Here’s my opinion

The chair of an organisation feels her CEO is not responding to coaching. The coach, against protocol, gives advice to both, which is followed. Wrong move?

Mary is an executive coach working with a CEO who is under pressure from the supervisory board of her company. Mary has had a triangular meeting at the start of the work with the CEO and the chair. Another one has been planned after five sessions. Two days before this second meeting Mary receives a phone call from the chair, who is almost apologetic: “The CEO is still not addressing the issues in our view.” Mary listens somewhat anxiously, as the call is not part of her contract and the information reflects badly on the coaching. She suggests the chair raises this with the CEO when the three of them meet:

“Be open – tell her the same way you are telling me.”

In the meeting the chair jumps in with the bad news and carries on: “The best you can do now is to resign. I really do not trust that this will improve”, whereupon she leaves the meeting abruptly. Mary stays behind with her rather upset client, who asks, “Now what do I do?”

On impulse, Mary says, “Why not resign as suggested, but choose your own terms.” The CEO likes this idea, so much so that she announces her resignation in the board on the same day, for a date in four months’ time.

Mary says to her supervisor: “I have learned that coaching is not advising and we should refrain from advice giving, but look what I have done. I have given my advice twice, and they have followed it. Was I wrong?”

This issue was supplied by Erik de Haan and his supervisee, Ineke Duit.
The thing that strikes me here is the sense of pressure, fear and urgency. The CEO is under pressure to improve her performance. The chair appears under pressure when contacting Mary and again, shows up, pressured (and nervous?) in the three-way. Mary feels under pressure and anxious because the coaching doesn’t appear to be working, and this impacts on Mary’s response to the chair and again her response to the CEO.

As supervisor, I have a strong urge here to slow us down in our conversation before answering Mary’s question directly, thus avoid getting hooked in the parallel process of giving Mary advice or reassurance or both.

Rather than answering Mary’s question directly (“Am I wrong?”), I would like to invite Mary to explore what is happening here with the individuals within this system and the impact it is having on her. Perhaps explore questions such as: Were the coaching outcomes realistic?; What changes had the CEO made during the period of the coaching and what evidence could she show?; In the CEO’s view, were the board’s complaints fair?; and only contribute things like listening, empathising, summarising.

The advice worked so well because it had already been considered yet at the same time frightened the two clients involved, ie, both early on for the chair and then for the CEO.

By then I would have freed myself up to such an extent that I would want to give some more advice. The only aspect that seems a bit troubling or risky here seems to me the fact that the CEO acted so swiftly on the advice. Might there have been an opportunity to reflect with her a little more, on whether she could give herself more time, given it was such a momentous decision? Sit on it for a few days, and then bring it back to the company?

This would undoubtedly spark new conversation with Mary.