What's happening in the coaching conversation with an executive at risk of derailing?

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Abstract

Little is known about what happens in a coaching conversation when an executive is at risk of derailing. Consequently, the coach might be unsure how to manage such challenging engagements. This phenomenological study takes the coach's perspective in focusing on this gap in the evidence base. Findings highlight the importance of quickly tuning into the client's unconscious scripts and schemas manifesting the maladaptive behaviour and high emotion. Readiness for change is identified before applying appropriate strategies and interventions. The coach is however required to apply their skills in complex environments where the vagaries of organisational systems become exposed.

Keywords: coaching, leadership, derailment, systems implications, interventions

Introduction

Evidence-based research has revealed that failure and incompetence of management runs at extremely high levels. Hogan et al. (2009) analysed the findings from twelve studies over the past 25 years amongst public and private sectors within western societies, concluding that "two-thirds of existing managers are insufferable and at least half will eventually fail" (Hogan et al., 2009, p3). If correct, these staggering findings indicate that those who coach people in senior positions have a significant challenge on their hands. Practical evidence-based guidance for coaches working with such clients has only recently started to emerge. The research findings presented here bolsters that evidence base. A comprehensive study of this common performance management challenge was conducted by focusing on the perspective of the coach. The result is an in-depth analysis and understanding of the following three fundamental questions:

1. What qualities and skills is a coach drawing upon when working with an executive at risk of derailing?
2. What wider systems implications should the coach be mindful of when working with such clients?
3. Which interventions and strategies achieve successful outcomes for both the coaching client and their organisation?

These questions are intrinsically linked and provide the structure to describe the findings presented within this article. Insight gleaned might help to inform and enrich a coach's practice, while also being of value to coaching supervisors, purchasers of coaching services as well as organisational and independent learning and development professionals.

Significant evidence exists to describe the qualities and skills required by the practitioner, but which are particularly pertinent when coaching this specific group of clients? Here, the existing theoretical approaches and genres of coaching are matched against those practiced by the research participants. Their initial experiences are explored as they become immersed in early coaching

conversations with executives at risk of derailing. We see how they assess their clients and what common themes are emerging amongst their many varying experiences. The heightened importance of the coach-coachee relationship is fully investigated before considering the stability of the coachee and how the research participants help their coaching clients begin to gain an awareness of the maladaptive patterns of behaviour they might be manifesting.

The research objective of the second question is to explore the wider systems implications when such behaviour is manifested within the workplace. Kets de Vries (2006) discusses how dysfunctional organisational systems are created which can rapidly metastasize like a cancer. "Very rarely does an individual show signs of derailing unless there is a problem with the whole system" – Sandra. This research participant's insight encapsulates the wider systems issues she considers in pursuit of achieving a successful outcome. This simple statement helps to reveal some of the most complex and thought-provoking dynamics of these research findings. Contracting is always important, but never more so than when the motivations of individuals or groups are continually shifting, often extending beyond the classic coaching contract triangle. The feasibility of the coach remaining outside the system is considered along with how the coach might manage their own conscious and unconscious feelings. Many research participants choose to engage in deeper levels of supervision when working with such clients and this is investigated.

The third question concerns the strategies and interventions applied by the participants in pursuit of achieving successful outcomes for both the coaching client and the organisation. Once again, a mass of coaching literature exists offering valuable interventions and strategies. Those commonly practised with these often challenging coaching clients are brought together here to provide the reader with some practical insights, strategies and tools. This article concludes by distilling the key findings from these three core questions and consideration is given to the possibilities for further research.

Methodology

The concept of derailment can be described as a phenomenon which the research participants have experienced in their coaching engagements with their clients. This study identifies what coaches perceive as the most pertinent aspects of their conversations by asking them to describe these experiences and make meaning from it (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008, Moustakas, 1994, Smith, 2004). Taking such a perspective led to a qualitative research methodology being chosen.

The core principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were followed to both collect and analyse the data. Elements of a further research method, Conceptual Encounter, were used to enable the author to discuss and explore deeper and richer levels of thinking about this phenomenon with each participant towards the end of the research interview, (de Rivera, 1984).

