Student ID 678308
PgC Coaching and Development – C1911P

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

CONTENTS

The coach is referred to as 'she'.

Student ID 678308
PgC Coaching and Development – C1911P

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

The person being coached is referred to as the 'client' or 'he'.

Introduction

> *'True challenge comes from a belief in potential'.* (Downey, 2003, p88)

This assignment identifies how to establish the mandate for challenge in a coaching relationship. This curiosity has arisen out of the author's practice with clients where she is trained to 'follow the client's interest', in a primarily non-directive way, yet sometimes she has an instinct that their potential is best served by challenging what they say. Starting this assignment, she is unsure how and when to challenge – what should she be considering? The assignment analyses how to create a mandate to challenge through contracting, the strength of the relationship and cues in the coaching interaction.

This work is valuable in developing the author's confidence around offering challenge. Further to that, it is of contemporary interest in the coaching profession as a high challenge model of coaching is being proposed (Blakey and Day, 2012, p.xi, Chynoweth, 2012) in place of the more traditional supportive relationship. If the coach is setting out to bring a high level of challenge, where are the client and the coaching relationship in this? Following extensive personal reflection since December 2012, the author deduces that client and sponsor set the terms of the coaching relationship with the coach, informed by the demands of the wider organisational system.

That is why this work considers the mandate to challenge – contracting, the coaching relationship and other cues - and how the coach can make this the most effective it can be for client, sponsor and their organisational system. This is done through literature review and primary research, leading to conclusions that will enable the author to be confident in bringing challenge to her clients.

Student ID 678308
PgC Coaching and Development – C1911P

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

Literature Review

Challenge is internationally recognized as a core element of the coaching relationship (Bresser and Wilson, 2010, p14, Downey, p55). There is an implicit mandate to challenge. However the level at which that challenge is delivered is subjective and contextual (Sands, S, 2011). So what does the coach need to consider when creating a mandate to challenge with its inherent risk of rupture in the relationship? A 'relational' coaching approach upholds the need for challenge as a gateway to new possibilities for the client, 'a door of possibilities' in spite of the risk of rupture (De Haan, 2008, p148). In fact, the rupture/repair cycle creates transformation and strength in the coaching relationship (Critchley, 2010, p857) which itself holds the challenge.

However, the coach earns the right to challenge from the client (Egan, 1994, p198) or, put another way, high challenge is a function of trust between both parties in the relationship (Blakey and Day, 2012, p99). High challenge early in the relationship may foster dependence on the coach for answers. So as the relationship strengthens so does the capacity for challenge, and challenge builds the relationship. They dance together in an iterative process.

'Contracting', a core coaching process of making explicit stakeholder expectations (Tulpa, 2010, p39) might include a 'learning contract' including outcomes and learning strategies (Rock and Page, 2009, p229) and this can be used to understand the client's capacity for challenge. This psychological contract will be as explicit as possible about what can be expected by the parties involved (Sills, 2006, p3) for clarity, integrity and effectiveness of the relationship. Necessarily the coach is making judgments about what it is in the client's interests to challenge and this may touch deep-rooted psychological patterns (Heron, 2001, p60). Heron explicitly states 'make a contract with your client as to what your 'confronting' remit is.' Sands agrees with the effectiveness of this approach (Sands, 2011, p39) revealed through her action research.

Also, when the client invites challenge, and certainly if it is given uninvited, there will be dissonance, crisis and resistance. The client will have different strategies for getting rid of this uncomfortable state (Egan, 1994, p174). Therefore, it is argued that to maximize the coaching impact, there will be explicit permission to challenge (Day, 2013, 'Challenging Coaching' group, www.linkedin.com)

Another point of view is to build challenge in the contract implicitly through an experience of challenge. De Haan introduces the notion of 'fearless speech' at the contracting stage and is implicitly challenging for both parties. (De Haan, 2006, p4). This kind of contracting is beautifully shown in the film 'The King's Speech' (Hooper, 2010) where the 'practitioner' Logue insists that he call the future King by his first name, and that Bertie visits Logue's offices rather than vice versa. This breaks all social convention but gives the relationship a strength and context of its own, in which Bertie can literally find his voice.

