

Managing Metaphors—Executive Coaching and the Role and Power of Analogy

ABSTRACT

For the better part of two decades, the practice of executive coaching seems to have outpaced the scholarly study of this popular managerial development intervention. Cemented now as commercially mainstream and pivotal in the portfolio of executive education tools, academics have urged fellow scholars to better understand the “black box” of how coaching is enacted and how it unfolds in practice. Indeed, some of the mixed results concerning the efficacy of executive coaching appear anchored to the confusion and surrounding ambiguity of the episodic and processual nature of coaching. In this conceptual paper and field study, we turn to the power of metaphor to explore how executive coaches, either consciously or subconsciously, approach and enact their role. In particular, we identify two core metaphors that enjoy some dominance in how executive coaches make sense of their role and duties: coach as pastor and coach as therapist. Even more, and in light of some of the limitations of the existing metaphors, we offer an alternative metaphor, coach as physical trainer, that may offer a more compelling, comprehensive, and accurate portrayal of the executive coach.

Keywords: executive coaching, metaphors, role theory