



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?

The Issue

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."

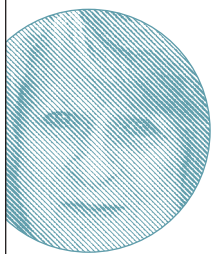
In the meeting the chair jumps in with the bad news

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 Interventions



Dr Alison Hodge

Executive director
and director of
research
Coaching
Supervision
Academy

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

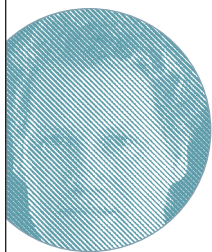
appear to be working, and this impacts on Mary's response to the chair and again her response to the CEO.

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?;

As the chair advised the CEO to resign, how could she do this in a way that would be to best advantage?; Did the CEO want the job?; What did the CEO see as the pros and cons of resigning?; What was Mary afraid of?; How had Mary got caught up in the parallel process of giving advice that appeared to emanate from the chair?

Once we had explored some of these avenues, we could then consider how the system, culture, fear and pressure may have all compounded to trigger Mary's "advice giving". We could then re-consider the appropriateness of her interventions and/or how she might avoid this in the future. We might also look at how she could slow herself down to contract with the CEO in the session to offer some advice, but the CEO would be at liberty to ignore it.



Erik de Haan

Director
Ashridge Centre
for Coaching

The case creates a dilemma for me as a supervisor. It seems to have had a very positive outcome, for all parties involved. Yet the manner in which the outcome was achieved was not through coaching, but by the coach volunteering her spontaneous advice.

For me it illustrates a debate in the profession, where we often say that as coaches we should refrain from advice,

and only contribute things like listening, empathising, summarising. But the very people who say this do not always seem congruent. They seem themselves to be quite forcefully directive when they coach.

How could I be congruent in this case? If I confirmed Mary's own thinking and argued against advice-giving I would be inconsistent. I would advise against advice. On the other hand, if I only asked questions and summarised Mary, how would I be helping her, and would my own views not leak out anyway?

I would opt to support Mary in her advice giving and congratulate her with what seems to have been a helpful piece of work. I would say that possibly

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.