A purposive sampling method was applied to find willing participants who met a robust set of criteria. Five coaches were selected. All manage their own practice focusing primarily but not exclusively on providing executive/leadership coaching. Experience in this field ranged between 8 and 22 years. Their backgrounds varied; one entered coaching as a qualified psychotherapist, one as a chartered occupational psychologist and one as a qualified counsellor. Two entered coaching through a business career in the private and/or public sectors. All are based in the UK. Each research participant/coach is referred to by pseudonym within this article in order to protect anonymity – given names are as follows: Rachael, Sandra, Janet, David and Brian.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and an idiographic approach was followed where participants were encouraged to tell their stories as the experiential expert. Interviews were recorded and data from them analysed following the clearly defined research method of IPA. Derailment can be thought of as a label. For the purposes of this research, participants were advised it was not relevant who had applied this label: coach, organisation or coaching client. Participants were asked to describe their experiences when coaching anyone in a middle-management position or above, but with a preference towards expressing their experiences when coaching those holding more senior positions.

Findings: inside the coaching conversation

We begin our analysis of the findings by exploring the initial experiences of the research participants once they have become immersed within their early coaching conversations with executives at risk of derailing.

Expressing High States of Emotion

Participants spoke of how consistently their clients present themselves to coaching in a highly-charged emotional state.

> *She was sobbing and said I can't think straight because I'm so tired, because I'm so stressed I can't think straight I cannot think intelligently, I really don't know what I'm doing, I'm scared. When I go into work I don't know what people are saying; I over react; I can't control the situation like I normally do.* – Janet

Janet's highly stressed and anxious coaching client started to reveal a degree of openness to her but not all clients were so open. Sandra was asked to coach a senior leader who was regarded as inspirational largely because of his skill at managing financial instruments and was consequently revered by customers. He was also described as a bully; highly aggressive and who created trouble across the organisation though his behaviour. After listening to the appraisal of the assignment, Sandra was told by the HR lead that this man had already "eaten two coaches". He fired the first one after hearing 360 feedback and had reduced the second one to tears in the first meeting. He came to their first session very late and immediately began shouting; banging the table and coming very close physically; almost to the point where it became a personal attack.

Participants' clients appear to be at their most heightened state of emotion at the outset of the coaching engagement, possessing little or no awareness of their basic anxiety and as a consequence are often blind to the consequences of their action. The literature clearly classifies the behaviour of people at risk of derailing as falling into one of three clusters of neuroses identified by Horney (1950) and applied widely today in psychometric assessments such as Hogan's Development Survey (HDS). These research findings did not identify any clients who could be described as demonstrating the 'moving towards' trait: trying to succeed by ingratiating others and building alliances. Most coaching clients whose stories form these findings fell into one of the other two clusters. The 'moving against' trait is clearly visible in Sandra's client, the finance executive. Janet's client was very different – a senior healthcare executive who was unable to function in a normal manner who instead was motivated to withdraw from the world and was 'moving away'.

Identifying Patterns of Behaviour

All coaches interviewed were keen to identify the patterns of behaviour of their clients which might be leading them to derail. Participants' clients who were 'moving away' and withdrawing from the world did so in different ways. Levinson (2006) warns that high-pressured executive roles

form the perfect breeding ground for cases of burnout. Janet's client's poor health was leaking out causing a downward spiral of rational thinking. Janet clearly recognised this pressure valve and spent much time during the coaching engagement working to raise her client's awareness of it and to see that she should give herself permission to fully recover. Coaches might choose to look out for the signs of burnout which Levinson (2006, p24) describes as "1) chronic fatigue; 2) anger at those making demands; 3) self-criticism, cynicism, negativity and irritability; 4) displaying high emotions with a sense of feeling besieged".

A common strategy adopted by participants when presented with such extreme behaviour is to allow the outpouring of emotions for a period of time. Janet recognised the need to allow her client to let it go and to give her the space to reduce those highly charged emotions, as did Brian who allowed his client to "explode with blame, self-recrimination and expletives". All participants were demonstrating the need to take a person-centred stance at this early point in their coaching conversations. Rogers (1957) advises of the importance of allowing the client to experience that cathartic release which is necessary as they are likely to be in a state of incongruence, demonstrating vulnerability and anxiety. A person-centred approach is especially applicable in crisis interventions, (Corey 1991). When people are in crisis, one of the first steps is to give them an opportunity to fully express themselves. The client is likely to reject the presence of the coach if they do not feel understood and accepted.

