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Leadership group coaching in action: The Zen of creating high performance teams

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

Executive Overview

Although one-on-one coaching can be very effective, this article advocates the benefits of leadership coaching in a group setting, because durable changes in leadership behavior are more likely to occur. Discussion is offered to show that leadership group coaching establishes a foundation of trust, makes for constructive conflict resolution, leads to greater commitment, and contributes to accountability, all factors that translate into better results for the organization. The article suggests that a change methodology centered on leadership group coaching creates high-performance teams, is an antidote to organizational silo formation, helps put into place boundaryless organizations, and makes for true knowledge management. A strong plea is made for aspiring leadership coaches to undergo clinical training to prepare them for the kind of deep-seated psychological problems that can derail the leadership coaching process. Commentary about the clinical approach to organizational intervention is included. The article also explores the similarities between leadership coaching and psychotherapy. Finally, the article includes a discussion of a number of general concerns about leadership coaching.

Consult your friend on all things, especially on those with respect to yourself. His counsel may then be useful where your own self-love might impair your judgment.

—Seneca

No man is so foolish but he may sometimes give another good counsel, and no man so wise that he may not easily err if he takes no other counsel than his own. He that is taught only by himself has a fool for a master.

—Ben Johnson

A Japanese Zen master during the Meiji era received a visitor who came to inquire about Zen. The Zen master served his guest tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, but then kept on pouring. His visitor watched the overflow with alarm until he could no longer control himself. "The cup is overfull. No more can go in it!" he cried out. "Like this cup," the Zen master replied, "you are full of your own opinions, beliefs, and assumptions. How can I

teach you anything unless you first empty your cup?"

As this anecdote illustrates, Zen Buddhism has as its fundamental purpose the awakening of the mind and the individual attainment of spiritual enlightenment. A Zen teacher is concerned with self-help and helping others with wisdom and compassion. Given this mindset, Zen teachers can be seen as forerunners of leadership coaches. Like Zen teachers, such coaches provide learning opportunities by giving constructive and balanced feedback. They serve as sparring partners. They help their clients reflect on their own actions. As a way of clarifying and enhancing consciousness, coaching has become the Zen for executives. With executives finally realizing the value of coaching, the coaching market—now a multi-billion-dollar enterprise—is ballooning. Originally carried out by "one-person bands," leadership coaching has become a major activity for many large consulting firms.

Why this staggering interest in coaching? Why does every self-respecting executive now demand a coach? Various answers can be given to these

questions. Perhaps the biggest reason for the coaching trend is the pace of change in our present-day global world. In many businesses and circumstances, what was an effective way of running a business five years ago is no longer valid today. Competencies that proved to be highly effective in the past have become outdated, and the new competencies threaten to be mothballed even more quickly. There is relentless pressure on executives to transform their way of thinking to accommodate present-day realities while achieving stellar bottom-line results.

With these changes, coaching and commitment cultures have replaced the command, control, and compartmentalization orientations of the past. It has not been an easy transition, because organizations that are flat, boundaryless, or virtual, and organizations that rely on networking structures, put much higher demands on the "emotional intelligence quotient" (EQ) of executives. The emphasis on managing interpersonal relationships has grown as organizational leaders have come to realize that talent and human capital are what differentiates mediocre from high-performing organizations. The war for talent is a never-ending reality. Furthermore, people are being promoted to senior executive positions at an ever-younger age. Whatever the age, joining an executive team entails an enormous amount of stress. Top executives' legal and corporate governance responsibilities are growing as well, adding to the pressure. As a result, being invited to take on such a role often creates enormous feelings of insecurity and loneliness. The overused complaint of "having nobody to talk to" is not just an empty statement for most fast-track executives, who learn that the higher they are in the organization, the more difficult it is to talk to others about their issues and concerns.

Because the traditional psychological contract between employer and employee has been broken through endless downsizing and reengineering, other more creative ways of retaining and inspiring talented people need to be found. Likewise, new ways are needed to help reinvent and revitalize highly stressed executives and prevent burn-out. Recognizing the pressures placed upon them, high-achieving executives are eager to accommodate competencies, skills, and experiences to present-day realities. They know that without continuous learning and development they will be left behind in our ever-changing global environment. Thus the opportunity to continue to learn and to renew oneself has become a great motivator. No wonder coaching, with its potential to establish, fine-tune, or rebuild the competencies needed to

remain effective in the workplace, has become one of the most powerful strategic and tactical weapons in the executive repertoire.

Leadership Group Coaching: A Case Study

It was obvious from the strained small talk and the jokes that the eight people in the room—seven men and one woman who were members of the executive committee of an information technology firm—were more than a little anxious. This was unusual, because these board members were typically self-confident and in control, and had a well-rehearsed script for meetings that they happily enacted as if on automatic pilot. This time things were different, however. Today's gathering was clearly not going to be business as usual. Their new CEO had asked them to participate in a high-performance team-building workshop facilitated by an external leadership coach. They had no idea what to expect. Worse yet (from their perspective) they had been asked to complete a number of 360-degree feedback instruments. Sitting together now—their faces revealing a mixture of curiosity and anxiety—they were wondering what their colleagues, subordinates, friends, and family members had to say about them.

They had reason to worry. For over half a year, clouds had been hanging over their organization. The company, a well-established firm in its industry, was not as nimble as it should have been, making a takeover threat from a much smaller competitor a truly frightening prospect. Future job security was at stake for many employees. Only a few months ago, the non-executive board members had finally realized that the CEO couldn't turn the company around, and they asked him to resign. Realizing that new blood was required to shake the company out of its complacency—to make it less bureaucratic, more entrepreneurial, and more results-oriented—they had hired a new CEO with a different profile. The non-executive board had made it clear that it was up to him to bring corporate returns to a level that matched, or bettered, the standards of the industry.

After his initial appraisal of the situation, the new CEO decided one of his main priorities was to form a stronger and more effective top executive team. It was clear to him that the present team wasn't an exemplary decision-making body. From his first encounter with the group, he observed that meetings tended to drift, priorities changed almost on a whim, accountability and follow-up were lacking, and the various executive board members had trouble arriving at closure. The new CEO sensed the presence of a considerable amount of

unspoken conflict among the executive team. Participation during meetings was extremely uneven, which the CEO gradually realized was a result of the fact that several fiefdoms had been established, leading to block voting. It also became clear to him that the various members of the executive group didn't feel accountable to each other. As a result of all this, there had long been a lack of focus under the former CEO, a problem that was widely noticed at lower levels in the organization (as had been clearly indicated in company-wide satisfaction surveys). Not surprisingly, many of the complaints centered on the fact that the board members appeared to be giving conflicting signals.

