

# Consultants at Work

## Thinking about Consultancy

From time to time, we will share some thoughts about current themes in our consultancy experience which we hope will resonate with others who, whatever their roles might be, are thinking about similar issues.

Coaching is one such issue which continues to preoccupy us. Our clients want to talk about it and so do our colleagues. There was a time when the word itself would not have been seen as an accurate or appropriate term to describe the consultancy relationship between one executive and an external consultant. It is now common place, there is little embarrassment and indeed, there is often a noticeable pride when people talk about this particular kind of relationship.

## The Ascent of Coaching

Increasingly, we wonder out loud with our consultant colleagues whether any of us can pin down the reasons for the rise of coaching in the past five years. At one level, it is quite clear that the trend to use Life coaches in the USA has made its natural journey across the Atlantic. Does that also explain the increased commitment to executive coaching?

When we talk about coaching here, we are making specific reference to executive coaching. It is not that the wider issues dealt with by Life coaches are not valid; it is not that the debate between client and coach in that relationship cannot be a potentially rich and rewarding one, but we hold a firm boundary between the two because we are unconvinced that a client organization should pay our fees to help one or more of its employees resolve highly personal issues. Of course if a person is troubled by issues at home, these are likely to spill over into their role at work. We therefore feel a duty of care to identify and take appropriate action when an individual is in distress psychologically.

It may be that the rise in coaching is an outcome of the various high profile failures of corporate governance over the past ten years. It could be that some of the lessons learned pointed to the absence of the 'critical friend', the objective outsider, the commitment to learning. Or perhaps the checks and balances which were deemed to have been missing might have been available to the boards of these failed companies and to some of the individual members if a coaching programme had been in place.

It may also be a recognition that leaders at all levels of organizations are often surrounded by technical advisors and specialists, but that sometimes they may need a sound and reliable relationship with a disinterested third party who is simply there to help the executive to be more effective in their role. It is this exclusive focus on the professional needs and concerns of an individual which characterizes the coaching relationship.

What is clear to us is that if an organization decides to use the services of external coaches, there are several important issues which need to be explored, resolved and declared. The first and most obvious is to agree what purpose coaching serves in the realization of the goals fundamental to an organization's purpose. Where too, is the locus for change? If a particular level of managers is targeted to be the beneficiaries of coaching, have they been given the levers to push through

significant changes? What added value is coaching likely to have? What are the challenges faced by the organization which all those having coaching and all those offering coaching must understand and work through?

Another issue to be explored and declared is to consider how the knowledge and experience generated through multiple coaching relationships can be translated into high level thinking which is accessible to the wider organization and ultimately capable of creating a distinctive competitive advantage.

The antecedents of many approaches to coaching lie in the psychological therapies. The purpose of these is to develop insight and understanding of self and others and to learn from experience. Just as it is in the therapeutic relationships, increased insight is not enough in the coaching relationship; whatever is learned has to make more meaning and eventually make a difference to the quality of behaviour and the quality of thinking, usually manifest in inter personal relationships and in decision making.

One of the key tensions within the coaching relationship is how to demonstrate this link between the individual's development and the imperatives set for the development and change of the organization and to do so within the bounds of the confidential relationship. What does need to happen is that the individual client, whoever pays the coach's fee and the coach start the process by declaring in broad terms what the agenda is and to anticipate potential difficulties with confidentiality.

Coaching is neither theory free nor values free. The purpose of the relationship is to work towards change. What both parties feel about change and development will inevitably influence events. Coaches and their clients should also be quite clear how they regard the particular privileges and responsibilities attached to the coaching relationship. In an ordinary assignment working with the client and others, both the inputs from the consultants and the outputs generated by the process are generally available for most people involved to know and to debate. In the coaching relationship, it is important for both parties to recognize where the boundary lies between the private and public aspects of this learning.

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