

# **Social Construction on the Road to Transformation: Applying Rites, Rituals, and Play to Executive Coaching**

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## **Executive Summary March, 2010**

This study is based on interviews of nine executives and their coaches conducted in Spring/Summer of 2008. The coaches in the study all employed an ontological method of coaching based upon their training from Newfield Network. While this study focused on ontological coaching and coaches trained by Newfield Network, there may be application of the findings to other models of executive coaching, particularly those that recognize transformation as a goal of the coaching process.

Qualitative research methods were used in conducting the study. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of study participants. The researcher's guiding purpose was to listen deeply to what the coaching experience meant to the executive clients. The data emerged from the clients', and then the coaches', stories about their experiences with ontological coaching. The findings showcase powerful stories of client transformation. They also reveal discrepancies between coaches' and clients' interpretations of the coaching process that invite further exploration of the assumptions coaches and clients hold and what we can learn from them.

What follows is a summary of the main themes and findings. A complete copy of the study can be ordered from ProQuest Dissertation Express at <http://disexpress.umi.com/dxweb> (search for Stacey Larsen or order number 3388672). Questions, feedback, and dialogue are welcomed by the author at [Stacey@authenticedge.com](mailto:Stacey@authenticedge.com).

### *Satisfaction and Success*

Executives interviewed shared positive reactions to their coaching experiences. They felt they had learned a great deal and would recommend coaching to others. Similar to other studies, executives perceived coaching as unquestionably valuable (Seamons, 2006) and rated their experiences as very or extremely satisfactory (Hall, et al., 1999; McGovern, et al., 2001). Executives reported beneficial personal and professional outcomes from their coaching experience. Most significantly, executives' self-efficacy increased. They felt as though they were more effective leaders, and perceived that others' perceptions of them had improved. Coaching also boosted executives' levels of job and life satisfaction. They reported less stress and more confidence. At work, executives celebrated enhanced relationships and career/business success in the form of improved performance ratings, promotions, and reduced office conflict. They attributed much of their success to their coaches' assistance in building their emotional competencies. In particular, executives noticed an increase in awareness--of emotions they had and of behaviors they displayed that triggered negative perceptions of them by others.

Similar to other research findings, a significantly influencing factor in the executives' satisfaction with coaching was the rapport they had with their coaches (Seamons, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). The executives liked and trusted their coaches, seeing them as part educator, part counselor/therapist, and part person who held them accountable. Clients enjoyed and respected

the balance the coaches achieved between theory and practice, personal and practical outcomes, and compassion and challenge.

### *Powerful Stories*

These executive clients told powerful stories of personal transformation—attitudinal and behavioral shifts significant enough to prompt their colleagues and family members to comment that these executives did not seem like their usual selves.

At least six of the nine executives described dramatic changes in their outlook and behavior. As the executives told their stories, their language came alive with vivid description, metaphor, and emotion. For example, Rocco described himself prior to coaching as opinionated and defensive with his peers. He was a senior manager so miserable in his job that he got to the point where...

walking down the hall here at work, something as simple as saying good morning to a person I didn't know didn't happen....I'd just as soon spit in your face as to say hello. [After six months of coaching,] bottom line is that my day went from an adversarial, confrontational, you know, 10 hours a day, 12 hours a day of nothing but conflict to 'Hey, let's try something different'. (Rocco, personal communication)

With the help of his coach, Rocco started building relationships with colleagues on his team. "Instead of thinking [my colleague]'s an idiot and disagreeing with everything that comes out of his mouth, I [now] at least have the tolerance...to say, 'Wait a minute, time out...where are you coming from?'" (Rocco, personal communication). As Rocco's attitude changed, his communication became more effective. He had more energy and even began to like coming to work in the morning. "There's no doubt about it. (laughs) My blood pressure went down" (Rocco, personal communication). Rocco, like many other executives, said his willingness to change allowed him to build more trusting relationships with his colleagues.

In the first year of working with her coach, Elaina went from being held back from a promotion and told that she needed to work on her soft skills to having the highest 360-degree assessment rating on her boss's team and getting feedback about how fun and cooperative she is at work. Where she once was viewed as intimidating, she proudly stated, "I now seem to have a reputation for...being able to bring people together and to align people across the widest departmental differences" (Elaina, personal communication). Elaina said coaching made her more conscious of how her verbal and non-verbal communication comes across to people. She started to make some changes and the results have convinced her that coaching is "totally worth the ride" (Elaina, personal communication).

Executives told story after story of how significant changes in their attitudes and behaviors resulted in these leaders having more effective communication and more productive relationships in the workplace.