The executive board members were aware of this and therefore were somewhat anxious, not only about the prospective teambuilding exercise but also about the new CEO's plans for the future. They knew that things had to change, but how would pending changes affect their positions in the firm? These concerns made a teambuilding exercise — with its associated feedback and self-disclosure — a much more risky and anxiety-ridden exercise for this particular group than it would have been for people at lower levels of the organization.

The new CEO had experienced similar interactions in his previous position, and he knew that mutual accountability was often more difficult to establish at the top level of an organization. There was always potential for conflict between corporate and line-of-business goals. He also realized that the stakes tended to be much higher for people at the board level, given the executives' personal goals. He was confident, however, that the leadership group exercise in which his team was about to participate would provide results and lead to improvement.

Breaking the Ice

The leadership coach started the process by engaging the group in conversation centered on effective and dysfunctional leadership. He led the group into a discussion about the characteristics of high-performance teams and organizations, a topic to which they devoted considerable amount of time. He asked the executives to contribute examples of what they viewed as good and bad leadership. Building on these examples, he asked individuals to talk about a personal "Everest experience," or feeling of "flow"¹—situations when they'd felt at their best as a leader. This led to an interesting exchange among group members concerning their views about the competencies the

future leaders of their organization should have, and what selection, development, and reward processes were needed to hire and retain this type of leader.

After a break, the leadership coach explained the common difficulties associated with giving and receiving feedback. He pointed out that most executives tend to be "over-estimators" with an exaggerated sense of their effectiveness at work. (He jokingly added, "Present company excepted, of course.") He explained the theory behind the kind of 360-degree feedback instruments they had completed prior to the workshop, and how these instruments help executives to understand their own competencies and weaknesses. In this case they had used *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*, an instrument that measures leadership in twelve dimensions, including: visioning, empowering, energizing, designing and aligning, rewarding and feedback, teambuilding, outside orientation, tenacity, global mind-set, and emotional intelligence. This instrument also includes dimensions that evaluate resilience to stress and life balance.²

The members of the executive board had completed the questionnaire themselves, and each had asked seven to ten work colleagues to be his or her or personal "observers." The observers had answered the same questions about the target participant, and in addition, they were asked to write answers to three questions: What behavior should the executive continue doing? What behavior should he or she develop further? What behavior should he or she eliminate? Answering these questions gave observers the opportunity to make specific recommendations about how the person being rated could be more effective. Their responses to these questions would make the feedback session even more relevant for each participant.

The responses to all the questionnaires had been summarized in a report that compared the results of self-reporting with the aggregated results of their observers' questionnaires. To help the test-takers further analyze the results, the observers' ranking of the leader in each dimension were also separated into categories: superior(s), co-workers, subordinates, direct reports, and others, with no names attached. The leadership coach showed the group a sample graph to explain the different categories that each person would see when they received their own personalized feedback material. (See Figure 1 for an example of the summary report cover page.)

In addition, to complement the *behavioral* dimensions measured by *The Global Executive Life Inventory*, each board member had been asked to

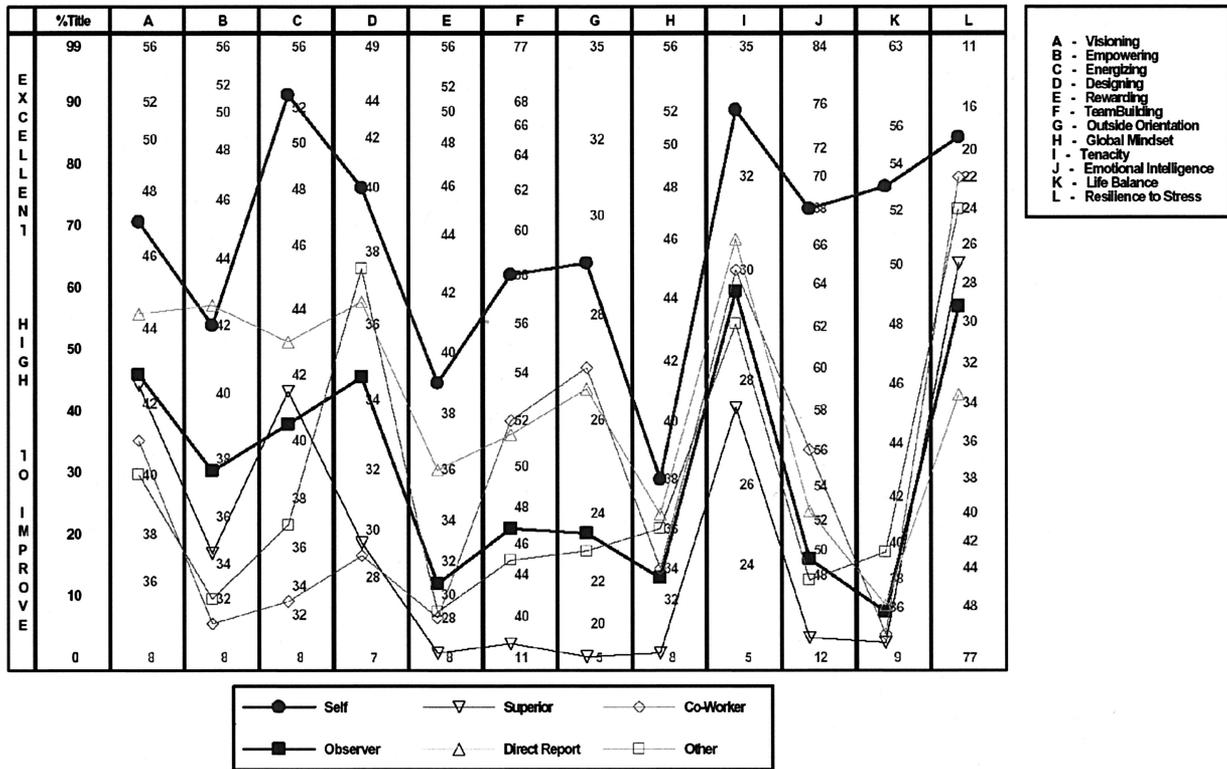


FIGURE 1
John Smith Summary Page: *Global Executive Leadership Inventory*

complete *The Personality Audit*.³ This 360-degree instrument differs from the *Global Executive Leadership Inventory* in that it measures personality dimensions (presented in the form of polarities) such as sense of self-esteem, conscientiousness, trust, assertiveness, extroversion, mood state, and adventurousness. For this questionnaire, the leadership coach had specified that the observers should be a significant other or spouse, and two colleagues at the office who were both well acquainted with the participant (for example, one superior and one subordinate). The summarized results of this questionnaire, which were not anonymous, offered the executives the opportunity to see the way their observers—work colleagues or personal contacts—differed in their evaluation of the leader’s personality traits. This feedback would help the executives understand how they managed their public and private selves, and would illustrate the level of consistency of their presentation of self. In addition, the responses would reveal differences in how people managed upward versus downward. Once again, the leadership coach carefully explained the presentation of the Personality Feedback page to the participants. (See Figure 2 for an example of *The Personality Audit* report.)

