

# The 7 Qualities Of Brilliant Executive Coaching

Laura Lozza



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# For whom is this book?

Executive Coaching is a burgeoning profession that has grown largely unregulated throughout the last five decades. As such, the lines between the serious and improvised professionals as well as the borders between well-supported methods and improvised approaches of undocumented effectiveness are quite blurry. Navigating the complexity of offers and approaches can be a lengthy exercise.

This book attempts to provide an objective and simplified summary of the most updated facts and elements from well documented studies and literature, complemented by practical examples; as such it can serve as both an introductory and a quick reference guide on Executive Coaching for:

- life coaches who wish to learn executive coaching tools and skills in order to offer their services to businesses;
- executive coaches who wish to continue to invest in their development and complement their knowledge with additional perspectives;
- business leaders and HR professionals who wish to learn and use executive coaching tools and skills in their daily working relationships;
- business professionals who, intending to use external Executive Coaching services and finding the offer confusing, wish to identify clear criteria and selection guidelines to complement and support their evaluation and choice;
- designers of behavioral training and leadership courses who want to incorporate coaching qualities in their programs.

# Author's Bio



Laura Lozza gained a Master of Science in Industrial Chemistry at the Genova University (Italy) and then immediately joined Procter & Gamble as Technical Brand Manager; she then continued in P&G throughout a successful international career; she lived in the USA, in Germany and Belgium and gradually moved to more global and strategic positions that exposed her to a vast range of Asian, American and European cultures. When their two children reached school age, together with her Norwegian husband she decided to move the family to Norway and joined Norsk Hydro where she continued her international career in roles that included Business Development, Marketing and General Management. She had a further expatriate assignment in France and held significant P&L responsibilities in Africa.

Constantly eager to learn, develop and grow, Laura became very quickly fascinated by leadership studies from the early days in P&G, a passion that she continued to cultivate through extensive executive education (from IMD to Ashridge) and which culminated in Coaching studies and more recently in Applied Neuroscience studies, which were both instrumental to her decision, in 2010, to leave her corporate career and become fully engaged in coaching and leadership training. She founded Grooa, a partnership of international business consultants and coaches operating in Europe and has since successfully coached and trained in coaching skills hundreds of executives.

A member of ICF, she coaches in four languages (English, Italian, French and Norwegian) and she divides her time between the city life of Oslo (Norway) where Grooa is headquartered and the country life of Gemert (Netherlands), where her third husband has his origins.

website: [www.grooa.com](http://www.grooa.com)

# Introduction

## a. Purpose and benefits

This book is intended to provide an updated and greatly simplified, albeit rigorous, overview of the vast and dynamically evolving field of Executive Coaching, its scope, promise and benefits, structure and key tools. It also offers some essential, timely and much needed clarifications about the role and challenges of the Executive Coaching profession itself.

The success of Executive Coaching and its exponential market growth are mainly linked to its **unique promise**:

Unlike traditional management and competence-based leadership training, Executive Coaching does not provide one-size-fits-all recipes nor lists of behavioral “dos and don’ts”.

In stead, Executive Coaching encourages to explore the attitudes (made of preferences, assumptions and beliefs) that are at the roots of our behavior, in order to identify personalized and sustainable ways to become more effective and more confident.

By helping to increase our self-awareness, effective Executive Coaching allows us to make more conscious use of our skills and to mastermind our professional development and growth. We can “learn how to learn” in a non-judgmental way and we can ourselves steer the process of strengthening our effectiveness, impact, influence and social wellness.

*Figure 1 shows a theoretical model of the development steps that we can expect from brilliant Executive Coaching.*



**Fig. 1:** The attractive promise of Executive Coaching, a model (L. Lozza, 2014)

In reality however, along with many brilliant examples of such attractive promise being fulfilled, it is not uncommon to observe a number of situations in which the promise is only partially met or even totally disregarded.

First of all, the Client's role in ensuring a positive outcome is an important variable, strongly impacting the coaching effectiveness. If the person being coached does not commit or fails to actively engage in the process, the promise goes unmet.

Additionally, Executive Coaching is a relatively recent and not yet regulated profession that has attracted practitioners from a variety of backgrounds, sometimes with improvised qualifications (in fact, anybody can use the title of Executive Coach without a single hour experience or training) and it is not uncommon to hear of Executive Coaching programs that do not encourage self-awareness and self-learning, but offer entirely different approaches (e.g. mixing advice with therapy or preaching), thus disregarding the mentioned promise.

Finally, the use of the word "coaching" that carries strong associations with sport, has somewhat contributed to a number of misunderstandings: some business managers still think that Executive Coaching has to do with correcting performance issues and providing a modern form of the traditional "kick in the butts", thus underestimating its real potential.

As the Executive Coaching industry reaches a mature phase, therefore, the market is increasingly **voicing a desire for more clarity and rigor**.

As a business executive first, and more recently as an executive coach myself, I have for a number of decades been an enthusiastic supporter of the most serious approaches in Executive Coaching and at the same time a challenger of the many misconceptions.

Thus the underlying purpose of this book is to **contribute to the clarification efforts of “the professionalization of the coaching movement”** (to quote an expression used by Dave Ulrich in the forward of Marshall Goldsmith’s “Coaching for Leadership” Third Edition).

Specific benefit is to serve as a **reference guide** for those who wish to become professional Executive Coaches as well as for those who wish to learn and adopt coaching techniques in their professional management and leadership roles.

An additional benefit of this book is to serve as a **guide** to help identify and select the most appropriate and effective coaching services, by knowing “what to look for”.

*To note: specific care has been taken in providing as comprehensive and balanced a view as possible, based on extensive documentation, years of training and first-hand experience, as well as feedback from numerous business leaders and coaches. Some of the most relevant sources are listed in the Appendix: Sources and References.*

*Also to note: specific care has also been taken in providing an independent overview; independence in this context means that the book does not focus on one specific coaching methodology, but rather refers to recurrent key themes and examples from a number of different mainstream coaching schools and methodologies.*

## b. What is Executive Coaching?

There is still vast confusion around the subject of Executive Coaching. As a matter of fact, the 2012 ICF Global Coaching Study reports that “Marketplace confusion” and “Untrained professionals” are the top two issues facing the coaching industry. Further, the 2014 Sherpa Executive Coaching Survey reports that about half the respondents are still confused about the difference between coaching and management.

Such misconceptions are often a product of the market fragmentation that might induce some confusion; other times confusion is generated on purpose. Misuse of the Executive Coaching terms include a variety of “sins”, from applying coaching to situations where there is no real commitment to change, to reinventing the wheel under a new fancy name for promotional scopes and with little concern for serious professionalism.

We will here attempt to provide a short summary of Key Introductory Facts: Definition; Expected Outcomes and Coachee's Responsibilities; Professional Code of Ethics and Core Competences of Coaching.

#### b1. Definition

Being a profession in flux, Executive Coaching is prone to varying and ever-changing definitions. The most up to date and comprehensive definition might be the one given by The Executive Coaching Handbook (Fifth Edition of 2012):

*“Executive Coaching is an experiential and personalized leader development process that builds the leader’s capability to achieve short and long term organizational goals. It is conducted as one-on-one and/or group interactions, driven by data from multiple perspectives, and based on mutual trust and respect. The Organization, the Executive, and the Executive Coach work in partnership to achieve maximum impact.”*

This definition clearly highlights a key difference between personal Business Coaching (including career coaching, transition coaching, leadership coaching, etc.) and Executive Coaching: the former is simply a one-to-one, whereas the latter requires the involvement and commitment of all stakeholders, not only the Coachee and the Coach, but also the Coachee's Organization, usually the one contracting the coaching service.



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A related important difference is that Executive Coaching follows a highly rigorous process. Although Setting Goals, Managing the Process and Accountability appear in the ICF list of Core Competences for all Coaches (Table 1), it is in the cases of Executive Coaching that these skills are particularly critical, in order to ensure:

- positive outcome in shortest time, and
- crystal clear alignment with all involved parties and stakeholders.

As a final comment to the definition, the term Executive does not only indicate the hierarchical “top” of an organization, but also any individual in an executive function, intending with executive function “the requirement on them to plan and take actions to fulfill the aims of their organization” (to quote the definition given in Halina Brunning’s Executive Coaching).

## b2. Expected Outcomes and Coachee’s Responsibilities

The **unique promise** of Executive Coaching, as already anticipated in the Introduction, is to deal with the roots of behavior, **raise self-awareness**, and thus **ignite a self-learning process** that can significantly **increase a leader’s** (potential) **effectiveness, impact and influence**, ultimately bringing the **confidence, resilience and wisdom** that characterize the most accomplished and fulfilled leaders (see Figure 1 above).

This sounds attractive and most of us would intuitively expect that such personal growth would always translate into outstanding and measurable business performance benefits. In reality, this correlation is not always obvious and the verification of such benefits is still rather arduous.

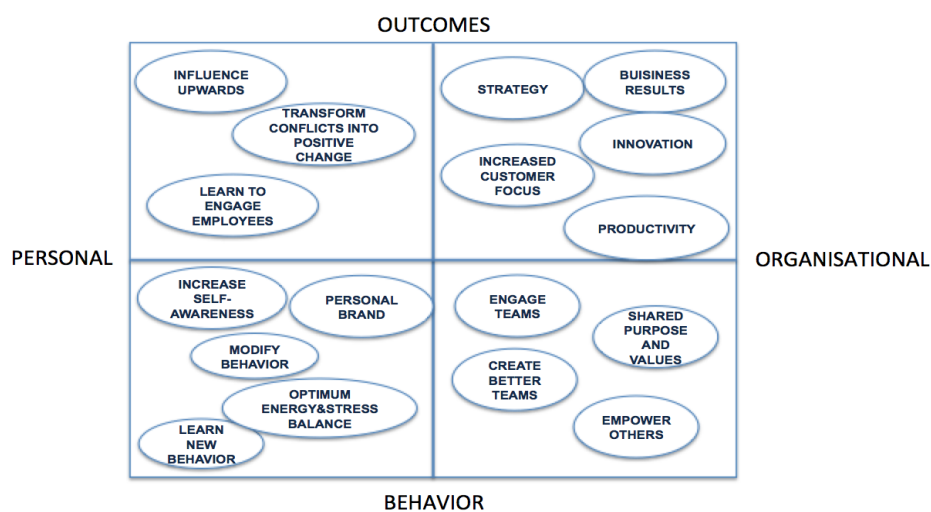
A number of empirical studies were conducted in the last two decades to document the positive outcomes that are and can be obtained via Executive Coaching; several such studies also measured the Return on Investment of Executive Coaching, showing impressive results. The picture is however fragmented and incomplete, as well as tainted by a number of less rigorous pseudo-research of purely promotional nature.

