



Counting the cost

*How coaches behaved in the credit crunch isn't just a matter for personal reflection – coaching is young enough for our reactions to have affected the whole profession. It's time to get our house in order, says **John Blakey***

At the start of 2009, I was reading Coaching at Work when I came across reflections by Peter Hawkins, chairman of Bath Consultancy Group on the credit crunch crisis and the role of coaching among it. He said: "What were the executive coaches doing while the banks were burning?"

The question really hit home. For days afterwards, it kept running round in my mind, taunting me with its directness and its call to accountability.

As I digested the words, I started answering the question, partly for the benefit of my own coaching, partly to help me anticipate the day that our clients at 121partners would be asking us the same thing and partly because I thought it was an important question that the coaching profession should answer collectively.

One simple question

I started to share my answers with colleagues and other coaches. Whenever I did so, there was great energy in the room, lots of opinions and emotions, inspiration and insight. It appeared to be a very powerful question. So much so that these conversations became the basis of a 121partners masterclass and ultimately a book which my colleague Ian Day and I have written and which will be published this month (January).

It's a simple question: "Where were all the coaches when the banks went down?" Yet it yields so many views, reactions and perspectives.

The premise of our book, however, is that when we get into new stages of the economic cycle, when the tide goes out and you see all the rubbish on the shore, every party has to ask themselves: "Where was I? What was I doing and what was my contribution? What am I learning from this?"

Be the change

As coaches, and as a profession, we must look at ourselves first. The consultants, leaders of organisations and politicians – all could have done something different, and be blamed – or not – for what went wrong, depending on your chosen prejudice.

But how about we shine the light on ourselves, our coaching and our profession first and ask: "What are we going to learn?"

How might coaching best adapt to an environment in which these questions are being asked much more ruthlessly by buyers of coaching services? How can we get our own house in order and inspire others to do likewise in their own, unique ways? After all, isn't it Gandhi that we coaches most like to quote: "Be the change you want to see in the world"?

Me or us?

It is worth considering the history of our profession. We sometimes forget that executive coaching is young. The International Coach Federation, the largest global coaching body, was formed in the US in 1995. Despite the pioneering work of the likes of Graham Alexander and Sir John Whitmore in the 1980s, the mainstream use of coaching in large organisations has only taken hold in the past 10 years. What's more, executive coaches have crafted their skills in a climate of strong economic growth, full employment and adventurous risk taking. How has this backdrop affected coaching development?

In the "me, me, me" and the "more, more, more" business culture of the past 10 years, executive coaches often found themselves working with high potentials and senior leaders to focus on personal career visions, leadership skills and goals. It was all "personal".

Organisational buyers were happy because one of their key challenges was to attract and retain top talent. As recently as 2006, 41 per cent of senior HR professional saw retention as their most important issue.

Following the client's agenda in a confidential setting became paramount. At its best, this created openness, trust and facilitated self-awareness. At its worst, it tempted all parties into self-interest, collusion and the accommodation of client prejudices at the expense of the wider organisational system.

Still, it is easy to be righteous in hindsight. The real value, now that we know what we know, lies in adapting and learning fast, taking what has worked and building on it a new layer of experience and expertise that will allow executive coaching to remain a robust, transformative tool in more challenging economic times.

What, then, is the nature of these challenging times? Will the tarnished paradigm of risk be replaced by responsibility in the lexicon of leadership values? Will a culture of "us, us, us" replace "me, me, me" as our collective dependency on wider economic and environmental agendas overtakes self-interest? The jury is still out but our experience at 121partners in the past 18 months is that organisational buyers have shifted their focus from attracting and retaining talent to improving the performance and productivity of grateful survivors of redundancies.

Sacred cows

In this context, it was worrying to read Alison Carter's recent research in *Coaching at Work*, which revealed that only 17 per cent of the sample clients' coaching objectives were aligned with business outcomes. It is our view that, over time, the impact of these factors on coaching best practice will be significant.

The first sacred cow to go is likely to be "following the client's agenda". Replacing personal perspective with a systems perspective will enable executive coaching to serve the collective and the individual agenda. In practice, this will require a much more thorough contracting process in a coaching assignment in which HR and line management are more visibly involved. The ethic of confidentiality will become less black and white, requiring sensitive negotiation with all stakeholders.

With the emphasis on performance improvement, there will be no place for coaches to collude with the client or accommodate blind spots to avoid difficult conversations. The current coaching competencies that focus on accountability and feedback will typically play a much bigger role. These tough love aspects of coaching have always been there but were easily brushed aside in the boom.

Another skill that has always been featured in coaching textbooks but is more rarely observed in the field is challenge. The very word is enough to send a shiver down the spine of a profession that has yet to work out how to confront assertively while staying friends with the people who are paying the bill.

And yet, how many of us can remember people we respected, even loved, who had the courage to challenge us? Yes, it hurt at the time but if delivered from a foundation of trust and humility, it accelerated our development in a way no amount of encouragement and positive feedback could.

With a wider systems perspective, feedback, challenge and accountability playing a larger role, we can also expect that the level of tension in a coaching relationship will rise. Tension, like any energy, can have a constructive or destructive presence.

The challenge for executive coaches will be to work with tension constructively to make it healthy. Being able to hold the tension will be akin to holding the silence in a coaching conversation. Just as with silence, there is a temptation to feel uncomfortable in the presence of tension, to take responsibility for it

and to seek to remove it as quickly as possible. In so doing, we might be denying the client a valuable opportunity to transform the tension into insight and action.

In summary, “the times they are a-changing” and coaching will be changing too. This young profession is facing a different environment and will adapt quickly to reach a new level of maturity. In so doing, it is our opinion that tough love skills will play a much larger role in the typical executive coaching conversation:

Feedback

Accountability

Courageous Goals

Tension

Systems Perspective

...Or **FACTS**. You could say it is time for coaches and their clients to face FACTS and not shy away from these aspects of the coaching role.

John Blakey is co-author with Ian Day of 'Challenging Coaching – Going beyond traditional coaching to face the FACTS. For more information see www.challengingcoaching.co.uk

References

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