To encourage more personal feedback, each par-

ticipant had been told to ask a number of good friends and family members to respond in writing to questions such as, “What’s the first thing that comes to mind when you think about this person?” and “What should this person change about him- or herself?” Finally, the executives had been asked to complete a short biographical sketch to help the leadership coach better understand the general background of each person.

At the end of the first day of the leadership team-building workshop (the first phase of a three-day leadership group coaching process), after the sample feedback graphs had been presented and all questions about the process had been answered, each member of the executive team was given an envelope containing the feedback information that had been assembled for him or her. The leadership coach suggested that they study this feedback carefully on their own and sleep on the results in order to be prepared for next day’s program. He counseled them, tongue-in-cheek, not to go on a witch-hunt to identify or retaliate against the people who may have given them a low rating on a dimension. “Killing the bastards who gave you unpleasant feedback,” he said, “is not a productive exercise, although it might feel good!” His advice was to calmly thank everyone who had worked hard and had the courage, to give each of them

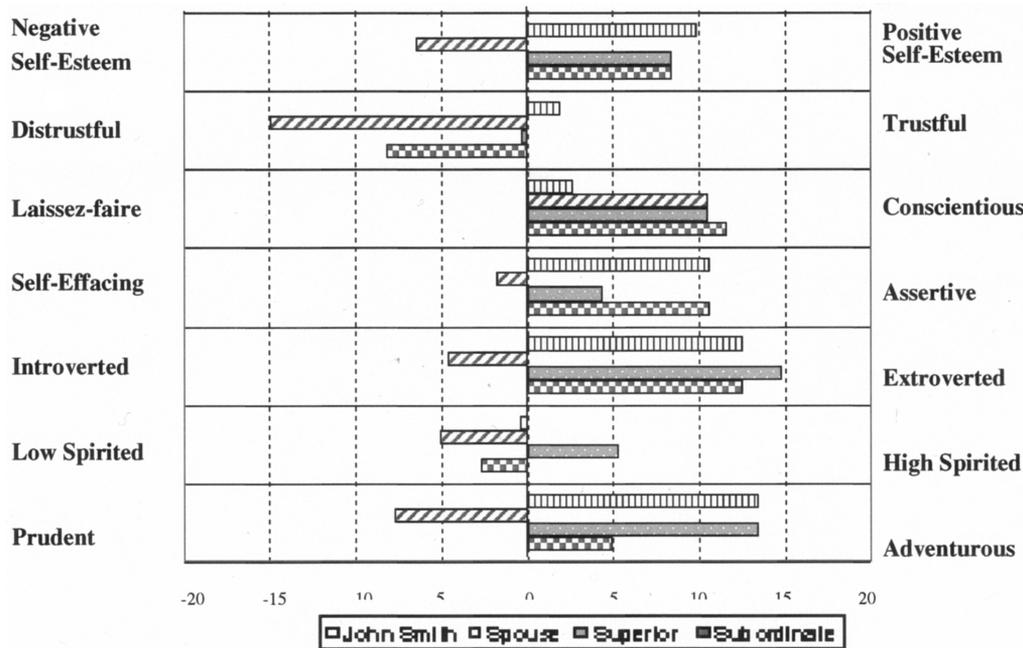


FIGURE 2
Summary: *The Personality Audit*

feedback. As a caveat, he reminded them that individuals—this time, “present company *included!*”—are highly complex, and far too complicated to sum up via a simple questionnaire. Questionnaire results, he said, weren’t an end in themselves; rather, they offered a jumping-off point for a constructive discussion about future career choices and decisions. As a final quip, he mentioned that his experience with people had taught him that everyone seems normal until you get to know them better—and then everyone is revealed to be positively *abnormal*, flawed by interesting quirks.

Not all members of the executive team had a restful night after opening their envelopes, given the feedback they had received. Although much of the feedback concerning their leadership of the company came as no great surprise to them, it was nonetheless disturbing to see it so clearly summarized in a report. (At their level in the organization, honest feedback wasn’t usually part of the deal; subordinates often said what they thought executives wanted to hear.) During the course of a late evening, while reading a mixture of praise and condemnation, the executives began to spin out rationalizations to explain any low ratings they had received.

Group Coaching Dynamics

As the morning session began on the second day, some of the executives seemed quite defensive

about the feedback found in the envelopes. The leadership coach understood the reason for this; he knew that a main precondition for an effective intervention is a relationship of mutual trust and respect between coach and client. Trust and respect are the foundation of what clinical psychologists call the working alliance. Research has shown that, as in the case of psychotherapy, the most important factor in making leadership coaching successful is the quality of the coach-client working alliance.⁴ An important task for the coach in this session would be to help the executives relax so they could reflect honestly on their observers’ comments.

The leadership coach explained the next phase: each of the executive board members in turn would be asked to share with the group the feedback he or she had received, and the other group members would give their reactions to that feedback—a two-step process that would help the individual participants formulate a personal leadership development plan. He mentioned that they needed to manage the time carefully, so that each of them would have approximately ninety minutes “in the limelight.” After this short introduction, he asked who would like to start the process. After a moment of distinct unease, one of the executives, John, indicated his willingness to volunteer. The leadership coach asked John whether he was prepared to share the information he had received with the other members of his team. After receiving a somewhat hesitant affirmative, the leadership coach

used an overhead projector to display the summary data of *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory* and *The Personality Audit* for John on the screen.

After the other participants had had time to read and absorb the material, the leadership coach asked them how they would interpret the information summarized from *The Global Executive Leadership Inventory*. After a lengthy pause, one commented that John seemed to be an over-estimator, rating himself higher than his observers in the organization had rated him. Soon other people joined in the discussion, offering comments about other variances between John's self-assessment and the assessment of others. To complement and focus the presentation of the data, the leadership coach read out some of the written comments that John had received from his observers. The most telling dealt with John's need for details, his problems in delegation, his inclination to take over work from weak subordinates, his occasional moodiness, and his tendency to work too hard and get stressed out.

When the discussion turned to *The Personality Audit*, the leadership coach pointed out that the assertiveness dimension indicated that John was something of a "tiger" in the office but a "pussycat" at home, an observation that resulted in a certain degree of hilarity. Although John perceived himself as quite extroverted, at home—at least according to his wife—he was rather withdrawn; her ratings also indicated that he should be more adventurous in his dealings with her. *The Personality Audit* also showed a fairly high rating on the conscientiousness dimension, confirming John's tendency toward micro-management. The supplemental personal feedback pages were revealing as well. The leadership coach asked John to read aloud some of the observations made by family and friends. Many expressed concern that he seemed to be under too much stress and that he should learn how to delegate more effectively — advice which surprised John, since he had not been aware that people considered him a micro-manager. Other comments indicated that he should be more careful about his health, and that he should set clearer boundaries between his private and business life. Some commented that he was sometimes moody or hypersensitive. There were positive comments as well. For example, some observers mentioned the creative way John tackled and solved problems that other people had given up on.

