

Executive Coaching for Seafarers

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Abstract

'If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind'. (Gibran, 1991).

Executive coaching, as a form of developmental intervention aptly reflects the wise words above of the Lebanese philosopher Khalil Gibran. However while coaching may be becoming widespread in some sectors, its application within the maritime field appears sporadic and restricted to shore personnel. Although the logistical and practical barriers inherent within this sector are real, there are strategies and modes of operation which will surmount them.

Coaches inevitably bring their own bias to any coaching intervention. This bias may show by the coach adopting one or more of a range of styles and approaches. The paper will offer an overview of three styles, namely person-centred, solutions-focussed and psychodynamic. A theoretical appreciation is offered together with examples of how these styles may present to the coachee.

Links between the so-called *human element*, and the resultant effect on safety at sea are well researched. This paper concludes that these links can be forged in a strong and demonstrable manner by a coaching intervention.

Keywords

Seafarers; Safety; Coaching; Personal development; Psychodynamic; co-active; solutions-focussed

1. Introduction

Cleggs, Rhodes and Kornberger (2003) maintain that 'business coaching is a growth industry'. The internet would certainly bear this out with a quick search indicating nearly 25 million hits. So, what actually is coaching? Does it work? And what should interested parties be looking for in a coach?

It may be argued that in some respects, the maritime world moves at a conservative pace and some changes take longer than others. It is also an industry, along with many others, where only things which can be measured get done, or perhaps more importantly, get paid for. Anecdotal evidence would indicate considerable and positive Return

on Investment for 'Coaching' ...but these returns may not be instantly gratifying and it may take time to reflect and realise the investment.

There was a time perhaps when to have a coach inferred a negative, almost remedial, intervention for staff who had fallen below expected performance. It was kept quiet. This view is now looking increasingly historic and coaching is becoming to be seen as an indispensable tool to get the best out of already high-performing staff. Corroboration of this is plain when the sports sector is examined – it is unthinkable for a professional team or individual to be without a coach and, in many cases, several – for different aspects of performance.

Since there are no internationally recognised standards or practices, terms and expressions have definitions at polar opposites. The two words most often interchanged are 'coach' and 'mentor' and, for the purposes of this paper, the following definitions will be used.

2. Definitions

Coaching facilitates the solution of problems through the efforts, skills and knowledge of the coachee. Coaching is the process of 'equipping people with the tools, knowledge and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective' (Tobias, (1996) cited by Peltier, (2001)). Although there needs to be caution against the wholesale use of sports analogies in a business setting, there are some parallels. Whitmore (2004) cites Gallwey (1986) in his book 'The Inner Game of Tennis' who describes coaching as 'unlocking a person's potential to maximise their own performance. It is helping them to learn rather than teaching them'. Using this definition the coach does not need close knowledge of the coachee's area of work, though sometimes this may prove useful.

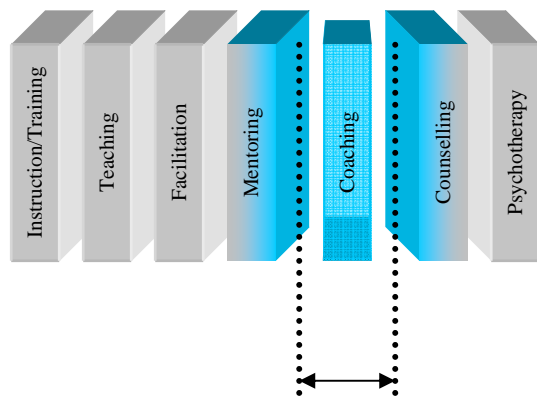
On the other hand a mentor is one who shares both political (meaning intra-organisational) and professional knowledge with the mentee. In other words, the mentor is able to help, guide and assist the mentee in navigating the workplace both operationally and strategically. This is the sort of support that is probably expected by cadets or trainees when they first go to sea.

3. Coaching Skills

To quote the International Coach Federation (ICF), coaches should 'provide an ongoing partnership designed

to help clients produce fulfilling results in their personal and private lives'. (www.coachfederation.org). This definition is of course open to challenge since many coaches and coachees draw boundaries around the areas which are to be addressed and it is usually common to stay focussed on work issues. Furthermore it is a measure of the coach's skill that he/she should be able to recognise when the relationship is moving beyond coaching and into areas where additional help may be required (see Fig. 1). ICF also maintain that '...coaches are trained to listen, to observe and to customize their approach to individual client needs. They seek to elicit solutions and strategies from the client; they believe the client is naturally creative and resourceful. The coach's job is to provide support to enhance the skills, resources, and creativity that the client already has' (ibid). This definition describes well what is at the heart of a coaching relationship.

