Coaching on the Axis: An integrative and systemic approach to business coaching

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Business coaching is defined as occurring within an organisational context with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organisation by affecting the actions of those being coached. Its success is based in the quality of the coaching relationship and the degree to which it successfully aligns with the organisation from which it takes direction and sanction. This paper explores an integrative and systemic approach to business coaching which captures the way it interfaces with organisational, interpersonal and intrapsychic systems. The integrative orientation ensures the coach is unrestricted theoretically and practically in delivering the most viable intervention and the systemic orientation works with the relational interfaces between coach, coachee and organisation to ensure alignment with organisational reality. These interfaces are viewed in three dimensions, the environment, the individual and the coaching relationship, existing on an axis that a coach may track thematically. A practical dialogical process is offered to elicit insights and test actions systemically along this axis. A detailed case study is provided.
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BUSINESS COACHING is defined as 'a process of engaging in meaningful communication with individuals in businesses, organisations, institutions or governments, with the goal of promoting success at all levels of the organisation by affecting the actions of those individuals' (Worldwide Association of Business Coaches, 2007). The past decade has seen a significant increase in literature addressing the way coaching interfaces with organisations to deliver business results. Many authors (Brunning, 2006; Cavanagh, 2006; de Haan, 2008; Huffington, 2006; Kemp, 2008; O'Neill, 2007; Passmore, 2007; Rosinski, 2003) established the theoretical and practical foundations for a relational and systemic approach to business coaching in which success of the intervention is based in the quality of the coaching relationship and the degree to which it successfully integrates and aligns with the sponsoring organisation. These authors show that business coaching is more an engagement of relatedness than any one particular method or skill (Kemp, 2008, p.32; Passmore, 2007, p.69) and that this relatedness is embedded in a greater systemic context, commonly an organisational culture (Rosinski, 2003; Schein, 1992). Successful approaches to business coaching, therefore, incorporate significant consideration of the relational dynamics between the triad of coach, coachee and organisation, and focus on the coaching relationship and its systemic interface with the business environment.

From a theoretical perspective many coaching offerings have tended to be effective conversions from established psychotherapeutic approaches (Passmore, 2007; Stout Rostron, 2009) with 'a focus on transferring a single model from its therapy origins to coaching' (Passmore, 2007, p.68). In many respects this has been a blessing as it has ensured that early coaching practices were automatically underpinned by rich and deep theory and research. However, business coaching occurs within the context of a marketplace not a therapy room, and thus there is a clear argument for more coaching offerings that begin with this as the starting point informed by psychotherapy and other

established fields rather than the other way around. For example, Passmore (2007) offers an eclectic and integrative approach to business coaching inviting coaches to 'work in an eclectic way, mixing tools and techniques from methodologies, but with a focus on the primary objective of executive[1] coaching; enhancing performance in the workplace' (p.76). Integrative and eclectic approaches encourage the use of diverse strategies without being restricted by theoretical differences and practitioners use the most viable theoretical lens or intervention based on their experience and what makes most sense (Brooks-Harris, 2008; Norcross & Goldfried, 2005; Palmer & Woolfe, 1999). Such an approach best suits interventions in business which has a unique and distinct context and boundary system from that of the psychotherapeutic world. It allows for the strongest application of viability in any intervention, which from the context of business is particularly desirable, and it offers some liberation from problem orientated, psychopathological or remedial coaching orientations typical of the therapy room.

Informed by an integrative and systemic theoretical orientation this paper describes an approach to business coaching that explores the way the coaching relationship, a system in itself, interfaces with organisational, interpersonal and intrapsychic systems through its course, and demonstrates it through the use of a case study. It suggests that it is helpful to view these interfaces in three dimensions existing on an axis that a coach can track thematically thereby ensuring the coaching process successfully aligns with the business reality from which it takes its direction and sanction.

The Coaching on the Axis approach to business coaching

This approach is termed Coaching on the Axis and the metaphor of a tree is used for illustration (Figure 1). The paper further provides a dialogical process within this axial orientation that may be used to track themes, elicit insights and generate coaching actions in a way that ensures alignment with business outcomes.

Business coaching may be viewed in three systemic dimensions: The environment (branches and leaves), the individual being coached (the root system), and the coaching relationship itself (the tree trunk).