Another perspective is that challenge is a business imperative for the coach. To serve the organisation that pays her fees, the executive coach will challenge more and pay less attention to the client's agenda (Blakey and Day, 2012, p7). This is a false dichotomy if the client is aligned with business objectives. If he is not, she uses a 'loving boot' to drive greater performance (Blakey and Day, 2012, p169). Organisations require rigorous contracting with both the coach and her client /their employee to root the coaching in their business reality (Blakey and Day, 2012, p7). In effect, the client or sponsor will make sure the challenge of the business environment is present in the coaching conversation.

Student ID 678308
PgC Coaching and Development – C1911P

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

'Are you up for this? Are you prepared to come to the edge, to be pushed, and to fly?' (Blakey and Day, 2012, p121)

In their brief reference to building the contract for challenge, the client is asked if he is committed to challenge. They argue that leaders love a challenge (Blakey and Day, 2012, p1). They are not alone. Challenge and goals make us happy (Rock and Page, 2009, p333) and 'A' players have a passion for challenge that makes it is impossible to overload them 'if you collaborate with them on defining the nature of the challenge' (Berglas, 2008, p104). Contracting for challenge is cited as an imperative for talent management.

Others bring challenge to the contract less explicitly. Challenge is the 'backbone' of coaching (O'Neill, 2007 p 14), and the work of coaching must be outcome focused, and rooted in organisational performance. However, O'Neill weaves challenge into her coaching contract and her working style without specifically asking for a remit to challenge.

In considering a contract to challenge, there are two further factors that affect the client's ability to work with challenge; capacity and support. For the client to be engaged in learning, the coach will balance challenge and the client's existing capacity for learning (Rock and Page, 2009, p243). In addition, drawing on Daloz's work, support and challenge are most effectively offered in balance with each other (Blakey and Day p120).

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

Big challenge requires big support and what 'challenge' and 'support' mean to individuals varies. The coach needs to understand how each client receives challenge and support (Bluckert, 2005, p338). In building a contract, the coach will consider the client's existing capacity and how they receive challenge and support most effectively. The challenge and support matrix can be used as a focus for the contracting discussion (Sands, 2011)

In a 'relational coaching' approach, the mandate is defined by what is interesting to the client and where they see value (De Haan, 2008, p53). Considering this perspective in light of a high challenge model, the client may see high challenge as valuable – or they may not. The grit in the oyster is where the coach sees high challenge as valuable and the client does not. No literature reviewed addressed this issue. Is this simply the client's defences in action, or are they not committed to development?

The author has been trained by The Performance Coach (2012) and invited to contract around challenge at the beginning of a coaching contract, using a Likert scale of 0-10, however there is no written reference to this.

In summary, whilst the coaching literature referred to a psychological contract underpinning the coaching relationship and the dynamics of challenge, scant reference was found to explicitly contracting around challenge (Blakey and Day, 2012, p120). The clearest references to contracting challenge were found in an unpublished dissertation (Sands, 2011 p37) and in Heron's work on intervention (2001, p60) that dates from the 1980's. It is clear from media coverage, internet discussion (Challenging Coaching group on Linkedin, YouTube) and coaching conferences lectures (CIPD Sept 2012, ICF Oct 2012, ICF May 2013) that this high challenge model (Blakey and Day, 2012) is interesting to the coaching community. Sir John Whitmore claims it is the new frontier (2012). Yet there is a gap in the literature about *how* to create a mandate to challenge. Does it need to be explicit? Are coaches contracting around challenge and, if so, how? If not, how else are they creating a mandate to challenge? This creates the inquiry for primary research.

