Exploring the meaning of coaching for newly appointed senior leaders in their first twelve to eighteen months in role

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Abstract

Newly appointed senior leaders are typically expected to "hit the ground running" and start making a difference within a few weeks of their arrival. This study explores how they articulate and interpret their experience of coaching during their transition period. Using a phenomenological based approach, the empirical research involved in-depth interviews with six recently appointed senior leaders in the private and public sectors. The findings revealed that participants attribute particular significance to their coaching in helping them overcome a deep sense of vulnerability in the face of complex challenges, develop new personal, social and cognitive capacities, and identify new purpose and meaning in their whole lives which in turn engenders motivation and ownership of the role. Participants also attributed significant value to the calm, reflective space created by the coach who may need to engage in a variety of ways, as coach, mentor, counsellor or management consultant, depending on their needs.

Keywords: Senior leaders, coaching, role transition, new capacities, coach's role

Introduction

Expectations of senior leaders seem to have risen significantly and their responsibilities become more complex and challenging, if not onerous, than ever before. Garten (2001) believes that historians will conclude that the pressures and demands of their roles proved to be far greater than most could manage. Newly appointed senior leaders are nonetheless expected to "hit the ground running" and deliver results very quickly. Both the management and coaching literature discuss the scale of transition necessitated by a senior role appointment (Charan *et al.,* 2001; Bridges, 2002; Lee, 2003; West and Milan, 2001) and point to the potential mismatch between the capacities of the individual and the demands of the role resulting in poor performance if not failure by the executive. In Kegan's (1994) words, many find themselves "in over their heads" unable to master the new ways of thinking and acting required. Indeed Watkins's research (2003) suggests that as many as 50% of leaders fail within the first eighteen months of their appointment.

Given the risks of exposure and even failure for newly appointed senior leaders, my study hypothesised that coaching has a particular significance for them during their transition period. Evidence from literature and previous studies for the meaning of coaching during transition to a senior role appears limited. Indeed, the voices of senior leaders are rarely heard articulating what coaching meant in terms of getting to grips with the role and meeting their own and the organisation's expectations.

This study explored the experience of coaching for newly appointed senior leaders from their own perspective, seeking to hear their voice articulating and interpreting the meaning of their coaching experience. *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* (Sykes, 1976) defines meaning as that which is "important, significant, noteworthy" and can "be of some (specified) importance" to a person "especially a source of benefit". My study's three objectives were therefore firstly to understand how coaching contributes to helping newly appointed senior leaders become effective in role and thereby meet their performance targets, secondly to explore how coaching influences and supports their transition and thirdly to identify the aspects of their coaching experience that they appreciate most.

The findings revealed patterns and themes in the participants' experience of coaching which contribute to the coaching profession's thinking about the style and nature of coaching interventions for senior role transitions.

Insights from relevant literature

Key career transitions, particularly to senior leadership positions, are regarded by many coaching professionals, for example Grant and Greene (2001), Lee (2003), Peltier (2001) and Rogers (2004) as moments when coaching can be a highly positive and supportive experience for the individual. It is much less clear, however, in what ways senior leaders find coaching helpful as they adjust to their new roles. The study therefore examined a range of views and evidence for the role of coaching in catalysing and supporting leaders' transitions, by drawing on literature from the domains of management, psychology and coaching.

Management literature

The management literature seems to focus on two key areas related to newly appointed leaders; views on the reasons for their poor performance and even failure, and the new capacities that they need to acquire. Whilst no direct link to the role of coaching in addressing these is made, the differing views on the required development journey for new leaders are insightful.