Figure 1: Range of Interventions



Source: anon

There are many different types of 'intervention' ranging from didactic training and instruction at one end of a scale, to psychotherapy at the other. These scalar extremes are not coaching territory simply because it's most unlikely the coach is qualified to operate there. Instead the coach occupies that narrow band as shown in Fig. 1 and part of his/her skill is to recognize when the boundaries are being reached and, crucially, what then to do about it.

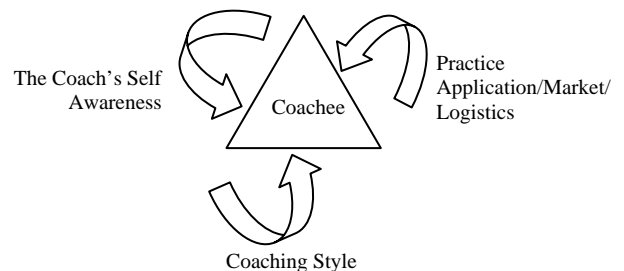
As with many emerging disciplines (although this has been around in various guises for more than twenty years) there is a risk that some may adopt the mantle of 'coach' with insufficient background knowledge, learning and skill. The lack of regulation and international standard means that anyone can set themselves up as a coach. It's a case of *caveat emptor* – let the buyer beware - when it comes to selecting a coach. By the same token, those who are setting out as coaches should recognize that this is not something to undertake lightly. Poor coaching may be worse than no coaching.

4. Theoretical Considerations

This section examines three of the theoretical concepts which inform coaching. These three positions are not exhaustive but do give an indication of the areas in which this discipline is embedded.

- person-centred
- cognitive-behavioural (or solutions-focused) coaching and
- psychodynamic

Figure 2. Protecting the space



Source: Western (2005)

Fig. 2 aims to show the dynamics at play within a coaching paradigm. At the centre of everything is the client, or coachee. Other factors include the degree to which the coach themselves understands their own position and how well they know themselves. Plainly, the theoretical position – the style – of the coach will influence the event and, lastly, coaching takes place against a commercial backdrop and this has to be factored in. The whole model allows a 'space' where learning can be encouraged and fostered.

The paper will move on to describe, in brief, three of the more usual coaching styles starting with person-centred coaching.

4.1 Person Centred

This approach to coaching has its roots in person-centred psychotherapy developed by Carl Rogers (1902–87) in the last century. Person centred coaches would start 'from the assumption that both they and their clients are trustworthy' (Thorne, 1983). In an interesting slant, Western (2005) highlights the socio-political and cultural context of the 1950s and 60s in the United States and suggests that this was fertile ground for a theory with this provenance to flourish. He maintains that it was the right time to 'experiment and focus on personal growth' (ibid).

Rogers (1961) believed in the supremacy of the individual and projected an almost evangelistic zeal in support of this position: '...evaluation by others is not a guide for me. The judgements of others...can never be a guide for me...only one person can know whether what I am doing is honest, thorough, open, and sound, or false and defensive and

unsound, and I am that person...I cannot relinquish [the weighing of evidence] to anyone else.' (ibid)

That approach (reflecting his own persona), he of course applied to everyone else too. Thorne (1983) posited that people in good psychological health will be those who have been allowed to be in touch with their 'deepest experiences and feelings without having to distort or censure them'. Thorne (1983) uses Rogers' terminology - fully functioning - to describe this state. It manifests itself in 'openness to experience' (Rogers, 1961) and an ability to take life and live it to its fullest potential.

Given the potential of these almost ethereal heights of human performance it is probably not surprising that coaching appropriated the theory in an attempt to improve business performance along with everything else.

Rogers (1961) maintains that expertise in others is irrelevant and that the 'only learning which significantly influences behaviour is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning' (1961). Arguably it would be possible to mount a challenge to this Rogerian philosophy. For instance, and within the maritime sector, a perhaps flippant response would be to pray the canal pilot did not learn his trade at the Rogers' Navigation School. Perhaps the expertise of the pilot is something we might welcome. Flippancy aside, this counter argument is probably an unfair and harsh position. Rogers was in fact preparing the ground for action-centred and experiential learning which, it may be argued, have indeed become important touchstones for pedagogy in the 21st Century.

