Four Essential Ways to Coach Executives: A Progress Report and Reflections on Our Practice

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Summary

Last year, we looked at ways that executive coaching works in organizations today (Witherspoon & White, 1997). Recognizing that coaching is situational, we defined a continuum of four coaching roles:

- Coaching for skills, sharply focused on an executive's current project or task;
- Coaching for performance, focused more broadly on an executive's effectiveness in a present job;
- Coaching for development, focused even more broadly on an executive's future job or responsibilities; and
- Coaching for the executive's agenda, focused on the executive's larger agenda, including better business results in the broadest sense.

This paper starts with an overview of our coaching practice model, the Coaching Continuum. Next we offer an informal progress report on *Four Essential Ways*, based on reader responses and our own further reflections. Then we draw some additional practical implications for coaching executives—from our recent coaching engagements with executive clients—as context for our presentation to The 1998 Leadership Conference: The Art & Practice of Coaching Leaders.

Introduction

Some executives use coaching to learn specific skills, others to improve their performance on the job, to prevent derailment, or to prepare for career moves. Still others employ coaching to get better business results. These executive coaching situations may look similar. Most are based on one-to-one relationships between executive and coach, typically behind closed doors. Yet each coaching situation is different, and some distinctions are important to recognize—if only to foster informed choice by everyone involved.

In our earlier work we explored some key distinctions among such coaching situations and defined four different ways to coach executives. We said that coaching executives is situational, and occurs along a *coaching continuum* of four coaching roles, depending on the executive's felt needs at the time, stage of his or her career, and similar factors. For shorthand, we refer to this work as *Four Essential Ways*.[1]

Beyond informed choice, we hoped that *Four Essential Ways* would foster a dialogue about the role coaches play. We see a future where coaching is widely available in organizations, where coaching is informed by insights from an evolving practice theory for coaching executives.[2] A practice theory resembles formal theory but is based on experience and reflection more than systematic research. We base our practice theory on mental maps drawn up while thinking about a range of coaching cases from our respective coaching practices. While mental maps paint an incomplete picture of coaching, our aim is to continue clarifying the respective roles of coaching along with coaching models, best practices, and related matters.

This paper starts with an informal progress report on *Four Essential Ways* in two respects. First, the theory: What are reactions so far? How is our work being used? What seems more or less useful? Second, the practice: What are some additional practical implications from this practice theory for assessing and developing executives?

Beyond a Buzzword

Before proceeding, a caution. Coaching is a current buzzword in business circles—but with many different meanings. Some see coaching as part of the boss's responsibility to develop subordinates, often in conjunction with an annual performance review. Others conceive of coaching as a manager's efforts from day to day to modify and reinforce employee behavior—a key part of performance management. Still others have applied coaching to a certain managerial style. And others connect coaching with mentoring, management development, and career development over a long period of time. In addition, a growing management literature along with articles from the popular press and training materials (not to mention the use of coaches in sports, the performing arts, and other areas of life) has made coaching a household word.[3]

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[1] The most recent reference is Robert Witherspoon and Randall P. White, *Four Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives* (Center for Creative Leadership: Greensboro, NC: 1997). However, we first wrote at length on this subject in 1996, and an abridged version of the CCL report originally appeared in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 1996, volume 48(2), pages 124-133, under the title "Executive Coaching: A Continuum of Roles." For simplicity we refer here to *Four Essential Ways* to include both the CCL report and the CPJ paper.

[2] A practice theory is also known as a theory of practice or theory-in-use. See Weisbord (1987), Argyris, Putnam & Smith (1985), and Argyris & Schön (1974).

[3] For a review of the significant research and management literature on executive coaching. See Witherspoon, *Executive Coaching* (forthcoming).

Unfortunately, the popularity of the term coaching has produced confusion, so much so that 360° feedback and coaching have become, in some circles, synonymous when in fact they are not. Consequently, executive coaching risks losing its meaning or failing to live up to its potential as a useful set of interventions.

A Definition of Coaching

Our concept of coaching is about bringing out the best in people. "Executive coaching," we said in *Four Essential Ways*, "might be defined as a confidential, highly personal learning process" to bring about effective action, performance improvement, and/or personal growth for an executive client, as well as better business results for the executive's organization (Witherspoon & White, 1997, p. 5). While a start, these words didn't clearly differentiate executive coaching from other helping relationships.