Conflicting views emerge as to why executives succeed or fail. Giglio *et al.* (1998), supported by Spreier *et al.*, (2006), find that senior leaders new in role display very high levels of confidence, belief in their abilities and an overriding determination to succeed but are unaware that these very same qualities may put them at risk if failure. On the other hand Pullen (1996) claims most executives spend the first six months "desperately trying to avoid burnout" and suppressing emotions that might undermine their original decision to accept the role. This experience echoes Argyris' (1991) notion of the doom zone and Newell's (2002) recognition of the despondency to which executives fall prey if they fail to achieve the high levels of performance to which they aspire. Failure in role, often referred to as derailment, has its roots, according to studies by McCall *et al.*, (1983); Lombardo *et al.*, (1988); Van Velsor and Leslie, (1995) in insensitivity to others, frequently associated with an abrasive, intimidating and bullying style.

Inability to adapt to the requirements of the new role plays a major part in executives' poor performance according to Charan *et al.,* (2001). They assert that many leaders fail because they do not develop the new patterns of thinking and acting appropriate to their new roles. There is considerable support (Goleman, 1996; Goleman and Boyatzis, 2008; Newell, 2002; Oleson, 1996; Weller and Weller, 2004) for this view and also for new leaders' need to develop advanced

interpersonal and behavioural skills (Kets de Vries, 2001) in order to exert appropriate influence and thereby inspire great performance.

Leslie (2009) argues that many leaders lack the skills in leading people, strategic planning, inspiring commitment and managing change which his study identified as critical for a leader's success. Other writers, for example, Vint *et al.* (1998) and Watkins (2003), identify the most critical issue as failing to transition from an operational to a strategic perspective. Interestingly Leslie's (2009) study also shows that whilst developing deeper self-awareness is regarded as a strength by leaders, it is over-invested in and, relative to other competencies, unimportant to leaders' success. Other views (Bolden, 2004; Collins, 2001; Goleman, 1996; Goleman, 2000; Lee, 2003) appear more strongly in favour of leaders developing greatly enhanced self-knowledge and more sophisticated political awareness and influencing skills.

Psychology literature

In contrast with the management literature, the psychology literature seems more concerned with leaders' internal processes of transition and growth and implies a psychological journey in adjusting to the new role (Bridges, 2002; Peltier, 2001). Two factors in the "Five Factor Model" of personality structure, agreeableness and emotional adjustment, seem particularly relevant in this context. Agreeableness, the capacity for being kind, gentle, trusting, trustworthy and warm characterises transformational leaders who deliver outstanding results and are recognised as inspirational (Bass, 1985) and who in turn are more motivating to work for and achieve greater employee engagement (Judge and Bono, 2000). The second relevant factor, emotional adjustment, often labelled neuroticism or the dark side of personality refers to the tendency to be anxious, moody and depressed, particularly during stressful periods. Trickey and Hyde's research (2009) asserts 85% of UK leaders demonstrate some dark side behaviours of which the most common is appeasement and accommodation to others.

The psychology literature also points to the difficulty of developing self-awareness that leads to changed thinking and behaviour. Dunning (2006) suggests that poor performers are not engaging in wilful delusion but simply lack the capacity to know how to recognise their over- or under-rating of themselves. Kegan (1994) argues that most adults in more demanding roles in life need to move from third to fourth order consciousness whereby they rely more on the self not the environment as the source of direction and value. This transition to fourth consciousness rarely happens as a natural process of maturing but can evolve through greater self-awareness.

Whilst these insights suggest deeper self-awareness and the capacity to control negative emotions are significant factors determining the success of leaders, there appears to be little firm evidence for coaching catalysing the development of these capabilities in newly appointed leaders.

Coaching literature

There is, nonetheless, some evidence from the coaching literature that coaching can effectively support leaders transitioning to senior roles. Bradford (1995) reveals that 41% of respondents, i.e. those transitioning to senior roles, identified coaching and mentoring as their preferred style of support and around half felt they would have contributed more quickly had they received a specific role change programme. Work by Kombarakan *et al.* (2008) supports the contention that coaching can make a difference to leaders' interpersonal skills and behaviours as they prepare for role.