It is also important to stress the empirical aspect of our global knowledge in this field, since we still lack sufficient ground and theoretical scientific research to fully understand “why” coaching is effective. In a nutshell, we can only observe that – when done properly – Executive Coaching is highly effective, but we lack the in-depth comprehension required to transform empirical guidelines into rigorous discipline.

In this book we shall not report any specific studies or empirical results, but simply refer to a few reliable sources mentioned in the List of References.

Based on those, we make an educated assumption that Executive Coaching, when done properly, ensures a number of positive results in four areas of application, as visualized in Fig. 2:

- Personal Behavior, e.g. Self-Awareness, Changed or Modified Behaviors and Clarity of Personal Purpose and Values (Personal Brand)
- Organizational Behaviors, e.g. Engage Teams, Create More Effective Teams, Empower Others, Influence without Authority, Effective Delegation Practices
- Personal Outcomes, e.g. Influence Upwards, Learn to Engage Employees, Transform Conflicts into Positive Change
- Organizational Outcomes, e.g. Design and Shape Strategy, Stimulate and Drive Innovation, Focus on Key Business Results, Thriving Environment



**Fig. 2:** Examples of coaching outcomes grouped in clusters (inspired by Dave Ulrich Typologies of Coaching Outcomes)

The scheme of Figure 2 can help when setting goals in the contractual phase.

Additional important consideration for the contractual phase is the definition of responsibilities and requirements for all Stakeholders:

#### **Key Responsibilities and Requirements for the Coachee:**

- Willing to proactively engage in the coaching process
- Open to learn
- Open to change
- Willing to experiment outside comfort zone
- Focused on Future

As a final notation, it is important to mention that the Coach and the Coachee share responsibility for what the Handbook of Executive Coaching identifies as the three levels of learning:

1. Tactical problem solving
2. Development of leadership capabilities and new ways of thinking or acting, which can be reapplied to a number of other situations
3. Learning how to learn, i.e. developing the ability and the habit of self-reflection that ensures sustainable learning (i.e. Clients acquires self-coaching abilities that will make them independently able to continue to learn and solve leadership challenges)

b3. Core Competencies and Code of Ethics.

Many local and international associations attempt to set **professional and ethical standards for the coaching profession**. The most global and allegedly regarded as the current standard of excellence is the **International Coach Federation**. The list of **ICF Coaching Core Competences** and **ICF Code of Ethical Conduct** are here reported in Table 1 and 2 respectively.



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<p><b>A. Setting the Foundation</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Meeting Ethical Guidelines and Professional Standards</li><li>2. Establishing the Coaching Agreement</li></ol> <p><b>B. Co-creating the Relationship</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>3. Establishing Trust and Intimacy with the Client</li><li>4. Coaching Presence</li></ol> <p><b>C. Communicating Effectively</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>5. Active Listening</li><li>6. Powerful Questioning</li><li>7. Direct Communication</li></ol> <p><b>D. Facilitating Learning and Results</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>8. Creating Awareness</li><li>9. Designing Actions</li><li>10. Planning and Goal Setting</li><li>11. Managing Progress and Accountability</li></ol>
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**Table 1:** The ICF Core Competences

It is however important to note that Coaching in general and Executive Coaching in particular lack an independent regulatory board that can fully protect the interests of the clients: certifications, credentials and membership in professional boards simply guarantee a serious commitment to education and a principle adherence to a professional code of conduct; they do not guarantee effectiveness. Unlike other regulated professions, certifications and credentials for coaches are virtually always granted to anyone who pays for training and is sufficiently persistent. Also, at the time of writing this book, there is no evidence of memberships or credentials being withdrawn in case of malpractice.

Obviously this is not said with the intention to discredit the schools and associations who struggle to create professionalism; it is simply added as a word of caution, in a moment when entities offering or soliciting coaches for additional training and certifications continue to proliferate indiscriminately at an exponential rate.

The word of caution is simply this: **credentials alone do not guarantee effectiveness**. Our recommendation is for **organizations to investigate beyond credentials** and for **coaches to invest more in demonstrating on-the-job effectiveness** than in piling up too many credentials. In few areas like Executive Coaching are references, testimonials and proven investment in knowledge of paramount importance.

Regarding the Code of Ethics, other than reminding to the general code of Table 2, it is important to specify three aspects of particular relevance for Executive Coaching:

- **Confidentiality:** In Executive Coaching the Client's organization (Sponsor) is deeply involved, often as the initiating and financing party and generally as a vested interest party; however this role does not in any way imply access to privileged Client's information, short of the Client's permission. Rule of thumb is that the Coach interacts with the Sponsor only in two ways: collect upfront information and facilitate Client-Sponsor alignment at various checkpoints (leaving it to the Client to choose what to disclose and how).
- **Watch-out for Conflict of Interest and be transparent about it.** The most common risks faced by an Executive Coach is to obtain a personal gain from a choice made by the Client as a consequence of Coaching. Unlike consultants, who recommend a course of action based on their own educated opinion, thus can legitimately demand a share of the resulting profit in payment, the essence of Executive Coaching is to guide the Client to make the choices that are in the Client's best interest, hence any participation in the benefit that results from such choices can be seen as misconduct (undue influence for own advantage). Being transparent is key. A specific case is the choice to get paid for results, rather than by the hour or the program: as long as the goals are agreed upfront with the Client, and accepted to be in her best interest, there is of course no conflict of interest.
- **Compliance:** Professional Executive Coaches are expected to abide all applicable laws and regulations. When working internationally across a large variety of contexts and cultures, it might be difficult to be aware of all potential risks. Some comments and actions made in good faith and with best intentions, might be misunderstood or misinterpreted and expensive legal defense might be required. It is advisable to have Liability Insurance, and most businesses today already require it, for mutual protection.

**Section 1: Professional Conduct At Large****As a coach:**

1. *I will not knowingly make any public statement that is untrue or misleading about what I offer as a coach or make false claims in any written documents relating to the coaching profession or my credentials or the ICF.*
2. *I will accurately identify my coaching qualifications, expertise, experience, certifications and ICF Credentials.*
3. *I will recognize and honor the efforts and contributions of others and not misrepresent them as my own. I understand that violating this standard may leave me subject to legal remedy by a third party.*
4. *I will, at all times, strive to recognize personal issues that may impair, conflict or interfere with my coaching performance or my professional coaching relationships. Whenever the facts and circumstances necessitate, I will promptly seek professional assistance and determine the action to be taken, including whether it is appropriate to suspend or terminate my coaching relationship(s).*
5. *I will conduct myself in accordance with the ICF Code of Ethics in all coach training, coach mentoring and coach supervisory activities.*
6. *I will conduct and report research with competence, honesty and within recognized scientific standards and applicable subject guidelines. My research will be carried out with the necessary consent and approval of those involved and with an approach that will protect participants from any potential harm. All research efforts will be performed in a manner that complies with all the applicable laws of the country in which the research is conducted.*
7. *I will maintain, store, and dispose of any records created during my coaching business in a manner that promotes confidentiality, security and privacy, and complies with any applicable laws and agreements*
8. *I will use ICF Member contact information (email addresses, telephone numbers, etc.) only in the manner and to the extent authorized by the ICF.*

**Section 2: Conflicts of Interest****As a coach:**

9. *I will seek to avoid conflicts of interest and potential conflicts of interest and openly disclose any such conflicts. I will offer to remove myself when such a conflict arises.*
10. *I will disclose to my client and his or her sponsor all anticipated compensation from third parties that I may pay or receive for referrals of that client.*
11. *I will only barter for services, goods or other non-monetary remuneration when it will not impair the coaching relationship.*
12. *I will not knowingly take any personal, professional or monetary advantage or benefit of the coach-client relationship, except by a form of compensation as agreed in the agreement or contract.*

**Section 3: Professional Conduct with Clients****As a coach:**

13. *I will not knowingly mislead or make false claims about what my client or sponsor will receive from the coaching process or from me as the coach.*
14. *I will not give my prospective clients or sponsors information or advice I know or believe to be misleading or false.*
15. *I will have clear agreements or contracts with my clients and sponsor(s). I will honor all agreements or contracts made in the context of professional coaching relationships.*
16. *I will carefully explain and strive to ensure that, prior to or at the initial meeting, my coaching client and sponsor(s) understand the nature of coaching, the nature and limits of confidentiality, financial arrangements, and any other terms of the coaching agreement or contract.*
17. *I will be responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries that govern any physical contact I may have with my clients or sponsors.*
18. *I will not become sexually intimate with any of my current clients or sponsors.*

- 19. I will respect the client's right to terminate the coaching relationship at any point during the process, subject to the provisions of the agreement or contract. I will be alert to indications that the client is no longer benefiting from our coaching relationship.
- 20. I will encourage the client or sponsor to make a change if I believe the client or sponsor would be better served by another coach or by another resource.
- 21. I will suggest my client seek the services of other professionals when deemed necessary or appropriate.

**Section 4: Confidentiality/Privacy**

**As a coach:**

- 22. I will maintain the strictest levels of confidentiality with all client and sponsor information. I will have a clear agreement or contract before releasing information to another person, unless required by law.
- 23. I will have a clear agreement upon how coaching information will be exchanged among coach, client and sponsor.
- 24. When acting as a trainer of student coaches, I will clarify confidentiality policies with the students.
- 25. I will have associated coaches and other persons whom I manage in service of my clients and their sponsors in a paid or volunteer capacity make clear agreements or contracts to adhere to the ICF Code of Ethics Part 2, Section 4: Confidentiality/Privacy standards and the entire ICF Code of Ethics to the extent applicable.

**Table 2:** The ICF Code of Ethics

c. A Short History of Executive Coaching

The history of **Executive Coaching** can be traced back to the late 1950's with the appearance of various educational articles that introduced coaching as a management function (e.g. "On the Job Coaching" by Myles L. Mace and W.R. Mahler in Developing Executive Skills and Macy's "The Growth and Development of Executives" published in 1959 by Harvard Business School)

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It took however more than two decades before coaching started to gain real public attention. The 1970s saw the success of books like F. Fournies' "Coaching for Improved Work Performance" but it was only in the early 1980s that a significant number of articles were published on the subject – describing the various advantages of coaching in the business context – and that several coach training programs started to see the light, both in the US and in the UK.