A clear difference in approach to the initial coaching conversation is evident after this point in the engagement. The person centred, holistic approach appears to be extended beyond the initial outpouring with clients who, to use Horney's terminology, are 'moving away'. Rachael describes how she had to slow down the pace of the session and accepted that very small steps forward were in themselves very precious. Janet was keen to provide her burnt out client with a safe supportive space where she could calm her mind and body, working on strategies to help her regain that inner strength and resilience. Conversely, Brian and Sandra were coaching highly aggressive and abrasive clients. Sandra advised that had she continued to adopt a person-centred approach beyond the initial outpouring, the client would have probably used this as ammunition to terminate the coaching engagement without hesitation.

The Importance of the Coaching Relationship

These findings suggest that coach credibility is heightened when the client is at risk of derailing, particularly so when the client attaches no value from the outset to entering into the coaching engagement; perhaps more typical in clients who are 'moving against'. Trust and confidentiality are prerequisites to establishing a firm base for any coaching relationship. Clients who enter into coaching because they are derailing appear to put the coach's credentials as both a professional and a person under greater scrutiny. The valued credentials vary considerably and it is for the coach to accurately assess what these might be.

All research participants talked about their need to uncover admirable qualities in their coaching clients. This enabled them to gain traction within the coaching engagement. Without such attachment it seems the relationship might stall, reducing the likelihood of achieving a successful coaching outcome.

These coaching clients are now beginning to build an awareness of what they want from coaching and the coaches are starting to gain an understanding of the patterns of behaviours that might be leading them to derail. Next we explore these patterns further and specifically look at the systems implications behind these cases.

Findings: Systems implications

No executive operates in a vacuum and deciding to fight through their derailing tendencies will result in their highly emotional state being on display. This in turn will likely have a negative effect on the performance and motivation of members of their team, department or organisation. Goldman (2006) warns that an entire organisational system can become corrupted by a leader extolling extreme antisocial or narcissistic behaviour. Conversely, those who have chosen to withdraw may not appear to be causing such a negative effect on those around them. However, the consequences of running away might be that they are leaving a trail of devastation behind them. Here systems thinking and maladaptive behaviour in the workplace converge as we discover the interplay between the patterns of behaviour of executives and the wider systems in which they operate.

Awareness of impact on organisational systems

Nelson & Hogan (2009) tell us that it is critical for coaching success to raise to the coachee's awareness their potential dysfunctional patterns of behaviour. Peltier (2001) however, warns that we are highly likely to put up resistance to defend our maladaptive behaviours if challenged with new information that conflicts with our perception. Senge (1990) describes how we all learn best from the direct experience of our actions. This is restricted to our learning horizon as beyond it we are unable to assess how this might be affecting others. The dilemma he identifies is that people rising through leadership rarely get to experience the direct consequences of their actions and as a result become blind to them. He continues by describing how players in a human system have the power to eliminate these extreme behaviours that invariably occur, but fail to do so because they do not understand how they created such instability in the first place.

Sandra describes how her narcissistic coaching client's mood would affect the whole team. "If he came into the trading floor in an apparent bad mood, everyone would just sink down below their screens and they would be worried… they didn't want to catch his eye and get zapped". This had a real impact on people's performance, not just during the down time as they were taking cover, but also overall as team members' own emotional and cognitive stability became an issue. Kilburg (2000) advises of the mushroom effect where such organisational symptoms create inertia, teamwork is destroyed, motivation is sapped and performance plummets. Kets de Vries (2006) advises that followers become anxious when embroiled with such a leader and will often resort to defensive reactions by identifying with the aggressor through idealisation and mirroring of their behaviours. When placed in the same system, people however different, tend to produce similar results (Senge, 1990).