A practising Rogerian coach, Greg Mulhauser, explains some of the techniques he espouses under three main headings of empathy, acceptance and authenticity (Mulhauser, 2006). Empathy - the idea that the coach can get inside the skin of the coachee and experience things as the coachee experiences them - is, arguably, not limited to person-centred coaching.

Acceptance refers to the ability of the coach to unconditionally accept the 'inherent value of a human being, without conditions' (ibid). That is not of course to say that a coach has to accept unconditionally the behaviours of a client.

Authenticity, Mulhauser argues, means 'sharing appropriate reactions and responses with [the client] rather than hiding those reactions behind a professional façade' (ibid).

4.2 Cognitive Behavioural Coaching (Solutions Focussed)

Cognitive behavioural coaching (CBC) has its roots in Pavlov and the positivist school of psychology. It was developed mainly by American psychologists (Watson, 1919; Skinner; 1948, 1971, 1976; Bandura, 1969, 1977)

who were concerned that cognitive psychology per se was inherently immeasurable and therefore unscientific.

B F Skinner (1904 - 1990) was arguably the most well-known and most controversial behaviourist. He coined the term 'operant conditioning' and argued that a person's behaviour could be controlled by judicious use of stimulants and reinforcers. Bandura (1969) built on the theory by adding a social dimension. He observed that a person doesn't have to experience reinforcement to learn. As an example: we are quite happy to accept our parents' advice that to walk off the top of the cliff is dangerous.

Neenan and Palmer (2001) point out that CBC doesn't try to supply answers to people; rather it provides a structured framework (or a 'collaborative process called guided discovery' (2001)) within which clients can find their own solutions. This is achieved by, amongst other things, using a Socratic questioning style designed to 'promote insight and rational decision-making' (ibid).

CBC is systematic and prescribed. CBC coaches may use a range of models to work step-by-step through clearly defined issues. Wasik (1984) cited by Neenan and Palmer (2001) developed a 7-step model; see Table 1.

Table 1. CBC Coaching Model: Wasik (1984)

| Steps | Questions/Actions |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Problem identification | What is the concern? |
| 2. Goal selection | What do I want? |
| 3. Generation of alternatives | What can I do? |
| 4. Consideration of consequences | What might happen? |
| 5. Decision making | What is my decision? |
| 6. Implementation | Now do it! |
| 7. Evaluation | Did it work? |

Another performance management model, John Whitmore's GROW (2004) (Goal, Reality, Options, Will), is also used extensively by coaches with this style.

4.3 Psychodynamic

As we have seen, particularly in person-centred coaching, 'feelings' are crucial in coaching. They are positively central to the process when the coach is employing a psycho-dynamic approach. The validity of feelings as measures of management performance is sometimes challenging to defend. The reason for this may be that feelings are quintessentially subjective, inherently fickle and famously difficult to measure or quantify. In their research of coaching in Australian businesses Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger found that many coaches 'described their work in relation to emotions - most commonly in terms of emotional intelligence' (2003). Interestingly, the Australian researchers' language avoids much of the psychodynamic phraseology which is prevalent in other research (Peltier, 2001; Klein, 1932;

Freud, 1900) yet the fundamental building blocks of a psychodynamic approach are discernible.

A psychodynamic approach to coaching starts with a blank sheet. It is this sense of 'not knowing' that differentiates it from other schools of coaching. Western (2005) describes it in the following way:

- "...not seeking premature disclosure
- allowing for the unconscious...
- acknowledging that not all results are immediate or obvious
- being curious about the process – looking awry"

Source: Western (2005)

An important psychodynamic concept is that of the Third Position. It refers to a shift from the dyadic relationship and linear approach (coach/client) encountered in goal-centred strategies to a more complicated dynamic in which a third position is opened up - the oedipal triangle. In Freudian terms it moves the relationship from the maternalistic paradigm to one where a paternal influence now enters the dynamic. Thus a third partner materialises and enables observation of the relationship from without.

Peltier argues that despite being rooted in psychodynamic therapy, 'many of the essential rules and conventions are violated in executive coaching' (2001). Specifically, he has a diametrically opposed view from Western and maintains that psychodynamic coaching is 'goal- and action-oriented...' (2001).