1. The environment

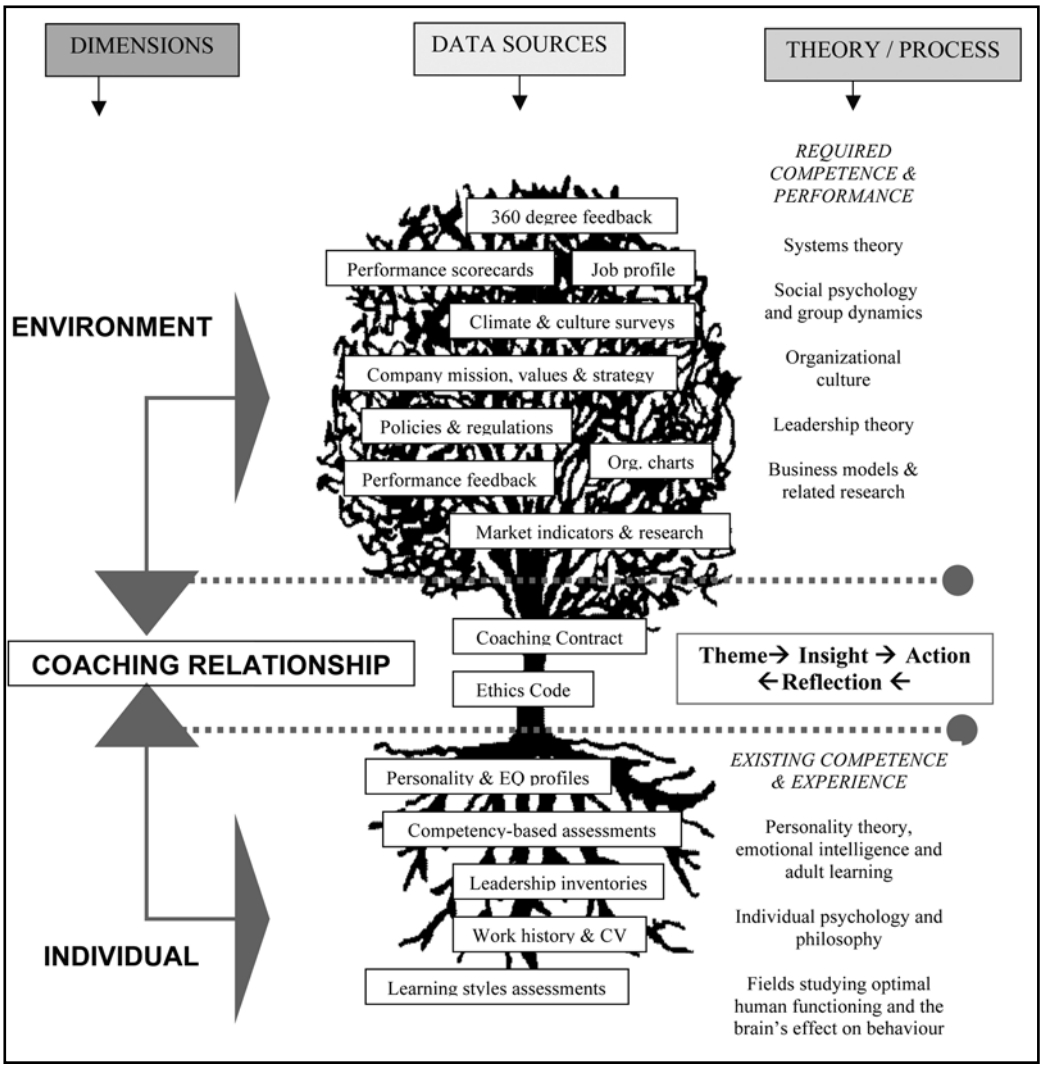
The environment is the current systemic reality. For the coachee this is the business context (business model, strategy and market forces), organisational culture, work-based team and socio-political situation within which they operate. The coachee's job profile, required competencies and performance deliverables are born in this dimension and are a concrete expression of it. The environment specifically includes how the coachee is perceived by others, ergonomics and all environmental stressors. In the visual metaphor of a tree this dimension is located in its leaves, branches and 'above the ground' atmosphere. This symbolises the entangled relationships that give rise to the growth of the tree and its probability of bearing fruit. The metaphor of photosynthesis is useful here in reflecting the chemistry between the coachee and their environment that is necessary for growth.

Examples of data sources that can inform the coaching process from this dimension are:

1. Job profile
2. Performance scorecards and competency frameworks
3. 360 degree feedback
4. Climate & culture surveys
5. Company mission, vision and values
6. Leadership and performance feedback
7. Organisational charts

[1] Although Passmore uses the term 'executive' coaching and the author has used the term 'business' coaching, executive coaching is clearly a form of business coaching and the author would argue that other forms of business coaching such as leadership coaching are subject to very similar (and in many cases exactly the same) systemic realities.

Figure 1: Coaching on the Axis illustrated in the metaphor of a tree.



8. Strategy documents
9. Market indicators and research
10. Company policies.

The way the environment articulates desired outcomes for the coachee (often through their manager or HR) is a central expression of this dimension, and the way people (including the coachee) describe culture, history and relationships is relevant. The object is to understand the way the environmental system works and what the coachee is 'holding' for the system in their role. Some important questions are: 'How do things work around here? How does one get ahead? Who is who, and who is ahead and behind? What kind of things happen here that nobody would easily and openly admit? What should one never and always do here? What has happened in the history of this place that most people know has set the current tone and direction? What is the secret to success here? How do decisions really get made?'

The theoretical frameworks that inform this dimension describe the way human beings perceive and behave within the environment (system/group/company/market),

and how the environment simultaneously drives their behaviour and perceptions. Below are some good examples of classic texts and recent literature:

1. Systems theory and social psychology (Brunning, 2006; Cavanagh, 2006; Lencioni, 2005; Lewin[2] 1947a, 1947b; McRae & Short, 2010; Minuchin, 1974; Senge, 1990).
2. Organisational culture (Rosinski, 2003; Schein[3], 1992).
3. Business models and research (Chesbrough, 2007; Collins, 2001; Sisodia et al., 2007).
4. Leadership theories (Covey, 1989, 1992; Maxwell, 1995; Northouse, 2010).
5. Performance management theory and practice (Luecke & Hall, 2006).

