executive coach, that coach would likely be motivated to provide direct and actionable advice regarding short-term steps to take action and reduce uncertainty among stakeholders.

Signaling legitimacy is also an issue when a leader's position becomes uncertain due to the critical events noted in the preceding sections. Sometimes, organizations offer up a leader as a sacrifice to signal the organization's commitment to recovering from a critical incident (Schwartz and Menon, 1985). Alternatively, enlisting the assistance of an executive coach could be a different means to signal legitimacy. In a situation such as this, organizational stakeholders may have lower patience if other remedial actions had previously been employed or if the stakes of the situation are high. As such, an executive may possess a sense of urgency to signal to stakeholders that they are the right leader for the moment. An executive coach would need to support the leader's need for immediate and tangible action to signal this legitimacy. A sense of urgency, such as retaining an executive coach, may be the last remaining intervention between executive improvement or executive firing.

Proposition 3. Executive coaches will need to adopt a more directive, accountable and urgent coaching relationship when working with leaders who have a felt need to signal legitimacy to stakeholders.

High hazard/high reliability organizations

Little, if any, scholarly insight suggests that coaches may need to adopt varying styles to better match the organizations or industries in which they operate. We suspect that this omission is critical; executive coaches may need to adjust their styles depending upon the type of organization they are in. High hazard or high reliability organizations (HROs) offer an appropriate context in which to reimagine the typical coaching model.

HROs offer extraordinary social benefits when they work as expected. HROs provide energy, transportation and defense services to the populace, including examples such as nuclear power stations, Navy aircraft carriers, oil refineries and airplanes/air traffic control. Unlike other organizations, HROs possess the potential to unleash catastrophic damage to the public and/or to the environment. One example of a HRO not working as predicted is the 1984 Bhopal disaster in India in which 30 tons of highly toxic gas (methyl isocyanate) were released and resulted in almost 4,000 deaths. More recently, the BP Deepwater Horizon spill serves as a reminder of the incalculable environmental damage when a HRO fails to work as planned. Hence, while HROs offer scalable and immense benefits to a functioning society, embedded in all HROs are latent, and outsized, risks.

Given both the immense reward and risks captured within a HRO, there should be little question that executive and leadership coaching can help make them safer. Indeed, scholars such as Roberts and Bea (2001), Perrow (1984), Offstein *et al.* (2013, 2014) and Shrivastava (1986) suggest that HRO leadership and culture needs to be different from traditional organizations to maintain its reliability and safety. For instance, knowledge gaps within and between individuals can result in a warning signal being missed and, hence, jeopardizing critical safety functions (Offstein *et al.*, 2013; Roberts, 1990). For that reason, Roberts and Bea acknowledge that HRO leaders and cultures must "aggressively seek to know what they do not know" (Roberts and Bea, 2001, p. 71). Of course, skilled executive coaches can contribute to this skill-set by asking intrusive questions and challenging widely held assumptions,

duties that are expected of a competent executive coach (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). Indeed, common industry documents such as the nuclear industry's Significant Operating Experience Reports (SOER 10-2) demand that leaders build a healthy and intrusive questioning ethos within their organization (INPO, 2010). For those reasons, we think that executive coaches who are particularly skilled at exposing blind spots in mental models and who can help leaders, via modeling, to embed a healthy questioning attitude offer more utility than coaches that cannot or do not.

HROs offer other tricky characteristics that demand an unconventional coaching style. And, in describing one such characteristic, it is impossible to ignore the temporal aspect and urgency of its nature. More specifically, all HROs are characterized by tight coupling between human and machine systems (Perrow, 1984; Roberts, 1990). Tightly coupled systems are usually time dependent, follow invariant processes (B must follow A), and offer only one way to achieve a goal (Perrow, 1984). Tightly coupled systems also mean that there is little slack within and between systems; small changes in one system will create changes, sometimes larger, in downstream systems (Perrow, 1984). Put simply, in tightly coupled systems, small problems in one small system can go undetected and can travel quickly, in a contagion manner, to cascade into much larger problems, even accidents (Roberts and Bea, 2001). While engineers can try to create safeguards and contingencies, the complexity and the interdependence of the systems suggest that no engineer or group of engineers can account for all possible failures. In this case, "sometimes these holes line up like slices of Swiss cheese" and "just as one can sometimes see a hole all the way through even a thick block of Swiss cheese, the little problem gets through all the barriers and becomes a big problem" (Roberts and Bea, 2001, p. 71).

In the face of such factors, Perrow (1984), Offstein *et al.* (2013, 2014) and Roberts (1990) suggest that leadership and human behavior can help. Notably, leaders can build a culture of accountability and responsibility where ownership of small or latent problems are addressed immediately. This is one such area in which traditional coaching may need to adapt. Executive coaches may wish to adjust their style from the open-ended and relational style of coaching to a more pronounced method in which accountability is part and parcel of the coaching session. Also, and as mentioned above, HROs, because of their tight coupling, demand short response times. In other words, HROs operate in a temporally urgent and demanding context. Putting it all together, we offer:

> *Proposition 4.* Executive coaches will need to adopt a more directive, accountable and urgent coaching relationship when working within HROs.

