Linking Theory to Practice in Executive Coaching

A Supplement to the 2006 OD Network Conference Presentation: "Understanding the Theory Position that Guide Your Coaching Practice",   October 24th, 2006

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Author's Note: The following article provides a brief overview of the four major points that form the basis for this presentation. For additional information, the reader is referred to the suggested readings listed at the end of the article.

Point 1: Theory Guides Practice

As OD practitioners, it's important that we be mindful in the ideas, assumptions, and theories that guide our work. With respect to executive coaching this means being able to explicitly identify and articulate the theory positions that inform our coaching practice.   These theory positions shape our coaching practice by influencing the manner in which we respond to the following types of coaching issues, and are reflected in the manner in which we answer the following questions:

What are the goals of executive coaching?
How does the coaching process influence constructive change within the client's life/work space?

- ¾ What legitimate roles can I, as a coach, assume as an agent of personal and organizational change? What roles are illegitimate (e.g., where do I "cross the line" as a coach?)

- ¾ Where does constructive change take place? In the client's self-perceptions? In the client's work-related behavior? Within the full sphere of the client's life/work space?

- ¾ What information do we need to obtain to form a complete diagnostic picture of the client?

- ☺ What is the client's responsibility for change? What of the client's organizational stakeholders?

Point 2: Our Theory Positions Tend to be Implicit and Assumed

Every coach operates from some theory of how the coaching experience fosters personal and organizational change. The assessment tools you use, the language you employ in your interactions with clients and organizational stakeholders, and the form your interventions take, are all selected on the basis of the theory position that you've gradually developed over time.

These theory positions are implicit. By this I mean that we tend to employ certain coaching tools and techniques without periodically stepping back to reflect on the underlying theory of change on which these elements are based. Unfortunately, when we lack a clear understanding of the theory base that shapes our practice, we tend to encounter several problems:

1   Without careful self-review, we are less likely to understand how we need to adapt our practice to those shortcomings and constraints that accompany the particular coaching model that we employ.

2   Our clients and their senior HR sponsors are becoming more sophisticated and knowledgeable about executive coaching, and are continually bombarded with information regarding different coaching approaches. As a result, if you can't succinctly explain to a client's manager or SVP of HR the set of assumptions and beliefs that guide your coaching process you reduce your credibility as an OD professional.

3   When you understand and can articulate the mental models that guide your coaching practice you are able to intentionally add to your coaching arsenal new tools, techniques, resources, knowledge, and skills that are consistent with your theory base. In this way your coaching practice takes the form of a congruent approach, rather than a grab bag of unrelated techniques. Concurrently, your own personal development as a coach unfolds in an intentional and deliberate way.

Point 3: Executive Coaches Tend to Operate From One of Four Theoretical Models

The author contends that there are four theoretical models that are frequently applied to the practice of executive coaching; these are the clinical model, the behavioral model, the systems model, and the social constructionist model. To some degree, it can be argued that certain elements within each of these models intertwine at the level of practice. Thus, for example, a coach who operates from a clinical perspective may also be interested in tracking how progress in coaching is revealed changes in a client's day-to-day behavior. At the same time, these four models differ in fundamental ways, including how each model views the goals of coaching, how success in the coaching intervention should be evaluated, the types of data that are critically important to the assessment of coaching issues, and the roles that coaches play within their interventions.

The Clinical Model

I refer to this model as the "inside-out" model, because it takes, as its starting point, the assumption that the executive coach should focus the change process on encouraging internal changes on the part of the client, in terms of this individuals self-perceptions, personality, and (some would argue) world view. Within this framework, it's assumed that when certain "derailment behaviors" (arrogance, insensitivity, difficulty in forming work relationships) are displayed by a client, these problematic behaviors are merely symptomatic of some deeper underlying, dysfunctional patterns in the client's psyche. To uncover these patterns, coaching assessments and interventions may extend to include interviews and sessions with the client's spouse and family. Since the presented problems that brought the client to coaching are assumed to be part of a long-term dysfunctional psychological pattern, coaching is viewed as a long-term intervention. In the way, because the coach's focus is on the client's personality and self-perceptions, the coaching assessment tends to make extensive use of such tools as personality assessments and other psychometric instruments.