2. The individual (being coached)

The individual dimension refers to the personal psychology, competence and history the coachee brings to their relationship with their environment; their personal reality. People bring their personality and psychosocial history to bear on everything they do in their work, coachees commonly refer to this as their 'personal make-up', their 'past', their 'mindset', or their 'baggage'.

The coachee's resume tells part of this; naturally peoples' competence and experience embedded in their career story resides inside them. However, the deeper, and often more critical components of this dimension are less visible and sometimes unconscious to the individual. For example, coachees' personality type, relationship with authority, power and control, their self-esteem, confidence, learning style and self-limiting beliefs are commonly hidden but nevertheless play a powerful role in determining success. The individual dimension is, therefore, placed underground in the metaphor of the tree, where the tree's roots symbolise the notion of origins, roots. In fact, coachees will sometimes speak about their 'roots,' and how these are driving their current behaviour and perception.

The term 'roots' has cultural resonance reflecting the coachee's cultural origins and diversity differentials as well as the previous impacts they have endured as a result. This is also the place to explore ethical, moral and spiritual beliefs and history and how these influence perceptions for they are indeed often 'deeply rooted'.

Examples of data sources that inform the coaching process from this dimension are:

1. Personality profiles and emotional intelligence assessments.
2. Work history and resume.
3. Competency-based assessments.
4. Leadership inventories.
5. Learning styles assessments.

The way individuals articulate the story of who they are, and from where they come, is important here. Some good questions to elicit this are: 'Please tell me about yourself. Who are you really? Where do you come from? What are you about? How did you get here?' In addition, their personal wishes and goals are key lenses and so next questions could be, 'What do you want from your work and your life? What do you want personally from this coaching process?'

The theoretical frameworks that inform this dimension explain the way human beings perceive and behave as a function of their past relationships, personality and social history. This is an enormous field[4], and below are a few classic examples alongside some current literature:

1. Personality theory (Crowne, 2010; von Fanz & Hillman, 1991) including assessments such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Hirsh, 1985), the field of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2005) and associated assessments (Bar-On &

[2] Although Lewin's work is dated, it has been included because his theories are relevant today.

[3] Schein's quintessential text on organisational culture and leadership is seminal to this dimension.

[4] It is worth mentioning that it is not necessary to be familiar with all these frameworks. Most coaches will likely immerse themselves in one or two and have a cursory knowledge of several others.

Parker, 2000), and adult learning theory (Kolb, 1984; Merriam et al., 2006).

2. Fields of psychology and philosophy such as psychodynamic psychology (Corsini & Wedding, 2008; Malan, 1995), humanistic psychology (Bridges, 2004; Schneider et al., 2001), behaviorism (Rachlin, 1991; Woollard, 2010), existentialism (Frankl, 2008; Schneider, 2008; Spinelli, 1989), narrative psychology (Sarbin, 1986; White, 2007), Jungian psychology (Hauke, 2005; Jung, 1965; Jung, 1996; Stevens, 1994) and Integral theory (Wilber, 2000, 2006).
3. Fields studying optimal human functioning and the way the brain drives behaviour such as neuro-linguistic programming (Bandler, Grinder & Stevens, 1979; Burn, 2005; Mathison & Tosey, 2010), positive psychology (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Peterson, 2006; Seligman, 2004) and relevant developments in neuroscience (Page & Rock, 2009) such as the recent field of NeuroLeadership (Ringleb & Rock, 2009).

3. The coaching relationship (constituting the centre of the Coaching Axis)

The coaching relationship constitutes at the centre of the Coaching Axis and is its core. This dimension brings the individual and the environment into dialogue in a way that promotes alignment, integration and improved performance. In other words, business coaching is born from the desire of both the environment and the individual to exist in an improved state of relationship. Business coaching goals are expressions of this call to relationship, for example: 'Since I've been promoted to executive I need to move from a management mindset to more of a leadership mindset.' Here the desire is to shift something on the individual dimension (mindset), to meet a need on the environmental dimension (executive deliverables). Another example expressed by a human resource manager is: 'He (the coachee) jumps to conclusions too quickly. He is impulsive and speaks without thinking. Technically he is great, but when it comes to people he damages relationships. Can you help with coaching?' Again the environment calls for the individual to behave in alignment with consensual behavioural parameters (organisational culture) and looks to coaching to facilitate this alignment. It might be the case that the individual calls for the environment to shift and come into alignment. An example of this is when a new CEO arrives with a vision for the company. Here the Coaching Axis helps the CEO find ways to influence environmental shift in order to realise his or her vision.

This relational orientation ensures that the outcomes of business coaching are continuously linked to better business. The suggestion here is that although good coaching may be delivered where there is a win for the individual but none for the business, that is not business coaching. Business coaching is about business; otherwise it is unacceptable, possibly even unethical, for business to pay for coaching which is failing to deliver business outcomes[5] and for which there is no clear intention for a return on investment.

Furthermore this approach offers relative freedom from moral or clinical judgements because business coaching is not so much about correcting something 'wrong' with the coachee or the organisation but more about bringing them into an improved state of relationship. Clearly coaching is often about change and transformation, but the foundation from which the coaching works is relationship. This opens the door to coaching outcomes that are not just about change, but also about acceptance of what is; letting go of the expectation of something different for both the individual and the environment

[5] This excludes situations where the individual is seeking life coaching, not business coaching, and hoping that the business will pay for this. Such a request is ethically tricky and the author would argue this kind of request is best dealt with through another service provision such as an employee assistance programme.

and appreciating the value of what is already there. This relational orientation offers some methodological protection from the temptation to collude with a system that marks a coachee as bad, sick or deviant and asks the coach to 'fix them', or the converse where the coachee marks the system in a similar way and uses the coaching as an agony aunty or complaints department.