One dimension of coaching that appears significant in how senior leaders respond to their coaching experience is the style of the intervention. Ludeman and Erlandson (2004) recommend a structured approach, rich in feedback data and analysis that commands the coachee's attention engages his curiosity and hits him "hard enough to hurt". In contrast, Peltier (2001, p.216) argues for creating an environment where leaders can "think, reflect, synthesize, develop and use their imagination". David Peterson (Kauffman and Bachkirova, 2008) echoes this recommending an approach based on responding to the client's needs by discussing what really matters to him. He argues this works because it deals with senior leaders' instinctive restlessness and impatience by finding the quickest way to achieve the coaching goals.

In summary, evidence for the meaning and significance of coaching for newly appointed senior leaders at such an exciting, demanding and sometimes unnerving stage in their careers appears limited.

Methodology

The research approach, grounded in interpretivist and phenomenological perspectives, enables, as closely as possible, an understanding and interpretation of the meaning found in the coaching of six senior leaders new in role, as expressed in their own style, idiom and words. In order to generate the best possible depth and breadth of understanding from the coachees' perspectives, I have relied on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to guide my methodology. IPA's three core underpinnings, phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography, align well with the nature of this study's key question. Interpretative Phenomenology aims to generate a better understanding of the nature and quality of phenomena as they present themselves (Willig, 2008) and the way the world is experienced by its members (Holliday, 2007). IPA is concerned with "detailed examination of human lived experience" (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p.32) allowing that experience, as far as possible, to be expressed in its own terms.

IPA also draws on the hermeneutic tradition which asserts that all description of phenomena involves some form of interpretation of them. The fore-structure referred to by Heidegger (1926) is present in the insights from my literature review. These provide an initial framework within which to situate my participants' own meaning-making. There is also what Smith *et al,* (2009, p.59) refer to as a double hermeneutic involved in this study as I seek to interpret my participants' meaning-making in terms that are accessible to the reader. IPA's idiographic underpinning (Smith and Eatough, 2007; Smith and Osborn, 2004; Storey, 2007; Smith and Osborn, 2008) is evident in the focus on producing insights from detailed engagement with each case before integrating these into perspectives across all cases (Willing, 2008).

Study participants

The six participants have all been appointed to senior roles within the last two years and experienced at least six coaching sessions that started within their first twelve months in role. Senior leaders, for the purpose of this study, are on the senior executive team reporting to the CEO, head of a major business or service line, or a senior manager operating at one or two levels below the executive team. I secured participation from two individuals coached only by me, one by me and subsequently another coach, and three by coaches with recognised coaching qualifications. Three work in major public sector organisations and three in large private sector enterprises. Gender balance is achieved through three men and three women. These six offer the potential richness in perspective, viewpoint and experience highlighted as important by Holliday (2007).

Generating data, analysis and interpretation

Whilst there is no definitive way of doing an IPA study, I have adopted its core approach to generating data which is in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Recognising that protecting their anonymity means their words cannot be verified by another researcher; I have relied on my integrity (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) in the face of the data and used participants' own words extensively in my write-up to show that I have fairly interpreted their intentions and meanings.

A pilot study was conducted with a separate senior individual whom I had coached during her first twelve months in role. This revealed some weaknesses in my approach whereby my attempts to avoid non-leading questions resulted a rather rambling discussion. I therefore recast my questions to explore specific themes arising from the literature review and my own experience of coaching senior people but sought to maintain my receptivity to respondents' interesting comments, inviting them to expand on topics that appeared important to them (Willing, 2008; Mason, 2002).

The tension in the analysis stage of an IPA study lies in applying relevant interpretative frameworks whilst remaining close to the experience and meaning authentically expressed by the participants. Storey (2007) alludes to the risk of over-emphasising the interpretative aspect and thereby overwriting the participants' subjectivity but Willig (2008) and Smith and Osborn (2008) recognise that exploring participants' sense-making must necessarily involve the researcher's theoretical framework and experience. My analysis follows the IPA process advocated by Smith and Osborn (2008). It started with listening to the recorded interviews, re-reading the transcripts, making notes, identifying and labelling themes before grouping these into "natural clusters of concepts" (Willig, 2008) that share meanings, whilst maintaining the integrity of what the participant said (Smith and Eatough, 2007). I then compared and contrasted the core themes and clusters that emerged from each of the six sets of analysis and defined three superordinate themes encapsulating the core experiences shared between the participants.