Many consider the publication of the broadly influential "Coaching and the Art of Management" article by Evered and Selman (1989) as the official end of Executive Coaching's "introductory" period and the start of the "growth" phase.

**The 1990s saw the beginning of the golden age of coaching.** Top schools that continue to lead the way in the new millennium were created in those years (both CTI, The Coaching Training Institute and Coach U were founded in 1992) and articles about coaching reached mainstream publications like Fortune magazine, Newsweek and the Wall Street Journal. Among them, the most famous is John Whitmore's "Coaching for Performance" (1992) that introduced the GROW method (goal, reality, options, will), still largely referred to as a basis for coaching accountability. By the turn of the century several universities started to offer coaching courses and graduation opportunities.

The term **Executive Coaching, as a specific and separate branch of Coaching, was however not actually used until the late '90s**; it slowly appeared for promotional reasons towards the end of the millennium and was gradually given more attention by researchers and serious practitioners in the attempt to create a distance from "the menace of generic coaching" that was by many indicated as doing more harm than good with improvised quick fixes.

This was the decade that saw a new understanding of the fundamental role of continuous learning and leadership training within organizations, an understanding that is well summarized by Arie de Geus in *The Living Company*: "the ability to learn faster than [their] competition is [their] only sustainable competitive advantage".

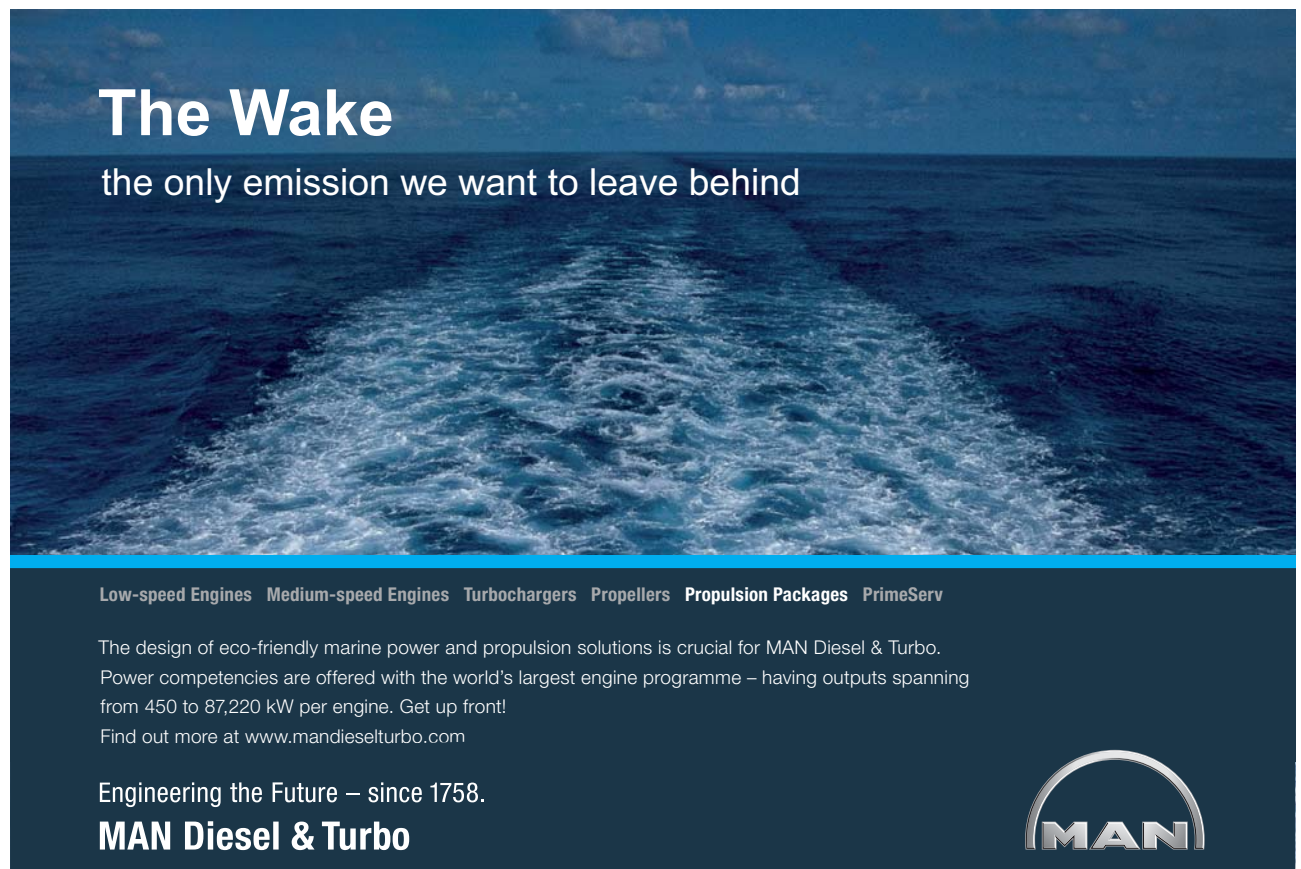
**Executive Coaching became increasingly recognized as an effective tool to nurture learning in critical behavioral areas** like: asking critical questions in a "learning" decision process; acquiring the flexibility to adapt to frequent changes; and becoming more proactively resilient in the face of globalization, downsizing, flattening of hierarchy and blurred authority lines. Realizing the value of people assets and the damaging effects of derailed behaviors, organizations started to use Executive Coaching more for education and prevention, than for fixing performance issues.

Another important milestone that indirectly helped fuel the growth of Executive Coaching was the **Emotional Intelligence movement initiated by Daniel Goleman**. Until then the distinction between management (functional, process and IQ related) and leadership (relationships, behavior and EQ related) was unclear and the two terms were often used interchangeably. With this clarification in mind, **Executive Coaching could better establish a prominent position in one niche of executive education: behavioral competences and people skills.**

The **beginning of the new millennium** saw several major changes in the coaching universe.

First of all, there was the emergence of a strong **desire to set order** into what Sherman and Freas called “the wild west of yesteryear, chaotic, largely unexplored and immensely promising” (HBR, 2004).

- It is in this period that the process-driven Sherpa method was launched and that Marshall Goldsmith published the first edition of Coaching for Leadership.
- It is also in this period that associations of coaches are formed to attempt a certain discipline in setting standards of professional conduct. The largest of these associations, the International Coach Federation, was created in 1995, reaching 20,000 members by the year 2000, and still being the largest and most global such organization today.




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Another major change was the **booming of the “neuroscience” movement** that attempted to disconnect coaching from its classic psychological and motivational roots, and link it to “science”, allegedly in search of a more authoritative status. The roots of this trend can be dated back to the 70’s with the appearance of NLP (Neurolinguistic Programming), whose reputation was however dented by accusations of incorrectness and oversimplification, some calling it “pseudoscience”.

In the last decade, references to more rigorous facts and discoveries in Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience seem to add a facilitation tool and a new angle to Executive Coaching: many find it **less personally threatening to think in terms of reprogramming our brain rather than thinking about changing our whole self**, while the novel angle stimulates our curiosity and interest. This is actually the fastest growing trend within executive coaching today. The market and the media have been seduced by the promise that neuroscience can explain virtually everything; thus, like with all fads and fashions, the most serious practitioners are being followed by a multitude of less rigorous “pop-neuroscience practitioners” that pollute the scene.

Last but not least, **Leadership requirements have dramatically changed** in the last decade and Executive Coaches are increasingly confronted with the need to train in new skills. A recent study of Megatrends (as reported by Hay Group: Leadership Megatrends, 2013) sheds some lights into what these trends mean for leaders, specifically what will be increasingly required in leadership:

- Megatrend of Globalization.
  - This will require the Ability to Lead across Diversities. In an increasingly international arena, it is not sufficient to think globally, but also to positively and influentially act across borders of different languages, ethnicities, educations and beliefs. This in turn requires the confidence to open a diverse dialogue; the willingness to listen, understand, include and merge.
  - Globalization will also require the Ability to Lead Virtually. This is an entirely new field, where we need to reinvent team collaboration and trust without the usual face-to-face methods.
- Megatrend of Individualism and Value Pluralism.
  - This will require the Ability to Influence without Authority, a sore issue in our increasingly “matrixed” corporations, where “legitimacy” of requests can no longer stem from authority level, seniority position or empowering title; personal influence based on behavioral skill is the new ballgame.
  - This megatrend will also require the Ability to Transform Conflicts into opportunities for Positive Change. When everybody is entitled an opinion and everybody is respected and acknowledged, how can we keep focus and steer? how can we incorporate disagreements into an enriched dialogue and merge ideas into a strong aligned path? Transforming disagreements into opportunities to clarify, include, enrich and identify novel ways forward is an advanced skill, almost an art, which future leaders will need to master.

- Megatrend of Digital Lifestyle.
  - This will require the Ability to Cope with Multiple Pressures. We see it already that leaders of today are much more stressed and perceive to be increasingly more under pressure than ever before. Old time management techniques are insufficient. We need to change our mindset and learn to manage our energy. Thus the Ability to Cope with Multiple Pressures also contains other Abilities like Energy Management and Resilience.

These are the challenges that Executive Coaching, continuously evolving and transforming, is called to help address today and in future years.

#### d. Brilliant Executive Coaching in a nutshell

In addition to the Core Coaching Competences listed by the ICF, the different schools of Executive Coaching use various models and principles to describe effective Executive Coaching. In the attempt of creating a market diversification, various schools promote a vast array of characteristics. This fragmentation and variety can be highly confusing.

In 2006, the Center for Creative Leadership engaged in a thorough review of such characteristics as promoted by different entities around the world and found that they could mostly group them in five categories: “High Ethics and Integrity”, “Interpersonal Sensitivity”, “Lifelong Learning & Self-Development”, “Self-Confidence”, and “Interest in Helping & Problem Solving”. An analysis of more recent studies and surveys highlights that we need to add two categories: “Dedication to a Rigorous Process” and “Dedication to Courageously Stretch”.

It is therefore possible to state that “in general” there are 7 characteristics that must be nurtured for well-rounded and effective Executive Coaching. Such characteristics will be variously declined, interpreted, personalized, and deployed within the various cultures, models and approaches. But once these characteristics are sustainably nurtured and become Qualities, we will see Brilliant Executive Coaching.

These Qualities can be grouped in four Archetypal Attitudes and three Functional Complements, as shown in Fig. 3.

