Do Theory and Techniques in Executive Coaching Matter More Than in Therapy?

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The purpose of this commentary is twofold: first, to argue that theory and techniques in executive coaching might matter more than in therapy, using insights from the psychotherapy literature itself, and second to argue that the active ingredients of therapy cannot be transferred to executive coaching without more empirical research.

Theory and techniques in executive coaching might matter more than in therapy. McKenna and Davis (2009) refer to the so-called dodo bird verdict in therapy, arguing that the differences in theories and techniques between coaching schools might have negligible effects. The factors that are common to all schools such as the environment of the executive are likely to matter more. Hence, they argue that it is important to understand and use the organization's culture, business demands, and social networks to improve executive coaching. One could even state, however, that the environment in executive coaching is more important than in therapy for two reasons: (a) One of the major differences between therapy and executive coaching is that several stakeholders are involved in executive coaching (Peltier, 2001) and most of these stakeholders would be classified as ''environment'' in the therapy literature, and (b) the purpose of executive coaching is not only to improve the professional performance and personal satisfaction of the executive but also to improve the effectiveness of his/her organization (Kilburg, 1996). Stated differently, the goal in executive coaching is also to improve the ''environment,'' something that is less likely to be the case in therapy.

The psychotherapy literature (Batson, 1975) revealed, however, that professional counselors/therapists are more prone to the fundamental attribution bias than nonprofessional helpers. The fundamental attribution bias is a phenomenon in which the observer tends to attribute an actor's behavior to stable dispositions, whereas the actor attributes his/her own behavior to situational factors. Coaches share professional characteristics with therapists that are argued to be partially responsible for their more biased judgments: They might have learned like therapists to formulate all client problems in language that emphasizes personal control and accountability (Avis & Stewart, 1976), and that it is easier to change clients than to change their social situations (Caplan & Nelson, 1973). The latter is, for example, partially echoed by McKenna and Davis when they write that ''we can't change the organization's culture'' (p. 248). Hence, it might be that coaches are also

more prone to the fundamental attribution bias.

The higher presence of the fundamental attribution bias with professional counselors/therapists than with nonprofessional helpers is an important finding as the error might discourage the development of a sense of competence and self-worth, which in turn may translate into feelings of powerlessness (Furnam & Ahola, 1989). In sum, this might result in lower counseling effectiveness (Chen, Froehle, & Morran, 1997) or, applied to coaching, to lower coaching effectiveness.

It seems, however, that it is primarily psychoanalytic when compared with behaviorally trained clinicians who perceive a problem as significantly more person based (Snyder, 1977). Royce and Meuhlke (1991) used the E-R-A model of Frey and Raming (1979) to test if the attribution of a problem is related to certain intervention strategies in psychotherapy. The E-R-A model classifies the goals, processes, and methods of psychotherapy by their emphasis on emotionality, rationality, or activity. Emotional strategies are based upon humanistic, Gestalt, existential, and experiential schools; rational strategies have a psychoanalytic and cognitive ground; and active strategies have a behavioral and systems theory base. The study revealed that internal attributions (the problem is credited to the person) were linked to rational intervention strategies, and stable attributions (the problem is a constant over time) were linked to active strategies. The selection of emotional strategies was not influenced by the previous two attribution variables nor by controllability (the problem is subject to one's volition). The study, which was in line with previous therapy research, implies that psychoanalytic and cognitive-trained coaches might be more likely to look for change inside individuals, whereas system and behavioral-trained coaches might be more likely to focus on changing the environment. Given the assumed higher importance of the environment in executive coaching, one can therefore wonder if there is not a bigger potential difference in effectiveness between the coaching schools. This would imply that the dodo bird verdict would be less applicable to coaching.

The active ingredients of therapy cannot be transferred to executive coaching without more empirical research. Before jumping to conclusions, however, McKenna and Davis among others, have argued that coaching is not therapy. There are five differences between both practices that could undermine the primary assumption that coaches, like therapists, suffer more from the fundamental attribution bias than nonprofessional helpers. First, coaches are, according to McKenna and Davis, better positioned than therapists to involve the working environment of the client. Research shows that psychology students with situation-oriented resources are more likely to perceive their roles to involve helping with situational problems and hence make fewer dispositional diagnoses than students having person-oriented resources (Batson, Jones, & Cochran, 1979). Second, Tetlock (1985) demonstrated that pressure to justify one's causal interpretations of behavior to others reduces and eliminates the fundamental attribution bias with undergraduates. This could mean that the type of confidentiality agreement between the coach and the organization might moderate the bias and the intervention strategies used. Third, research showed that no difference emerged between the behavioral and psychodynamic clinicians when the interviewee was described as a job applicant. The psychodynamic therapist, however, perceived the problem as more person based (Snyder, 1977) when the interviewee was depicted as a patient. This labeling effect is argued to result from the degree to which it triggers the ideology associated with the training of the therapists. In coaching, however, the executive is most often labeled as client, regardless of the specific training or theory by which one coaches, which would at least diminish a potential difference in being more prone

to the bias between coaching schools. Fourth, Batson (1975) showed that in cases where the helper had no prior diagnosis of the problem, he/she made more situation attributions (43%) than when he/she had such information (25%), and Snyder, Shenkel, and Schmidt (1976) revealed that problems that were presented as chronic clients' problems were more often viewed as being personality based by counsellors than were the "first time in therapy" clients' problems. Hence, the information provided by different stakeholders or tools executive coaches use might diminish or provoke the bias. Finally, the clients themselves might also play a role. If they appear highly credible, meaning the person has high awareness of his/her situation and can be trusted to honestly reveal this awareness to the counsellor, they receive more situation attributions (39%) than clients with low credibility (24%). Moreover, if they present their problems as more personal, it will result in more attributions toward them versus if they present their problems more as adjustment problems (Batson, 1975). As executives are high functioning profiles (McKenna & Davis), it might be that they are considered more credible and that they present their problems more often as adjustment problems rather than identity problems, which would diminish the bias.

Conclusion

We support McKenna and Davis in believing that much of the research in psychotherapy has a great deal to offer for executive coaches. Hence, therapy research was used to explore the role theory and techniques might have in executive coaching. It revealed that professional counsellors/therapists, in general, and certain theoretical schools, in particular, are more inclined to make the fundamental attribution error in their assessment of a problem than nonprofessional helpers. This biased assessment is linked to certain intervention strategies that will or will not involve changing the environment. Given

the argued higher importance of the environment in executive coaching, this might mean that certain theoretical schools and techniques in coaching might result in a higher success rate. Therapy is, however, not coaching, and in times of the current recession when mistakes have more severe consequences, I–O psychologists should be careful not to make the mistake that the active ingredients of therapy can be transferred to executive coaching without much more empirical research. Applying five counterarguments, we therefore argue that "the road to Dodoville needs paving with more than good assumptions" (Lowman, 2005, p. 90).

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