4.4. Does coaching work...?

Proving there is benefit to individuals is (relatively) straightforward and can be gleaned from direct questioning and observation of behaviours. There is extensive literature to substantiate this claim.

Evidence of benefit to organisations and a return on investment is the holy grail of the coaching profession. Logically if the separate parts of an organisation show improvement, then the synergy should move the organisation as well. In summing up their research into Australian coaching interventions, Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger conclude (2003):

'In summary, business coaching is emerging as a potentially valuable form of organisational intervention, yet one that is only in its infancy in terms either of having a clear conception of what it is trying to sell as a product, or in terms of being able to define what the parameters of best practice and identity are for the industry' This quote sums up succinctly the case for coaching in Australia and probably elsewhere too.

5.0 Practicalities

Many coachees will be engaging in this process for the first time. Understandably there may be ignorance of the expected process and, perhaps more importantly, how the adopted or inherent style of the coach may affect this. There are some basic ground rules that all coaches should follow. In general the following core competencies form a basis for any relationship.

5.1 Establishing the ground rules

The 'ground rules' in any coaching intervention include consideration of ethical and professional standards. The coach should use the initial session to build a relationship. This will involve a degree of intimacy and trust which is much more powerful than may be found in a normal facilitator role. It is also crucial that a 'contract' between coach and coachee is negotiated. This will usually include a commitment to confidentiality. A coach's remit and focus of work is far removed from that of clinician or confessor. Furthermore the coach, though aspiring to the highest ethical standards, is not bound by Hippocratic or other oath. Thus it should be explicitly declared that the coach will take whatever steps are necessary if they learn of illegality or other impropriety through their coaching interventions. Both coach and coachee must feel comfortable about walking away from the relationship if that is in the best interest of the coachee. Recognising that this may be appropriate action is an essential awareness on the part of the coach.

5.2 Communication

Seminally important to the success of any coaching event is effective communication. Above all the coach must be skilled in active listening. His/her questioning should be measured, appropriate and impactful. They should be directed towards reaching objectives, the facilitation of learning, creation of awareness, action planning and progression. Interruption is unusual, though sometimes practised, particularly in co-active coaching (not addressed in this paper), and coaches may sometimes use it with positive effect. Effective coaches will have rehearsed 'closing out' strategies which can be adapted and tailored to the event. If the coach (or coachee) perceives an insuperable problem with the dynamic and seeks a premature ending of the relationship, the coach must have an effective exit strategy planned.

While some of the points above can be discussed prior to commencing a coaching programme, many of them may not surface until the process is well underway. Under the circumstances, it is as well for coachees to try and find out as much about their coach as possible before committing to a long programme. Word of mouth, though subjective, is sometimes relied on.

Even then, the problem remains that coaching is a very personal experience and the coaching style that suits one person is not necessarily the same for everyone.

6.0 Research Findings

The (UK's) Chartered Management Institute (CMI) has indicated that Coaching as a learning and development tool is growing (Jackson, 2007). While 41% of small organisations undertook coaching activities in 1996 this had increased to 74% by 2000. The 2002 Coaching at Work survey carried out by the Chartered Management Institute supported by Lloyds TSB showed that 80% of organisations now have Coaching Programmes in place (ibid). Despite this impressive figure, there is little evidence to show that the maritime sector is enjoying the same exposure.

Jackson (2007) goes on to say the study also showed that the main reasons for using coaching are:

- supporting structural change
- staff motivation
- demand from managers
- retention of staff

These qualitative measures are backed up on the Jackson website by a range of quantitative findings which would indicate overwhelming positive impact.

A 2000 issue of The Industrial Society's "Managing Best Practice" series focussed on Coaching (Jackson, 2007). The report highlighted the 'human element' improved by coaching. These included:

- improvements in individuals' performance/targets/goals
- increased openness to personal learning and development
- helps identify solutions to specific work-related issues
- greater ownership and responsibility
- developing self-awareness
- improves specific skills or behaviour
- greater clarity in roles and objectives
- corrects behaviour/performance difficulties

7.0 Maritime Application

To demonstrate the links between safety at sea and coaching the paper will explore first some work done by the United Kingdom's Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) on leadership. They published a pamphlet in 2004 called 'Leading for Safety'. In their website introduction to the work, they say:

"There is well-established research both in the maritime and other hazardous industries that confirms the huge impact of leadership on the safety of operations. Whilst the International Safety Management (ISM) code has been

a major step forward in improving safety standards, its effectiveness depends heavily on how leaders approach its implementation, and this in turn depends heavily on the skills and qualities of leaders – both at sea, at the ship-shore interface, and on-shore.

