

It is already happening in the Fortune 500 boardrooms and is sweeping Europe. It's not therapy – but it is therapeutic. It is called coaching and it is process-derived (unlike mentoring which is pattern or content determined), and it's coming to a company near you.

As work is being performed in flatter and more distributed – often more temporary – configurations, executive coaching provides social glue that can bind teams together. It supports a style of 'knowledge work' and the move towards a service economy, helps transform managers into leaders, and is something that keeps personal development alive in the workplace. For alumni it can help identify and give focus to supporting programmes back in college.

Dialogue is at the heart of coaching. In an interview we find two people: one is typically a senior executive of a large corporation, responsible for a significant part of the business. The other is an executive coach – neither an employee of nor a technical consultant to that corporation. The executive has million-dollar-spend authority. The coach has no corporate authority whatever. But, by using only dialogue, the external coach exercises considerable influence. With neither formal authority nor direct accountability, the coach's greatest ambition is to profoundly affect the way that executive thinks and behaves.

Best Practice

Good coaching is difficult to do. In the practice of coaching, perhaps the greatest challenge is to engage the executive in a dialogue of emerging purpose. The disarmingly simple question, "What should we talk about?" can be hard to answer well. Thus, the coach often works with the executive as a kind of scout, whereby selection of an appropriate path is a mutual activity. Coaching is potentially high-impact and high-risk. Dire consequences can result from setting off in the wrong direction – disappointing to the executive and the business. In contrast, identifying the right path will reap high reward.

A good coach need not be an expert in the executive's job-type or industry. A good coach might not possess as wide a range of social skills as the executive. With a sound appreciation of business and interpersonal dynamics, a good coach is a process person who can establish rapport; is informed about the executive's immediate environment; is honest and courageous in providing feedback; is a good listener; asks good questions;

For a fortunate few outside the USA who have encountered it, executive coaching has provided a profound personal experience. To some it can seem little more than a cosy conversation, but when performed well, coaching offers a highly practical approach that integrates personal improvement in the individual with strategic development of the business.

Dr Laurence Lyons explains why coaching will be crucial in the new Millennium.

is visionary and analytical; and is a good planner who seeks follow-up and closure.

What's in it for me?

For the person being coached, the experience is invariably strategic. Coaching offers the executive a golden opportunity to step back and reflect on personal development. In expressly allocating precious work time, the coaching interview momentarily suspends the immediate pressures of the day and encourages that individual to think about 'just me'. From such a viewpoint, the coaching intervention is able to break the pedestrian logic of mere reaction and repetition. For once, the executive will take time to look dispassionately and proactively at more broad-brush issues in a far wider context. Work is within life; work is a part of life. In order that the executive may learn and develop at work, that individual must first understand where they are in their career and in their life.

Often reflection on one's purpose will validate or challenge the current position. Such consideration may encourage the individual to move forward or to move on. To the extent that coaching sensitises people to reflect and



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act in such a purposeful way it is strategic in nature – helping align the organization with the people who are in it.

Organisational Change through Team Development

In times of major organisational change, coaching often provides the necessary impetus for building and motivating teams. Team-coaching helps establish and then build a collection of individuals into a fully functioning business network. The resulting team unites people across functions and divisions, often



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including members outside the formal organization. Time and again, we have seen a team-coaching process motivate people to coalesce. Provided that the group contains that critical mass of people needed for the business to move forward, a nascent transition team starts to emerge. Many team members will have recently taken part in individual coaching sessions, and so will be ready strategically primed at the moment the team starts to form. When a foundation of trust has been established, the conditions for cohesion are in place and the team sponta-

neously ignites in a dialog of business improvement. Such teams are enthusiastic; such teams have solutions that will work; such teams are unstoppable. In this way, a well-designed coaching process encourages the coincidence of the right people, the broadest challenge, and an environment in which failure is not an option.

Coaching at the Top

Coaching plays a special role at the most senior level in the organisation (ie with the board or senior management team). Here issues are often motivational rather than technical. Technically, the coach will play a unique role in acting as interpreter by insisting that jargon gets transformed into business concepts that are commonly understood. In terms of motivation, members may differ significantly in their beliefs about the purpose of the business, and may hold conflicting expectations towards the meaning and measurement of success.

Then again, business owners may hold wildly different views about asset valuation and a preferred exit or merger strategy. Located at an intermediate level in large companies, divisional and regional boards often grapple with a particularly perplexing question: How can we find ways to add value from our unique vantage point in the overall structure? In all these cases, coaching offers yet another framework for dialogue. Coaching provides a climate within which vital, though seemingly intransigent, issues may be brought to the surface, confronted, and then dealt with. Coaching offers the senior team a practical tool to break any logjam that is in the way of progress.

Flexible Work

Perhaps it all started with the fax and the mobile phone. Then there was e-mail. Then came e-business and e-commerce. Now prepare for e-Work explosion. There is no need for trepidation as we enter into this new world. The Future Work Forum at Henley has been researching and discussing e-Work since 1990. That's because e-Work is in fact a new label for 'Future Work' – the interaction of communications and computer technology with business to create new forms of working.

e-Work becomes possible with new technology. We can now be equally – or often even more – effective when we substitute traditional elements in our work patterns for new ones. Everything in the '9 till 5 commuting to the office' style of work is now under



Dr Laurence Lyons.

threat. Provided that we are prepared to measure work in terms of results, not simply on methods, there is no reason we all have to all work on the same white-collar shift.

A new thoughtful breed of leader is emerging who typically contributes to a high-performance network or works within a diverse yet cohesive team. These successful people thrive on results. They have learned to replace the old hierarchical structure with their own merit-based system in which individual freedom and team responsibility are prized.

Coaching for Tomorrow

It can be as lonely at the periphery of a modern networked organization as it is at the top of a traditional pyramid. There may be genuine problems with talking too freely inside an organization, however flat or virtual it may be. Work colleagues become tomorrow's interested parties. Truly innovative concepts can sound like crazy ideas in the early stages and few executives want to take the risk of appearing foolish in public. Even private discussions can contain political topics which, when touched on even tentatively, could establish a position from which it is difficult to reverse. Leaders need a safe and supporting theatre or laboratory in which to rehearse and refine their ideas. Coaching meets this need.

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Parts of this article are excerpts from "Coaching at the Heart of Strategy" in *Coaching for Leadership: How the World's Greatest Coaches Help Leaders Learn* eds. L. S. Lyons, M. Goldsmith, and A. M. Freas (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, Spring 2000), which contains contributions from over thirty thought leaders in management and leadership.