Contingent and narrowly skilled executives

Earlier, we theorized that coaching may need to be more directive because of the investment involved in choosing, grooming, and promoting an executive. Drawing on some counter-factual thinking, could the reverse also be true? Specifically, would temporary or contingent executives – those with less organizational investment – also require a more directive, and less consultative, coaching style? There are enough reasons to support such a possibility.

Of particular note, contingency-based workforces are usually pigeon-holed or perceived as applying to only low-level parts of the workforce (Barley and Kunda, 2004; Barley *et al.*, 2017). Temp agencies, for sure, are known for supplying large amounts of contingency workforces to organizations, worldwide and their use and impact only continue to grow (Katz and Krueger, 2019; Parker, 1994). What is less discussed, though, is that this contingency and/or freelance orientation is now found at higher and higher levels within an organization. Where accounts payable clerks, custodians, executive assistants, and the like, were the sole domain of contingency workforces, we now see this "contingency" philosophy apply to senior

managers, project managers, and specialized executive functions (Barley *et al.*, 2017). Take for instance, and something "close to home" for academe is the Registry within Higher Education (see https://www.registryinterim.com/). This organization's exclusive focus is only on *interim* statuses – to help universities with temporary Deans, Provosts, and Presidents and other specialized executive functions (e.g. Admissions Director) to assist an institution within Higher Education, but, again, only on an interim basis.

Interestingly, when we acknowledge the growth of contingency and freelancing as a possibility for senior managers and overlay that with the systems approach to training (Bailey and Waldinger, 1991; Kirkpatrick, 1977; Mallon and Duberley, 2006), a change in coaching style may be required. Specifically, a hallmark of the systems approach to training is to begin with a needs analysis (Kirkpatrick, 1978; Reed and Vakola, 2006; Schneier *et al.*, 1988). This analysis often involves a person analysis along with a task analysis (Herbert and Doverspike, 1990; Schneier *et al.*, 1988). Also, integral in the systems approach to training is the imperative to begin by, ironically, focusing on the end (Leigh *et al.*, 2000). In other words, training should be designed with the end-state, goals, or objectives of the intervention clearly delineated.

As we apply this logic to our assertions, Jones *et al.* (2016), in a study of workplace coaching, identified four broad based coaching criteria or outcomes. These included affective change, cognitive development, skill-based enhancement, and results on the job as possible desired outcomes from workplace coaching (Jones *et al.*, 2016). When senior leaders are placed in position on a purely temporary or interim basis, they may still require the expertise of an executive coach. However, it is reasonable to assume that the thrust of that coaching relationship is different. Given the contingency or short-term nature of her/his position, coaches may choose to focus less on cognitive and affective change, and instead devote efforts to driving results and improving skills of the executives in their care. In many ways, this is commonsensical. Senior leaders may find themselves in a "holding pattern" and may not be interested in cognitive or affective change. Rather, they require coaching to help the organization maintain or obtain results while leaders search for a permanent replacement.

Essentially, we suggest that the needs of an interim executive or senior manager differ markedly from those who wish to hold a more permanent position. In addition, the organization, when appointing someone for an interim basis, requires different behaviors and outcomes from this coaching intervention when compared to permanent executive replacements. Thus, while interim leaders and the firms they lead may still benefit from coaching, the desired end result is different and, consequently, demands a different coaching style.

Proposition 5. Executive coaches will need to adopt a more directive, accountable and urgent coaching relationship when interfacing with contingent or temporary executives.

Discussion

In one of the only expansive surveys and reviews of the coaching literature, Feldman and Lankau, lament:

> There is something of a "black box" feel about much of the current coaching literature; we know it can work but often do not know why it works or how it could work even better. Without a stronger theoretical foundation and empirical research, coaching runs the risk of falling into a passing trend that has no advocates because it has no evidence. (2005, p. 845)

This manuscript begins to make inroads into this call. Toward that end, we offer some theoretical arguments in support of a contingency model of coaching. Plainly put, we believe

that in certain scenarios and within certain contexts, executive coaches will need to adjust their coaching style or process to meet the situation. To summarize, we feel that the best executive coaches will need to flex towards a more directive, urgent and accountable coaching relationship when the executive's career is in jeopardy; the organization, itself, is in distress; if the leader needs to signal legitimacy; if the coach finds herself coaching within the boundaries of a HRO; or if the coach is working with an executive who has interim status. We do not claim these contingencies to be an exhaustive list; rather, our intent is to explore, through the literature and framed by our own coaching practice, types of relatively common contexts in which a more directive coaching may be more effective.