#### **Archetypal Attitudes:**

1. LISTENING QUALITY, corresponding to the “Interest in Helping & Problem Solving” characteristic
2. SUPPORTING QUALITY, corresponding to the “Interpersonal Sensitivity” characteristic
3. MODELING QUALITY, corresponding to the “Self-Confidence” characteristic
4. CHALLENGING QUALITY, corresponding to the “Dedication to Courageously Stretch” characteristic

**Functional Complements:**

- 5. GRAVITAS QUALITY, corresponding to the “Life-long Learning and Self-Development” characteristic
- 6. ETHICS QUALITY, corresponding to the “High Ethics and Integrity” characteristic
- 7. RIGOR Quality, corresponding to the “Dedication to a Rigorous Process” characteristic



**Fig. 3:** The 7 Qualities of Brilliant Executive Coaches

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# 1 Listening (Interest in Helping & Problem Solving)

Listening is the first Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching, the first Archetypal Attitude and the foundation of the coaching profession. It corresponds to the “Interest in Helping Others & Problem Solving” characteristic.

Understanding the role of Listening within Executive Coaching deserves a bit of background.

In most Western cultures we tend to value “talking” more than “listening” and we may often give unsolicited advice or quick solutions as part of showing our interest and care; sometimes we are so eager to “help” that we even push our views as the only “right” view and forget to check what the other person really feels, thinks or wants. A professional coach is trained to induce awareness, critical thinking and deep reflections, so that the Client is guided to find own path forward and own solutions. This approach is called “caring for others” as opposed to “taking care of others” and is described in more detail in Chapter 2.

**Listening is a rare and valuable skill.** Professional coaches spend the vast majority of their continuous learning effort around this quality. It is both the most used communication skill, and the least taught; the most needed and yet the least mastered.

Studies show that in our modern society we spend on average 9% of our time writing, 16% reading, 30% speaking and 45% listening. The same studies however also show that most people are poor and inefficient listeners. The most common explanation is that “we think faster than we speak”; this means that our brain is sort of multitasking, formulating lateral thoughts and preparing responses while listening to what we hear. This usually means that we are ready with a new flow of ideas and extensive responses far before the others have finished their sentences, and often act upon our new thoughts, in so doing “forgetting” to listen to the whole message.

There is no such thing as a poor listener, only poor listening habits!

Listening is hard work that requires training and practice. Unfortunately, very little listening training is available in regular education and only a few specialized professionals receive proper listening training (e.g. therapists, market intelligence experts, coaches).

How does one train in Listening Skills for Executive Coaching?

First of all, by increasing awareness and making a conscious effort to listen (**Conscious Listening**); second, by powering up the effectiveness of our listening via rephrasing, summarizing and asking great questions (**Active Listening**); and third, by nurturing a systematic dedication to critical thinking and problem solving (**Critical Listening**). See Fig. 4 below.



**Fig. 4:** Listening Skills in Executive Coaching

## Conscious Listening

### A. Becoming aware of our listening style

Initially it might be useful to learn to recognize our preferred Listening Style. Our Listening Style is our preferred way to make sense of what we hear. To those who have never been trained in Listening Skills it usually comes as a big surprise to learn and realize how we may extract very different meanings from what we hear, depending upon our personality, habits, or learning preferences, and how we also tend to hear different types or amounts of information. For example, some of us tend to focus more on details, others quickly grasp the “big-picture”; the former might reach incredible depth, but may also risk to lose focus and go astray; the latter can quickly identify opportunities and draw proactive conclusions, but might risk to miss vital information. Some of us are capable of hearing feeling-like information and non-verbal signals, while others remain strictly attached to facts; in both cases there are advantages and watch outs.

Although we all tend to have a preferred Style – a “default” that we use when we are very relaxed or particularly stressed – we are all able to learn and apply any Style or combination of Styles; we may even already unconsciously adapt to different situations using the most appropriate Style. In any case, gaining awareness of our preferences helps us increase our ability to either consciously adapt or to search for complementary help.

*For example, knowing that my preferred Listening Style is one of jumping to conclusions, I learnt as a junior business leader to tame my impatience and pay attention to others, especially during delicate negotiations; I was however aware that in stressful situations I would fall back onto my “default”, so I often asked a colleague with a complementary Listening Style to sit next to me during critical negotiations, and assist me by “being my additional ears”; whenever he should become aware of some comments that I had hastily ignored, he would kick me under the table to attract my attention; I would then stop and enquire further. We were a very effective negotiating team for years, each of us using at best our complementary Styles.*

There are many different types of models and assessments that can help; an example is shown in Fig. 5, derived from David Kolb’s Learning Inventory Model.

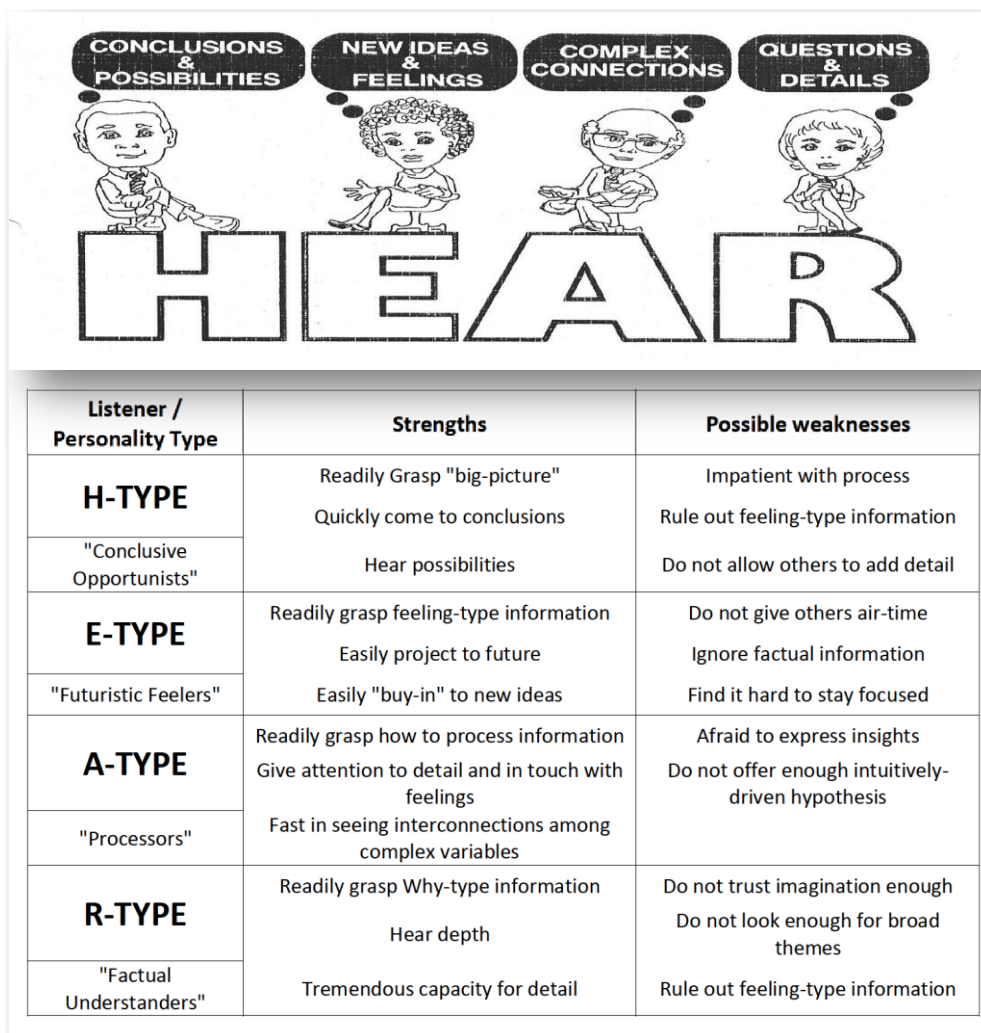


Fig 5: Listening Styles

However, there is not yet a clear understanding of the mechanisms and parameters that influence a preference, nor sufficient support to any specific model. I would normally suggest to my Clients to use any model or method simply as a guide and reference to stimulate some reflections and to bring about more awareness about our “default” Listening Style: do we tend to look for the story or the details? do we need to find the big picture before we dig or do we dig before we make up the story? do we tend to judge and select information based on factual pros and cons or do we consider perceptions and gut feelings in our evaluation of what is important to hear?

This is a good start in the long journey of learning to listen.

B. Learning to recognize and use the three levels of listening

The second step is to learn to pay attention to “where we put our focus” while listening. The Co-active methodology provides the following simple classification:

**Level 1 or Internal Listening:** when the focus is on ourselves and we listen more to our own inner voice than to what the other person is really saying; when we are busy asking ourselves “what does the information mean to me?”

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**Level 2 or Focused Listening:** when we focus entirely on the other person, oblivious of the rest of the world including ourselves; when we hear and notice every nuance and stay focused on the single question: “what is this person really trying to communicate beyond the facts and the story?”

**Level 3 or Global Listening:** when we are aware of the energy surrounding us and have a soft focus on the entire environmental context; when we sense and formulate a background question “what do I detect in the atmosphere?”

In our everyday life, we are used to the Level 1 listening, which is extremely useful (e.g. I hear the “change of gate” announcement at the airport and I think: “what does it mean to me? is this my gate? do I have to start to run?” or I hear a comment about the traffic at a party and start to think if I can make a pertinent comment to keep the conversation going)

However, when we are trying to understand what the other person is really saying, we need to manage our temptation to follow our thoughts and rather focus on the other person (Level 2) as well as the context, like body language, impact on others, and the “unsaid” of silences (Level 3).

Specifically, Level 2 helps us to deepen the understanding and helps us uncover hidden motivations and beliefs, while level 3 often helps to reach what is often called the level of “resonance” and where intuition happens.

The majority of effective coaching is done staying in Level 2 or 3.

It takes a lot of practice to be able to consciously use Level 2 and Level 3 and even more practice to turn it into an automatic habit.

The biggest challenge is to be able to separate the flow of our thoughts from our listening process and become fully absorbed in the other person.

### C. Learning to self-manage

One of the most common challenges for coaches at the beginning of their training is how to resist the temptation to provide own solutions or answers.

The reason why this is particularly difficult is strictly linked to the reasons and values that drive coaches to embark in the coaching career in the first place: the dedication to helping others and the passion for solving problems.

Of course the most sustainable way to help the Clients and to ensure that they learn how to solve their problems is to guide them to identify their own solutions. Professional Executive Coaches know that this requires patience, discipline in taming own eagerness, attention to offer alternatives and new perspective only when the Client is stuck and only as part of a brainstorming; in a word, it requires self-management.