O'Neill (2000) describes how communication between parties in a dysfunctional environment creates multiple triangles which evolve in an attempt to resolve anxiety. These triangles can cascade throughout an organisational system and will "siphon off energy" from all those caught up in it, leaving them less able to deal with the challenge at hand (O'Neill, 2000, p63). It is unrealistic to assume that a coach can remain outside the system when entering into such multi-faceted engagements, as their presence will create additional triangles beyond the classic coach, coaching client and organisation triangle. A coach might benefit from raising their own conscious awareness to the many more triangles created by their own presence. Indeed, any individual within the system holding a position of interest could be creating additional triangles. A coach managing such an engagement therefore holds significant responsibility and might choose to give careful consideration to the potential impact of their proposed actions upon the wider system.

Separating self from the organisation

Sandra spent much time working with her client to help him develop conscious awareness of how this behaviour was being experienced by those around him. Traditionally, the organisational culture of this bank had supported such behaviour within task-based managerial roles, but things had started to change. This client was also now progressing through leadership where such behaviour was deemed to be counter-productive. Senge (1990) states how people become their positions and are unable to see how that affects those in other positions. Sandra advises that when working with an individual captured by their own mental framework and emotional responses, it is for the coach to help them separate themselves from those thoughts and feelings. Brian describes how he helped his derailing client split his value, integrity and who he is as a person away from the organisation, separating his own feelings and measure of self-worth.

Janet recognised that her burnt out client could very easily bring down the whole team who were working on a large scale healthcare project. A high media presence was building around it as rumours began to circulate that this project was in trouble. Janet recognised the high price to the wider environment should her client continue to make decisions from a highly stressed emotional perspective and subsequently worked hard to help her client separate herself from the system and consider more rational and cognitively driven perspectives.

Coaching contracts – the dynamic nature of derailment issues

The terms of the coaching contract becomes critically important when derailment is an issue. Sandra advises that this is very much the case when emotions are running high and even more pertinent when an individual is in conflict with the organisation. The relevancy of the initially agreed contract might therefore shift. A coach can choose to keep the contract on track by:

- *continually redefining what a successful coaching outcome looks like;*
- *keep restating confidentiality boundaries;*
- *remaining totally alert and brutally clear* - Sandra

The coach might come to recognise that what is stated as fact by any interested party to the coaching engagement at the initial coaching, three-way contracting meeting, might at worse bear little or no resemblance to their conscious or indeed unconscious intentions, or at best, be accurate when stated but change very quickly after that meeting. An organisation might bring in a coach to help an individual re-rail, but with such high emotions present it is highly likely that any further inappropriately timed outpouring might fundamentally change the mood of the system's hierarchy. Equally, a further influential person within the system hitherto unknown to the coach might drop an opinion or issue an order which could fundamentally change the original coaching objective.

There is no shifting from the fact that this is challenging for a coach engaged with a system manifesting its own dysfunctional traits. Participants overcame this challenge in part by developing a depth of knowledge of the system they were working in over time. Taking a wider perspective, coaches holding consultancy responsibilities within a system demonstrating levels of dysfunctional behaviour might be in a better position to help them become a more effective learning organisation and thus improving overall systemic health.

Heightened levels of supervision

Engaging in more frequent and heightened levels of supervision is of immense value when working with derailment issues (Rachael, Sandra, Janet, David). These four participants were recalling recent derailment engagements during these research interviews. Each of them discussed how their thinking was continuing to unravel and how even discussing it during the research interview was helping them to make more sense of it. Janet used supervision as a space to question herself on the actions she had taken within the coaching conversation and to think through the wider

systemic issues. Sandra advised that she would generally take advantage of supervision after each derailment session. This she believed was necessary to ensure she was not allowing her own emotions to get in the way or, perhaps more specifically, not addressing an unconscious fear of tackling a particular emotion that might be affecting her cognitive reactions. Such a position is expressed by Roberts & Brunning (2007) who advise coaches to consider unconscious communication passing from the coachee to the coach. Indeed, such unconscious to unconscious communication can be explored and raised to the coach's conscious awareness through supervision.

Supervision is also of great value in testing the coach's cognitive reasoning to help ensure they are not colluding with any part of the system. This includes the unconscious pitfall of the coach entering the drama triangle and resorting to rescuer mode. Janet sensed that her burnt out coaching client was looking to her to be rescued. "What do you think I should do?" was the question she posed to Janet when facing the need to make a significant life choice decision. Janet was careful to keep in check her own objectivity and not to fall into this trap.

