

Executive coaching strategies for leading in turbulent times

Coaching is in heavy demand but organisations are constrained by the current financial crisis. **Erik de Haan** examines the market and how the situation can be resolved

Executive coaching is establishing itself as an organisational and management development intervention of choice. What was once very personal has now become what is most relevant for performance in leadership roles – witness the growing interest in transformational and relationship theories of leadership and the importance attached to emotional and spiritual intelligence.

Nowadays, leaders are required to be in touch with and able to express their deepest personal wishes, feelings and doubts. Executive coaching is the strategy *par excellence* for enabling and deepening this understanding. Furthermore, one-to-one conversations are the only organisational or management development (OD/MD) interventions that have demonstrated substantive effectiveness beyond doubt.

However, while executive coaching gains ever more credibility and popularity, no-one can escape the fact that our society is embroiled in the deepest recession of our lifetimes and that the coaching profession is one of the sectors worst affected. After all, executive coaching is the most expensive of all OD/MD interventions, since the time of the coach will be exclusively devoted to a single leader or, in rare cases, to a small leadership team.

There is increasing tension between the rising status of executive coaching and an economic climate where executive development budgets are being slashed. More and more leaders seek the experience of working with a coach, particularly in these anxious and turbulent times, while their organisation cannot afford them that support.

In response to this dilemma a variety of creative solutions is being found. More people than ever are preparing for the eventual “upturn” by applying themselves to serious coaching development programmes such as our own Ashridge MSc in Executive Coaching.

Pricing pressure is also leading to the flourishing of internal coaching programmes with external coaches being less frequently hired in their capacity as coach and more often in a capacity of a “consultant” to develop a “coaching culture” that promotes coaching styles internally or as a “supervisor” for a whole community of internal coaches.

Our own Ashridge Centre for Coaching has recently been asked by organisations as diverse as consultancies, global professional services firms and government bodies to help them supervise their internal coaches and we have noticed that a growing number of internal coaches are becoming formally accredited and so are developing themselves to the highest standards of professionalism.

What in my view has been less noticed but is highly pertinent here is the kind of help that the coaching profession can offer in times of turbulence, conflict and uncertainty.



More people than ever are preparing for the eventual “upturn” by applying themselves to serious coaching development programmes



This help is essentially threefold in my view:

- **First**, coaches will be well trained to listen, summarise, support, offer hypotheses and build confidence – all the usual things that coaches are reputed to do so well. They really help to prepare for, anticipate, understand and change the increasingly challenging and confusing dilemmas of business leaders.
- **Second**, one would hope that coaches, through their training and experience in conversation, have acquired a sophisticated expertise in working through critical moments and conflict as these happen.
- **Third**, the counselling and coaching professions have overcome decades of divisions and rivalries between competing schools of thought and they have now entered into an era of rapprochement among themselves. Rivalries between schools are being transformed into curiosity about how others conceptualise and work with those challenges that everyone recognises.

In particular, some 21st century approaches to coaching and counselling can be credited with focusing on the commonalities between the schools and on the “common factors” that underpin them all. This is what I would call the “relational turn” exemplified by a range of integrative models of executive coaching and also by the emergence of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council as a platform for bringing together a very diverse group of coaching practitioners.

The essence of this relational turn is that, just as in psychotherapy, there is a good chance that any professional approach to executive coaching works and that all work equally well although it matters to what extent you yourself believe in your approach. In other words, “allegiance” is much more important than “adherence”. Again, just as demonstrations in psychotherapy have shown, various approaches and theories share all the factors that really matter, such as time for conversation, interest and warmth, rapport, a positive expectation and so on. A hugely important factor is the quality of the relationship between client and coach. In fact, it is the relationship while engaging in a coaching session that is the only one of all these “common factors” that coaches can enhance and improve from moment to moment and from session to session.

Most coaches recognise and agree upon the importance of the relationship in coaching. This broad container called “relational coaching” is now energising, inspiring and uniting a new generation of coaches who are finding a common point of focus and a common route into their coaching conversations and into the wonders that take place in them.

In my view the progress that has been made in reconciling professionals from the counselling and coaching professions is hugely relevant for

“”

We can be opinionated, partisan, even dogmatic as long as we are willing and able to consider our convictions and beliefs from entirely opposing perspectives

leaders and HR professionals. The large organisations of today that find themselves in a siloed and competitive marketplace could do well to learn not only from the direct experience of working with executive coaches but from the mediating developments of the last decade that have brought together so many executive coaching professionals.

In summary, I believe that the recent history of executive coaching teaches business leaders a positive way to transform conflicts:

- Inviting them to reflect on the anxiety and turbulence they experience from a range of perspectives
- Recognising that every viewpoint is of equal “value” and that no view or position is intrinsically “better” than any other
- Valuing the common factors, such as allegiance, the conviction one often experiences regarding one’s approach or point of view
- Teaching that common factors such as commitment and allegiance can be explored and exploited further to make them stronger leaders

Essentially, this form of conflict resolution is a bit like realising that an annoying or obstructive colleague is actually also a loving member of his own family in his personal life, where he looks rather similar to ourselves.

What this means for our own attitude is that we are willing and able to consider other ways of looking at the world. We can be opinionated, partisan, even dogmatic – as I believe I have been with regard to relational coaching – as long as we are willing and able to consider our convictions and beliefs from entirely opposing perspectives. This can always be possible as long as we can take a stance towards our own convictions which smiles at them, mocks them... and transforms them into sources of compassion.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Erik de Haan is Director of Ashridge Centre for Coaching, UK.