

# Working with the leadership shadow

**Erik de Haan** writes on how executive coaching and supervision for coaches can help restore and maintain balance and so provide quality assurance for organisations.



In today's fast paced, interconnected, and mercilessly competitive business world, senior executives have to push themselves and others hard. In order to succeed, leaders have to endure the paradox of closely attending to and following others as deeply as they lead. They have to listen well to others, understand their concerns, give them personal support, and at the same time motivate them for results or take decisions on their behalf.

Precisely those leaders who can adapt to these conditions and can develop a tough and relentless focus on competitive advantage are most at risk of adopting unhelpful and ultimately unproductive patterns of demand, stubbornness, or frenetic activity. Instead of being open to possibility and ambiguity, and willing to engage in creative conversations with themselves and others, these executives instead may become obstinate, resentful, inarticulate, or intense. They may become a caricature of themselves and go into 'overdrive'.

Often these are qualities executives have relied on to get to the top and to achieve outstanding results, qualities that overshoot under stress and challenge, into unhelpful drives that lead to business and personal catastrophes.<sup>1</sup> Hitherto high-performing executives suddenly find themselves facing the prospect of relationship breakdowns, strategic failures or the risks of derailment.

Stepping forward to make a leadership gesture always creates a rift within oneself: between one's sunny, active, constructive, or aggressive side, that has the ambition to contribute, create and prove something; and one's doubting, pessimistic, needy, vulnerable, careful and concerned side, which craves connection with oneself and others. This *shadow side* is therefore part and parcel of leadership.

This rift, and the play of light and dark accompanying this process, may be very subtle; for example, we may bring a very caring side of ourself to our leadership role, bringing out our particular warmth, care and concern. Even in such cases there is bound to be a whole 'other' side of our personalities that we push down in order to make such a bid for leadership, or to follow the leadership role through. In the case

of a very caring, concerned, warm leader, there may be another side of ourself to do with conflict, resentment, self-importance, that we are keeping down. The 'leadership shadow' phenomenon is consistently present in all leadership roles. In order to make the 'bid' or put forward our 'drive', other aspects have to be left behind, pushed back and discarded, somewhere in the dark of our experiencing, including self-experiencing.

We are getting used to our daily dosage of corporate scandal at the top of the very organisations that deliver the products and services that we love to buy. As an example, on 21 July 2015 the CEO of Toshiba resigned, together with his predecessor and a swathe of senior executives. *The Financial Times* wrote: 'A panel of external lawyers and accountants said on Monday there was a "systematic" and "deliberate" attempt to inflate profit figures amid a corporate culture in which employees were afraid to speak out against bosses' pushes for unrealistic earnings targets. The CEO Mr Tanaka said in a news conference following a 15-second bow of contrition, that he "felt the need to carry out a major overhaul in our management team to build anew our company".<sup>2</sup> Apparently Tanaka himself had been aware of the overstatement of profits and had not taken action to end the improper accounting. Top management would assign 'challenges', or earnings-improvement targets, at monthly meetings with the heads of in-house companies and subsidiaries, and this drive for improvement ultimately brought out the very opposite of what it was designed to achieve. Tanaka resigned, together with his predecessor and five other Toshiba board members. Those who had pressured others with demands for blind loyalty and the achievement of impossible targets were now leaving the firm with more than a billion dollars unexplained and still greater damage to the brand.

The great challenge of leaders can be summed up by the same paradox I mentioned above. It is the art of maintaining a focused 'leadership agenda' or drive forward, together with the 'debris' of that same agenda: all the contradictions, doubts and vulnerabilities that leadership has relayed to the dark shadows of the leader's or the organisation's personality. →



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### **Quality assurance for leaders: how coaches and organisation development consultants may help**

The shadow side plays a role in every form of leadership. However, as long as leaders have a strong-willed, confrontational spouse or partner, as well as assertive colleagues, who remind them of their human fragility and fallibility, the leadership shadow can be processed so that it does not cause too many problems. Unfortunately, many of our captains of industry and political leaders are not in such a fortunate position. They are dedicated and even devoted to the job, they put in an exorbitant amount of time and effort, and they are rarely criticised or challenged by those near to them. Under such conditions, how will leaders remain fresh, balanced and inspired, in order to keep reflecting openly and self-critically alongside their own firmly held convictions?