To that end, one of us has suggested the following elements of executive coaching (Witherspoon, 1998b):

- A *professional* relationship.[4]
- To enhance *effective action* and *learning agility*.[5]
- Through a *deliberate process* of observation, inquiry, dialogue, and discovery.[6]
- That provides *valid information, informed choice* and *internal commitment*.[7]

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[4] This view sees executive coaching as a *professional* function, provided by full-time practitioners who make their living in this endeavor, either as internal coaches (often in organizational development [OD], organization effectiveness, or human resources) or as external coaches (not part of the organizations of executives being coached). In contrast, most other coaching in organizations is a *managerial* function carried out by one's boss or another corporate insider.

[5] This view sees most coaching in the executive suite as aiming to enhance (a) effective action in the present and (b) an executive's ability to learn from feedback and experience, which impacts on future performance. The focus on effective action is frequently part of executive coaching definitions. A focus on learning agility, however, is novel. This second quality is called learning agility, tacit knowledge or "street smarts" (as distinct from "book smarts"). (See Footnote References, #5.)

[6] This view is influenced by the discipline of organization development (OD), notably *action research* (research on action with the aim of making the action more effective) and *action learning* (solving real business problems in unfamiliar situations when there is a real need for a solution). By comparison, this approach seems broadly consistent with the overall process of other executive coaches who have written about their coaching engagements with executive clients. For example, Hollenbeck speaks of five stages of coaching: Engagement (or the contracting stage), Assessment, Action Planning, Implementation, Follow-up (Hollenbeck, 1996). See also Kaplan & DeVries (1996). Obtaining valid data and feedback for the executive are essential to these approaches.

[7] This approach to executive coaching is based on three core values: valid information, free and informed choice and internal commitment to those choices. The three core values come from the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schön (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

So, consider this working definition: *Executive coaching is a highly personal learning process to enhance effective action and learning agility.*[8] It involves a professional relationship and a deliberate process to provide executives with valid information, free and informed choices based on that information, and internal commitment to those choices. One outcome of this process is that executives accomplish more (effective action) after coaching than otherwise. Another outcome is that executives learn by becoming more aware of their impact (learning agility) after coaching—for example, by asking for feedback and reflecting before and after action—than otherwise.

Coaching Theory

One way to think about executive coaching is in terms of client need. For example, does the executive need to learn a new skill, to perform better in the present job, or to prepare for a future leadership role? Or is the executive looking for a confidential *talking partner* to serve as a sounding board and source of constructive feedback? These questions suggest client need as a key dimension for distinguishing among different coaching roles.

Four Coaching Roles

We are finding that executive coaching entails at least four distinctly different roles.

Table 1 The Coaching Continuum

The Coaching Continuum: Coaching for Skills[1]

When	"I need to sharpen my skills for . . ." "I know how, but I don't always do it well . . ."
Who	Any executive, manager, or individual contributor
Why	Better skills. The primary coaching focus is on sharpening an executive's skills for a current project or task. Coaching sessions often address one or two key skill areas.

Executive works with coach to

- Assess current skills.
- Clarify expectations for current project or tasks.
- Prioritize executive's needs for present project or task.
- Plan for skill building.
- Enhance effective action.
- Improve (to some extent) learning agility.

Coaching for skills usually occurs over a short term (a session or more, over several weeks or months).

[1]Skill is used broadly to refer to the applied knowledge, skills, abilities, and perspectives that enable effective action.

[8] Research at the Center for Creative Leadership and elsewhere says that one of the most glaring differences between successful executives and those who falter in their careers was this ability to learn from experience. Further, research also suggests that this learning agility, or the ability to deal effectively with first time or changing conditions, is more predictive of long term potential or performance than is raw intelligence. Finally, there are now some surveys that can measure learning agility. (See Footnote References, #8.)

Coaching Continuum: Coaching for Performance[2]

When "There's pressure to improve . . ."
"I need to do a better job at . . ."
"I'm not aware of my impact on . . ."
"I haven't made a commitment to doing it well . . ."

Who Senior executives, key performers, or executives at risk

Why Better performance. The primary coaching focus is on improving the executive's effectiveness in a current job or role. Coaching sessions often address one or more core competencies for the executive's current success.

Executive works with coach to

- Assess current competencies for present job.
- Clarify expectations for present performance.
- Prioritize executive's needs for present job performance.
- Plan for continuing improvement.
- Enhance effective action.
- Improve (to a noticeable extent) learning agility.

Coaching for performance usually occurs over a longer term (several months or quarters).

[2]Performance is used broadly to refer to the executive's competencies and characteristics that contribute to a current job or role. A related coaching subrole is "coaching to correct performance" (or "fix" for short).

The Coaching Continuum: Coaching for Development[3]

When "I'm being groomed to advance. . ."
"I'm being promoted to. . ."
"I'm considering a career move to . . ."
"I'm in the succession planning pool for . . ."