Findings

The findings are structured to stay as close as possible to the participants' own articulation of their coaching's meaning, whilst also offering an interpretation of their experiences that may enable the reader to reflect on the meaning and significance of these experiences in the light of her own practice. I discuss my findings in the context of the three overarching linked themes that convey the heart of the meanings expressed by my participants.

Theme one: Developing new capacities

Participants describe a series of new capacities that they believe the coaching has enabled them to develop in the face of very significant challenges in their new roles, triggered by a pervasive sense of vulnerability and reduced ability to cope and thrive. In one participant's words,

> I think the coaching has meant I got to grips much more quickly with the role and was able… to perform at a much higher level than I would have done otherwise…

Their sense of heightened vulnerability in the early weeks in role is variously expressed as feeling overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the task, not understanding what senior executives expected, pressure to get it right and start delivering quickly, all underpinned by a fear of "being found out". My second participant speaks of his appointment saying,

> *I felt a lot of pressure to get it right in the first few weeks, certainly first months...I didn't want to appear naïve or too junior or not up to the job. ...I wasn't panicking, well maybe I was panicking, I was certainly feeling out of control...*

Later he says, "…the feeling of loss of control as a leader is quite stark and I don't think you understand that until you experience it*".*

Participants' experiences tend to confirm views from Pullen (1996), Argyris (1991) and Newell (2002) that fear, anxiety and self-doubt are profound in the early stages of role transition, whether or not they are acknowledged. The role for coaching emerges as first recognising the emotional upheaval and secondly helping them to think differently in order to be able to act differently. This tends to support Lee's (2003) contention that coaching enables managers to learn how their emotions are directly linked to their patterns of thinking and doing. In the participants' minds, settling their emotions is linked to thinking differently about both their role and their relationships with key stakeholders, most particularly their immediate team, their new peer group and in some cases the most senior executive managers.

Thinking differently in a senior role is linked in my participants' minds to transitioning to a new and unfamiliar strategic level of thinking about the business and importantly to being able to take strategic decisions and follow up with the right actions. One participant explains this as "…setting the strategic direction for the business and worrying about where we're going to be in five years…" Another speaks of learning to value what she terms "the fluffier stuff*",* referring to "…the transformational stuff, the five year growth and market rather than just responding to the market…"

This experience confirms views expressed by Vint *at al.* (1998) and Watkins (2003) who assert that the most difficult aspect of transition to a senior role lies in moving from an operational to a strategic focus. In contrast to these views, however, my participants do not see this as the most challenging aspect of their transition. They identify recalibrating relationships with those around them as equally troublesome.

One participant describes the challenge of relating to her team as "the step change was behaving in a way that means I delegate more…" explaining that "…I have had a problem in that I've been too accessible to my team…" Another describes learning to hold his team to account "…rather than kind of constantly rescuing them." It seems that coaching catalyses a new perspective on what they need from the team below and brings into focus the importance of encouraging the team to grow in maturity and confidence. This is not simply a matter, however, of sharing out the tasks differently but points to my participants' recognition of the need to provide motivational leadership that will enable their teams to be high performing. This echoes the concept of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985; Covey, 1992) whereby successful leaders inspire their followers with a vision beyond immediate self-interests. This capacity to influence and engage (Bolden, 2004) will, they believe, mark them out as successful and is one they are eager to develop through their coaching.

What is surprising here is their apparent lack of certain basic skills in terms of being able to delegate effectively, limit their involvement in operational detail and build high performing teams. There is an apparent contradiction, therefore, in the participants being regarded as appropriately

skilled for senior roles without having properly mastered some of the capacities more usually associated with more junior management roles.