The term 'axis' is used to describe this orientation then because the coaching relationship is actually constituted as a systemic and relational axis between the individual and their environment and because, put simply; business coaching is more about gaining awareness and finding agreement between the dimensions than it is about fixing a deviant, damaged or resistant individual.

As previously discussed the quality of the coach-coachee relationship is central to success and is itself a systemic indicator of the themes playing out in the Coaching Axis. The interpersonal dynamics between coach and coachee come to the fore here. For example, the coachee might indicate that the reason they could not action the intentions of the previous session was because they didn't really believe the insights that emerged and the coach had 'seemed so convinced'. Here the interpersonal dynamic between coach and coachee is a theme in itself and may liberate insight for both parties as they explore what this means in terms of the coach and coachee's interpersonal patterns. It is important to remember that the coach is learning about themselves in each interaction. For example, Kemp (2008) suggests that the coach is 'a central instrument in facilitating the relationship' (p.33) and would describe the above example as 'the coach's Achilles Heel' where the coach has 'a tendency to overestimate the accuracy of his beliefs and opinions and to be more confident in these opinions then accurate' (p.35). Also playing out here are the powerful phenomena of transference and countertransference[6] (Racker, 2002). It is, therefore, important that significant attention be paid to the interpersonal experience of the coaching relationship and in particular the role the coach as an individual, with his or her own psychosocial context and history, plays in the process. This lens can be profound and is particularly effective when the coach undergoes supervision (Moyes, 2009) especially since the coach may be unconscious of their own personal process.

In the metaphor of the tree, the trunk, which connects the branches and leaves to the roots, symbolises the coaching relationship. This is used to reflect the idea of a space or axis where the continual focus is relationship between the parts.

There are also several 'hard' data sources that inform the coaching relationship. These express the contract between the environment, the individual and the coach, for example:

1. The coaching contract, outlining boundaries, fees, timelines and expecta-tions.
2. The coaches' ethical code of practice.
3. Company policies or processes that affect the conduct of the coaching relationship.

Furthermore the systemically agreed outcomes against which the coaching is to be measured are central to this dimension, and as is often the case these change over time. When this occurs an immediate re-contracting must happen between the parties otherwise the fundamental integrity of the axis is destabilised and success compromised.

The theoretical frameworks that inform this dimension come from literature that specifically explores coaching practice. Examples are coaching journals such as *The International Journal of Evidence-Based Coaching and Mentoring*, *The International Coaching Psychology Review*, and *Coaching: An Inter-*

[6] This refers to the psychoanalytic considerations of the way in which the therapist and the patient (coach and coachee) activate each other's projections and unconsciously recreate their personal issues (from their roots) in the therapeutic (coaching) relationship. Specifically, there is an opportunity to use this phenomenon as a mechanism for awareness and transformation.

national Journal of Theory, Research and Practice, as well as coaching and relevant consulting texts such as Flaherty (2005), O'Neill (2007), Palmer and Whybrow (2007), Peltier (2009), Stout Rostron (2009), Schein (1999, 2009) and Stober and Grant (2006).

The dialogical process embedded in the Coaching on the Axis approach

The dialogical process embedded in the Coaching on the Axis approach facilitates a practical method of exploring the dimensions and the way they interface. Although this process was created and refined by the author over time it is acknowledged that it has loosely been influenced by David Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984) and some facets of insight-orientated psychotherapy (Scaturo, 2010). This process is explained below:

1. Theme:

As soon as the coach is engaged by the environment or the individual they track emerging themes. From the first conversation these emerge, usually in the form of descriptions of issues to be addressed or goals. Examples are: 'shifting mindset from manager to leader' (theme=*leadership*) or 'improving communication' (theme=*communication*). Coaching goals are captured as themes in themselves. Environmental themes are tracked and captured, examples of this would be that the business is under sudden market pressure to perform or that the coachee is in a new role that has never existed before, or perhaps it's something about the organisational culture that emerges, for example, it's reported as being 'unforgiving'. Simultaneously individual themes are being identified, for example the coachee may believe they are not fully supported in their role or perhaps they don't feel confident.

A thematic picture gradually appears of both the individual and environmental dimensions through a process of incisive questioning and active listening in the coaching dialogue, and through a sensitive interrogation of all the available data sources including relevant individuals in the environment (e.g. HR, coachee's colleagues and/or the coachee's manager). The coach offers their understanding of the themes to the coachee on an ongoing basis, testing assumptions and clarifying themes. In so doing the thematic exploration deepens and becomes increasingly clear. In particular the coach is looking for points of alignment and misalignment between the environmental and individual dimensions, and reflecting these back to the coachee and others in the environment where contracted.

2. Insight:

The process of thematic exploration is like an archaeological excavation. As deeper aspects of the coachee's experience are uncovered insights emerge, often spontaneously, on the part of the coachee and the coach. These insights are captured and reflected. Commonly, the coachee uses a coaching journal[7]. A simple example of an insight would be when one realises that one is limiting oneself from stepping into power because of having assumed that others will not accept one's authority. Such an insight might emerge from the coach questioning how the coachee really knows that 'nobody will listen to me', when they have not tested that in reality. This question uncovers a previously hidden distortion in the belief system of the coachee which spontaneously liberates the insight.