Choosing to derail

Sandra believes that a common misconception of coaches and related professionals is that it is their responsibility to help prevent the executive from derailing. She considers this perspective to be fundamentally flawed as it may discourage the coachee to take responsibility for their actions. "The coach's job is to give them more choices - if they choose to derail then that's their choice". This might explain the view of Haidt (2006) who contemplates the value of experiencing trauma as an extreme form of cathartic release. Sandra warns that coaches who are motivated to provide high levels of service can find it is a huge temptation to take this responsibility onto their shoulders. Such tendencies should be surfaced within supervision. Being sucked in can also lead to the coach's own emotional levels to rise which could result in the coach losing resilience and creativity, leading to less than fully objective decisions being made.

Findings: strategies and interventions

All participants expressed clear views on delivering effective strategies and interventions when working with derailment issues. While these vary in nature, Brian and Sandra have developed their own holistic leadership and developmental coaching frames which they adapt when working with these often challenging coaching clients. These frames draw upon the major theories of psychotherapy and behavioural change and consider the multiple traditions of Rogerian helping relationships, Freudian consciousness raising and Skinnerian behaviourist perspectives.

Participants described how they adopt strategies and interventions which can largely be placed into one of these three major theories. Adopting a Rogerian helping strategy is commonly taken during the initial emotional outpouring. This both builds rapport and gives the client time and space to let off steam in a trusting environment. Freudian consciousness raising is subsequently adopted, both as the coach tries to understand what might be driving the unwanted patterns of behaviour and in helping the coaching client in raising their own levels of awareness. These can be described as experiential strategies which participants typically applied in the early stages of the coaching engagement.

An experiential approach to raising awareness

Experiential techniques arouse the client's unconscious to elicit a heightened state of awareness and consequently, they begin to see the need to make changes within themselves. Brian suggests the coach should use eloquent Meta Model questions from NLP to gain specificity and clarity when helping clients identify what they want (O'Connor & Seymour, 1990). In holistic terms,

Sandra describes the need to develop insight, the need to see the world as it is and not as a coachee might expect it to be.

Resilience building is a key experiential strategy which many of the research participants describe as a vital component when considering how to help a client discover for themselves the value in changing behaviour. Janet helped her burnt out client understand how her Chief Executive boss might be performing a test to determine her level of resilience as a self-sustaining leader. Janet worked on building her client's capabilities by challenging her to show leadership and consider the system she was working in as well as offering her insight as to how she might manage relationships and networks in order to achieve her leadership goals. Her client came to see the Chief Executive's stance as a natural selection process, designed to weed out those without sufficient resilience. She gained strength from understanding the need to build her own resilience and was able to make conscious choices on how she might do this.

Experiential strategies also include those interventions which help a client gain a more in-depth understanding of self. Sandra's aggressive client sacked the first coach on the spot after receiving the findings from the 360 feedback initiative. She synthesises her thoughts with the writings of Argyris (1991) in describing how intelligent people just cannot take negative feedback. They will readily show the brittle side of their personalities if put in a situation which they cannot handle immediately. They "zoom into a doomed loop of despair" (Argyris, 1991, p9), being so highly defensive that they become completely predisposed and cannot learn from the situation. Sandra's approach is to instigate a feed forward initiative where she conducts phenomenological interviews with key stakeholders, but rather than focus upon eliciting information on the past behaviours of the coachee, questions are very much about now and the future. Typical questions asked are:

- *What's happening now?*
- *What do you value in this person now?*
- *How is this person impacting upon you now and how does this affect the future?*
- *How could your working relationship add more value?*
- *How could the way in which this person works create more value for you and the organisation?* - Sandra

All questions are solution-focused, to determine how the future could be better rather than "you did this in the past and it was bad". The solution-focused technique draws upon the work of Milton Erikson and has become popular in coaching as a systemic approach to achieve change. Grant (2006) describes this integrated goal-focused approach as an enabler for people to access and use the wealth of personal experience, skills, expertise, and intuition that resides within them.

Such a blended approach as described above is offered as the coach builds an environment of trust and respect. Equally, raising their clients' level of awareness and challenging unconscious drivers enables them to begin to appreciate a wider range of perspectives. This subsequently arouses their desire to begin making changes to their behaviour.