### *Transformational Learning?*

How was this shift achieved? The coaching process that executives and coaches described seems to correspond with the ten phases of Mezirow's (2000) transformational learning theory.

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of fear, anger, guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions

4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective (p. 22)

Executives' coaching experiences began with a disorienting dilemma or breakdown. Coaches helped clients increase their self-awareness by critically evaluating their assumptions about themselves, others, and the situations at hand. Executives confirmed that this self-examination was uncomfortable at times, especially as they dealt with emotions such as frustration, anger, and shame. Coaches helped their clients explore new ways of acting. Clients learned new skills and strategies, which they applied in role plays with their coaches and then in live interactions with coworkers. Each interaction was followed by a debriefing session, where executives learned from their successes and their mistakes and planned next steps. Executives' competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships increased with every successful interaction. Clients reintegrated their new perspectives and ways of being into their lives so successfully that coworkers and family members comments on the change.

While the data suggests transformational learning may have taken place in these ontological executive coaching relationships, the research findings also indicate a strong contrast between executives' and coaches' understanding of the executive coaching process. Coaches compared clients to heroes on a transformational journey, whereas clients described themselves as monsters and sinners. Though coaches encouraged a light, playful approach to coaching, clients continued to hold the view that coaching was hard work. Both coaches and clients said coaching was about building relationships, but the executives regularly used subtle language cues that implied they felt they were at war. Executives saw themselves as navigating minefields and obstacles in their organizations and their coaches as allies in the trenches with them as they planned their battle strategy.

The common thread among executives' references to monsters, hard work, and war was the role others played in their executive coaching experience. Others' negative perceptions motivated clients to commit to coaching, and societal expectations influenced executives' concept of an effective leader. Additionally, executives considered their interactions with others the hardest part of the coaching process. This focus on others demonstrated by the executives was strikingly absent from interviews with the coaches. When they discussed what occurs in coaching, coaches' focus was almost exclusively on their individual clients' mindsets and behaviors.

### *Looking Through a Different Lens*

Relatively little is known about the coaching process. There are few studies of executives' experiences with the process, and even fewer that compare the perspectives of both clients and coaches. This significance of this study is that it identifies contradictions between coaches' and clients' views of the coaching process and explores what they may mean. This study also adds new perspective to the coaching literature by complementing transformational learning with a social constructionist lens in order to arrive at a more complete picture of executives' experiences.

It is clear that executive coaching serves to improve clients' effectiveness in social interactions; yet social theory's influence on coaching theory and practice remains all but absent. Vicki Brock's (2008) study of coaching's origins and influences suggests that coaches' lack of sociological perspective applies to the coaching field as a whole, not just the coaches in this study. Brock found that coaches and coach researchers tend to rely on the theory base of their legacy field. Since most practitioners hail from business or psychology, theories and models from psychology have heavily influenced coaching, and the application of coaching has primarily occurred in the business sector. Only 1.9% of coaching practitioners surveyed by Brock identified sociology as having an influence on the field of coaching where the influence of psychology, business, adult learning, and philosophy was recognized by 21.9%, 44.6%, 8.3% and 7.6% respectively.

### *What Can We Learn from an Application of Social Theory?*

#### *Unintended Consequences*

One of the unintended consequences of coaching for executives in this study was that they came to view themselves as monsters or sinners. The change process began when executives took their coworkers' negative perceptions of them to heart and deemed their current management style as ineffective, unproductive, and essentially socially unacceptable. The executives declared they were willing to go through the pain of critical self-reflection and change their ways.

Coaches saw this as a natural part of the transformation process, the breakdown, where clients get to confront the fact that "they are part of the problem" (Steve, personal communication). What they don't realize is that the clients imagine their monsters accompanying them on their journey as personal, permanent aspects of their own flawed character. "You just let the monster out and you shook hands with the monster and now you have to live with the monster. You just married the monster. You know? And, now you just have to control the monster" (Angela, personal communication).

This dissertation applies Durkheim's (1957) theory of the sacred and profane, suggesting that the breakdown serves as an initiation rite of sorts into the coaching process. In fact, it may be necessary for executive clients to renounce their old, more production-centered (profane) management style in order to embrace a new, more relationship-centered (sacred) leadership style. The question is whether or not it is necessary for clients to take this so personally or to continue to carry this burden with them. These findings present an opportunity for coaches to develop an awareness of how clients may interpret the breakdown, and to consider how what they say and do as coaches may contribute to clients' perceptions.