Who Promising people and high potentials.

Why Better development. The primary coaching focus is on preparing the executive for a future position, a leadership role, or career moves. Coaching sessions often address one or more core competencies for the executive's future success.

Executive works with coach to

- Assess current competencies.
- Clarify expectations for future performance.
- Prioritize executive's need for future job performance.
- Plan for continuing development
- Enhance effective action.
- Improve (to a significant extent) learning agility.

Coaching for development usually occurs over a still longer term (several quarters or more).

[3]Development is used broadly to refer to the executive's competencies and characteristics that contribute to a future job or role, and may entail considerable growth.

The Coaching Continuum: Coaching for the Executive's Agenda[4]

When "It's lonely at the top . . ."
"I'm in over my head . . ."
"I need a talking partner on the topic of . . ."
"I'm facing a big challenge at . . ."

Who CEOs and heads of a business or major business function.

Why Better business results. The primary coaching focus is on the executive's larger agenda, including better business results. Coaching sessions often address executive's agenda in broadest sense.

Executive works with coach to

- Develop more ideas and options.
- Prioritize executive's needs.
- Plan for the executive's agenda.
- Obtain better support for the executive's agenda.
- Enhance effective action.
- Improve (to a variable extent) learning agility.

Coaching for the executive's agenda can be ongoing and is highly variable depending on the issue.

[4] Executive's agenda is used broadly to refer to personal, business and/or organizational issues or concerns.

Note. For more about the coaching continuum and actual case examples of four coaching roles, see Witherspoon & White, *Four Essential Ways That Coaching Can Help Executives*. (Center for Creative Leadership: 1997).

As an entrée to the process, these different coaching roles should be clarified and discussed so that:

- Both client and coach should recognize key differences among roles, if only to foster informed choice by everyone taking part in the process—the executive (and possibly family members), the executive's boss, the human resource officer, and the coach(es) providing the service.
- These distinctions provide a common language about coaching for both clients and practicing coaches and serve as a useful way to orient all parties to the process of contracting, assessment, feedback, action planning, and follow-up.
- These distinctions represent a continuing choice through the life of the coaching relationship and are particularly useful during the early stages. The choices define how clients and coaches work together and can make the difference between meeting or missing client expectations.
- An open discussion of these matters is helpful in creating some ground rules and a feedback system to be used in the coaching process.

A Dialogue About Coaching

As we hoped, *Four Essential Ways* and other recent contributions to the field have fostered a dialogue about executive coaching and the state of the practice, at research centers such as the Executive Development Roundtable,[9] conferences like this, and elsewhere.

Overall, the reactions to our practice theory and the coaching continuum have been positive. Consider these comments from several perspectives.

- In our experience, executives in coaching seem to readily grasp these distinctions and apply them in coaching conversations. We regularly refer to the different coaching roles in our own work with executives and organizations (e.g., to clarify expectations and contract for new coaching engagements).
- Some organizations have employed *Four Essential Ways* to prime the pump for coaching in their executive populations. One global professional services firm, for example, gives the Center report to its partners after an elite leadership development program with these words, "Read this, consider which coaching fits your needs, then let's contract with a coach to help you work on your agenda over the coming year."
- Other organizations have started to use the coaching continuum and some or all of the four coaching roles as a common language to manage both internal and external coaches for their formal coaching programs for executives.[10]
- Colleagues in the coaching field have also been positive. One seasoned coach, for example, said we had helped her to see "the field of coaching in a much more multidimensional way."
- Several researchers have been favorable. One recently wrote us, "Your… continuum of roles and distinctions among [each] I have found to be very helpful in researching coaching."

Reflecting on the preceding comments, we sense that some comments about *Four Essential Ways* stem from the elephant problem—that any coaching can be seen from many angles. Executives have one lens, coaches another, and researchers a third. So one reason for the favorable reactions may stem from our inclusion of actual case examples, which allowed readers to explore how these coaching situations played out from several perspectives. In any event, we favor more accounts of actual coaching cases in the future.

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[9] See Hollenbeck (1996) for an early essay and compilation of reference materials, including constructive feedback about our coaching continuum and presentations from a symposium, Executive Coaching—A 360 Degree Perspective, at the 11th Annual Conference of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology Inc., on April 26 , 1996 in San Diego.