Preparing for change – a behaviour-based approach

A behavioural-based approach can be taken once the readiness of the client has moved to a point where they are preparing for change. Sandra's aggressive client dropped the defensive stance on realising the choices he had in front of him. The defensive barriers were no longer necessary and he began to feel he was back in control and was preparing for change.

Brian recalled the engagement with his narcissistic client describing how, on reaching the stage of readiness for action, he was able to use his high level of intelligence and drive effectively.

With Brian's help he adopted a behavioural perspective after identifying the triggers in others and in himself that might lead him to enter into a rage and learned to perform some very simple tasks to remain calm. He learned how to breathe through his nose into the diaphragm, how to apologise and to be honest about how he was feeling, both with himself and with others.

While modern psychological approaches to coaching have clearly begun to overlap and become multi-modal, here it is suggested that a degree of separation is required by adopting a more traditional approach for each stage in the change cycle when coaching those at risk of derailing. Typically this requires adopting Rogerian helping strategies early in the engagement in conjunction with Freudian consciousness raising – both can be described as experiential strategies. A traditional behavioural-based approach is subsequently applied, but only once the client has begun to see the need to change and is preparing to do so. Coaches might bear in mind that progression along the change cycle is not always linear and hence the need to move with the client as their needs dictate.

Conclusion

This study has sought to bolster the evidence base by discovering what's happening in the coaching conversation with an executive at risk of derailing. Participants' early coaching conversations hold many similarities. Perhaps the most striking difference is those clients manifesting their defence reactions by overtly expressing power were choosing 'fight' over 'flight'. Conversely, those clients who were choosing to withdraw from the world were, to use Horney's category 'moving away'. Below is a summary of the key professional attributes demonstrated by participants upon entering the coaching engagement:

- Confidently manage conversations where coaching clients are lacking in emotional and cognitive stability;
- Be professionally skilled in psychological factors that drive behaviour;
- Be able to quickly indentify patterns of maladaptive behaviour;
- Use this psychological skill to appropriately challenge and support the client;
- Possess gravitas and presence as a proven professional coach;
- Be seen by the coaching client as being of equal professional standing;
- Be highly resilient as a professional and as a person;
- Expect to be on the receiving end of cutting defence reactions from others;

When considering the wider implications of derailment, these findings have identified a need for coaches to hold a deep awareness of the vagaries of organisational systems. Below is a summary of the wider systems implications identified by research participants:

- Be highly skilled in managing complex organisational behavioural issues;
- Understand human motivations driven by wider systems issues;
- Build awareness of the hidden motivations of all in the system and choose how to act upon them;
- Continuously review the coaching contract to ensure it remains highly relevant;
- Help clients achieve a greater degree of separateness between self and organisation;
- Help them to re-establish who they are as a person, their values, integrity and self-worth;
- Understand own position in the system – carefully calculate each step taken;
- Be highly proficient in holding robust and honest conversations;
- Understand own emotions, conscious and unconscious drivers;
- Regularly explore own emotions and motives through supervision;

Participants clearly identified specific strategies and interventions they would regularly introduce when working with these coaching clients. Summarised below is the approach taken by participants in applying appropriate strategies and interventions:

- Understand the client's degree of readiness to change and meet them there;
- Hold a portfolio of experiential and behavioural strategies and interventions;
- Understand the client's emotional state – know when it is appropriate to apply each intervention;
- Introduce experiential interventions to raise awareness, build resilience and stimulate desire to change;
- Introduce behaviour-based interventions to help clients take practical steps towards making change.

Suggestions for further research

This study has focused attention on understanding the perspective of the coach who has been charged with managing derailment engagements. It is clear this work has taken a relatively one-sided view, i.e. the perspective from the coach, and any further study might want to consider alternative perspectives. Organisational HR leaders and senior executives will certainly hold valuable opinions and these might be sought by researchers. Equally, those coaching clients directly affected by derailment might choose to tell their story, perhaps as part of their own desire to move their life forward. Researchers might seek out Industrial Tribunal cases in search of willing research participants. A further area of study might be to consider applying other research methods by taking a different approach to view this highly fascinating subject.

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