3. Action:

Once insight has emerged the coach must look to embed the insight into action – real, preferably measurable, behavioural change. In the example above, the coach would ask: 'Now that you have the insight that your own self-limiting beliefs around power have been

[7] This is an act of ownership, and empowers the coachee in self-coaching practice for moments when the coach is not around and after the coaching officially terminates.

in the way of you feeling fully authorised in your role how will you act differently?' and the coachee would then articulate new behaviour. The coach is ready to challenge the coachee to make the change in their environment and see how it feels. In a single coaching session, many actions might be captured or none for that matter, depending on the number of insights that emerge. Also, some insights are not related to obvious behavioural change, for example, realising the impact of a past negative experience on self-image. In such an insight the action is intrapsychic and the transformation is immediate, though not obviously visible in behavioural terms.

4. Reflection

Once actions have been identified it is important to reflect on the learning process. This serves to embed the awareness gained and make further learning easier as the coachee becomes increasingly familiar with the way coaching works. Reflection occurs within and across sessions as the dyad explore 'how it is going' – the coach should be particularly interested in whether or not the coachee will be or has been successful in putting into action the insights of the session, and if not, what prevents this. It is here that the interpersonal dynamics between coach and coachee may be reflected upon and mined for insight as discussed in the example earlier.

This reflective loop often gives rise to deeper themes and layers of the coaching axis and in turn further insights emerge. The level of alignment between insights and related actions from the coachee's perspective and the requirements, expectations and cultural norms from the organisation's perspective are tested here. For example, a coachee may think that the solution to reducing their work stress (an axially agreed outcome of the coaching) is an improvement in work-life balance by reducing working hours; however, the organisation may reject this and so coaching actions need to be tested from a systemic perspective before being implemented. The use of circular and reflexive questions (Huffington & Hieker, 2006) is helpful in achieving this, for example, a circular question might be: 'If you reduce your hours how would this impact others in the organisation who work full day?' And a reflexive question would be: 'Let's imagine how your manager will feel when you ask her to reduce your hours, can we appreciate what that might bring up for her?'

4. Termination

As the cycle of theme, insight, action, reflection continues, no single point is reached where one can say: 'There are no more themes, no more insights, so coaching is over.' Because opportunities for awareness and growth continue throughout life the Coaching Axis needs to remain in integrity with the initial goals as per the contract, and when such are sufficiently achieved the coaching should be terminated or a new contract agreed. The litmus test is to ask: 'Is there sufficient alignment between the environment and the individual against the goals?' If the answer is largely in the affirmative then coaching is complete.

Case study methodology

A single case study (George & Bennett, 2005) was used with the object of illustrating the effectiveness of the approach described above. Purposive sampling was employed where a single coachee undergoing business coaching by the author was selected. The richness and accessibility of the coachee's early coaching experience was the reason for selection. The data was sourced within the contract of the business coaching relationship and collected within the coaching sessions using coaching notes. Thematic analysis (Braun & Victoria, 2006) of the coaching notes was used to help make sense of the data.

The case of Des[8]

Des was a newly-appointed executive in a multinational company. She engaged my[9] services as an executive coach based on a referral from another client with whom she was acquainted. Des contacted me directly and said she needed coaching to help her 'step up' in her new senior executive role.

In our first meeting we explored her wants and goals:

1. Move from a more task-based managerial mindset to a more relationship orientated leadership mindset.
2. Build her ability to influence and empower as opposed to direct and control others in order to achieve outcomes.

These individual dimension outcomes were articulated in terms of the environmental requirements for her role. Des explained that both her boss and her job description made it clear that 'leadership through influence' was required and that success in such would be an important consideration 'come bonus time'. She further shared that she 'was not good at this politics stuff'.

During our first meeting I asked myself a series of internal questions:

Is business coaching the appropriate service here?
This is an axial question tapping for integrity between the business need (environment) and the individual request for coaching. Business coaching is commonly used to address mindset change particularly when it involves development of leadership competencies as required in a complex business environment (Stout Rostron, 2009, pp.18–20). In such a case, training would be too generalised, consulting would be inappropriate as 'solutions on a silver plate' usually have little impact on mindset, and psychotherapy wouldn't be right as the focus is not on healing a wound or treating a disorder. Mentoring might be helpful, but not necessarily more so than coaching. So coaching seemed a good fit and in integrity with the axis.

Was there good chemistry between the coachee and I?
This question is an early axial tap for the quality of the coach-coachee interpersonal relationship. Rapport was quickly established between us. The conversation flowed both ways without struggle. Body signals from the coachee indicated openness to the dialogue and an increasing level of trust and safety as the meeting went on. I felt an increasing eagerness and interest to engage further.

What themes emerged beyond those overtly articulated?
My initial impression of Des was a focused, articulate and determined individual; tough, but not hard. As she shared more I noticed a 'softer' inside peeping through, but it was quickly defended away. Her posture and physical manner was forward moving, upright with opening motions indicating confidence and receptivity. She moved easily and spontaneously indicating freedom from significant anxiety and comfort with the context and her personal power. Her tonality, pace and speech indicated an obvious partiality to the masculine archetype (Jung, 1996) and I wondered already at this stage about her relationship with the feminine. She described her company as delivery orientated, results-focused and committed to maintaining its status as the international leader in the industry. She said the company 'only employs the best,' and 'expects staff to score winning runs.' Of import here is that she shared a sincere appreciation for such a culture and a deep desire to 'put points on the board.'