During this discussion of the various forms of feedback, the leadership coach made sure that John's observed strengths were emphasized and his weaknesses reframed in a positive way to re-

duce defensive reactions. The coach knew that this kind of reframing was a very effective way to reinforce self-esteem and make the participant more willing to make an effort to change. He also knew that timing was critical. Hard experience had taught him that when the timing is not right, it is better to stay silent. Contrary to the advice in the old adage, he believed it was better to "strike when the iron is cold." When the issue is "too hot," people don't hear what is being said.⁵ In addition, he went to great lengths to present observations in the context of the experiences of others. He knew that such an approach took the sharp edges off some of the more critical behavioral observations.

After the first phase of the feedback review, the leadership coach asked John if he could mention a few things about his background as a way of helping the others understand his way of looking at the world. The leadership coach helped him structure his narrative by asking him a number of questions. Among the questions included were: Can you say a few things about your personal background? Can you describe events/situations (personal, organizational, or both) that affected your career in a significant way? Can you say something about the best/worst times in your life? What kind of people do you admire? What do you see as your greatest accomplishments? What was your greatest failure/disappointment? What makes you angry, happy, mad, or sad? What regrets do you have as you look back on your life? If you could change three things in your life, what would they be? How do you look at the future? The other participants found the responses to this information extremely helpful, because it gave them a different view of a person who had been their colleague for many years.

Following this part of the session, John was asked to be silent and just listen to what the others had to say. The leadership coach asked the others what thoughts had come to mind when they heard John talk. What kind of feelings did they have while listening to his narrative? What were their "fantasies" or associations while listening to John? To stimulate the group's creative thinking, he asked, "If John were an animal, what animal did they think he would be?" This particular question evoked many responses. Some mentioned a watchdog, like a German shepherd; others referred to a rat in a cage. Another person strayed from the animal motif and compared him to the mythological figure Sisyphus, endlessly pushing his rock up a hill. What stood out in the discussion were John's strong work ethic, his driven nature, his need for control and, once again, his tendency toward micro-management.

Next, each member of the team was asked, "as a

friend," what advice he or she would give John to help him become even more effective. This question prompted an intense discussion. Two of the participants made disparaging remarks about certain members of John's management team and suggested that he should stop protecting those "incompetents" and avoid doing their work in addition to his own. He had enough work to do as it was. These respondents felt that he should take the tough step of letting some of the subordinates go. One team member suggested that he should reorganize and simplify his department's structure rather than having 12 people reporting to him. Still another participant complained about how difficult it was to approach John and the people who reported to him. This participant said that although the company claimed to aspire to be a networking, boundaryless organization, John, through his territorialism and his anger when people approached his team without his consent, had created what the participant referred to as a "silo"—that is, a part of the organization that was extremely hard to enter. This latter comment took John by surprise. He had never realized that his behavior gave this impression.

During this process the leadership coach was actively listening and trying to comprehend the key issues that John faced. He also offered tentative suggestions of other ways that John could act in certain situations, should they come up again. By reframing some of the colleagues' suggestions, he helped John to become more aware of conscious and unconscious influences on his behavior. He helped John see connections between critical life situations he had mentioned in his description of himself and the problems he was having in the workplace. Why did he have such a great need for control? What was behind his reluctance to delegate more? Why did he get so moody? Why did he protect incompetents? During this exchange, the leadership coach used humor as a highly effective means of clarifying certain points and defusing tension.

When the discussion had reached closure after some time, John was asked how he felt, what he had distilled from everyone's feedback, and what had been most important to him during the discussion. He now had the opportunity to reply to the various observations. When he had said his piece, the leadership coach summarized the major points of the discussion (which had been jotted onto a flip chart as they came up) and these were presented as part of John's personal leadership development plan. The leadership coach explained that when all members of the group had discussed their feedback, they would end the session with a discussion

of how to design their own personal development plans.

This same rather intensive feedback exercise took place for each member of the executive team in turn, with each participant identifying issues to be included in their personal leadership development plan. Although the exercise was the same, the *atmosphere* was not: people were tense and hesitant to contribute at the outset, but they gradually became more comfortable and spontaneous. The group leadership coaching exercise created for the members of the executive team a "transitional space" or holding environment aimed at understanding and resolution, a place where they were able to play and experiment safely.⁶

As a result of the group dynamics of these discussions, the different roles played by the members of the executive team were clarified and the effects of the various leadership styles on the group as a whole became clearer. They recognized how they could complement each other, how they could build on each other's strengths to become more effective as a team. At that point, one board member remarked to another, "We've worked together now for 28 years. It's sad that I learned more about you in the past two days than I had in all the previous years. But now I have a better sense of your strengths and weaknesses, and I understand what you stand for. I think we'll be able to work together more effectively now."

Before closing the workshop, the leadership coach discussed the importance of the personal development plan. He asked each member of the executive team to state out loud what he or she had learned during the past two days, and which one or two areas each of them planned to work on. (The leadership coach had learned that setting too many goals was unwise. Trying to do too many things at the same time carried the strong risk that *nothing* would get done.) He also asked them how they were going to deal with the people who had provided them with feedback. How would they involve those friends and colleagues in bringing about changes in behavior? He mentioned that involving the persons that gave them feedback would make changes in behavior more likely.⁷ In addition, he asked them to put down in writing a realistic, measurable action plan (with a timeline) that would be circulated among the other members of the group. Stressing the importance of having an internal leadership coach to monitor progress, he suggested that they ask one or two people in the executive group to help them monitor and assist them to implement the desired changes. Finally, the leadership coach set a date (approximately two months later) when they would have a follow-up

meeting to discuss what they had done and how well they had met their set objectives. The leadership coach knew from experience that a follow-up process was essential for successful change.

Creating High EQ Teams

The benefits that came out of the leadership group coaching exercise far exceeded the expectations of the CEO who had initiated it. Over time, they became more of a high EQ team.⁸ The members of the team became also more aware of the interpersonal role in which they consciously or unconsciously had cast themselves.⁹ They recognized that, just as they had taken on a particular role in their own family while growing up, they now frequently occupied a parallel role in the workplace. They identified such roles as martyr, scapegoat, cheerleader, peacemaker, hero, and clown. They also began figuring out the complementary roles that others had been placed in, and thus saw how other members of the executive team could be used more effectively.¹⁰ They also acquired insight into maladaptive interpersonal patterns that weakened the team, discovering how such patterns, and the collusive relationships that underlay them, contributed to the team's lack of effective conflict resolution, lack of focus, and reduced productivity. After the workshop, one of the members of the team half-jokingly said, "In the past our meetings were get-togethers where some of us said what we really didn't think, while others *didn't* say what we really *did* think! I hope we will be able to change this pattern."