Virtually all maritime leaders want to do their best for safety, this is not in doubt. But sometimes real life makes things difficult – time pressures, economic constraints and everyday circumstances sometimes seem to conspire against good safety leadership. [Leading for Safety] is based not just on theory but also on real life, including consultation with over 65 seafarers and shore managers about everyday safety leadership challenges. You will see that some of it is common sense, but nearly everyone can benefit from a reminder...what really counts is how leaders behave in everyday situations. Your crews will draw inferences about your safety leadership based on what they see you do and what they hear you say, far more than what you might declare in a speech or a written communication." (www.mca.org)

The MCA publication drives home the crucial importance of developing so-called 'soft skills' in support of a positive safety culture. It argues that an awareness and use of these skills is linked inextricably with the striving towards Safer Lives, Safer Ships and Cleaner Seas.

So it is in this vein that coaching is contextualised. These underpinning concepts, so well espoused by the MCA, of empathy, understanding, respect, communication and listening, inter alia, are congruent – indeed intrinsic - with the delivery expected by a competent and confident coach.

Masters, Chief Engineers and other officers, particularly those newly promoted, may find themselves in a lonely position. They handle unusually demanding situations and may face operational and strategic problems for the first time in their careers which give rise to complex and uncomfortable feelings. These are not usually the thoughts they can offload to a Company Superintendent. A coach is ideally placed in these situations and can provide the sort of support which their colleagues ashore, in equally challenging situations, are beginning to take for granted.

At the same time there may be officers in senior positions who tend towards over-confidence and whose leadership style, zeal and enthusiasm brings with it a different set of challenges upon which to reflect critically.

These behavioural 'blind spots' lead to poor decision-making with serious consequences for staff relationships, crew morale and, ultimately, safety at sea.

Over confident, under confident and all points between - those in stressful and critical positions at sea may well find a coaching intervention appropriate and effective in addressing these issues.

7.1 Practical application

Coaching is normally offered as a programme of sessions at a frequency to be mutually agreed but, typically, one per month for six months. In offering this to seafarers there are of course, the logistical challenges to overcome. It would be possible to build a coaching programme around a person's leave pattern with intermediate sessions being conducted by telephone.

In executive development it is seldom that coachees can take time out for face-to-face sessions. When this happens telephone coaching is used and it proves highly effective. It is used routinely and successfully as a mainstream intervention in multi-national companies to support executives in far-off places.

7.2 Other personnel

Furthermore, it may well be company policy to develop their Masters and Chief Engineers to be the coaches of junior officers on board. While this may seem at first glance an effective policy there are many factors to discuss.

Firstly, there is the personal development of the senior officers – not everyone is suited to be a coach and people really must want to do this in order to be effective.

Secondly, the hierarchical power dynamic which operates on most ships (for the very best of reasons) may not lend itself to the true spirit of coaching.

For example, there may be a case where, say, a junior officer is being bullied by his or her senior officer. The senior officer may also be the junior's coach. It is plain that the likelihood of meaningful dialogue and a positive relationship between the two is slight.

That is not to say, of course, that coaching skills cannot be introduced, practised and utilised in other one-to-one engagements such as annual appraisal meetings. The power relationship may never be lost between, say, Master and Officer, but at least some of the techniques discussed above may make the interaction more effective.

8.0 Conclusion

Coaching is having a sweeping effect across many sectors of industry. Parsloe and Wray (2004) argue that we are in the midst of a 'revolution in thinking'. The opportunities to develop own behaviours and working practices in ways that would hitherto have been unthinkable are with us and are being exploited positively to great effect. It is a disservice to seafarers if they remain excluded.

Coaching is already seen by many organisations to be a cost-effective and sustainable method of synergising the power and intellect of their executives and senior operatives. Managers at sea face the same and potentially worse problems as their counterparts ashore. Time is

getting shorter, the job more complex and bureaucracy threatens to swamp us all.

Coaching would never claim to have the answers – they lie within the minds of seafarers and others – but it does offer senior personnel a thinking partner and a sounding board which could support sound decision-making and improved performance.

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