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

Research Methodology

Ideally this research would have addressed the client's experience of challenge and what they find most effective. However initial exploration revealed that clients struggle to engage with a conceptual discussion about challenge because it is subjective and contextual (Sands, 2011, p37) until they have had an experience of it with a particular coach. In order to develop conclusions that have practical application, this research seeks to identify the practice of experienced coaches, working in a corporate environment, with more than 10 years experience. The author believes that they are likely to have spent some time reflecting and developing the way in which they offer challenge. This is an assumption without evidence.

The research methodology has three stages.

The first stage used Reflective Inquiry (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2012, p555) to clarify the research topic from the wider field of how the coach brings challenge. Since completing WBL1 assignment, the author has had a curiosity about determining the level of challenge and has used her own coaching sessions, and discussion with colleagues, to explore how this can be done. The coach and the client/sponsor together create the coaching relationship and therefore, rightly, the level of challenge. This inquiry developed rational and creative thought to refine the research topic (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2012, p37).

The research question that came from this first stage was 'How does the executive coach create an effective mandate to challenge?'

Following literature review, the second stage uses in-depth Narrative Inquiry to determine the research objectives and to 'test drive' research questions that are understandable to research subjects. An in-depth discussion was carried out with two very experienced subjects, informed by the Delphi technique (Saunders, Lewis and

Thornhill, 2012 p37). The first is a Masters graduate from Ashridge Business School (Sands, 2011) whose dissertation 'What emerges for my clients and me in moments of challenge?' was explored through reading and discussion with her (Appendix I: material from SS). The second, an executive coach with 20 years experience, and trained psychotherapist, had an extended telephone interview (Appendix II: interview with TM). This investigation of the issues enabled the author to proceed to the third stage, and the engagement of a greater number of coaches, with a higher level of confidence about the appropriateness of the research questionnaire and its usefulness in developing a picture of best practice.

The third stage gathers mainly qualitative data on the 'how' of practice from a group of executive coaches. There are two streams of data collection. Firstly, twelve coaches, with more than 10 years experience, who are working in a variety of contexts (organization, self-employed, academic and coaching consultancies) were approached by email (including Informed Consent information see Appendix IV) and asked to complete a questionnaire (see Appendix III: emailed questionnaire), or through personal interview where time and circumstance permitted. The questionnaire structure facilitates comparison. Secondly, using a Linkedin discussion forum from the Challenging Coaching book, data was sought from participants on how they create a contract to challenge (www.linkedin.com 'Challenging Coaching' group, March 2013). This latter group was biased through an interest in challenge, and this served the research purpose to establish practice around contracting challenge.

Research Findings

The completed research comprised two in-depth interviews, seven completed questionnaires and five contributions from Linkedin discussion forum including both authors of 'Challenging Coaching' (stage three).

Thirteen experienced executive coaches responded to whether they contracted challenge, and how. Most did (ten out of thirteen). The explicit nature of the research – to study contracting challenge – and the study groups is likely to have positively biased response to this question. Therefore it is not a statistically valid representation of how many coaches contract challenge. However the data offers qualitative value in the range and detail of responses.

Coaches offered a range of responses as to how they explicitly contracted challenge, and two offered written examples of their 'contracts' that referred to challenge. All but one of these did some kind of initial contracting as the relationship started. Almost all also contracted with the organisational sponsor, where there was one, including where to pitch the level of challenge. This initial contract was either a statement that their style was to offer a high level of coaching or they asked the client what level of challenge they would like. In both cases, most coaches calibrated the client's experience of challenge by asking what worked for them. This was then returned to during 'spot' contracting either during conversations, or at the end of the first session, or during a formal review in the middle of a contract.

Some coaches used the Support Challenge Matrix (Blakey and Day, 2012, p88) to calibrate the client's needs in contacting. One coach used this matrix with the sponsor and then reviewed the difference between sponsor and client expectations. In addition, two coaches used theoretical models in the contracting stage with clients to give a flavor of high challenge – the Yerkes Dodson performance curve and Zone of Uncomfortable Debate or 'ZOUD' (Blakey and Day, 2012, p133 and p22). This research identified that new clients found it hard to identify with a conceptual description of challenge so accurately calibrating their actual experience with that coach was important (Bluckert, 2005, p338).