By participating in the intensive group coaching process, the members of the team learned what it meant to coach others; the group exercise helped them acquire a new interpersonal tool in their repertoire. In particular, they learned how to become better listeners. They saw that listening is a precondition for *any* meaningful relationship, because it fosters understanding. And better relationships mean better business, because people who feel heard and understood are easier to motivate and influence.

There were many other benefits that came out of the group leadership coaching exercise. The executive board members felt that they had become much more of a team. As a result of the teambuilding session their common goals and values had become much more explicit. There was a higher level of trust and mutual respect among them. They also noticed during subsequent meetings that *team* objectives were no longer being affected by an undercurrent of *personal* objectives.¹¹ Turf fights were rare. When someone

strayed and resorted to behavior that the team now recognized as dysfunctional, the others stepped in to remind the person of the promises made during the "infamous" teambuilding session. They were no longer willing to let such behavior slip by. In addition to having better relationships with the other team members, board members were able to use their newly acquired coaching skills to improve relationships with direct reports.

Communication within the executive team became more focused, less conflicting, and therefore less energy-draining. As the executive board members concentrated on what was really important to the organization, endless discussions lacking resolution and commitment became a thing of the past. Whereas before there had been some "silent types"—executives who rarely spoke—all members of the executive team now participated. And they did so frankly, openly, and honestly, engaging in constructive conflict resolution and eschewing politics. As a result, the members of the executive team felt more accountable to each other and to the organization. They took ownership and responsibility for their decisions and behaviors and followed up on their actions. Conflict between the members of the team and other members of the organization was reduced as speaking and listening took place at a deeper level.

Keeping in mind the feedback they had received, the executives attempted to unlearn specific behavior patterns that had proved to be ineffective. With the new climate of collegiality, they now found it acceptable to ask each other for help when in a difficult situation. Likewise, talking about personal matters was no longer taboo, which made the executives more willing to express concerns about their life-work balance. Becoming, in effect, a mutual support group, they experienced more satisfaction and fulfillment in their work and personal life. What this group exercise did for them was help them become a true high-performance, high-EQ team: they shared common goals and values; they respected (and built on) each other's differences; and they learned to use the complementarities in their leadership styles to create an effective executive role constellation.

In addition to changes that each board member initiated after the workshop, there were changes imposed from above. Encouraged by the exercise, the CEO reassigned the roles of some members of the executive group so that their duties were more in line with their real talents. For example, to help one executive come to grips with his conflict-avoidant behavior, the CEO asked him to turn around a very messy situation at a foreign subsidiary. Another executive (John, the one who favored

silo formation) was given a very different portfolio in the executive team—one that was less people-intensive and more future planning oriented. This reassignment, the CEO felt, would prevent departmental isolation. Another executive, after reflecting for several weeks on the feedback he had received at the workshop, decided that he didn't really fit in the team. Feeling that he would be more effective in another organization, he resigned.

Looking back on the leadership group coaching process, the CEO was quite satisfied. The leadership coach had quickly created a safe transitional space for the executives in which they felt at ease while narrating their story. Throughout the process, the person who was being discussed engaged in a journey of self-discovery, while the other members of the group vicariously learned from his or her story and validated the experience. Thus, all of the participants not only engaged in a problem solving exercise (in the form of making action recommendations) but also learned how to practice their leadership coaching skills. Going through this process of mutual exploration also implicated the group in supporting the action plan of the person who was in the limelight, making behavioral change more likely. (For a summary of the process of the leadership group exercise see Figure 3.)

To summarize, the group leadership coaching exercise allowed the executive team to reflect on each member's leadership style. It enabled them to deal with personal issues that had been lying dormant for a long time and to develop strong relationships based on trust and mutual respect. That foundation of trust fostered a genuine exchange of information, broke down barriers, exposed the "undiscussables," and promoted true conflict resolution. The discussions the executive board members had during the workshop, and the more open communication they practiced afterward, helped them rethink priorities, and reshape the future of their organization and improve the financial results. Since they were no longer "playing the violin while Rome was burning," they developed a specific strategy that enabled them to ward off the takeover threat. A follow-up session three months later confirmed the robustness of the leadership group coaching intervention, as did a subsequent follow-up a year later.

Making Executive Team Coaching Work

I have learned from hard experience that if you want to change people, merely dealing with cognition is not enough. Changing behavior necessitates a double-pronged approach: dealing with

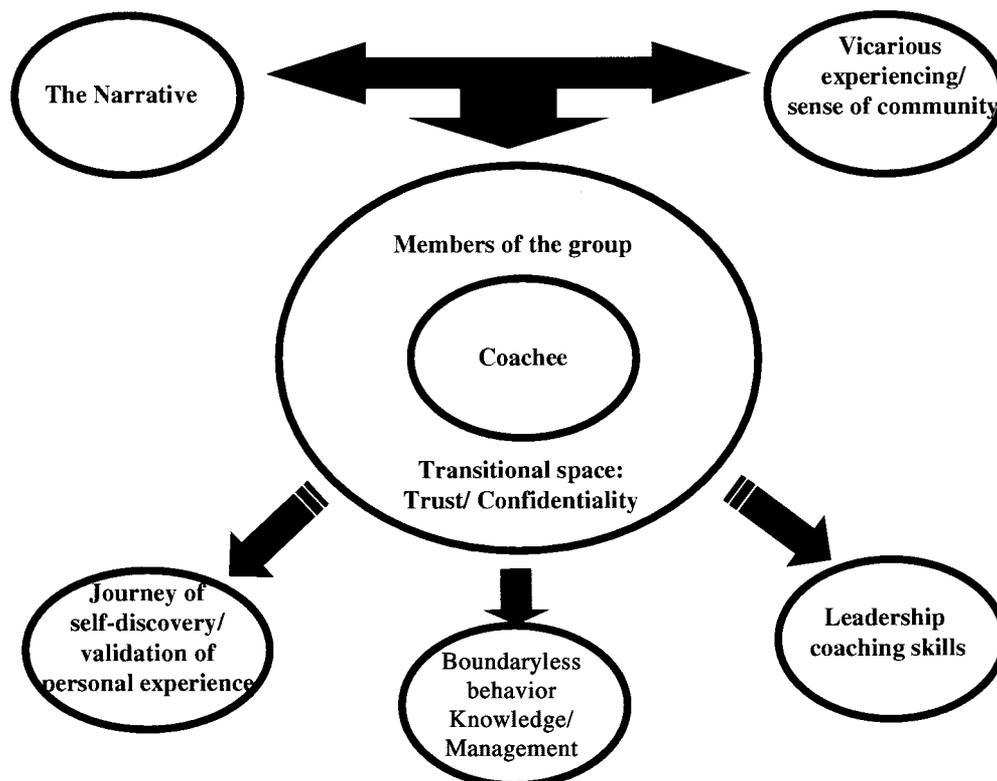


Figure 3
The Leadership Group Coaching Process

cognition and affect.¹² As the case study example above illustrates, such a strategy really pays off when leadership coaching takes place in groups, especially "natural" working groups. That is not to say that individual leadership coaching doesn't work. On the contrary, successful leadership coaching is often the outcome of a one-on-one process. However, private coaching sessions rarely have a lasting impact, in part because they are too infrequent. All too often, when the coached individual is back in his or her working environment, "automatic pilot" takes over and wipes out lessons learned. In addition, the business and private environment often act as a "rubber fence," bouncing the client right back to the starting point despite the person's best efforts to change aspects of his or her behavior. Thus the question whether people can change must be answered in the affirmative, but whether people will change has to be answered with a maybe!¹³