Much of the extant literature implicitly assumes there is sufficient time to undertake relationship-building between the executive and the coach (McGovern *et al.*, 2001; Thach, 2002; Whitworth *et al.*, 2007). Taylor *et al.* (2019), for example, argue that an effective coach needs to help satisfy underlying needs within the executive, and in doing so, the coach facilitates the leader's development of self-awareness and an authentic growth plan. Many leaders are, no doubt, blessed with the time to develop such a relationship with their executive coaches and would realize deep benefits therefrom. This is particularly likely within organizations marked by slack (Boyce *et al.*, 2010b; Cyert and March, 1963; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), where leaders are afforded time for personal development. Organizations with strong succession planning will also likely invest the time required for long-term leadership growth. Furthermore, executives who contract with their coaches on their own – without organizational support – would also be able to take the time to build a mutual relationship before enacting an action plan. A theoretical and practical contribution of our manuscript is to consider the variety of temporal demands and contexts within which the coaching relationship is to unfold.

There are elements of Hersey and Blanchard's (1976) situational leadership model that underpin the essence of our contentions. This, though, should cause some collective pause as the critiques of Hersey and Blanchard's may also apply here. Namely, is it even reasonable or plausible to expect coaches to toggle between coaching styles? Or do coaches embrace a dominant coaching style that is comfortable to themselves and unlikely to change? Perhaps, executive coaches cannot meaningfully adjust their coaching style to fit the situation. The ability to change may be further restrained by collective and institutional models such as those embraced by the International Coaching Federation or in popular practitioner books, such as *Co-Active Coaching* (Whitworth *et al.*, 2007), that reinforce through such means as certification a qualitative, consultative, episodic and relational model. In light of this, perhaps instead of expecting coaches to change to meet the situation, we should change the coach to meet the situation. In other words, maybe an executive coach cannot be all things to all executives/leaders. If we assume some veracity in that claim, then notions of coach-executive fit (CE-FIT) become meaningfully more apparent and more important.

Another underpinning of our arguments warrants more dialogue. Specifically, are there moral and ethical imperatives that thread through some of the arguments above? In particular, if a seasoned coach is about to see an executive engage in a faulty, bad, or, even worse, an unsafe decision, what is the duty of the coach to intervene and to exercise forceful coaching? As discussed above, much of the coaching literature, to include trade and practitioner outlets, stress that the coach should let or allow the leader to find her own answer in her own time. Does that mean executive coaches should sit by idly if they reasonably conclude a leader is about to engage in career suicide, for instance? Considerably more debate and discussion is warranted here especially if coaching continues its ascent into the mainstream. Importantly, in the few expansive reviews of coaching, to date, from Feldman and Lankau (2005) and Hannafey and Vitulano (2013), little discussion is directed at the moral and ethical boundaries of the coaching relationship. As executive coaches continue to find

themselves in complex and ambiguous contexts, one would expect more attention directed to the ethical and moral dimensions of the coaching relationship.

Another way we attempt to broaden our collective sights in regard to executive coaching is to respectfully, but proactively, challenge the status quo thinking in much of the coaching literature. Perhaps, practitioners and scholars, alike, are overstating the prime importance of trust in the coaching relationship. Continuing along those lines, maybe affective and cognitive change is not the only reason why firms should embrace executive coaches. Rather, skill enhancement and driving results may be sufficient in and by itself.

What we do know, though, is that investment continues to pour into executive coaching as a field and discipline. It is imperative as scholars and scholarly practitioners that we attempt to keep pace with this growth with meaningful, actionable, insightful and meaningful research. This, of course, requires us to manage and resolve dichotomies that exist as part of the executive coaching phenomena. As we have argued, we see the coaching literature and field as being prematurely monolithic in its relational focus. Paradoxically, then, before setting about to manage and resolve dichotomies about whether executive coaches should be primarily relational- and/or task-focused in nature, we need to unpack the complexity and contingent aspects of the dichotomy.

In advancing Feldman and Lankau's (2005) call for more robust theoretical and empirical work in this domain, we call on practitioners and scholars alike to join us in questioning received wisdom and explore contingencies of coaching. We hope other scholars continue to probe the boundaries of coaching approaches, including such issues as national, industry or organizational culture, with the ultimate goal of improving the practice of executive coaching. For example, it is possible that cultures marked by high power distance or face-saving norms may limit the effectiveness of directive coaching, even in the contingencies we describe (Gan and Chong, 2015; Hofstede, 2001). Therefore, we encourage executive coaches to follow the theorizing of our propositions and thoughtfully discern if more directive coaching may better serve their clients. We encourage scholars to build upon the contingencies we elaborated, conceptualizing other contexts in which performance-first coaching may behoove executives. Finally, we encourage scholars to empirically test our propositions to increase the rigor and effectiveness of leadership coaching.

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