This phenomenon is explained, at least in part, by Charan *et al.'s* (2001) concept of the leadership pipeline where promotions mean leaving behind old patterns of thinking, skills and behaviour in order to embrace those required at more senior levels. Participants seem to acknowledge their need to abandon old patterns of thinking and behaving in their sense of having to recalibrate relations with their team, peers and those more senior to them. This, in their eyes, represents a critical and difficult area of personal challenge and a dimension where their coaching adds real value in their early period in role.

The findings here contribute towards my study's first and second objectives, revealing that participants all speak of their coaching enabling them to develop new capacities that they perceive as critical to their success.

Theme two: Developing new meaning and identity

Participants speak powerfully of their coaching's importance in enabling them to situate their new role in the context of their future professional and personal lives. Achieving alignment between the effort and commitment required in the new role and their future life time aspirations is critical for focusing and sustaining their motivation in the face of the role's huge challenges. One participant says …"the coaching helped me think in the right fashion about the long term pieces of the question…the manner in which they're actually tied together". Another says that part of his excitement in his current role is …"if I'm learning and building a knowledge base for the future."

This surfacing of personal concerns, desires and feelings, in the context of their whole life aspirations seems to release them from what West and Milan (2001) describe as the executive's environment where personal needs and emotions are often suppressed. Hogan and Hogan (2001) support this identifying that those lacking intrinsic motivation and who are overly concerned with pleasing superiors display one dimension of behaviour that may lead to derailment. Coaching emerges as a potential way of mitigating this risk.

It may also be that closer alignment between their professional lives and longer term personal and career aspirations may contribute to what Avolio and Hannah (2008) describe as developmental readiness. Such readiness, they argue, is the positive, open orientation towards personal development that includes the ability and motivation to make meaning from new knowledge and experiences and thereby accelerate leader development. They also argue that leaders with a deeper understanding of their personal identity and a wide variety of life experiences will be more able to interpret their leadership experiences, good or bad, constructively.

The journey of self-development seems, nonetheless, to be challenging and at times troubling. All my participants speak of troubling thoughts and feelings that interfere with or paralyse their ability to perform. Their coaching sessions provide a safe environment in which to explore these. One participant speaks of "…just brain dumping on her the terrible time I'm having and it's definitely more emotional than it is kind of business, it's definitely more personal emotion". She then elaborates saying, "…I have been in tears with my coach and that element is actually really important to me as well as the business side of the coaching stuff".

Some of the intense emotions they experience seem potentially to be a hint of the dark side of their personalities, the thoughts and emotions that in some way incapacitate them and negatively impact their self-efficacy in the face of unfamiliar and sometimes disorientating demands from their role. The most common dark side characteristic evident in Trickey and Hyde's research (2009) is appeasement, the desire for acceptance and approval that overwhelms the individual's ability to challenge, confront and disagree. Most of my participants recognise through their coaching the extent to which they have fallen into accommodating behaviours. One speaks of dealing with his colleagues saying "I tended just to feel responsible for everything and try to compensate for others…I would avoid confrontation". Another aspect of the tendency to accommodate others is revealed through being overly sensitive to others' opinions, for example, "…a lot of what was driving my behaviour was what will he think, what will he do? And in some ways he was the nub of my concerns…" These findings show that contrary to Leslie's findings (2009), increasing self-awareness seems to be important for leaders' development and success.

Exploring ways to see themselves, others and corporate issues differently emerges as a key theme from my participants. This aspect of meaning-making is a key area where their coaching has made an important contribution. There seem to be links between this meaning-making and Kegan's theory (1994) whereby he suggests that we create our world through our interaction with and interpretation of it. Berger and Fitzgerald (2002, p.32) apply his theory to coaching leaders and argue that encouraging coachees to make a Subject-Object shift may "shake up a client's way of seeing and dealing with the world, thus affecting the client's self-concept, relationships, goals and plans". My participants' coaching experiences suggest they are wrestling with mastering the fourth order of mind whereby they are affirming and enhancing their own system of decision making and becoming more confidently self-guided, self-motivated and self-evaluative.