The Role of Commitment

We have also discovered that too many people in search of change have a "dream." The "dream" goes something like this: "I will start exercising." "I will start dieting." "I will stop smoking." But in reality nothing happens. Unfortunately, having good intentions isn't good enough. External pressure is needed. When a smoker says in public, "I'm going to stop smoking," that person involves others, giving them a stake in the process. After hearing such an announcement, they are not likely to offer the person a cigarette or even to give one when asked. This public process changes the "rubber fence" into a much more robust foundation of support. What makes group leadership coaching so effective is that participants become committed to helping each other change. The leadership coach who sets the process in motion is eventually assisted by a number of volunteer "assistant coaches" who help each other stay on the right track.

The members of the group set boundaries that become an important force in behavior change; they help each person live up to his or her promises. Because shame, guilt, and hope are powerful motivating forces (as I am somewhat reluctant to point out), when an individual is tempted to fall back on old behavior patterns, the visualization of the group's disapproval often acts as an effective deterrent. It's as if the group becomes internalized within each member.

The Role of Storytelling

The support and acceptance given by the group also facilitate change, because they instill in each participant a sense of hope about the future. The powerful emotional experiences that come out of group leadership coaching are also change facilitators. As people reveal something about themselves by telling their life stories, talking about the experiences that shaped them, and sharing the feedback they received through assessments, they undergo a journey of self-understanding. Telling personal stories is a powerful way of exploring the self.¹⁴ It creates a readiness for interpersonal learning and insight, lays the foundation for working through internal conflicts and crises, and helps a person arrive at meaningful, personal life integration. In other words, by telling personal stories, people rediscover themselves, obtaining a better understanding of their own life. *Listening* to stories is a powerful learning experience as well: it allows for the vicarious instruction of role modeling and gives an empathic understanding of the questions the speaker is struggling with.

The Role of Trust

Growth can come out of the telling and hearing of stories only if trust binds all the participants in the group. Unfortunately, trust building isn't easy for highly competitive people. In many organizations, trust is an extremely rare commodity. After all, relationships of trust depend on our willingness to look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others. For trust to exist, we need to deal with such complicated issues as openness, honesty, active listening, communication, consistency, competence, fairness, and mutual respect.¹⁵ Trust is a delicate flower: it doesn't take much to crush it, and once destroyed, it takes a very long time to nurture it back into bloom. But if trust is honored and protected, it flourishes and bears good fruit. Trust makes for constructive conflict resolution; constructive conflict resolution makes for genuine commitment; and commitment makes for accountability—all factors that have an enormous impact on the bottom line of an organization.

The case example given earlier illustrates what can happen when leadership coaching takes place in groups. When people get to know each other better, when they understand each other's leadership styles, when they have a good sense of each other's competencies, and when they understand the nature of each other's work, there is a greater likelihood that they will trust each other. In the "transitional space" of the coaching workshop,

people open up and begin to share information, talking about the issues that really preoccupy them. They stop beating about the bush, they stop playing politics, and they start to support each other.

In the cyber society of today — in the virtual teams that are becoming ever more common in the global marketplace — the building of trust is even more important, and even more of an uphill battle. To make virtual teams effective, an enormous investment in relationship-building needs to be made up front. It's impossible to e-mail a smile or a handshake. Personal relationships and face-to-face communication, not electronic communication, build trust. And yet only when a significant degree of trust exists between various parties can one expect effective interaction between individuals and groups located in different parts of the world. Without the glue of trust, teams don't work well and virtual teams don't work at all.

Knowledge management can't take place in the absence of trust. If knowledge is power, why share it? Who would share information with someone he or she doesn't trust? When people trust each other, they have an incentive to share; once they open up to each other, they know what to share and how and why to do so. Thus only when there is a solid degree of trust between executives can there be true knowledge management.¹⁶ Unfortunately, many people who are in the knowledge management business don't seem to have figured that out! In spite of all the hoopla, knowledge management has in many instances been a less than successful concept. That's because its advocates focus their attention on the building of data banks and don't deal with the human factor. Setting up an extensive, state-of-the-art data bank isn't knowledge management; investing heavily in electronic management systems isn't knowledge management. Vehicles for storing and categorizing knowledge do exist; but they are only tools. It's people that in the end acquire, manipulate, and manage knowledge. Thus true knowledge management means creating teams and organizations in which the participants trust each other and realize the benefits of knowledge sharing for everybody involved. True knowledge management means the creation of social networks, of communities. True knowledge management implies paying attention to the unconscious life of organizations.

Beyond Traditional Organizational Intervention

As the case study above illustrates clearly, leadership group coaching, led by an experienced

A Clinical Orientation

Many organizations offer leadership coaching programs, but in many instances their training of coaches can be seen as questionable. There are exceptions, however. For example, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), with offices in Asia, North America, and Asia, has a long and successful history in the leadership coaching training business. INSEAD's Global Leadership Center, located in Europe and Asia, is also very active in the leadership coaching domain. Presently, leadership coaching modules are found in most of INSEAD's executive programs. In particular, follow-up of senior executive groups who attended an INSEAD leadership group coaching seminar has shown that the process proved to be extremely valuable in creating high-performance teams. INSEAD also offers an intensive 'Coaching and Consulting for Change' program designed for consultants, HR professionals, and senior executives. The program has a strong short-term dynamic psychotherapy orientation to give participants an in-depth understanding of psychological processes when coaching, preparing them to deal with complex human situations in organizations.