[8] Names and significant details have been changed or completely replaced with the permission of the coachee to protect her identity.

[9] The author has chosen to write the case study in the first person to provide the reader with more direct and intimate access to the experience of working with this coachee.

What contracts and boundaries need to be acknowledged and understood in order to proceed?
Des explained that she ran her own budget and her manager had already agreed to sign off for a coach. She would not need any triangulation in reporting on progress. She would let her manager know directly how the coaching was going. HR was to have no involvement in the process (this proved to be an interesting systemic issue later on and I recall wondering if there were any issues between her and the HR director[10]).

What is the coachee expecting? Do they understand coaching process?
Des had received coaching before and her understanding of coaching process was sound. She recognised the difference between coaching and other modalities and expressed this as, 'therapists love, consultants answer, trainers teach and coaches ask the important questions.' I enjoyed the simplicity of her statement and noted a further theme here around her remarkable ability to understand quickly and make complex things simple. Later on we discovered this strength was also her Achilles Heel.

We contracted to work together for one year, meeting on average twice per month for approximately two hours at a time with availability on email and telephone as needed.

We began our coaching process by turning our attention to gathering data from the environmental and individual dimensions.

1. Des nominated her boss, two colleagues and two direct reports for me to interview in a 360 process that focused on her leadership competencies.
2. I administered an Insight Discovery Personality Profile (Insights® Learning and Development, 2005) to assess Des's personality.
3. I took a comprehensive personal and work history.
4. I perused a range of company documents she provided which included her divisional strategy, company mission and values, Des's performance scorecard and her job description.

Our early sessions focused on exploring all the data sources as a whole, looking for emerging themes. The task was a collaborative one in which together, coach and coachee, acted as archaeologists, excavating Des's individual roots and environmental branches.

The following themes and insights emerged in early sessions:

Individual Dimension:

1. Her personality was strongly Type A (Friedman, 1996). She had high scores in the extraverted thinking range and very strong judging functions. In Insights® Discovery Profile terms (Insights® Learning & Development, 2005) she was 92 per cent Fiery Red with only six per cent Earth Green. This meant that she expected people to 'be brief, be bright and be gone!' and she had little patience for non-task-based dialogue and was unlikely to 'show how much she cares' even when she did.
2. Her personal history was populated with repeated and consistent threats to her social and emotional survival. Nothing had come easy. This had resulted in high levels of independence and a need for total control of her environment. She carried the following beliefs: 'God helps those who help themselves' and 'in this world there is only one person that looks after No. 1, and that is No.1.' She admitted that she secretly believed that if she could not take care of herself one

[10] Although I have found it common for senior executives to act independently of HR where their own coaching is concerned, this case felt different. Usually the head of HR is a team member on the same executive committee of the coachee (or may even report into them) and so boundary issues are trickier to negotiate (and understandably so), however, in Des's case other issues were at play for her not wanting HR to be involved, and these will be explored later.

day, 'nobody would give a damn' and she would 'probably die in a gutter somewhere (she laughed).' I did not laugh; instead, I reflected how hard it must be for her inside to carry this everyday. For the first time she revealed just how vulnerable she was underneath all her armour by nodding and her eyes welled up.

3. Her work history was truly impressive. Success after success based on solid delivery and target-breaking achievements; 24-hour days and an absolute, unbridled determination and focus. It was obvious why she had made senior executive at the age of 38. She was a machine.
4. Throughout her career all her roles were strongly operational in nature. She had little experience with influencing. She had always been focused on control and directives. As she explained: 'there was always a clear task and deadline to meet, and come hell or high water, I was gonna meet it with time to spare!' For this, she had been rewarded by the environment with promotions and bonuses for over 13 years.

Environmental Dimension:

1. The 360 was largely aligned in opinion. They all expressed a degree of respect for Des based on her solid history of delivery and 'no-nonsense' straight-talking approach. However, there were varying degrees of concern about her ability to 'lead from influence' as opposed to 'control and direct.' Some called her autocratic. Others described her as tough, honest and fair. Idiosyncratic responses included that she failed to understand the importance of 'certain relationships' in the system and that this would end up being her downfall as an executive.
2. The culture of the company was characterised by an aggressive focus on delivery in a meritocracy. Hierarchy was in place only so much as it served delivery. Long work hours were expected and admired and the place had a reputation for being 'unforgiving', 'hard' but 'fair'. Generous bonus based remuneration for performers were the order of the day. I characterised the underlying cultural motto as 'perform, perform… and then we will love… but stop performing and the love is gone', and several staff including Des confirmed it as accurate.
3. We unpacked the company culture and discovered it changes at executive level. What was previously a delivery orientated focus now changed to a relationship orientated focus. Hierarchy was less important than 'who you were in with' and whether or not you had the CEO's ear. Also, deliverables on several counts were rather subjective and the 'softer' skills of people management and leadership were seen as more important than whether you hit a particular number or not. Here the common feeling seemed to be that 'politicians rule'. It was on this theme that Des's aggression emerged: 'Screw that!' she said. 'I am not playing politics. Firstly I am crap at it and secondly its bulls..t!' It was clear that the environmental dimension, at this level, was deeply at odds with her individual value system and competence.
4. Interpretation of Des's scorecard suggested leadership skills and emotional intelligence to be important as well as stakeholder management. When juxtaposed against the above point Des recognised that she had 'a lot of inner work to do to deliver on this baby', pointing to her performance scorecard.