#### *The Hard Work of Coaching*

The executive clients took coaching very seriously, every single one of them describing coaching as hard work. Coaches interpreted this seriousness as a mood, and were apt to suggest that clients practice self-compassion and approach coaching in a more playful way. Yet no matter how much the coaches redirected them, clients seemed to return to the notion that coaching is hard work. This is understandable, said the coaches, since the cultural discourse in corporate is hard working and serious. Perhaps there is another explanation.

Coaches described the difficult part of coaching as internal—overcoming strong patterns of habits and cultural discourse learned over many years. However, clients saw the most difficult

aspects of coaching as their external interactions with others. In fact, clients' main incentive for change was others' perceptions of them. Applying Goffman's (1967) theory of impression management, this dissertation attempts to reconcile these two views, exploring coaching as the sacred work of maintaining and protecting one's identity or reputation in social interactions.

Ontological coaches tended to resist the notion that there is a common formula or pattern for coaching, preferring instead to say that every interaction coaching experience with every client is unique. While this may be true, the data in this study revealed a set of ritual behaviors that the coaches taught their clients. This dissertation includes a model outlining the impression management ritual, where executives learned to become more aware of social cues and to adapt a new line of behavior more in line with the face they want to project as a leader. This ritual is in keeping with the ontological notion of a co-created reality between the clients and others with whom they interact; however, coaching homework is explained as practicing and applying the ritual in real life situations rather than finding ways to overcome one's habits.

The findings encourage coaches and coach educators, particularly in regard to ontological coaching, to reflect upon the distinctions between terms such as habit and ritual and the role that others play in coaching process. Perhaps changes in terminology and/or use of a new model could better reflect what executive clients experience and assist them in their learning.

#### *From Performance to Play*

Executive leaders in this study considered being perceived as sincere essential to their success in implementing a more relationship-centered management style. Executives described coaching as "honest work" (Mary, personal communication), and made it a point to distinguish themselves from disingenuous clients coaches might have.

It was one of the clients who posed the question, "How do you tell when [clients] are pretending?" (Rachel, personal communication). When asked, coaches took the position that there was no way to know and that it was not their role to judge. However, this study suggests that clients' use of language can provide clues to the depth of their sincerity, and that perhaps pretending is the first step clients take toward transformation. Some executives remain at that first stage, while others go beyond.

All executives professed to be sincere in their efforts to make connections with coworkers and build relationships and seemed to be genuinely interested in building relationships with others. However, careful analysis of the transcripts showed that the language of six of the nine was more self-oriented while the language of three was more other-oriented. In this dissertation, the more self-oriented executives are described as players (who successfully performed what they learned from their coaches), while the three more other-centered executives are described as engaged in play (who were able to go off script and improvise because they had internalized a new set of values and beliefs).

The concept of play here is redefined using Gadamer's (2006) definition of play as an other-centered way of being and interacting, as opposed to ontological coaches' current understanding of playfulness as a mood based on the work of Heidegger (1996). This study suggests, based on Hochschild's (1979) theory of emotional work, that executives may pass through three phases or stages as they progress: 1) strategically implementing the rules of a new relationship based management style, 2) attempting to "really care", 3) internalizing a new value system.

Those executives who engaged in play came to truly believe that others were their equals and that they were “only half of the conversation” (Angela, personal communication). The full dissertation provides specific examples of how the three executives engaged in play used little to no war language, showed reverence and appreciation for others rather than seeing others as things to be dealt with, expressed heartfelt emotions rather than keeping an emotional distance, and were less apt to appear formulaic or scripted. Interestingly, clients’ ability to reach a level of play did not correlate with the amount of practice they had. There were executives who had been coached for years that remained at stage one, while others who had been coached only six months reached stage three.

Executive clients were quite curious to know how their progress compared to others. It was also not clear to them whether or when coaching should end. These findings present the beginnings of a tool to gauge where a client is in the transformation process. They also offer an opportunity for coaches and clients to discuss more concretely the benefits that continued coaching might provide them and language with which to set goals for future work together.

### *Recommendations*

This study provides an opportunity for ontological executive coaches to both celebrate and reflect upon their practice. It validates the success of the coaching experience, and presents numerous opportunities where a new understanding of the coaching process and/or clearer distinctions in terminology could enhance the learning of executive clients. In addition, this study identifies:

- a need for further studies comparing coaches’ and clients’ perspectives of coaching
- a lack of application of social theory in the field of coaching
- a need for coaches to better understand and be able to clearly communicate the theories that underlie their coaching approach

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