To summarize, in selecting a leadership coach for an organizational group intervention, it is important to ensure that the individual has completed a highly selective program like one of those described above. Furthermore, it is strongly recommended that the person has some kind of clinical perspective toward coaching to be able to identify possible danger signals in the bipersonal and group domain.

individual, can be extremely effective both for executives and for their organization. Unfortunately, the often impressive results obtained through this kind of intervention have attracted the attention of many unqualified consultants who take advantage of the leadership coaching trend to hang out their

own shingle. As in the early days of psychotherapy, leadership or executive coaching can presently be offered by anyone. Effective and constructive leadership coaching, however, is built on a solid base of psychological understanding and practice. *Particularly in the case of group interventions, it is essential that the leadership coach has had a modicum of clinical training; otherwise he or she will not be able to decipher dysfunctional group dynamics and individual pathology.*

Most traditional intervention techniques focus primarily on the rational side of human behavior, neglecting the non-rational patterns that are part and parcel of the human condition.¹⁷ Many incomprehensible activities in organizations ("incomprehensible" from a rational point of view, that is) are in fact indicators of what is really going on in the intrapsychic and interpersonal world of the key players, below the surface of their day-to-day routines. This underlying mental activity needs to be understood in terms of how it resurfaces as fantasies, conflicts, defensive behaviors, and anxieties. Thus, to be effective in leadership group coaching, one must accept the notion that there is more to behavior in organizations than meets the eye, a realization that can be anathema to far too many traditional organizational development practitioners. People who deny the reality of unconscious phenomena—who refuse to take them into consideration—increase the gap between organizational rhetoric and reality. Only those leadership coaches who have had some training in psychological techniques and methods, in combination with intensive experience of life in organizations, are equipped to be most effective in this domain.

Those "coaches" who are lacking training and experience in these two fundamental areas are likely to do more harm than good. It is often hard to predict how a coaching arrangement will evolve. What starts as a simple attempt to bring about desired changes in specific cognitive skills may turn into something far more complicated. Too often, issues that executives present require more than simple, surface interventions. Thus leadership coaches are *not* trainers. By definition, a simple training perspective is far removed from any form of reflection and introspection. Most trainers don't have the expertise to recognize the often deeply rooted nature of specific problems. To illustrate, a leadership coach who has not been exposed to the basics of dynamic psychotherapy would most likely not recognize the presence of a psychological problem underlying a complaint about leadership style. Furthermore, a mere trainer would probably not recognize transference issues (see sidebar), a critical dimension of the

bipersonal field (and a natural occurrence in any meaningful interpersonal relationship).¹⁸ Because the leadership coaching process often awakens deep-seated psychological problems of a characterological nature, raising issues that need much more than a simple coaching intervention, leadership coaches who do not have solid psychological training are woefully unequipped. They may ignore the problem, assuming that it has nothing to do with the workplace. Personality problems don't simply go away, however. A leadership coach's inability to recognize such problems, or the tendency to downplay them, can have detrimental results for individual and organization. Along with failing to get the best out of an individual or executive team—in the process harming the company and even potentially destroying careers—poorly trained leadership coaches may fail to recognize mental disorders, an omission that can be even more devastating for all concerned.

A clinical orientation to leadership analysis and intervention—used in conjunction with more traditional organizational development methods—is therefore essential in the organizational context. The clinical orientation is solidly grounded in concepts of psychoanalytic psychology (specifically, object relations theory), short-term dynamic psychotherapy, cognitive theory, human development, and family systems theory. It can be extremely powerful in deciphering knotty leadership and organizational issues. In the case of many incomprehensible organizational situations, a clinical orientation to leadership coaching can go a long way toward bringing clarity and providing solutions.

Short-Term Psychotherapy versus Leadership Coaching

My emphasis on the importance of familiarity with the clinical orientation brings up an important question: Are psychotherapists and leadership coaches interchangeable in the organizational context? A few observations about the specific skills of the two may help to clarify their differences. As suggested, the most effective leadership coaches draw heavily on psychotherapeutic frameworks and skills. After all, both leadership coaching and psychotherapy deal with behavior, emotion, and cognition. Depending on the psychological background and orientation of the coach, leadership coaching can take on many different forms, many of which look very much like short-term psychotherapy. In leadership coaching, as in psychotherapy, there may be a discussion (depending on how deep the leadership coach and the client are willing to go) of blind spots, defen-

Transference refers to a situation in which the client becomes confused as about time and place, as revealed in the way he or she interacts with the leadership coach, perhaps thinking of him as a father figure, for example. (Counter transference results when the leadership coach becomes similarly confused.) The psychological imprints of crucial early caregivers (particularly our parents) cause transferential confusion in time and place for all of us, in many situations, making us act toward others in the present as if we were acting toward significant people from the past. All of us act out transferential (or 'historical') reactions on a daily basis, regardless of what we do. For example, though we are generally unaware of experiencing confusion in time and place, the mismatch between the reality of our work situation and our subconscious scenario—colleagues are not parents or siblings, after all—may lead to bewilderment, anxiety, depression, anger, and even aggression. Unfortunately, people who have little clinical training may not recognize such interaction patterns, and thus cannot effectively change them. Moreover, leadership coaches unfamiliar with the power of transference may put the client in a dependency situation or otherwise unethically overstep the boundaries of the coaching relationship.

sive reactions, distorted thinking, and irrational thoughts. Not surprisingly, then, there are—or can be—rather fuzzy boundaries between short-term psychotherapy and leadership coaching. Whatever the depth to which the leadership coach is willing to go, it is important to be prepared for emergencies in the coaching process (a point that has been emphasized before), so that the coach recognizes in time the danger signs that can derail the coaching process.¹⁹ Therefore, as mentioned above, some psychotherapeutic (clinical) understanding should be a *sine qua non* for any effective leadership coach.

Regarding the differences between the two, in general leadership coaches have a broader perspective than do psychotherapists. Most psychotherapists have not supplemented their clinical experience with the training necessary to diagnose problems of executive leadership, dysfunctional team behavior, social defenses, corporate culture, neurotic organizations, and organizational decision-making. Effective leadership coaches, on the other hand, are expected to know not only the essentials of psychotherapy, but also the requirements of organizational management. Given the importance of the context in which the client operates, a deep understanding of the specific organizational context, and of organizations in general, are important factors in helping coached clients.²⁰ Because the organizational context is so important, leadership coaches take a holistic, not a reductionist, approach to framing problems. They must take a systemic, not a piecemeal approach. While in most forms of therapy information is principally taken from the client, leadership coaches gather information not only from the client but also from other people who have dealings with the client.

Furthermore, psychotherapy—particularly its more psychodynamic orientations—tends to be past, present, and future oriented, while coaching has a more present and future orientation.²¹ (Psychodynamically informed therapies emphasize the importance of early development, unconscious aspects of behavior, the therapeutic relationship between therapist and client, defensive reactions, and the presence of repetitive behavior.) As a result, in leadership coaching we find a more active goal-and-action orientation, while in psychotherapy the interaction is more passive and reflective. Finally, in leadership coaching the focus is on personal growth and skill development, while in therapy the question of symptom reduction and character problems is the primary area of interest.