So the first step to self-manage is to question yourself: “what is my attitude towards the Client?” If you cannot really believe that the Client has or can find own solutions, you are probably not in the right position to effectively coach him. You first need to challenge your own prejudice and assumptions and learn to trust.

The second step is to be transparent and matter of fact. Everyone can get distracted and rather than pretending to listen, self-management means acknowledging and resuming attention (“sorry, I went into my head for a second, do you mind repeating?”)

The third step is to declare your intention: if the Client gets stuck and cannot progress, it might be useful to suggest alternatives; not with the intention to solve the problem for her, simply to indicate a possible approach; and always declaring intention upfront (“May I offer an example of how one could deal with this? only as a possible alternative, that might not be right for you, but that might give you something to build on”)

As you may have noticed, self-management is the flip side of respect (more on respect in Chapter 2).

## Active Listening

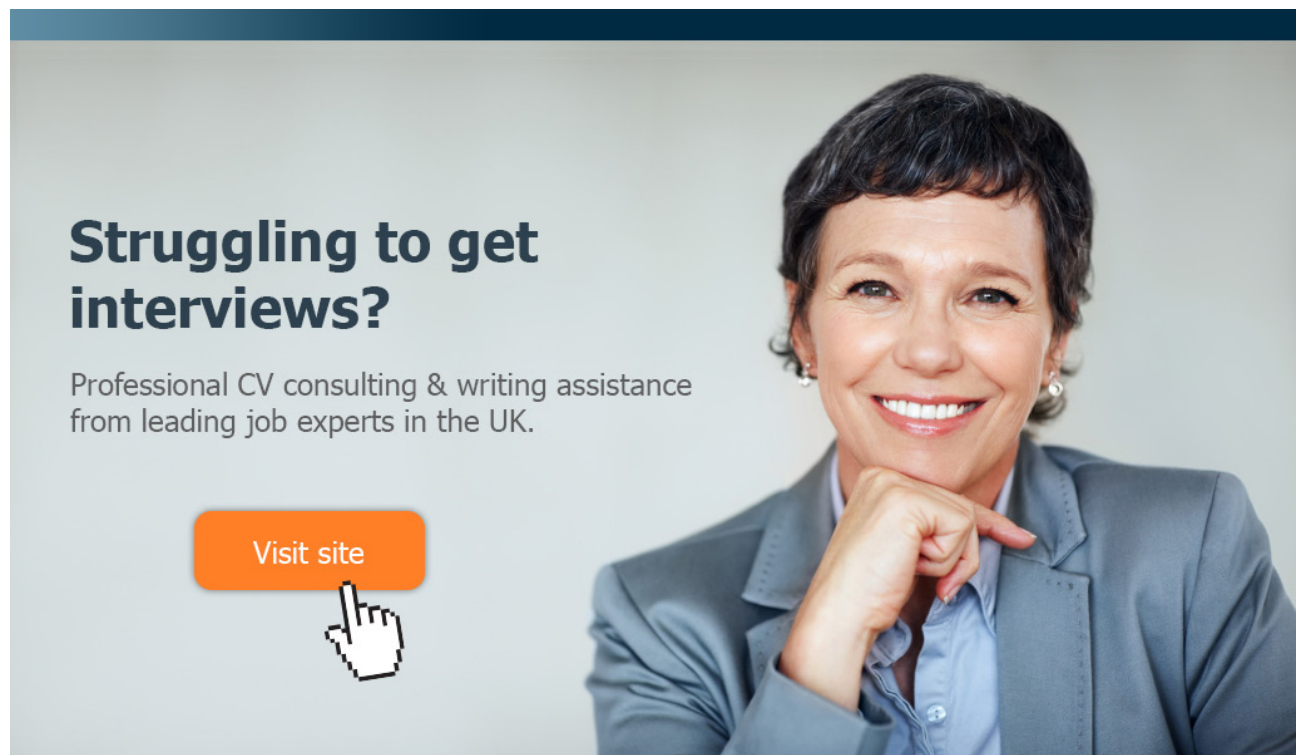
### A. Active Listening and Powerful Questions

It is not enough to listen carefully unless we continuously check our understanding and actively move forward to deepen the understanding. Yet, not any line of questioning would serve the Client’s best interest in an Executive Coaching session. It is important to learn to distinguish other styles – like what used by a journalist in an interview or by a psychoanalysts during a session – from Active Listening in Coaching.

The first difference refers to the time perspective: unlike other investigative types of questioning, **Executive Coaching is focused on the present and future**, not on the past. Of course it is only natural for Clients to provide context and at times the process towards self-awareness might include memories of past learning. However, it is important to define boundaries from the start: whatever happened in the past, which has influenced the way we are, think and act today, cannot be changed, hence it is not relevant for an Executive Coaching discussion.

What is relevant within an Executive Coaching session is to be or become aware of where we are today, our aspirations for the future and what it takes to get there. If the Client is simply stuck in a loop of justifications and excuses (often called being “in the box”), this can be specifically addressed by Supporting (see Chapter 2) and Challenging (see Chapter 4). However, if the Client needs something else, e.g. healing from past experiences, the Executive Coach is not qualified to deal with that and must recommend a different intervention (see Code of Conduct, Table 2).

The second difference is that **the focus of Executive Coaching is not on facts and details**, but on the overall picture. This is not usually an issue with senior managers who tend to have a helicopter view, but it is quite frequent with young executives or managers in transition. Faced with the complexity of today’s global businesses, unsure about their role in a multiple matrix organization, and overwhelmed with the flow of uncoordinated details typical of our Information Culture, they might insist on describing every single dotted line reporting in the latest re-organization. It is the job of the Executive Coach to re-conduct them to the essential, like “how do you want to show up, irrespective of the latest reorganization, in order to contribute to the interest of the company with the best of your engagement and talent?” (*Note: the latter is a Powerful Questions that shakes things up for most Clients*).



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The third important difference between Active Listening and simple listening is the application of a **Repeat – Add – Ask approach**:

- **Repeating** what we have heard is like putting a mirror in front of the Client, it helps her to become more aware of what she is actually saying or meaning; it also helps to recognize how effectively she has managed to communicate what she really means. An effective variation of the repeating technique is **rephrasing** that can help deepen the awareness; another variation is to **summarise** for the Client
- **Adding** is also an effective way to encourage a more in depth elaboration of thoughts.
- Finally **Asking open ended and non-judgmental questions** is the most powerful tool of Active Listening. An open question is a question that cannot be simply answered by yes or no, like “what are the downsides of this option?” or “what do you need to make it happen?”

#### B. Active Listening: Understanding the Context

The specific step that is of fundamental importance for Executive Coaching is to gain a good understanding of the context in which the person operates.

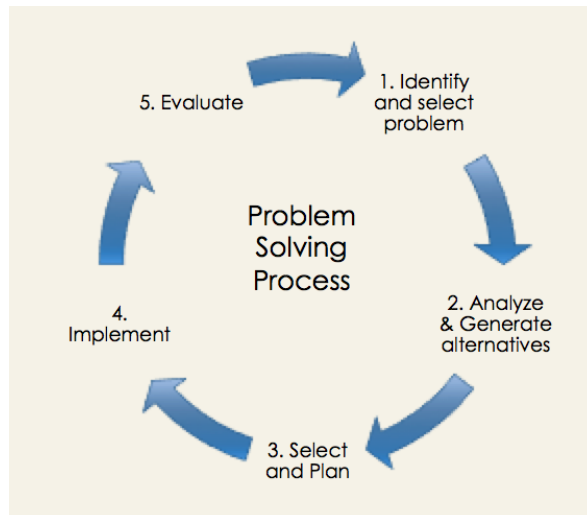
An often-debated question about Executive Coaching is whether a previous business experience is required, in order to better understand the context. While several surveys report that clients may strongly prefer an Executive Coach with business (specifically operational management) experience, studies about the real effectiveness of coaching show a rather mixed picture. A previous business executive can have both an advantage and a disadvantages vis a vis someone with no direct management experience, with the main disadvantage being the risk of getting too involved in the specific and to allow own opinions to interfere. Previous Executive experience is a great advantage only in combination with proper coaching training.

In general, whether or not the Executive Coach has previous executive experience herself, it is important to spend sufficient time in the contracting phase (see Chapter 7 on Rigorous Process) in order to prepare for most effective and efficient listening.

#### C. Critical Listening and Problem Solving

In order to help and guide the Client to find own solutions, an Executive Coach needs to be both fluent and passionate about Problem Solving.

The process highlighted in the diagram of Fig. 6, regularly applied by scientists and most college educated professionals, is a very useful five-step tool that may appear intuitive or obvious, but that we often forget to apply in our daily life.



**Fig. 6:** Problem Solving Process

*Early on in my management career I started to assign a simple exercise to newly recruited project managers: I used to give them a list of activities in random order, asking them to put them in a logical sequence, first things first; almost invariably activities like setting objectives, establishing actions and assigning responsibilities were listed in the first positions, while identifying the problem, analyzing causes and discussing possible solutions were pushed at the bottom of the list. When challenged about what was the basis for choosing their goals and actions, they were quick in recognizing the danger of haste: they had skipped a few steps, not done the preliminary homework and had started to design a solution before they knew what they were trying to fix. Thus they learnt that even a positive trait like the eagerness to get into action, might at times backfire.*

Also in Executive Coaching it is of paramount importance to clearly identify the real issue first, before starting to analyze and brainstorm about possible solutions.

*It is not unusual to face a problem or a challenge in its complexity and to mix the factual problem with how we feel about it. Let's take a common development wish: delegation. The Client might start with a comment like this: "I wish I could be better at delegating; delegation is a problem, I know I should delegate more, I am told so and I would also like to have time for more strategic work, but I do not like to lose control and sometimes I feel that it is quicker to do it myself than to teach others". After a few minutes of effective Executive Coaching, the Client may rephrase his challenge in this way: "The real problem here is how to ensure that I retain control while delegating" which after a few more minutes of analysis and (Active Listening guided) brain-storming, becomes an action plan: "I will clarify my expectations and include in the list the expectations to keep me regularly posted as well as promptly informed in case of risks of deviation from plan, so I do not need to worry and go check myself all of the time". At this point, the Client is ready to test his solution and evaluate outcome; then potentially readjust or move on to next challenge.*

As a final notation, those who wish that the Executive Coaching profession were better regulated and its standards raised by independent Quality Controls, would typically have Logic and Problem Solving assessments as part of minimum qualifications to access more specific Executive Coaching education.