The Behavioral Model

The behavioral model takes a rather direct and truncated view of coaching. Instead of viewing coaching as a change process that takes place within the client's internal landscape, behavioral coaches work from the "outside in" to make substantial changes in the client's behavior. Accordingly, the presented problems or issues that initially drove the client to coaching are not viewed as being symptomatic of more salient underlying issues. Instead these problematic behaviors are taken at face value as representing those areas in which the coach should focus assessment and intervention. Following these assumptions, "success" in coaching is measured by comparing client's performance prior to, and after, participation in coaching. To gain a more granular view of the client's performance, the coach is more likely to eschew the use of psychometric assessment instruments, in terms of more behaviorally-focused diagnostic tools. These might include performance appraisals, 360° feedback, and structured questionnaires or interviews that provide multiple inputs on the client's behavior from the client, and the client's manager, peers, and direct reports. In addition, since behavioral coaches view the coaching experience in terms of behavioral change rather than on personal transformation, the coach will be less likely to engage in coaching assessments and interventions that extend into the client's personal life.

The Systems Model

Coaches who operate from a systems perspective place a high level of emphasis on understanding the organizational context in which a client's problematic behavior takes form. The guiding idea is that leadership behavior needs to be interpreted as one component of a series of enveloping causal patterns that exist within the client's organizational system. Other system elements include the types of goals and performance expectations that are set by the client's manager, the interpersonal and work relationships that stand as predominant components of this system, and even those organizational changes and shifting that introduce volatile change into the system.

Coaches who operate from the systems perspective attempt to identify those system elements that are influential factors in the client's leadership performance. Examples would include the presence of ambiguous or unrealistic goals on the part of the client's manager or senior-level executives, interactions between key peer managers, the presence of conflicting organizational priorities, and interacting (and sometimes conflicting) demands of key organizational stakeholders.

The coach also realizes that each organizational system may also contains certain shadow elements that are not always readily visible to direct observation. As an example, a leader may encounter friction with the work team that she inherits because team members continue to compare the leader unfavorably to her predecessor, who operated from a different leadership style. In this case, the former manager can be considered to be a part of the client's system, even if this individual is no longer employed by the client's organization.

In attempting to interpret these patterns, systems-based coaches focus their assessment on mapping, both graphically and verbally, those effective and ineffective patterns that characterize the client's interactions with other organizational members and system processes. A key challenge here involves assessing whether the presented coaching issues are, in fact, reflective of large-scale system issues. If, for example, a leader may be asked to engage in coaching because her recent 360° feedback data suggests that she is viewed by her direct reports as being a micro-manager. As part of the initial coaching assessment the systems-oriented coach might ask to compare the leader's 360°scores with those found for other organizational leaders. By taking this step the coach insures that the micro-management issue is unique to the client, as opposed to being reflective of broader leadership and organizational issues that may extend across the client's work section or department.

The Social Constructionist Model

The social constructionist model represents the newest model for executive coaching. As a result, in the author's view this model is not yet fully developed, although it holds great promise for coaching practitioners. Because the social constructionist model is relatively unexplored, the author has attempted to spend additional time delineating the key features of this model.

The guiding idea behind this model is that many of the OD constructs that we hold to be objectively real, such as the "ideal leader" are instead only social constructions. As such, a leader's behavior may have very different "meanings", depending upon how that behavior is differentially framed and interpreted by that leader, other organizational members, and the leader's coach.

Language is the vehicle we use for framing our experiences as organizational members. This concept has significant implications for coaching because it suggests that, as coaches, the language we use and concepts we employ dramatically shape the outcomes of the coaching process. More specifically, the language that we employ to frame or interpret our clients' experiences will help to either empower and affirm these leaders, or to encourage the client and other organizational members to view the client's behavior through the selective lens of dysfunction, deficiency, and pathology.

If this concept appears familiar, it's because social constructionism has also influenced the way we look at organizational change, through the approach known as appreciative inquiry (see David Cooperrider, Perter Sorensen, Jr., Diana Whitney, and Therese Yaeger, *Appreciative Inquiry, Rethinking Human Organization Toward a Positive Theory of Change*, 2000, or Ford 1999, 2002).

When people attempt to "make sense" of their social experiences, these social constructions are encoded through the use of *narratives*. That is, as organizational members we attempt to make sense of our organizational experience by reflecting back on it, through the telling and retelling of stories. We are affected both by the stories we construct and how, in turn, we are embedded in the stories constructed by others.

The same social events may be captured as completely different narratives as stories and told and retold by different organizational members and social groups. Within a narrative, certain organizational characters emerge as heroes or villains, with some elements of plot are ether emphasized, marginalized, or ignored. In addition, how we construct events chronologically becomes very important, because it gives clues as to how we view cause and effect in social interactions. Moreover, narratives are not static or fixed, but rather continue to evolve and change as they are retold and reenacted (Barner & Higgins, 2005).

