

# Change through executive coaching

**Erik de Haan** and **Christiane Nieß** discuss their research into the impact of executive coaching interventions on organisations

**B**illions of dollars are spent every year on executive coaching, according to prominent sources (in November 2004 the *Harvard Business Review* estimated the global market to be around \$1bn, and growth rates since then have been consistently estimated at 20 per cent a year or more<sup>1</sup>). Larger figures are spent on internal coaching services and on coaching skills training of leaders and coaches alike.

How do we know this is money well spent? How do we know that our great investment and enthusiasm in executive coaching does indeed lead to positive change in organisations? Clients of coaching are usually very satisfied with the service<sup>2</sup> and why wouldn't they be? Who would not enjoy 'a good listening to'? Who would not relish the opportunity to go over work-related issues and concerns with a sympathetic and friendly other?

But when it comes to a real, measurable improvement of clients that can be directly

attributable to their experience of coaching – improvements that lift their successes above those of a 'control group' in similar circumstances without the access to executive coaching – results are much more sporadic, although they are still indicating significant positive change, albeit to a much less substantial degree<sup>3</sup>.

So how can we be convinced that executive coaching investments are well placed and enjoy the kind of return that organisations are hoping for? Anecdotal evidence is perhaps a good place to start, although it is very hard to come by from unbiased sources.

Some that are positive about so-called coaching cultures often have a large stake in those culture changes themselves. Professionals like ourselves owe part of their livelihoods to the growing interest in executive coaching and are therefore unlikely to come up with stories that contradict the reported successes. However, like most of our colleagues, we could easily come up with stories of where coaching did not really work and where clients found it hard to settle into the coaching relationship, or where it was broken off prematurely, well before achieving any of the promised success.

Let us share one story from practice, just because it highlights the difficulty of defining what we mean by 'coaching success' in the first place. Erik was coaching an executive in France who was the operations director of a European manufacturer. After a preliminary conversation over the phone, I spent an afternoon with him in his offices. We met his boss, the CEO, who had given us some idea of what he thought would be useful objectives for our work together, and in his office we were mapping out the territory together. When I asked the executive about his expectations and the kind of relationship he was hoping for from me, he confirmed again that he had chosen

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the coaching himself and that he was confident we would work together well if I just did what I, as a “professional”, thought would be right.

He then said he was almost put off from the idea of executive coaching by the experience of his sales and marketing colleague on the board. He told me that, six months ago, his colleague had been under some pressure from the CEO to work with an executive coach as he was not doing well. He had been bruising colleagues with his behaviour and had been experienced by people as ‘a bull in a china shop’. This colleague had responded to the challenge and had contracted an executive coach from the firm’s shortlist.

Soon after starting work with that coach, he had ‘turned around’ completely. Previously he had been perceived as jovial, full of fairly loud humour and pretty insensitive to others; now he was constantly and overtly engaged in ‘deep listening’, asking others how they were and collecting feedback on his own behaviour by others.

Although my client was impressed with the

radical change, he found the new behaviour very unnatural and his expectation was that this was a new ‘pose’ that would probably fade after coaching was over, after which his colleague would most likely revert to his original behaviour. My client had found it more difficult rather than easier to deal with him, and confessed that previously he knew what to expect from him while now he couldn’t gauge his colleague’s commitment any more.

Later that same afternoon, by pure coincidence, we bumped into this ‘miraculously changed’ colleague on our way back to the lifts. My client introduced me as his ‘executive coach’ and the S&M director pretty much confirmed the story that had just been told about him. First he asked me if I was one of those consultants who borrow your watch and then tell you what time it is. He immediately apologised and said he often blurted things out and that he didn’t mean to be rude. Then he added he had the highest respect for me and my work with my client, leaving me puzzled about what his message exactly had been. →

## Our core research question was about whether changes through coaching are visible to others in the organisation

Now was this a positive change attributable to executive coaching, or was it a freak result that had led to a clear loss of confidence and authenticity by this client? Only the future would tell and, unfortunately, I have not been able to collect more *data* on this curious assignment. Coaching contracts are bounded so we don't have much access to information about change after the duration of the contract.

We think the example underlines that, whatever we are told about the successes or not of executive coaching, we need to keep asking questions about what is really going on: how an assignment can be seen as a success and how will it look like a failure.

### The view of organisational stakeholders

Coaching is an organisational intervention. The client is part of the organisation. He brings with him deep traces from the organisation. And if anything changes, he will act differently upon the organisation, where more people will be affected.

So if one is interested in the impact of executive coaching, one would have to measure its effects at the organisational level. This has only been done to a very limited extent. Three hundred and sixty degree assessments by others in the organisation about the client have been used in the past to measure effectiveness of executive coaching<sup>4</sup>. However, in those cases, feedback from bosses, peers and direct reports was used essentially to measure the impact of executive coaching *on the client*, not on others in the organisation. As far as we could determine, organisational feedback on the impact of executive coaching on organisations in a wider sense, has not been investigated or analysed.