### Chapter Highlights

#### *Brilliant Listening*

- *Has a fundamental role in inducing self-awareness*
- *We listen on three different levels:*
- *1. focus on self, 2. focus on other, and 3. focus on total context*
- *Most transformation Coaching happens in level 2 or 3*
- *Curious about present and future, not past*
- *Curious about big picture, not anecdotic details*
- *Powerful questions are open ended and non-judgmental*
- *Problem solving is a process*



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## 2 Supporting (Interpersonal Sensitivity)

Supporting is the second Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the second Archetypal Attitude. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “Interpersonal Sensitivity”

Supporting is the heart of Executive Coaching:

- It is the **intention** behind every techniques or methods; it is the total trust and interest in others, which is brilliantly summarized in one of the cornerstones of the Co-active Coaching model: “the Client is resourceful, creative and whole”
- It is a **personal quality** that any truly passionate coach greatly values and constantly nurtures, formed on a basis of **positive energy** and optimism, and which includes interest, attention, curiosity, and the ability to detect and remember signals and cues.
- It is also a **trained competence** that makes use of a number of methods and tools

But before going into the tools, what does “Support” really mean within Executive Coaching? The word “support” can have a number of meanings and applications, from teaching to nursing and from construction work to agriculture. To really catch the meaning of this concept in the Executive Coaching context requires a number of not obvious steps.

First of all, we must always remember that we are talking about a **peer relationship**. The Executive Coach is confidently holding an equal level position with the client. Not a superior “I will explain it to you” position. Not a servile “I am here to meet any and all of your needs” position. Rather a generous and relentless “let’s get you to be your best self” determination on behalf of the Client’s best interest.

Second, based on this equal level relationship, the Executive Coach can be very **direct and matter of fact**, always in the best interest of the Client. There is neither evaluation nor judgment; in stead there is acceptance of the other and response to his growth aspirations. An effective coaching relationship is a safe space for the Client to reflect and learn in total honesty, without fear of being judged or manipulated; it is a place to be accepted and respected as a person, yet a demanding place to be confronted and challenged on behavioral choices.

Third, and descending from the above two points, the Executive Coach is trained to **care without taking care**, to speak up frankly without adding advice, trusting that the Client will be fully capable of dealing with the message.

Incidentally, this is one of the most useful quality that business leaders can learn from Coaches and reapply in their daily life, e.g. when choosing to give **courageous and respectful feedback that builds relationship and performance** (see case study in Table 3).

#### Jane and Sam

Imagine the following situation: you are invited by your colleague Jane to join a meeting with a Key Client; Jane brings along a young associate, Sam. In the middle of the discussion, Sam offers a comment, but Jane abruptly silences him and continues the discussion, oblivious of Sam's awkward expression. You feel sorry for Sam and decide to bring it up after the meeting. What do you tell Jane?

- a. "You should really watch your behavior, you never give space to anybody else, the kid was really upset that you did not let him speak."
- b. "I noticed that you interrupted Sam in the middle of a comment; I wonder, was it intended? I also noticed that the Client seemed puzzled and that Sam withdrew, did you notice?"
- c. "What was THAT all about?! You crashed the kid's confidence, you have been rude and totally insensitive!"

Comment "b" is an example of Observational Feedback. It consists of a **factual observation** (I noticed that you interrupted) and it is offered as a selfless gift to a person, **without any attached expectations of provoking a change**. It is sometimes complemented by the suggestion of possible consequences or by related observed reactions (the Client seemed puzzled and Sam withdrew). Depending on the relationship, one can also show some curiosity and offer an opening to talk about it (did you notice? was that your intention?)

Observational Feedback is very useful because it offers something that others know about you, which you may not be aware of by yourself: something that we call the Blind Spot. It is an **incredibly generous gift to give and to receive** and it is a real shame that we often pollute it with unnecessary advice or judgment.

In our example, comment b. gives Jane the extremely useful opportunity to **reflect upon what was observed by others, that she might not be aware of, and to compare it with her own intentions**.

Let's explore a little bit more to find out what this means.

Let's assume that Jane really intended to be blunt with Sam (after all, they had agreed upfront that he would just listen and refrain from offering comments, given his relative inexperience with the complexities of the deal), yet in her preoccupation to prevent a possible misunderstanding, she had not paid attention to the Client's reaction and had thus missed the cue that the Client was puzzled by her abrupt behavior.

Or maybe her intention had not been to undermine Sam's comment; she had done it without even thinking, so stressed she had been and focused on her own comments.

In either case, the Observational Feedback is precious in bringing up something that she not been aware of, which can help adjust her behavior the next time around.

We can now better understand what is "wrong" with comments "a" and "c": we make assumptions based on our perception, without knowing what is the real intention of the person, we give unrequested advice that tends to irritate or judgment that can be rather offensive, all together shifting attention away from the key message.

**Table 3:** Applying Supporting Quality to a business case (giving feedback)

This is perhaps the most difficult concept to grasp in this book. The Western culture is so permeated by well meaning advice and we are so used to saying things like “you should” or “you should not” that we do not often realize the implicit “patronizing” that we might at times inadvertently communicate, in spite of our most honorable intentions.

*I have coached several cases of managers who struggle to supervise a person with low ambitions; they desperately want to explain the value of continuous improvement, whereas the other person is unreactive and content. In such cases the manager often mentions the word “support”; she wants to support a subordinate by making him understand and accept her own values. When, through coaching, the manager realizes that – in spite of her intention to help – she is actually showing disrespect for the subordinate (by making her own values and preferences more “valuable” than the values and preference of the other person), it becomes clear to her that what she thought of as “support” is not the type of support that we use in Executive Coaching. Interestingly enough, when those managers modify their behavior, showing respect and acceptance of the other person, the subordinate often becomes a lot more engaged and willing to push the limits of his comfort zone – albeit at his own speed.*

This last example highlights another aspect of Supporting: whereas Listening is instrumental to inducing Self-Awareness, **Supporting ignites the motivation to learn and grow.**

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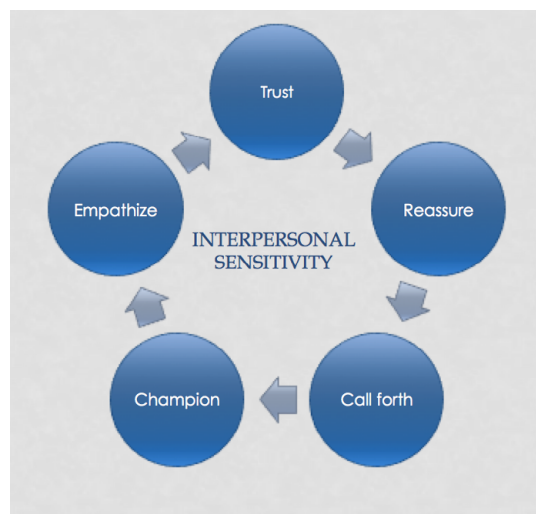
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Finally, research indicates that “power improves interpersonal sensitivity”; in other words, it appears that feeling respected and proud increases the ability to read and respond to others with respect, acceptance and empathy. Empirical evidence suggests that “Gravitas” (see Chapter 5) can positively influence the Supporting Quality.

We can now look into the tools used by Executive Coaches to support.

### The Interpersonal Sensitivity Process

Supporting consists of five main coaching activities, sometimes used individually, often in synergy **Trusting, Reassuring, Calling forth, Championing and Empathizing** (see Fig 7):



**Fig 7:** Components of Interpersonal Sensitivity

#### A. The First Elements of the Supporting Process: Trust

We have already looked into trust in the first part of this chapter, in terms of trusting that the other person is capable of finding own solutions and also in trusting the approach of caring without taking care. We are now looking into trust as a specific tool and part of the Supporting process. In this context trust is verbalized and reciprocated. In moments of doubt, when the Client is withdrawn or passive, this proactive use of Trust can help overcome the impasse. The Executive Coach both expresses trust in the resourcefulness of the Client with practical examples and at the same time he shares examples of own vulnerability to offer to the Client the opportunity to trust in turn.

*A typical conversation would be along these lines: “I appreciate that you trust me enough to be fully yourself; I see that you are not in one of your best moments and I am proud that you share this moment with me; I have absolutely no idea how to help you now, but I am sure that you will point me in the right direction when it is the right moment for you; I have seen how resourceful you are in situations when others, myself included, would feel lost, like this and that situation, so let me know how you want to progress now”*

## B. The Second Element of the Supporting Process: Reassuring

As we have discussed earlier in this chapter, in Executive Coaching there is care, but there is no taking care of. Thus also reassuring is not intended like as in our everyday life, as a way to soothe pain or to distract away from dark thoughts. Executive Coaches have too much respect for the Client's resourcefulness to indulge in the familiar "there, there, no need to worry, things will get better" type of thing. Rather, Executive Coaches would use one form or another of factual reassurances, including use of paradox or humor, as a way of calling back the Client from overdramatic and gloomy thoughts, and redirect or normalize:

*"Wow, I was wondering when you would have a moment of hesitation and doubt in this mess!" or "Of course it is silly to be worried about meeting the most scary person in the organization; if I were you I would not be talking it with my coach, I would be on the next plane out of here!" or "well, well, here we are, this is a new phase in our coaching journey; it has been a bit too easy so far, now we have some work to do; now it is the moment to put at use those skills we were talking about the other day"*

## C. The Third Element of the Supporting Process: Calling Forth

Calling forth means to demand, on behalf of our Clients, to stand up, speak up, take action, make choices and basically dare to show up at their best. When a Client holds back and chooses to comfortably sit in her comfort zone, the brilliant Executive Coach does not provide solutions, but calls her to action, to find herself a solution. It may sound something like this:

*"I am surprised that you accept to sit and do nothing; I have seen you react proactively in other more challenging situations, I cannot believe that you withdraw when you have so much to offer to this negotiation; with your resilience, intelligence and experience I expect to see you spring in action, call up a meeting and be the usual brilliant self, what are you waiting for?"*

## D. The Forth Element of the Supporting Process: Championing

Championing is more than a factual acknowledgment of their abilities; it is a sincere sharing of a positive expectation, which is based on an educated knowledge of the Client's capabilities and aspirations.