All participants describe engaging in coaching as leading to some form of greater ownership of their roles, feeling that they have made the role their own and created a new identity for themselves within the role. Coaching seems to encourage a journey of self-discovery and enables a greater sense of ease with the demands placed on them and enhances their self-belief in their ability to make positive changes in the organisation. Thus coaching plays a crucial role in supporting their transition and influencing its outcome.

Theme three: Discovering through the coaching process

Here I focus on the aspects of the coaching process that my participants have identified as being most significant in contributing to shifts in their perspectives, thoughts and feelings, resulting in changes to their outlook, behaviours and actions.

Taking time out to reflect emerges as one aspect of their coaching to which my participants attach great importance, for example, "…I have definitely valued just having an opportunity to step back from what I'm doing, to talk about it, to think about it". This finding seems to support assertions by Clutterbuck and Megginson (1999, p.14) that senior leaders need personal reflective space in order to develop personal insight through what they term "uninterrupted and purposeful reflective activity". Peltier (2001) and Stober (2006) support the notion that increased awareness from help in thinking things through is the precursor to positive, constructive action.

Several participants expand on this idea by explaining that the value from taking time to reflect is linked to being given something valuable through the process. One says, "…it's reminded

me of the importance particularly for me as a person of being watered, I need some nourishment…"
Another says:

> …it's like you're in a magic shop or something and they've kind of gone out the back and come back with this particular thing, and you want to peek through the curtain... is that the last one or have you got another thousand of those? So, I've no idea but it's quite exciting.

These comments suggest an appetite for learning and growing rapidly in the early stages in role through their coaching and echo comments by Bluckert (2006, p.66), West and Milan (2001, p.188) and Peltier (2001, p.218) on the importance and value for senior leaders of being nurtured, nourished and kept stimulated and fresh during their adaptation to new leadership responsibilities.

Another way in which taking time to reflect through coaching helps my participants is by creating opportunities to develop new perspectives on their situation. This emerges as important in helping them deal with their sense of vulnerability and being out of control. One participant explains, "…it's really easy to sit there and just get things completely out of proportion". She describes her lowest point as "…a kind of stuckness" where the coaching enabled her to gain "…a complete objective opinion on what I'm worrying about". Another participant echoes this saying, "…you see the ogre in the corner, but when you walk up to it, actually, why was I worried about this?"

Whilst the coaching is rarely a pre-agreed set of topics, it seems that my participants also attribute meaning to their coaching being able to offer contributions that seem more like counselling and mentoring. For example, one says, "…it was like psychotherapy at the time. I'd sit on the couch and kind of just let go on all the things that were troubling…there was a bit of a counselling element to it". These perspectives echo Clutterbuck and Megginson's (1999) views that senior leaders appreciate executive mentors who can act as a sounding board, a critical friend, a listener, a career advisor, a networker providing access to networks the executive will find useful, as well as a coach. Bluckert (2006, p.70) acknowledges that sometimes "a coaching session veers towards counselling" and at other times "a liberal dispensation of consultancy advice is in order".

A further way in which the coaching process seems to help my participants overcome their heightened sense of vulnerability is by slowing them down, and thereby enabling them to think more deeply. For example, one participant describes this saying,

> I work at great speed so I needed somebody to slow down my thinking, to help me get to a deeper level, to really spend some time thinking about what is it I really want out of this job, for my team, what impact do I want to have had in three years' time, what will be different...