We decided to undertake a first study into the organisational impact of executive coaching, by asking executives *not about the coaching they had*

*themselves undertaken, but about changes they had or had not perceived in their peers and which they would ascribe to executive coaching.* Our core research question was about whether changes through coaching are visible to others in the organisation. We were particularly interested in changes that are resilient and still observable well after the coaching intervention has ended, as there is so little retrospective data in the literature.

For this purpose, we asked 77 participants the following question: Could they think of an example where they noticed a difference in someone who has worked with an executive coach? Our analysis revealed that the majority were able to recall a moment of change, and that almost all the changes reported were positive. We found that they noticed changes particularly in communication and interpersonal skills.

About half the group of respondents were recruited through a piece of research we conducted with David Clutterbuck on "top team development"<sup>5</sup> and the other half was recruited directly at Ashridge by leaving a questionnaire in our hotel rooms between August and December 2010.

### Results from our inquiry into third-party perceptions of coaching

#### Changes in the clients of coaching are noticed by 'third parties'

Twenty eight per cent of the study participants were unable to describe a significant moment of change in someone else due to coaching. We don't know if this is because they knew no close colleagues with experience of executive coaching, or whether they simply did not notice any changes through the coaching intervention.

A further 19 per cent of critical-moment descriptions had to be excluded from the analysis because they either described moments in which the narrator was also the client, or because they did not refer to a pure coaching intervention. We ended up analysing 41 descriptions of critical changes in others attributed to executive coaching.

#### Almost all changes are perceived as positive

Having found out that executive coaching produces noticeable changes in clients, we were next interested in whether those changes were perceived as positive or negative by stakeholders in the organisation. With one exception, all descriptions of critical moments of change were positive in nature.

The descriptions revealed that stakeholders generally have positive experiences with the outcomes of coaching in their organisation.

## Examples of the descriptions of critical moments of coaching, by third parties:

- 1 "On this occasion he allowed his deputy to attend the external meeting, and he himself worked through the options, personally communicated the news to staff, and communicated more personally with those most directly affected. This might previously have been seen as a 'running the shop' role, and was now delegated to his deputy."
- 2 "At one of our first monthly team meetings, he was totally focused on the 'mounting of a notice board' even though I had initiated its installation and supplied him with a date. Although this appears trivial, it highlighted his inflexibility and lack of understanding of his subordinates' pressures. I am aware that he is currently being mentored by a CEO from my organisation. They have monthly meetings. Nine months later, I have a line manager who will listen and support his staff. He shows leadership by paving the way for the route he wants me to take and sets very clear milestones for me and others. He has also taken control of local strategies and now indicates what we will *not* do!"
- 3 "The significant moment was that the person involved left his office (something he never did before the coaching) and came to mine to advise me on how to perform a task better, actually guiding and introducing a new area of thought. This, in my opinion, was a very significant moment regarding the benefits of executive coaching."
- 4 "A member of my executive team had an executive coach as she was unable to say 'no' to requests to sit on committees and take responsibility for projects. I think a key critical moment was sitting in a meeting with her and she did not make eye contact with the person asking for a volunteer to take the minutes. While it was a tense moment, she didn't look up and eventually someone else took the minutes."
- 5 "This individual was not on my team, but was an executive who received poor feedback on her communication skills – especially her body language. Through executive coaching, she gained insight into why she behaved in the manner she did and she had a major 'ah-ha' moment – she learned new behaviours that she has sustained and 'hard wired'."
- 6 "An executive I worked with had a terrible habit of walking into his office every day and getting straight on with work without acknowledging any of the staff that worked for him. Through the executive coaching, this habit changed and, with a simple hello in the morning, his staff became more relaxed and comfortable at the workplace."
- 7 "My dean was coached and was very open about the experience. A noticeable difference was her willingness to talk frankly about her preferences and what they may mean to our relationship."
- 8 "I would say that the moment people got promoted to the more senior level, I have seen that those people, supported by an executive coach, tend to become aware of their new position and discover that different behaviour may be needed or is required. Specifically, when conflict or different views arise within meetings, they tend to be more diplomatic and take time to listen and be calm, and this is the moment I see the impact of executive coaching."

**Changes that affect day-to-day interactions are reported most frequently** We were curious to discover the specific areas of change identified by others in the organisation. We therefore developed 11 categories of change based on the descriptions of critical moments. Those categories naturally fitted into an 'onion model' of the client's personality (see figure 1 overleaf).