I believe that this kind of challenging, outspoken and fresh consultancy to (top) leaders exists and can help to remind them of their highly personal leadership shadows and of the fact that they do have (hidden) doubts, needs and vulnerabilities around their leadership targets and strategies. They may not say so in public, but at some level they themselves know how intrinsically weak their leadership is.<sup>3</sup> This fresh and challenging scrutiny of managers and leaders is provided by organisation development consultants and executive coaches, and these consultants are well worth the considerable fees they are paid if they do so.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the work that these coaches and consultants do is simply noticing the shadow sides that leaders have forgotten about or for many reasons prefer not to consider. It is the coach's task to bring back awareness of vulnerability or neediness, corruptibility or hubris, depending on the highly personal contents of the leader's shadow. Coaching restores balance and looks after a leader's 'fitness to practise' precisely by generating insight and inspiration around the leader's most sensitive and vulnerable areas.

A form of leadership is now required in turn from the coach or consultant: namely the drive to speak their honest, fearless truth to power<sup>5</sup> and to reflect freely and independently

alongside the leader and leadership questions of the day. The question presents itself: how do coaches remain fit for practice and make sure that they approach their clients with the requisite level of freshness and robustness? The answer to that question is: supervision.

### **Quality assurance for coaches: how supervisors look after those who are looking after leaders**

Executive coaching is no longer viewed as a privilege restricted to an organisation's elite: over the last decade or so it has become widely used as a 'just in time' development intervention in a broad range of managerial and technical settings. For the in-house learning and development specialist, this increased access brings with it the challenge of ensuring that the coaching is 'fit for purpose': not an easy task, given the confidential nature of the vast majority of coaching relationships. Only a few years ago, it was easy to set yourself up as an executive coach, with credentials based on recommendations and past experience. Qualifications were unheard of and very few organisations thought to ask about prior training or ongoing arrangements for professional development.

All that is changing: most large corporations now make use of internal and external coaches, who are expected to have been trained and accredited by a recognised institution. However, the achievement of a coaching qualification cannot be taken as evidence of professionalism and competence by itself. Coaching is an extremely demanding and isolated activity, full of struggles with finding one's voice to speak truth sensitively to power, struggles with doubts,<sup>6</sup> and with ethical dilemmas or invitations to collude with dysfunctional leadership behaviour.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, professional institutions and associations expect coaches and consultants to be in regular supervision. Supervision is no longer a 'nice to have'; it is an essential prerequisite to maintaining quality, competence and professionalism in an executive coach<sup>8</sup> and organisational consultant.<sup>9</sup>

Coaching supervision takes place either in groups or on a 1:1 basis. The purpose of supervision is to help the coach bring the best of themselves to their work with clients. In practical terms, this



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means ensuring that the coach is sufficiently well-resourced to help their clients recognise their own leadership shadow and take responsibility for their leadership choices. Although supervision is a developmental process, its fundamental purpose is to monitor and improve the quality of the coach's work with their clients. By attending to their own emotional and intellectual resourcefulness, coaches will be in a stronger position to help their clients.



### Case example

*An experienced executive coach was working with a client who was about to become a father and was under intense pressure, both at home and in his leadership role. The coach had been working with the client for some time and they had built up a strong trust. During the early sessions, the client hardly expressed any emotion, but was now sharing immense anxiety, profound anger and a sense of helplessness. The coach felt overwhelmed by his client's strong feelings and was concerned that working with this level of emotion was beyond his level of competence. At the same time, he realised that the client was relying on their trusted relationship as one of very few places to bring his despair. During supervision the coach started processing his own emotional response to his client and discovered to his surprise that he was feeling very protective towards him. With this insight and the encouragement of his supervisor, he felt strong enough to offer his client a clear boundary that would enable him to explore his emotions in a more detached way. The supervisor and coach agreed that if the coach felt he or his client was not coping, he would contact the supervisor again, even if in between sessions.*

Interestingly, the type of quality assurance that supervisors provide for coaches is comparable with that which coaches provide for leaders. As with coaches and their clients, supervisors are helping coaches to reflect more honestly and deeply, and to recognise, accept and get a handle on 'shadowy' aspects of their services, such as not speaking up to certain leaders, accepting soothingly big presents from clients, or responding viscerally and unhelpfully to leadership shadows (to name only a few). Supervision offers an opportunity to become aware of deeply hidden, unhelpful dynamics in organisations. I have noticed on many occasions that a slightly stilted, awkward, or telling moment in supervision helped to indicate a pattern that was ultimately at the core of a leader's problematic behaviour. And even though first noticed only in supervision, it helped the coach to go back, respond and make a positive difference for the leader (and others) concerned.