*It is something like "We both know that it is important to you to present to this audience and we both know that you are capable of doing so with competence, humor, clarity and flair; I am totally convinced that you will charm this audience, like you did in such and such occasion"*

### E. The Fifth Element of the Supporting Process: Empathizing

Empathy is the ultimate form of support. It means getting into the shoes and under the skin of the other person and being able to identify with the Clients' feelings and thoughts, even the darkest ones. There are moments when we need to take a deep breath and stop running, moments when we would benefit from simply "being". Brilliant Executive Coaches are able to recognize when the Client simply needs reassurance or when in stead it is the moment to offer the luxury of suspending time and just being. It is often upon the Coach's suggestion that this "being" exercise gets done; executives would typically feel compelled to shake it off. But a Client who brings such dramatic news as a serious sickness, a death in the family or of a close colleague, or even being fired, would often start to tell about next steps; getting busy with planning actionable steps allows to set aside the worst thoughts, the doubts and the anxiety. A Coach can offer to stop all plans and thoughts and simply feel.

This may result in long silences, few and careful questions and a still togetherness, in which the Client feels "understood" and can completely live through the pain, until the Client himself decides to "emerge". In co-active coaching this is a technique called "process" and it requires a lot of endurance and patience from the Coach.

**Chapter Highlights***Brilliant Supporting*

- *It has the potential to ignite the motivation to learn and grow*
- *It is based on a peer relationship between equals*
- *The Coach trusts the resourcefulness of the Client*
- *The Coach respects the Client as other and different from self*
- *Caring without taking care*
- *The five steps of the Supporting process are: Trust, Reassure, Call forth, Champion and Empathize*

### 3 Modeling (Self-Confidence)

This is the third Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the third Archetypal Attitude. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “Self-Confidence”.

Of course coaching is a lot about questioning, listening and trusting that the Client will find own solutions by himself. Yet there are several circumstances when only listening or waiting too long for the Client’s own solutions would not be in the best interests of the Client himself.

Examples are:

- When the Client wants to make a rush decision that might put him at risk, before having had the chance to acquire sufficient awareness of own impact
- When the Client is overly talkative and continues to explain his current perspective without taking the time to consider alternative perspectives
- When the Client is very silent or stuck in an impasse and cannot even begin to imagine alternative perspectives
- When the Client is specifically and insistently asking for suggestions, to set a new thinking process in motion



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In these cases, an experienced Executive Coach realizes that her intervention is called for.

Most such cases fall into a general category that we could identify as being inexperienced vis a vis the coaching process.

In the first example above, a Client who is not yet familiar with coaching might overreact at the first experience of self awareness and become overeager to share his learning indiscriminately, ahead of assessing how to deal with the reaction of others (e.g. suddenly wanting to announce to his boss the newly acquired awareness that his job is not a good match with his aspirations, this before having prepared to discuss alternatives, thus risking an unpleasant and non constructive confrontation). Any Executive Coach of conscience and integrity would immediately share and clearly alert the Client of a potential risk and offer the suggestion to wait.

The second example may happen when the expectations set in the contracting phase are unclear or the contracting phase has been insufficiently in depth, in which case this is the moment to stop and redesign how to work together. Or it might simply be an indication that the Coaching is not effective, the Coach insufficiently present or inattentive, or the relationship unbalanced, in which case the Coach must discontinue the coaching and refer the Client to another colleague, for reasons of integrity (see Chapter 7)

The third case happens quite often at the beginning, when the Client needs some suggestions and practical examples to learn how to work together; usually this is overcome within the first hour of coaching. It might however also happen with Clients who are already experienced with coaching, but under particular stress. In which case a skillful combination of confident statements and humor might do the trick of bringing the Client back to a more relaxed and creative state.

In the last example, the Executive Coach is asked to help with his experience in situations where the Client feels quite new to critical reflections about the self (not unlike an executive who is faced with a completely new tasks and requires quite some detailed directives in order to get swiftly started).

*During the first year of coaching training, my focus was on self-management. Having realized that my business management years had left me with a default habit of jumping to conclusions, I was doing my best to thoroughly practice the art of biting my tongue, until my own mentor and supervisory coach suggested that I might be withholding something valuable and that excessive self management would only distract my attention away from serving the best interest of the Client. His only suggestion was to be coherent and transparent; i.e. declare my intention to stop “pulling” in order to intervene with a more “pushy” approach, offering my expertise as a model and a stimulus.*

This quality obviously requires a high degree of self-confidence and a risk taking attitude – because the Client might react in a very emotional way and reject the help – as well as excellent communication skills. In most cases, however, the effect on the Client is to diffuse the tension and inspire confidence in the coaching process.

Here are some of the competences and skills required to master this quality:

- Assertiveness and fierce resolve
- Humbleness and selflessness
- Self-confidence and comfort around top levels
- Comfortable with not being liked
- Ability to swiftly assess readiness and risks on behalf of Client
- Comfortable with using Humor
- Good story-telling
- Experience and wisdom
- Able to teach by example
- Factual and not judgmental
- Ability to capture the big picture and to evaluate possible consequences
- Composure and contagious optimism
- Respect and trust

**Chapter Highlights***Brilliant Modeling*

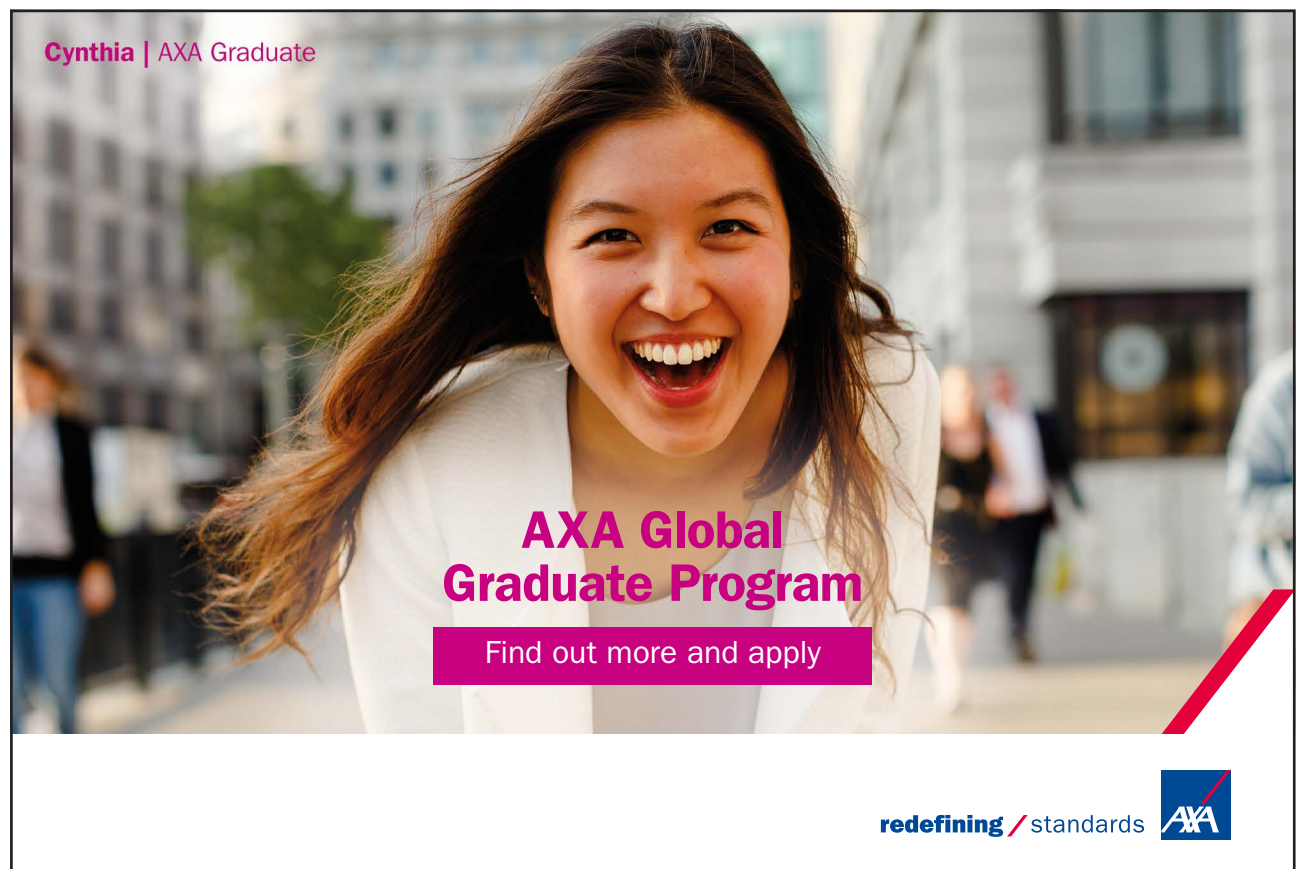
- *Inspires by example*
- *Opens new doors and shows possibilities*
- *Requires ability to dare to intervene with confidence, in the best interest of the Client*
- *Necessary and effective with less experienced or less self-aware executives*
- *De-stressing effect*

## 4 Challenging (Dedication to Courageously Stretch)

This is the fourth Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the fourth Archetypal Attitude. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “Dedication to Courageously Stretch”

Those who still confuse Executive Coaching with counseling, expect all coaches to be soft because they deal with “soft skills” (whatever that means!) or believe that an Executive Coach is a sort of company shrink, are usually surprised when they are for the first time confronted with a challenging, provoking and pushing coaching style.

And yet, once the Client has become more self-aware thanks to Active Listening, feels motivated to develop and grow thanks to Supporting, has stared his journey with various ups and downs being accompanied and encouraged by Modeling, the road is still long and steep and full of traps. And it is then that brilliant Executive Coaching can intervene with a **fierce dedication to challenge, provoke and stretch.**



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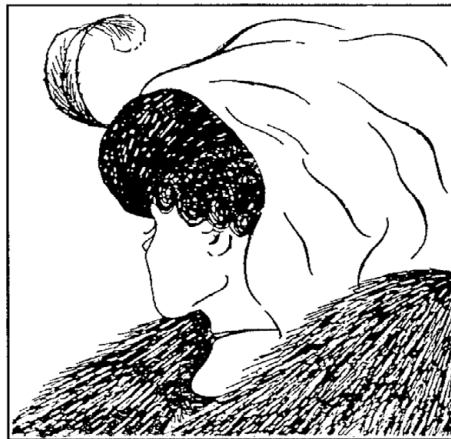
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The hardest obstacles that hinder our growth tend to be **self-protection mechanisms** that cause a loop of thoughts (often referred to by use of such descriptive terms as Limiting Beliefs, Saboteurs, Gremlins, Mind-Traps or Unconscious Biases) that have the effect of paralyzing our critical thinking, creativity and sense of perspective. The result is what is commonly referred to as **“being in the box”**. In this state we are closed to development and not at our best.