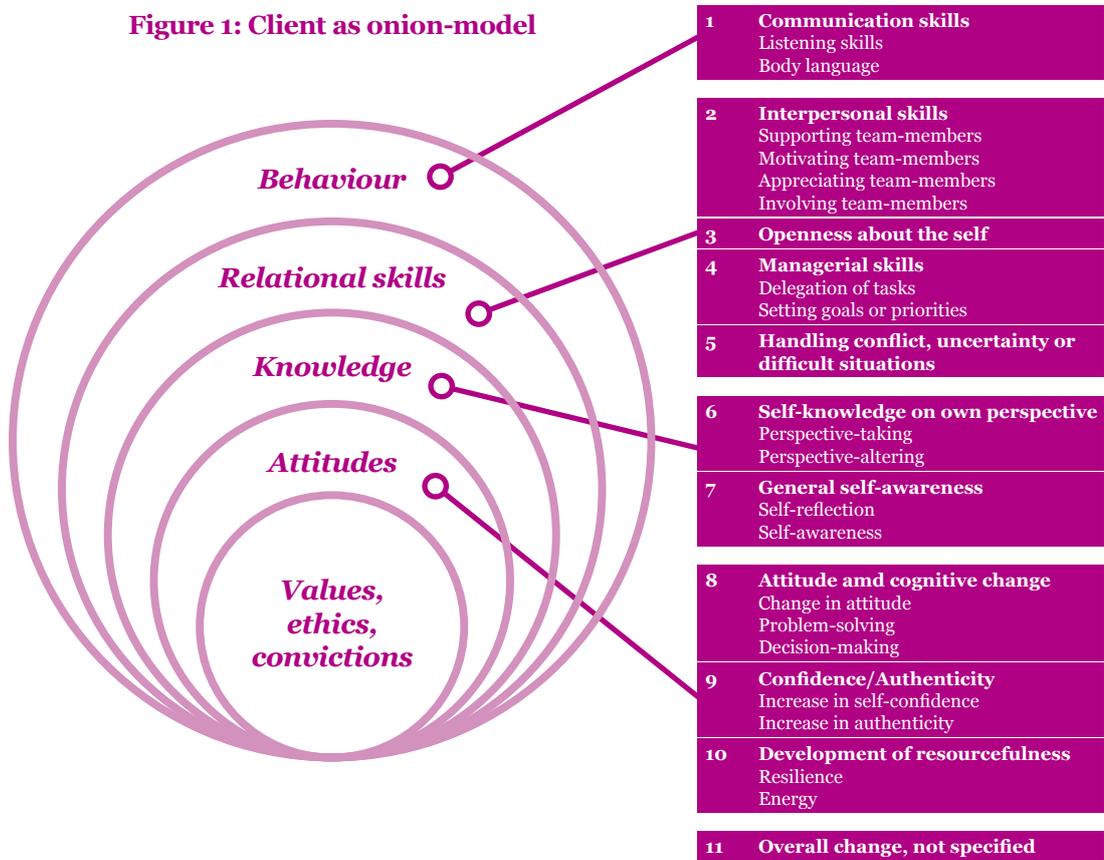
The metaphor of an onion resembles the client's personality with

- 1 an 'outer' layer that is our interface with the outside world. This first category comprises changes in communication skills, such as listening skills or body language
- 2 another layer that is also linked to our 'interface' with the outside world, including interpersonal skills (category two), such as supporting, motivating, appreciating and involving members of the team; openness about the self (category three); managerial skills (category four) such as delegating tasks and setting goals and priorities; and handling conflict, uncertainty, or difficult situations (category five)

- 3 more hidden areas to do with knowledge of self: taking a perspective and changing perspective (category six), and self-knowledge and self-awareness (category seven)
- 4 changes in attitude (fourth layer of the onion model) are described by categories eight to ten. Category eight implies changes in attitude and cognitive change, such as problem-solving and decision-making, while category nine describes increases in self-confidence and authenticity. Category ten refers to a development of resourcefulness, such as energy or resilience.
- 5 category 11 (overall change, not specified) was developed to fit the descriptions that did not mention a specific change.

Four individuals read the descriptions of critical moments and indicated which of the 11 categories each fitted best into. Analysis revealed that almost one third of the critical moments referred to changes in the first two categories, namely communication and interpersonal skills. Stakeholders thus noticed changes in listening →

Figure 1: Client as onion-model



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skills and body language, and they were aware of the fact that coaching clients had improved their skills of supporting, motivating, appreciating, and involving their teams in day-to-day interactions. People thus tend to notice those changes that affect themselves personally in day-to-day interactions.

Having said this, there was as much evidence in the critical-moments descriptions of more profound changes in attitude and cognitive ability.

In this first piece of research among stakeholders or third parties to executive coaching, we have found clear indications that specific changes through coaching are noted by those working with clients and that most changes seem to be beneficial. Executive coaching does seem to have a capacity to not only affect the immediate client – the coachee – but also influence other stakeholders in the organisation.

**Learning points**

- Changes in the clients of coaching are noticed by third parties
- Almost all changes are perceived as positive
- Changes that affect day-to-day interactions are reported most frequently. **TJ**

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