[10] See, for example, William Hodgetts and Mary Jane Knudson (1998). They have adapted four types of executive coaching from *Four Essential Ways* and add further, useful distinctions from their formal executive coaching programs at Fidelity Investments and Digital Equipment Corporation (now Compaq), respectively. By *formal coaching programs* we refer to coaching arrangements that were assigned, maintained, and monitored by the organization as part of an overall program, rather than on a spot basis. Spot coaching tends to be tactical (in response to individual problems or opportunities) rather than strategic and to be less integrated with other relevant systems (e.g., performance appraisal, management development).

As a further reflection, some comments may also acknowledge implicitly the *law of the hammer* in coaching. Also known as the law of the instrument (Kaplan, 1964), the law essentially states that if the only tool available is a hammer, everything looks like a nail. As applied to our subject, a skills coach sees one picture, a performance coach sees another, and so on. (Otherwise stated, if you're a skills coach, everything looks like a skills coaching need.) The law has several significant implications for coaching, including the reasonable assumption that coaches can diagnose only those situations they have the ability to conceptualize and can make only those interventions they have the ability to conduct. Perhaps it is for the master coach to know which approach to take. A master coaches from the entire range of the coaching continuum, not just one part of the spectrum.

Coaching Practice

With the preceding material as context, we plan to devote most of our presentation to coaching applications. So turning from theory to practice, let's look briefly at two additional ways the coaching continuum might apply to assessing and developing executives.

Contracting for Coaching

When talking about the roles coaches play, most of our clients and colleagues tell us that their sense of coaching executives fits comfortably somewhere along our coaching continuum. Some ask, however, whether real-time coaching really involves more than one of these roles. Hollenbeck (1996), for example, argues that "agenda coaching, as a confidant and advisor, becomes more complex as we move to high [executive] levels" (p. 5) and that coaching for the executive's agenda could cut across all of the coaching continuum.

In one sense we certainly concur (as we said in *Four Essential Ways*, the coaching roles may well overlap in time). Actual coaching sessions, in our experience, can and do entail more than one role. Two examples will illustrate the point.

- An executive had just received a negative performance review from his new boss, delivered as part of the organization's annual appraisal process. In this case, the coach first served as a sounding board for the executive's agenda: how to *read* her new boss and interpret this first review. (We would call this coaching for the executive's agenda.) After the executive decided to develop better relations with the boss, she worked with the coach to improve her relationship: how to repair strained working relations, starting with role-playing sessions with the coach to develop her active listening and communications skills, and to practice for her next meetings on this matter with the boss. (We would call this coaching for skills.)

- A newly appointed leader had just received a promotion and significant added responsibilities. In this case, the coach and executive started meeting immediately on a biweekly basis to address the leader's urgent new agenda. To this end, the first part of each four-hour coaching session addressed those topics chosen by the leader based on whatever was challenging him at the time. The second part of these coaching

sessions focused on developing his appointment charter for the new position: key roles, responsibilities, and relationships to manage for a successful transition, and so on. (We would call both parts of these coaching sessions to be for the executive's agenda.) Several months later, the focus shifted in coaching this same executive to implementing his development plan, based on 360° feedback about his effectiveness as an executive and the key success factors for his new position. (We would call this coaching for development, since the charge was to grow the newly appointed leader into his new position.)

In both cases, the right mix of coaching roles was important. But in both cases the mix was successful because key differences among coaching roles were clarified—and contracted for—early in each engagement.

Feedback for Coaching

Feedback—a coach's stock in trade—is central to our work with executives. Typically, we use feedback data from a range of sources: direct observation, active listening and inquiry, key person interviews, and formal reports about an executive's behavior and blind spots. But very often, what we (as coaches and executives) think we see and hear is not what is actually happening. So we receive data, but it is not very accurate.[11]

Executive coaching is only as good as the data about an executive. Using 360° surveys is increasingly a method of choice for obtaining accurate data for executive coaching purposes. Other methods include direct observation, interviews and written transcripts of actual conversations or events, either recalled or tape recorded. All can have applications to coaching, as outlined elsewhere.[12] The coaching continuum, we would argue, is one useful way to think about feedback data and to tailor data sources to specific executive coaching needs.

Clearly, coaches provide executives with important feedback they would normally never get about their own executive skills, performance on the job (including issues that could stall or stop a career), personal growth and development, and specific business challenges. These matters are certainly important enough to merit the rare opportunity to discuss them in a coaching relationship, to think out loud, and to receive constructive feedback. However, the data that is needed to address these issues and concerns will vary depending upon the coaching role and situation.

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[11] Given a core value of valid information, we would argue that valid information means, for instance, that the executive and coach share all relevant information about an important issue, perhaps using specific examples so that each can check independently whether the information is true.

[12] See Witherspoon (1998a).

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