Where the coach did not explicitly contract challenge they cited two reasons. Either they believed it was implicit in their contracting because they described coaching as a 'provocative' process, and that being too careful removed the element of 'surprise' or 'disturbance' required for effective challenge. Or two identified that their work was 'supportive' and 'facilitative', and any challenge came most effectively from gently facing the client with their own behavior/attitudes.

In terms of where to pitch the challenge, research identified a difference in how a client received challenge to conscious and to unconscious material. One respondent said, generally clients liked being challenged when they were broadly aware of something but hadn't seen it from this new perspective. However if the challenge was to bring awareness to unconscious material the coach can expect to activate the client's defences, and this has to be done carefully and within professional boundaries. Three coaches identified their best coaching as where they took their client to an edge between 'awareness' and 'exposure' and then let them choose how they wanted to move forward. In this moment, they would check-in with the client as to how they were feeling, what was happening for them. Emotionally, they would stay firmly alongside their client in this discomfort. This space is the ZOUD and the coach would show strong support for the client in this moment of challenge. This check-in with the client appears to be a hybrid between support and 'spot' contracting around the challenge in that moment.

In addition to this, one respondent described a common theme of constant evaluation of the client's state to assess whether they needed support or challenge 'I am always making judgments about my client's ego strength, about whether their primary need is to feel supported in developing their sense of confidence, or whether their ways of thinking and behaving have become repetitive and need disturbing'.

Respondents also identified that pitching the level of challenge was linked to the organisational challenges that the client faces. The client needs to be aware what the 'system' expects of them, and for the coach that is part of setting up the challenge appropriately. Coaches also identified energy levels, tone of voice, body language, eye contract, rapport, presence and distracted behavior as indicating how a client was dealing with challenge.

Coaches also identified if and how they could contract more effectively around challenge. Whilst the process of reflection enabled four offline respondents to identify what they would do differently – use models in initial contracting, and do more contracting around challenge during the coaching relationship - this did not bring new material to the research process. However, a new dynamic evolved in the research as the online response on Linkedin enabled contributors to see each other's practice. A reflexive process evolved from this and three of the contributors identified how they would change their process as a result of what others had shared. These changes were; to use the Support Challenge matrix in contracting to enable clients and sponsors to identify expectations around challenge; to use the Yerkes Dodson curve (Blakey and Day, 2012, p133) and ZOUD model (p22) to enable clients to see why challenge is valuable and how it might manifest.

So far this section has identified the research findings that were explicitly solicited. However another theme emerged in the research. Three coaches mentioned the words ‘danger’ or ‘fear’ in connection with a high level of challenge. One coach feared that ‘challenge’ meant something ‘punitive’ and ‘shaming’ and said for it to work, it had to be ‘supportive’ and ‘nurturing’. Others talked about their ability to challenge, their responses to challenging and being challenged. One coach revealed a process of Intensive Short-Term Dynamic Psychotherapy they had undertaken to deal with their own resistance to challenging others.

In summary, there was a rich experience of contracting around challenge, mainly explicitly. However, all respondents were thoughtful about how this might evolve to be more effective. Even one of the authors of ‘Challenging Coaching’ (Blakey and Day, 2012) stated an intention to develop their practice around contracting challenge as a result of these questions, as did other respondents.

Conclusions

The coaching relationship, between coach and client/sponsor, is the vessel within which every aspect of the coaching interaction sits. Contracting aside, the strength of that relationship determines the potential to challenge. With time, trust and rapport, there is ever-greater capacity to hold challenge (Heron, 2001, p74). As an inherently authoritative intervention, the coach will be sitting closely alongside the client before together they enter the deep, dark woods of challenging unconscious material (Heron, 2001, p6).