The reoccurring mechanism is quite simple and most often than not stems from poor listening. We hear something that we try to make sense of, use our own assumptions to interpret the message and we start to believe our interpretation without checking our understanding. Thus we may be convinced that a colleague has been intentionally disrespectful when he might simply have a bad day or we might convince ourselves that “we have no choice” because this serves as a good excuse to stay in our comfort zone. We cultivate and nurture such thoughts, thus spending massive amounts of energy in an inner dialogue that gets us stuck in one single perspective (see in Fig. 8 an optical illusion that exemplifies our brain’s difficulty in capturing different perspectives at the same time)



**Fig. 8:** Stuck in a perspective: can you see the young lady? can you also see the old lady?

**It takes tough coaching to shake us out of these paralyzing loops and discover alternative perspectives.**

Importantly, the “being in the box” occurrences are not only obstacles hindering growth, but also the cause of most conflicts as well as a major detriment to productivity and effectiveness. Entire books have been written on the subject (worth mentioning world class Arbiner books, see References), which is also being extensively investigated by neuroscientists.

The tools that can be used to challenge are numerous:

- spot contradictions and confront Client
- provoke by challenging assumptions
- use physical movement to imagine that we look at the issues from different vantage points, hence see differences
- role playing, asking the Client to change chair and interpret different sides of the story

The goal here is always to help the Client gain more clarity.

The **key questions** to ask are:

- what is the truth? (not because the Client is not telling the truth, but because a reality check can help separate the personal impression and assumption from other perspectives)
- have you checked your understanding? (to stimulate critical listening and critical thinking in the Client, who might stop at his own interpretation of what heard)
- it seems like there is there a dialogue going on in your head right now, where does it take you with respect to the immediate issue on the table?
- what makes you justify your position? what are you protecting?

The liberating effect of learning to identify the "in the box" state and how to get out of the box is usually what brings leaders to a higher level of self-confidence that can unleash both their creativity and their ability to resolve misunderstanding and conflicts.

#### **Chapter Highlights**

##### *Brilliant Challenging*

- *The tough side of executive Coaching: stretch to grow and challenge your Gremlins*
- *Being tough in the best interest of the Client*
- *When we are in the box we use energy in the inner dialogue and become less effective; the role of the Coach is to help us shake off our Limiting Beliefs*
- *Being in the box is often a source of conflicts*

## 5 Gravitas (Life-long Learning and Self-Development)

This is the fifth Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the first Functional Complement. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “Life-long Learning and Development” characteristic.

Let us think back about the promise of Executive Coaching as described in the Introduction.

It is a very ambitious promise. It requires from the Executive Coach not only to master the four Qualities, Archetypal Attitudes and related Skills as described in the first four chapters, but also the ability to engage with full understanding, presence, critical thinking and swift reactivity to a vast arrays of complex issues that are brought in by the Client, often in a not-particularly-structured form.

In order to be able to ask pertinent and relevant questions, to summarize and challenge, to participate to brainstorming, to offer provocative alternatives and to shift perspectives, the Executive Coach needs to have what we call “Gravitas”. This term, of Latin origin, was in the past used in a number of acceptions, some of which like importance, sobriety, dignity and serious posture, are neither relevant nor appropriate in our context. We rather use this term in the currently accepted meaning of “confidence, strengths of character, credibility, wisdom and seriousness of intent” and define this quality to be strictly correlated to a profound dedication to critical thinking and continuous learning.

Here are some examples of what we can expect from a brilliant Executive Coach who possesses the Gravitas quality:

- Ability to quote from different sources
- Not depending upon only one method
- Demonstrates a lifelong dedication to continuous learning
- Can prove constant learning / not improvised
- Seeks feedback
- Quickly acknowledges mistakes or misunderstandings without justifying
- Apologizes without using apologetic tone
- Broad experience / can quote from a number of practical cases
- Relates theory to practical
- Resourceful
- Is updated, makes use of latest scientific advance
- Understands the business context
- Is quick in picking up the central issue

- Communicates clearly in a well structured fashion
- Demonstrates strong critical thinking skills
- Engages in research including investigating own coaching effectiveness
- Makes broad use of consultations and peer supervision
- Collaborates with other professionals / assists other coaches and organizations in order to avail themselves of different resources and referral sources
- Has clear and well structured communication
- Appears comfortable with herself
- Shows maturity and confidence
- Shows humility
- Shares knowledge with others via mentoring, pro bono, publications or media presence, not solely for promotional reasons
- Is constantly curious, thanks and gets excited when learning new perspectives
- Has personally gone out of his comfort zone and learnt from work and personal challenges
- Comfortable around powerful people, and willing to speak up her mind
- Multiculturally fluent
- Independent thinker
- Willing to challenge herself and to take risks
- Is able to use the kind of humor that shifts the space, injects positive energy and suggests a sense of “everything is possible”

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## 6 Ethics (High Ethics and Integrity)

This is the sixth Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the second Functional Complement. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “High Ethics and Integrity”.

In the Introduction we have already mentioned the Code of Ethics and discussed some specifics.

But Integrity is a quality that goes beyond following a code of conduct. It is needless to say that a clean record and trustable references can be of good reassurance. But also this is largely insufficient. An Executive Coach is expected to exude integrity at every step, by being open, clear, coherent, fair, well prepared, honest, able to admit mistakes or shortcomings, able to apologize, recognizing contribution of others, humble, reflective, compassionate, yet firm and demanding, able to point at some non negotiable expectations and flexible on the rest.

When a Client engages in a coaching program, he makes himself vulnerable and open. The Executive Coach is conscious of the trust that the Client places in her and must honor the relationship in all contexts and with everybody. This means acting in the best interest of the Client at all time.

It is always advisable to have a clarification of communication rules at the very beginning of a Coaching program.



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Here are some guidelines of what needs to be included in a confidentiality agreement:

- The Client, the Sponsor and the involved Stakeholders must agree to be open and transparent with the Executive Coach, who will not further divulge the received information outside of this restricted team
- The Executive Coach shall share with the Client the factual information and feedback received from other parts of the Client's organization, with the scope of bringing valuable contribution to the development of the Client and in the best interest of the Client
- The Executive Coach shall never share with anyone, including the Sponsor and Stakeholders, any information received from or regarding the Client, unless agreed with the Client; preferably though said information would be shared by the Client himself, and the Executive Coach can facilitate the discussion.
- Before Coaching begins it is advisable to make a clear list of what shall or shall not be subject to confidentiality. For example, results of 360 assessments are typically confidential to the Client, but the Sponsor often receives a summary; interpersonal conflicts are often shared with the Sponsor, whereas Clients' aspirations outside the Sponsor's organization would typically remain confidential between Coach and Client.
- On this latter remark, it might be worthwhile mentioning upfront and stressing that any decision made by the Client as a consequence of the increased awareness gained from coaching, including the possibility that the Client quits, is to be considered as a normal risk, entirely dependent upon the Client and not a responsibility of the Executive Coach.

# 7 Rigor (Process Orientation and Use of Modern Tools)

This is the seventh Quality of Brilliant Executive Coaching and the third Functional Complement. It corresponds to the general characteristic named “process orientation”.

In previous chapters we have mentioned the contractual phase where the Sponsor, the Client and the Executive Coach establish and define the way of working. The most successful Executive Coaches in the world, starting from Awards winning Marshall Goldsmith, advocate with fervor in favor of this, because this is the only way to be able to have an efficient and effective process.

But this is only the first step of a process that requires proper planning, rigorous implementation, frequent checkpoints and a final measure of results.

All mainstream coaching schools recommend to follow a well constructed process and particularly insist on the start and end points: clearly setting expectations at the beginning (called e.g. Coaching Partnership, Contractual Phase or Designing the Alliance) and holding the Client accountable with frequent checkpoints or at minimum a final measure with evaluation of learning and results.

Let’s look at the different parts of a typical process:

- **Setting a common intention:**

The Client, the Sponsor and the Executive Coach, sometimes together with other participating stakeholders, get together to align on a purpose. The purpose is not a specific goal, but a belief, it is the “why”.

- **Define the mandate:**

The Client, the Sponsor and the Executive Coach collaborate to identify a specific mandate, clarify expected outcomes and define measures.

- **Understand the way of working:**

The Client, the Sponsor and the Executive Coach agree upon ground rules, including timings, potential pre and post assessments, checkpoints, communication lines, responsibilities, and confidentiality.

Subsequently the Executive Coach introduces the Client to Coaching essentials as an introduction to the process and they jointly design their alliance.

- **Planning:**

The Client and the Executive Coach work out the details of the plan, including making space in the agenda for the assessments, meetings, coaching sessions and development work in between sessions.

- **Core of the program:**

The Client, the Executive Coach, and when required Sponsor and Stakeholders, carry on the plan as defined, but allow sufficient opportunities to retain flexibility and incorporate new learning, within the initial purpose and mandate.

- **Accountability:**

The Client applies the learning and test new behavior, recording and reporting observed implications and consequences and reviewing progress with the Executive Coach and at agreed intervals with the Sponsor and Stakeholders.

- **Conclusion and celebration:**

The Client, the Sponsor, the Executive Coach and the Stakeholders evaluate outcome, celebrate the effort and align on a sustainability follow up (that may or may not involve the executive Coach).

We would like to spend a word on the use of additional tools like assessments. It is always recommended to use updated tools that are aligned with the Executive Coaching program. Some organizations are so used to their own assessments – that might date back to the Seventies or Eighties – and expect to use them in connection with modern Executive Coaching. This can bring some confusion.

More modern assessment that do not focus on acquired skills but on preferences and attitudes and are derived from recent advance in Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience might be better suited as coherent with the Executive Coaching *modus operandi*.

# Conclusion

The success of Executive Coaching stems from its unique and attractive promise: by exploring the roots of our behavior, we acquire self-awareness, which allows us to make more conscious use of our skills and to mastermind our professional development and growth. When effective, the results of Executive Coaching programs are more permanent and sustainable than traditional competence-based leadership training, because “learn how to learn” in a non-judgmental way and we can ourselves steer the process of strengthening our effectiveness, impact, influence and social wellness.

The market proliferation of various coaching schools, organizations and practitioners of various quality, combined with the lack of professional regulations, has however created quite some confusion and it is hard to identify serious coaching services among the fragmented offer.

In this context Credentials cannot be the only selection criteria and this book offers an overview of the key qualities to investigate when trying to recognize the well prepared and committed professional, or when to invest in further Coaching training.

This book is also an encouragement for Executive Coaches, Coaching Associations, Coaching Schools and Business Organizations investing in Executive Coaching, to continue to support the professionalization efforts of this exciting new profession.



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