Each organization is characterized, in part, by certain dominant narratives that shape that organization's culture. Ford (1999, 2002) refers to these narratives as the background conversations that exist as subtext to our daily interactions. These background conversations may involve such issues as race, gender, or lifestyle, and be subtly interwoven into the cultural fabric of our organizartions. As an example, two senior executives may debate whether or not a female manager is "too nurturing" to her staff to "take an aggressive lead", or whether this manager is "tough enough" to be ready for the next promotional level. In this case, the language in which discussion is framed may shed clues regarding important background conversations related to gender.

Coaches who employ the social constructionist approach do so by listening to the multiple narratives that emerge about their clients, as told by peers, reports, managers, internal customers, and the clients themselves. Taken together, these narratives form the context for how the client is "storied" by the client's organization. Coaches work with their clients to help them understand how these narratives influence the client's success as an organizational leader.

Because stories are not static or fixed, but are continually revised and reshaped through social experience, coaches encourage their clients to understand the role that they play as authors of their own experience. Clients are encouraged to understand how they can emerge as authors of their own experience, and shape the organizational narratives that they, as co-authors, help to create. At the same time, coaches simultaneously work with the client's manager and work team, to encourage them to look for and support leader behaviors that recast the client's narrative in a positive direction.

Point 4: Good Coaches Understand the Unique Advantages & Limitations That Accompany Their Coaching Models

It's the author's position that none of these four coaching models can claim a superior position in coaching practice. Each model represents its own unique set of advantages and disadvantages. Accordingly, a good coach is continually aware of the constraints and limitations that are associated with the use of a particular model. While it is outside the scope of this brief summary article to detail these respective differences (see Barner and Higgins 2005, 2007), a few illustrative examples are provided here.

The Clinical Model: One potential danger of the clinical model is that the coach may cross the line between providing coaching, and attempting to engage in clinical therapy. Once this line is crossed several problems emerge. First, in taking this step the coach may act in ways that are inconsistent with the expectations held by the client and organizational stakeholders. Another serious issue is that few coaches have the formal training and credentialing needed to properly address any deep-seated emotional or personality problems that may be encountered in coaching. Finally, coaches who attempt to act as therapists must consider how they will handle the issue of client confidentially, given that leaders who received executive coaching are not afforded the same protection regarding confidentiality of material that is usually extended to clinical psychologists and their clients.

The Behavioral Model: At the other end of the continuum, other caveats need to be applied when one is following a behaviorally based coaching model. One of these is the question of whether, by placing the

primary focus of attention on the client's overt behavior, the coach runs the risk of ignoring system constraints or broader personality issues that could substantially influence that behavior. The second caveat centers around the issue of organizational power. More specifically, the behavioral coach must honestly consider whether behavioral-change goals are owned by the client, or are externally imposed by the client's manager and organization. If the latter situation is the case, the coach faces the challenge of how to act in ways that respect the expressed needs of the client, and that keep the coaching intervention from degrading into a process that is directive and manipulative.

The Systems Model: When it comes to the systems model, an important caveat centers around the issue of organizational complexity. With respect to coaching, this means making certain that the system model that is mapped is truly representative of key system elements that influence the leader. For example, are all key organizational stakeholders incorporated into the map? An additional challenge involves the task of encouraging the client's manager and other key stakeholders to view themselves as influential factors in the client's success. This task may prove particularly challenging when the client's manager views the client as being entirely self-accountable for improving his or her performance. In addition, keep in mind that by definition, systems are fluid and ever-hanging entities For this reason, once they map the coach needs to be willing to continually refine this map, as new information becomes available.

The Social Constuctionist Model: If organizational experience is a social construction then coaches need to be cognizant of the fact that their interpretations of clients and their clients' organizational settings will be influenced by their own assumptions and cognitive filters. To correct for this, coaches need to be wary of attempting to inadvertently substitute their own interpretive perspective with that offered up by the client.

A second cautionary note is that, as has previously been mentioned, the social constructionist model is only now beginning to transferred from the field of family counseling (Freedman & Combs, 1991) to executive coaching. As a result, the basic principles that define and shape this theory position are only now being developed, and careful research and review will need to be undertaken before this model can be translated into clear guidelines for executive coaching practice.

Some Final Thoughts

The purpose of this presentation and supporting paper have been to prompt additional thinking with regard to how theory informs coaching practice. By taking the time to step back and reflect on those theory positions that form the underpinning of our own practice we become better able to communicate to our clients and their organizations those core beliefs that guide our coaching practice, and to practice our craft with intentionality and mindfulness.

Note: For additional information, please feel free to contact the author by e-mail at ibscribe@earthlink.net.

Suggested Readings

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