Challenge exists in the client's system from their team, their boss, from a 360-degree feedback process. They walk into the coaching relationship with that pre-existing level of challenge (O'Neill, 2007, p113) before a word is said. To that the coach might add their own challenge in terms of achievement or behaviour, moving to new frontiers. Not only this, the coach has their own challenges in managing the process (O'Neill, 2007, p66), and their own relationship with challenge. Clearly the process of challenge requires self-awareness, emotional intelligence and transparency from all parties to enable learning for the client (questionnaire DW). Psychological contracting is one way to achieve transparency (Sills, 2006, p6).

Models and theories are useful tools to raise awareness in the process of contracting the coaching needs (sponsor and client) and to demonstrate high challenge coaching. There seems to be little difference between whether a coach states that she offers high challenge, or if she asks the client/sponsor what is needed in terms of challenge. What is important is that the process is made transparent to the both parties.

Transparency can be achieved through contracting. However only so much can be achieved in initial contracting as the relationship and the client's experience of challenge (Bluckert, 2006, p338) are as yet relatively unformed. This contracting process needs to be alive as the relationship grows – reviews, spot contracting, checking-in with the client about their experience of the challenge, giving them time to digest the challenge that they have received (Heron, 2001, p74).

Transparency can also be achieved by giving a client the experience of challenge in establishing the relationship. This is the 'fearless speech' of articulating system challenges, or behaviour and beliefs that are not serving the client (De Haan, 2006, p4). It may also be achieved by describing the coaching in a particular way as 'high challenge' or 'provocative'. This approach of giving an experience of high challenge is shown in 'The King's Speech' (Hooper T, 2010) where Logue layers challenge upon challenge in the contracting of boundaries – he dictates the venue, the forms of address, the frequency of meeting – all against social convention and to Bertie's great discomfort. He does not mention the systems challenges; these are self-evident. He 'owns' the challenge and the process (Sands, 2011) with absolute confidence. To deliver challenge, the coach will have confidence in contracting what they need to do their job properly, and to contract around that.

Here two approaches to contracting challenge have been described; the use of models/theories with explicit contracting or a more implicit approach built through experience. One experience is similar to riding a horse with a saddle, and the other is bareback riding. It probably depends on the horse and the rider as to what is possible. The approaches are not mutually exclusive. If the coach is not able to deliver the experience of challenge in the initial meeting because they do not know where deep challenge lies at that stage, or the client is simply not challenged yet by the material, then she can use models/theories to explore this conversation.

The coach's orientation to the client's challenge appears to be significant (Sands, 2011). From where does the coach offer the challenge? It may be to stand separate from the client with new information about a blind spot – a sort of observational 'high ground'. It may be to stand next to them in asking them face a difficult situation – a more 'parental' model. Or it may be to stand next to him in a spirit of adventure, facing this situation together – a 'thought partner' and equal. Effective contracting may give the license to explore together (AO and DW questionnaires) and offer challenging hypotheses/insights which will sometimes be wrong but which are intended to create new awareness. This is the work of trust and relationship building.

The contract to challenge might also usefully explore the far edge of challenge. One of the limits to the level of challenge is the client's defences (Heron, 2001, p60). So if the coach wants to expand contracting the level of challenge out of a cognitive process, she might ask about what constitutes too much challenge for that client and open a discussion about what lies on this far edge of challenge (Appendix II; Interview TM). This discussion from third-position will enable the client to experience whether that level of challenge is unbearable, or that they thought it would be but is not.

The client's ultimate defense to an uncomfortable challenge is to rupture the relationship. The coach may hesitate from challenge because she fears this rupture (Critchley, 2010, p856). The experience that coaches describe is a fear of rupture at the point of challenge but when they have the courage to stand in the fear, and own the challenge, it allows the coaching relationship to move to a new depth and effectiveness (Sands, 2011, Critchley, 2010). Logue and Bertie have three powerful cycles of rupture/repair that build their relationship (Hooper, 2010). The resource that facilitates that intervention is the coach's capacity and resilience for challenge and it is important she face this challenge of her own.