Over time Des brought her daily experiences to our sessions. Each was unpacked thematically and explored in terms of other themes. An integrative thematic picture slowly took shape and grew richer as sessions progressed. A few of these themes have been selected to demonstrate this:

1. Jane

Des came to one session in an aggressive mood expressing her need to 'vent' her frustration with the HR Director, Jane, who she explained 'is just a typical bleeding heart female who knows as much about delivery as I know about brain surgery!' Further probing revealed that Jane had confronted Des on her 'harsh tone and shortness' in addressing Jane's HR team members after they had (in Des's view) failed to deliver on a talent project Des had commissioned some months earlier. When Des rejected Jane's critical feedback on her style, Jane raised several other circumstances where she had observed Des in this manner and asked Des if she was 'in denial' about her inability to appreciate how others feel around her. Des promptly told Jane that the only denial that was happening was the one where the company denied just how dysfunctional the HR department was. It now became clear why Des had initially instructed that her coaching was to have nothing to do with HR 'whatsoever'.

We explored Des's relationship with Jane. I asked her to imagine, in an appreciative way, how Jane's mind worked and what it must be like to be Jane. We also looked at whether there was anything at all about Jane's feedback, even if only in a tiny part, that might be true and worth exploring. Several themes and insights emerged. She recognised that Jane in many respects represented all the things that Des was not. She was into people more than tasks, she was into feelings more than ideas, she spoke softly and tentatively, she wore bright summer dresses to work (that was a big one for Des), she was a good listener and a poor driver of people, and finally she came from a happy family, best education, married money and was a mother of three (Des was divorced, no kids and self-made). The insight came for Des when I proposed that Jane could be a valuable psychological barometer for Des in achieving her goals. The very things that hooked Des about Jane were the same themes that she was challenged with as a leader, and for which coaching had been sought. Ironically her rejection of Jane was a rejection of the outcomes both her and the environment had set as behavioural deliverables.

The action that Des decided to follow from this realisation was profound. She said: 'I am gonna go to Jane and apologise. I am gonna tell her that I am short on what she is long, and I am gonna ask her to support me.' This was powerful not only for the reversal in perception in which she owned her issues but on a deeper level. For Des to ask for support was something that went against her every fibre. She was fiercely independent and this shift was so big that I was taken aback. I realised that Des's emotional competence was stronger than I had previously predicted, and I shared this with her. She smiled and told me that most men underestimated her. This led to the emergence of a new theme, gender.

2. The feminine and dresses

Des commented that it irritated her when woman wore light short dresses to work in summer. We explored this as 'the summer dress theme' and discovered a deep value system challenge. She judged that 'woman use their sexuality to get ahead and it's unethical and pathetic and work is not a place for fairies and flowers.' We then explored her sense that men underestimate her and she explained that this happens because men are used to woman not delivering and being short on certain competencies, and that she was as good as any man, if not better since she was a woman.

Des seemed to carry an ambivalent relationship with the feminine, at one level she rejected it and at another saw it as her edge over men. I reflected this to her and a great debate ensued. As a man I suddenly found myself in a strong transference in which Des experienced me as the 'other'. I too found myself entangled in the conversation with my own personal views and had to take a step back to separate my coaching role from my personal process. A subsequent supervision session helped keep me focused in serving

Des and not myself[11] in this particular dialogue as it emerged repeatedly in subsequent sessions.

Over time it became clearer for Des that there was a strong link between her capacity to listen, show care and tune into others feelings (as capacities she was seeking to acquire as a goal in the coaching) and her ambivalent relationship with the feminine as an archetypal force. This struck her one session when we did a scan of her friends and realised that her best friends had always been men. It also made sense to her when she connected her divorce into the theme and recalled that her husband had accused her of 'being the man.' She also had no interest in having children, something other woman had challenged her on repeatedly.

As actions around this theme Des began to 'play' with the feminine. For example, she decided to wear make-up to work and even tried a dress on one day 'just to see how it feels'. She reported that people complemented her on how she looked and that it made her feel 'uncomfortable but nice'. She found it curious that during this coaching experiment she found she was 'less harsh with people' and wondered if it was the dress. I interpreted that the make-up and the dress were simply expressions of a psychological shift inside her, a shift that welcomed rather than rejected the feminine competencies. She laughed and said: 'Nonsense! It is the dress. Sometimes life is simple and you make it complicated.' Her tendency to simplify in this way led us to another theme: Simplification as a strength and Achilles Heel.

3. Simplification as a strength and Achilles Heel

Des explained that one of the other directors, John, had picked her out about cutting him short when he spoke in meetings. In a subsequent discussion with Henry, another person whom she respected and who attended the same meeting, he explained that Des 'can't cope with ambiguity' and 'tended to deconstruct everything into simplifications which were often unhelpful and sometimes ignored the complexity of the situation.' Des was perplexed by this feedback because she always had felt that her ability to 'cut through the bulls..t' and make things simple was one of her greatest strengths.