### Ethical considerations

Similar to leadership focus going into damaging overdrive and derailment, there are substantial risks in coaching and supervision too, aside from the risk of simply not picking up one's client's practice going into overdrive. Berglas writes of the 'very real dangers of executive coaching'<sup>10</sup> which, in his view, are often aggravated by a coach's lack of psychological understanding. He gives case examples of coaches misjudging the situation; aggravating the status quo; and abusing their own power.

Other ethical challenges in the coaching and consulting professions come from:

- The many new coaches, often (internal) consultants, HR Directors and CEOs, who still enter the profession with only minimal training.
- Low bargaining power of customers, who mostly negotiate only small contracts.
- A lack of regulation in the consulting and coaching professions.
- Feelings of shame, anxiety and resulting client protection when there are difficulties or concerns.
- A certain 'numbness' or resistance to external quality assurance, particularly with more experienced coaches and supervisors.

Compounding these risks are practices of what I would call 'toothless' quality assurance:

- Administrative systems that only tick boxes or look into the 'facts' of practice, not the lived experience of it.
- Mindlessly applying codes of conduct through 'quandary' ethics and ethical vignettes, which does little to prepare for real-life ethics.
- 'Moral reasoning', which has demonstrably little impact on 'moral action'. It has long been known that there are essentially two ethical people in all of us: (a) the future ethical me, who will one day do those things I recommend for others; and (b) the present-day ethical me, who reacts from a different set of standards.<sup>11</sup>
- 'Selfless' or 'unrelational' ethics, where we forget the basic premise underlying all ethics and moral codes - the golden rule: 'Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you'; or, put more positively, 'Treat others as you would like them to treat you'.

Finally, here are some aspects of quality assurance through coaching and supervision that I believe do make a positive impact in practice:

- External quality assurance seems more reliable than peer quality assurance; so external coaching and supervision are better placed for quality assurance than internal coaching and supervision.
- Market forces, the triangular relationship and the general custom of contracts of only limited duration: these play a containing role and guard against excesses.
- Supervision is now most prevalent at the stage of education, while it can play a more important role for beginning (qualified) coaches and also for very experienced coaches, which are the two groups most at risk.

### Case example

*A team of coaches working with 'high potential' leaders at a government department had been meeting virtually for group supervision. Over time it became apparent that the content of many of the coaching sessions was about the coaches' poor relationships with the executive team, with many of the coaches blaming senior management for being remote and uninterested. Some of the coaches themselves felt similarly about senior management and wanted the supervisor to feed the concerns back to the executive via the learning and development (L&D) manager. The supervisor helped the coaches recognise that they were colluding with their clients and possibly part of a 'parallel process'.<sup>12</sup> He then helped the coaches reappraise their role and the coaches' personal responsibility for their interaction with senior management.*

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It is encouraging to see that increasingly leaders speak out about their reliance on executive coaches. Similarly, consultants communicate their supervisory support and are increasingly upfront about charging for supervision on larger projects. Most of the clients I work with at the Ashridge Centre for Coaching are agreeable with this approach and share Ashridge's view that (group) supervision is an integral part of the Quality Assurance process - similar to other elements such as contractual meetings and evaluation processes.

To sum up and paraphrase\* Professor in Psychology Gary Embleton: ethics are not problems to be solved. They are relational issues to be lived. Get in touch with your own pain and - whatever happens - do not inflict that pain onto others. This is the real task of supervision: to penetrate the celluloid respectability of coaching and explore the often brutal, destructive and mad forces operating within and among the leader, coach and supervisor.<sup>13</sup> ■

\*I have substituted 'coaching' for 'analysis' in my paraphrasing

**Professor Erik de Haan** is Director of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching and Professor of Organisation Development at the VU University in Amsterdam. He has an MSc in Theoretical Physics, a PhD in Psychophysics, and an MA in Psychodynamic Psychotherapy. He has published some 150 professional and research articles and 10 books, covering his area of expertise as an organisational consultant and executive coach.

[erik.dehaan@ashridge.org.uk](mailto:erik.dehaan@ashridge.org.uk)  
[www.ashridge.org.uk/erikdehaan](http://www.ashridge.org.uk/erikdehaan)  
[www.erikdehaan.com](http://www.erikdehaan.com)

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