Finally, the author comes back to consider the essence of an effective mandate to challenge. A strong and trusting coaching relationship is a sine qua non. Then explicit contacting has its place and practitioners have demonstrated creative ways to do this. Yet what holds the authors attention is 'fearless speech' and giving the client experiences of challenge from the start. Practicing her bareback riding, reflecting on what happens to her in moments of challenge and how to bring this in service of each client.

Student ID 678308
PgC Coaching and Development – C1911P

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

Learning Experience

The learning in this assignment has formed around three strands. Firstly, I have used feedback from WBL1 to improve my academic writing and researching skills. I have worked on making the objective very specific and developing the theme from literature review to research and conclusions in a way that builds more coherently, one stage on the next. I also developed a staged research methodology to refine my research objective and questions.

Since late 2012 I have taken my curiosity about challenge into my practice and used reflective inquiry to explore my WBL2 topic. What I discovered is that each client requires a tailored approach to challenge. This was coming through my personal practice as I did the literature review and research, both of which corroborated this approach of validating the client's experiential world. Research findings and practice have strengthened my confidence in bringing challenge to my coaching practice as I know its value for client learning and I have more approaches to use both in contracting and offering challenge.

Thirdly, taking my research on-line through Linkedin has been a great experience as I have seen its dynamic potential to cross-fertilise learning and connect with other coaches to develop ideas.

As a result of all this, I now feel clear that challenge is the leading edge in coaching, whether my client self-challenges or I challenge them. Now I am resourced to calibrate my challenge through contracting with my client/their sponsor. As a result of considering challenge, a new quality I take into my practice is 'fearless speech' (de Haan, 2006).

4296 words.

WBL2 :
Creating the mandate for challenge in an executive coaching relationship

Reference List

Berglas, S, (2008). *Harvard Business Review on Talent Management.* USA, Harvard Business Review Publishing Company.

Blakey, J, Day, I. (2012). *Challenging Coaching*. Boston and London, Nicholas Brealey.

Bluckert, P (2005). "Critical factors in executive coaching – the coaching relationship". *Industrial and Commercial Training*, Vol 37 issue 7 pp336-340.

Bresser, F and Wilson C, (2010) What is coaching? Passmore, J (Ed.) *Excellence in Coaching* (2nd ed). (pp9-26). Great Britain and United States of America, Kogan Page

Chynoweth, C. (2012, July 1). A Kick Up The Chief Executive. *The Sunday Times.* Retrieved from http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk.

Critchley, B (2010) . 'Relational Coaching; taking the coaching high road', *Journal of Management*, vol 29 Iss:10, pp 851-863.

De Haan, E (2006). *Fearless Consulting*. UK, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.
De Haan, E (2008). *Relational Coaching*. UK, John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Downey, M, (2003). *Effective Coaching* (2nd ed). USA, Cengage Learning.

Egan, G, (1994). *The Skilled Helper* (5th ed). California, USA, Wadsworth Inc.

O'Neill, M B. (2007). *Coaching with Backbone and Heart?* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Hooper, T. (Director). (2010). *The King's Speech* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom: UK Film Council.

Rock, D, and Page, L J (2009). *Coaching with the Brain in Mind.* New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons.

Sands, S (2011). *What emerges for my clients and me in moments of challenge?* (Unpublished postgraduate dissertation). Ashridge Business School, Hertfordshire.

Saunders, M, Lewis, P and Thornhill, A (2012). *Research Methods for Business Students* (6th ed.). Harlow, Essex, Pitman Publishing.

Sills, C (2006). *Contracts in Counselling and Psychotherapy (2nd ed).* London, Sage Publications Ltd.

Whitmore, J (2012). Coaching Connect blog. 'Coaching with a Scalpel'. *Retrieved from www.coachingconnect.co.uk/connectingcoaches.*