In exploring this feedback we separated out the usefulness of her ability to simplify 'noise' and get down to the bottom of things quickly from the kind of behaviour being pointed out by John and Henry. The former was a useful competence that did not need to change; the latter could be a problem. I asked Des to think about the difference between the two. At first she was unable to see any difference at all but after more reflection she realised that the latter had something to do with 'grey'. She said: 'I guess when an issue doesn't lend itself to a bottom line of black or white and actually leaves me sitting in the grey, I find it hard to handle.' I wondered aloud if this might mean she has difficulty managing ambiguity and she agreed. It appeared her tendency to simplify things was at one level very helpful (when simplification was required) and at another level very unhelpful (when complexity and comfort with ambiguity was required). In the latter her tendency to simplify acted as a defence against sitting with ambiguity (because to do so meant that she was in the 'grey' and therefore not fully in control).

Des found this session very helpful and the insight shifted her paradigm. At an action level she decided to mentally track each time she fell into this behaviour and remind herself to 'sit in the grey, and hold'.

We made a link into the emerging thematic picture by suggesting that cutting through the noise to the bottom line was a

[11] The supervision was really about letting go of my need to: (a) be right in whatever way and; (b) influence Des one way or the other on the matter. It was reminding me that my role was to ensure that we simply explored how Des's thoughts and feelings drove her behaviour, and whether or not that behaviour worked for her and the environment.

truly masculine competence and being able to 'hold' ambiguity is a truly feminine competence. We also had an interesting conversation at this point about left and right brain and how the former function is left brain and the latter is right brain[12].

4. Politics

One day Des described how 'sick and tired' she was of having to play politics. She kept finding herself on the short end of various 'political' relationships because she 'spoke so straight without calculating if this one or that one was going to be put out.' Apparently she had been picked out 'once again' for doing something without 'including the right people in the decision-making process.' The 'right people' in her estimation were 'the wrong people' in terms of execution, but her boss had picked her out nevertheless explaining that it wasn't up to her to decide who she worked with and 'if she couldn't play nicely with the other children she would have to reconsider if this was the right playground for her'.

In the session, Des admitted that she had taken 'a hit'. Her boss had been particularly annoyed with her deliberate exclusion of two other executives in a project he had personally commissioned. She realised it was important that she understand and face up to her choices as they were clearly at odds with her coaching objectives.

We took several sessions exploring the theme of 'politics', moving between separating out different meanings that she was attributing to the phenomenon and reality testing her perceptions and judgments. We delved deeply into her value system and ideas of ethics and unearthed several early experiences of 'politics' in her teenage years at school that wounded her deeply (particularly relating to other girls). Over a period of time Des began to reframe her distaste for the phenomenon as she found insight after insight through our dialogue. Some key insights were that she had 'thrown the baby out with the bathwater' in seeing the entire phenomenon as bad due to the wounds she had experienced at school. She began to see that 'good politics' was really about managing relationships, collaboration and community which are good for business and that 'bad politics' was about manipulation, intrigue and off-task behaviour which was bad for business. This separation into good and bad politics was helpful in shifting her appreciation for relationship management – a key goal in the coaching. She realised that she could still attack or ignore 'bad politics' but she could embrace 'good politics' and maintain her personal value system. We renamed 'good politics' – relationship management.

We once again threaded this theme into the overarching thematic picture. Working well with relationships (good politics) and leading in a way that encourages collaborative work culture might be said to be feminine in vision, whereas driving passionately for targets in a task-based, single-minded fashion might be said to be masculine in vision. Whether true or not[13], this thread was taken up by Des and constellated a powerful guiding dialectic that she used to manage development in the work environment.

Throughout Des would return to sessions and we would reflect on how she was shifting around the overarching goals. On several occasions we met with her manager and she shared what she was learning and the relationship with her manager became increasingly meaningful as his appreciation for her increased. Her relationship with Jane, the HR director, blossomed into a friendship which in turn moved Jane to support Des in recognising 'good politics' when it was important.

[12] I have chosen not to explore this brain theme further here in the interests of brevity.

[13] Some theorists might challenge the validity of this gender-based dialectic. However, whether valid or not, it was viable as a linking theme that helped the coachee mentally hold the complex behavioural shifts she needed to make to achieve her goals.

After a year of coaching Des was not free from critical feedback, there were some executives who maintained a fairly negative view of her leadership style. However a 360 review showed significant positive change in the way she was experienced by her subordinates and moderate improvement from her colleagues. Her manager shared with me that he believed the coaching had been instrumental for Des and that he had initially been worried as to whether or not she 'would make it' but was now confident that she 'will be fine'.

Conclusion

A systemic and integrative approach to business coaching has been explored which accounts for the complex relationships between the coach, coachee and organisation with the goal of delivering systemically agreed business outcomes, whilst at the same time drawing on the power of the widest range of theoretical and practical frameworks for such an intervention. Such an approach allows for the strongest application of viability in a coaching intervention and provides a degree of liberation from problem orientated, psychopathological or remedial orientations typical in coaching applications that draw straight from psychotherapy or other established fields. The notion of a 'Coaching Axis' is used to describe the interface between three systemic dimensions, the environment, individual and coaching relationship, and a dialogical process is offered to track themes, insights and actions across this axis ensuring alignment with business reality. This axial orientation ensures business coaching is properly linked to better business and that interventions remain relatively free from moral or clinical judgements. Finally, the approach was demonstrated in a case study in which an executive was able to measurably adapt her leadership and relational style to deliver on business expectations in her new role.

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