The Practice of Executive Coaching Requires Practice: A Clarification and Challenge to Our Field

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We feel the authors' link between psychotherapy and coaching is strong and valid. However, we feel further distinction is required between the types of skills and experiences that are common among industrial–organizational (I–O) consultants and those necessary to transition into executive coaching. Our anecdotal experiences with I–O psychology suggest to us that most applied I–Os are trained to be behavioral and organizational experts and practice as internal or external consultants. We argue that the typical consulting approach is substantively different from what the authors describe as the best-practice coaching approach, and as such, a distinction needs to be made among consulting, psychotherapy, and coaching. Furthermore, we recognize the unique combination of psychology and business expertise that I–Os offer, and as McKenna and Davis (2009) point out, there are critical ingredients to a successful coaching arrangement. We highlight the need for I–Os to seek additional training and practice in coaching specific skills that are client centered.

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Distinctions Among Therapy, Consulting, and Coaching

To help others understand the impending coaching process, executive coaches often make a general distinction among therapy, consulting, and coaching. Although all three practices are focused on changing the behavior of a client, there is a significant difference in the role of the ''expert'' in therapy, consulting, and coaching. More specifically, therapy focuses on resolving client issues or deficits with the therapist serving as an expert in diagnosing and treatment. The client looks to the therapist for answers, whereas an effective therapist, as McKenna and Davis argue, employs the four active ingredients to improve the client's state of being. An effective consultant performs a similar role in that she attempts to identify the root causes of organizational problems and, as an expert, offers the knowledge, experience, processes, or behaviors that the client is unable or unwilling to do on her own. A consultant is someone who has influence and expertise on a particular question to improve the client's condition (Block, 2000).

    In contrast to these approaches to changing clients' behavior, the executive coach serves as a facilitator with the *client* as the expert on the capacity for

change (Stober, 2006). The approach of a coach is typically evidence based, solution focused, and designed to help the client manage present and future challenges. To a large degree, coaches are not as much "experts" as they are "thought partners" (Eggers & Clark, 2000, p. 67). Effective coaches offer executives a sounding board and provide perspective and feedback as opposed to information or advice. We feel this distinction is critical, especially in light of McKenna and Davis' strong link between psychotherapy and coaching. I–Os are often trained and practice under this consultant model, in which we assume the role of the expert when interacting with a client, and provide them with specific contextual advice that is focused on solving a particular organizational problem. We argue this paradigm needs to be altered for the I–O psychologist to sustain a successful executive coaching career: I–O psychologists need to expand their skills to serve as an expert in the *process* instead of the *content*.

I–O-Specific Trends in Executive Coaching

We feel it is important to highlight two trends that emerge from the author's review and our experience in executive coaching. First, we believe effective coaching requires a client-centric approach to solving problems. As the focal article mentions, I–O psychologists are trained to be objective and variable centric not person centric. To determine whether an individual is ready, willing, and able to be coached, and to determine whether the individual is progressing satisfactorily, the coach must gather and compile data about the *person* using informal, subjective methods (Grove, Zald, Lebow, Snitz, & Nelson, 2000). This differs from our training: I–Os are taught to measure *variables* from large samples, often recommending solutions only when they have a high statistical probability of success. This presents a critical difference from coaching, in which success is often defined at the individual level and often

realized through subtle interventions. Clinical judgment and confidence in the nonlinear process of coaching can be just as much art as it is science. As many have argued, I–O psychologists are well positioned for coaching success, with our keen understanding and appreciation of business, psychological conceptualization, and assessment, which give us potential to excel as coaches (e.g., Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylyshyn, 1998; Tobias, 1996). However, others agree that no single discipline in psychology fully prepares someone to do executive coaching (Foxhall, 2002). To this end, we strongly agree with the need for deliberate and specific client-centered coaching training for I–Os interested in executive coaching.

As the authors note, there is an extensive body of psychotherapy research that is now commonly applied to the relatively young field of executive coaching (e.g., Stober, 2006). We agree, but as aspiring executive coaches seek out specific skill development, they should focus on building client-centered coaching experience. It is important to remember that just as there are many different approaches to psychotherapy (humanistic, psychoanalytic, behavioral, etc.), one can also approach coaching in many different ways. Of all the psychotherapy approaches, the humanistic counseling approach appears to emphasize the client-centered skills and beliefs that McKenna and Davis propose as critical for an effective coaching relationship (Stober, 2006). In contrast, the other modes of therapy (e.g., psychoanalytic, behavioral, cognitive, etc.) offer diagnostics and expert-driven interventions that are not shared with executive coaching methodologies. It is our worry that an I–O psychologist attempting to coach executives may be compelled to push their knowledge on processes, models, or other such assets on their clients, mirroring non-client-centered therapeutic approaches. As such, we urge I–Os interested in coaching to seek specific and deliberate client-centered coaching training and practice.

As I–Os seek to develop these client-centered skills, it is important to note that these are complex skills that go beyond training and require practice. For example, empathy is a commonly defined and a familiar construct for I–Os, but actually *being* empathetic to clients is a demanding and critical component of the successful coaching process. I–Os may be knowledgeable in describing what constitutes an empathetic response and be equipped to recognize it in others, but the practice of actually being empathetic—directly entering clients' worlds and identifying the meaning of their issues (Watson, 2002)—can be challenging and requires additional skills that are not taught in the I–O classroom or required when consulting. We feel that such coaching skills are successfully developed through a blended learning model that includes instruction or training, practice, supervision, and ongoing mentoring.

Challenges in Our Field

As executive coaching has grown from a function to a discipline, the I–O community needs to evolve with it, by ensuring we are well trained, establishing professional and ethical standards, positioning ourselves as industry leaders, and engaging in research that advances the science. We are confident McKenna and Davis would agree: I–O psychologists are well positioned to promote a field that has been criticized for being a dynamic and loosely defined construct (Sperry, 2008). We urge our I–O colleagues to apply our collective scientific expertise to become theoretical leaders of executive coaching by answering critical questions. What are the benefits of executive coaching to organizations and individuals? How can we effectively measure the success even with small samples of participants? What is the true return on investment as defined by scientific criteria (instead of the results often cited for marketing purposes)? What business issues are best addressed though coaching? When does coaching tend to create more issues then it solves? How can coaching be integrated with other talent management processes? What specific competencies should be incorporated when training effective coaches?

Our hope is to further the discussion of the role of I–Os in executive coaching by highlighting the need for specialized training, identifying practical shifts practitioners must make, and issuing a challenge for further research that advances the practice of this young field.

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