In the case of psychotherapy, help to the client stands central, and there is no question about who the client is. In the case of leadership coaching, on the other hand, the identity of the client is not as self-evident. When successful, leadership coaching helps *both* client and organization. So is the client the person the leadership coach works with, or is it the executive in the human resources department who organized the coach's intervention? Is it the CEO? Or is it perhaps even an abstract "ideal," such as contributing to the good of the organization? In the case of therapy, confidentiality is absolute. That rule doesn't always apply to leadership coaching, however. In many cases, confidentiality is much less definite, given the potential confusion about who the leadership coach is

working for. In spite of this confusion, it is advisable for leadership coaches to be, like psychotherapists, quite rigorous about client confidentiality.

The setting is much more flexible in leadership coaching than in psychotherapy. While leadership coaching can take place in many different environments—face-to-face meetings, e-mail, telephone conversations, or group meetings—psychotherapeutic boundaries in most instances restrict interactions to the therapist's office. The duration is likewise defined in therapy, which usually takes the form of regular 45- to 50-minute sessions. Leadership coaching sessions, on the other hand, are often as long as two or even more hours. Interpersonal boundaries differ as well: while therapists generally avoid having social relationships with their patients, not wanting to "contaminate" future sessions, coaches may interact with a client at various company events outside of coaching sessions. These occasions give leadership coaches a great opportunity to observe the client from another perspective. (For an overview of the differences between leadership coaching and psychotherapy see Figure 4.)

The Vicissitudes of Leadership Coaching

To temper all the hype about leadership coaching these days, I would like to end this discussion by presenting a number of concerns. Predictably, (as indicated earlier) my first concern is the proper training of leadership coaches. Companies looking to hire a leadership coach need to be selective,

assessing carefully the training and experience all the candidates possess. If a leadership coach doesn't truly appreciate the problems of the client or the business, this can prove to be extremely costly for individual and organization alike. Self-styled leadership "coaches" may have good intentions, but *real* leadership coaching is built on a solid base of psychological understanding and practice. Effective leadership coaches are attuned to the unconscious life of organizations. They realize that there is more to human behavior that meets the eye.

A related concern—and a troubling one, given human nature—is that leadership coaches don't always know their limits. Leadership coaches need to realistically appraise their expertise and acknowledge which kinds of clients they can work with and which they can't. "Hungry" (in a financial sense) leadership coaches are the worst coaches. Wise leadership coaches know what to take on and what to refuse, and they follow the credo, "Do what is best for the client." Any leadership coach, even one with a great deal of experience, would do well to have regular supervision and/or an independent colleague to discuss clients with, so that an experienced "other" can give his or her opinion on difficult interventions.

Another concern I have—this one multi-pronged—relates to the ethical code of conduct for leadership coaches. First, as noted earlier, it isn't always clear whether the client is the person being coached or someone else in the organization—perhaps someone higher up the management ladder

<u>Therapy</u>	<u>Leadership Coaching</u>
Past, present and future focus	Present and future focus
More passive/ reflective	More active/ goal and action oriented
Information from client	Information from client and key others
Symptom/character analysis	Growth and skill development
Who the client is, is clear	Who the client is, is more fuzzy
Confidentiality is absolute	Confidentiality not as clear
45/50 minutes sessions/ more rigid boundaries: Therapist's office	Sessions of variable length/ more flexible boundaries Various settings
Help to client stands central	Client/organization help stands central

FIGURE 4
Therapy versus Leadership Coaching

or someone in the human resources department. The hazy, potentially dual role that many leadership coaches play has the potential to create serious problems. The person being coached may fear that sensitive information will go back to top management—a realistic fear, since that's often what happens. Leadership coaches need to be clear up front, with both the person coached and anyone else they have dealings with, about how the information they receive during sessions will be used.

The issue of confidentiality extends beyond private personal data to sensitive organizational information regarding issues such as possible acquisitions or mergers, proprietary information about share price, and illegal activities. Organizations that use external leadership coaches should set confidentiality guidelines up front to ensure the client's (and organization's) privacy. Using that written agreement about how information will be shared, the leadership coach can then balance the need for privacy with a focus on improved corporate results.

Another troubling ethical issue is the question of consent. Sometimes clients participate in leadership coaching, not because they believe in its value, but because senior people in the organization have recommended it for career advancement. Declining such a "gift" (a word meaning poison in the Dutch and German language) isn't an option for anyone who wants to be promoted within the organization. But talk about questionable motivation! It's like the convict who enters therapy because a judge mandated it as one of the conditions of a reduced sentence. I have learned from hard experience that such scenarios do not augur well. Leadership coaches who find themselves working with clients who are under duress must exercise great vigilance in dealing quickly with resistances.

There are ethical issues around the question of money as well. If the organization finances leadership coaching, it should provide clear guidelines about the ways leadership coaches are going to be used, and for how long. Because clients, with successful leadership coaching, begin to grow and develop personally, they often want to extend the work beyond what was originally planned for. They may, for example, want what was intended to be a performance-improvement intervention to blossom into something of a very different nature. As with the work of the sorcerer's apprentice, the process can easily run out of control, becoming very expensive. Of course, it is another matter altogether if the leadership coaching is financed privately by the client.

My final concern (and this has been the main

topic of this article) has to do with the focus of leadership coaching. I would like once more to make a plea for leadership coaching in groups as the preferred tool for behavior change. Although one-on-one coaching currently has the center stage in the coaching field, my experience has shown that leadership coaching in a group setting has the highest payoff: high-performance organizations; results-oriented and accountable people; boundaryless organizations; and true knowledge management.

We have always known that the pressure that groups can exert in creating behavior change can be formidable. Zen masters have always been well aware of the efficacy of these pressures, as the following story illustrates: When a famous Zen master held his regular weeks of meditation, pupils from all over Japan came to attend. During one of these gatherings, one of the pupils was caught stealing. The matter was reported to the Zen master with the request that the pupil be expelled. The Zen master ignored the request. Soon after, the pupil was caught in a similar act, and again the master disregarded the matter. This lack of action angered the other pupils so much that they drew up a petition asking for the dismissal of the thief. If the master wouldn't agree, they threatened, they would all leave the temple.

When the Zen master had read the petition, he called everyone before him. "You're right, pupils," he told them. "You know what is right and what is not right. You may go somewhere else to study if you wish, but this poor brother of ours doesn't even know right from wrong. Who will teach him if we don't? How can we change his dysfunctional behavior? I'm going to keep him here even if all the rest of you leave."

The Zen master's expectations had been framed in a positive way, and the values of the other students had been praised. Surrounded by a group on the watch for further infractions, the pupil found that his desire to steal had vanished. It is easy to imagine that this gentle lesson was of lasting benefit to all concerned. It is a good example of the outcome all leadership coaches should strive for.

Endnotes

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