For another participant, slowing the pace of her conversations has made the single biggest difference, in her view, to how people respond to her. She mastered this through her coaching by doing "…quite a bit of work actually on me breathing occasionally or just setting a slower pace as I'm interacting with other people…"

For my participants it emerges that this slowing down is linked to allowing difficult things to surface and be acknowledged. These experiences echo Bradford's (1995) research and Pullen's (1996, p.45) experience that what helps those new in role is being coached by someone "impartial

but interested in my success who was skilled enough to get me to slow down, listen and understand". One participant explains, "It stops me trying to brush things away that are, you know, itches that won't go away…they do become real". Another comments, "…in this space, it's actually okay to feel this and …let's deal with it rather than minimise it".

At the heart of my participants' experience of their coaching lies the deep trust and rapport established with their coaches. They speak with passion and conviction of the rapidity with which these relationships became established and enabled them to be open and explore. These findings contribute to my study's third objective, showing how my participants find significant meaning and value in their coaching from the nature and quality of the process itself.

Limitations

All my participants believe that coaching in their early months meant they were able to settle into role and start influencing their organisation more rapidly than would otherwise have been the case. Evidence for this in my study, however, is limited to their personal accounts. There is therefore an opportunity for further research to explore whether close colleagues of newly appointed senior leaders are equally confident about the contribution of coaching to the new appointee's performance. Similarly, future research should include the coaches of new appointees to compare their perspectives on the contribution they are making in these situations.

The study does not include a senior leader who has derailed. Further research is needed with senior leaders who have been coached during their transition period and subsequently derailed to determine whether or not there are any notable differences in their coaching experiences from those who appear to be succeeding in role.

Whilst I have included both men and women in my sample across the public and private sectors, no clear differences in gender experience have emerged. Further research with larger sample sizes is needed to determine whether such differences do exist and, if so, their specific nature.

Conclusions

Participants have emphasised the important role played by their coaching in helping them rapidly develop new capacities they perceive as critical for success although they are sometimes less sure exactly what these new capacities need to be. They seem to lie mostly in the domains defined by Kets de Vries (2001) as personal and social, although strategic thinking and acting, belonging to his third domain, also feature. They regard their coaches' help, for example, in understanding the differences between leadership and management and recalibrating their relationships with peers, followers and more senior executives as essential elements in the value derived from their coaching.

Their openness to help from their coaches seems to stem from a deep sense of vulnerability in their early months in role. This anxiety about adequately mastering the role emerges as a significant catalyst for intense reflection and soul searching about how to act in ways to ensure success. Overcoming anxiety emerges as a key aspect of the meaning of their coaching for my participants and suggests that coaches need to pay serious attention to helping new appointees

articulate and understand the sources of their anxieties in order to facilitate changes in perspective and behaviours that will enable them rapidly to become effective in role.

While successful leaders are not necessarily also highly effective managers, they are assumed to be at least competent in basic management skills. It is perhaps surprising that my participants reveal concerns about developing skills that are typically regarded (Kets de Vries, 2001) as core management competences such as monitoring and control and delegation. Coaches of newly appointed senior leaders may therefore need to guard against assuming their coachees have adequately mastered the skills typically associated with more junior management roles.

Achieving close alignment between the aspirations in their professional and personal lives emerges as important for my participants in creating a new identity for themselves in the role, as well as increasing their self-belief and determination to succeed. Increasing their self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) appears a key factor in their coaching, enabling them to feel confident and to make the role their own. This seems to echo Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) concept of being flow when an individual is fully engaged with all details of life, good and bad, and experiences satisfaction from performing at his personal optimal level. Coaches may need to recognise, therefore, that new appointees are engaged on a rapid journey of self-discovery that is new and far reaching. Developing a new sense of identity and purpose, reinforcing self-belief and building confidence in their abilities emerge as important and beneficial elements of their coaching experience that support transition to their new role.

The findings also demonstrate that my participants attribute great importance to the coaching process. Creating an environment of personal reflective space where the coach is able to slow down their thinking and help them hear themselves offers the opportunity for troublesome thoughts and feelings to surface and be fully acknowledged. Such space also allows for learning and being nurtured and represents another key aspect of the coaching that they value highly. The significance of these findings for the profession is that coaches need to be aware that their way of being with senior leaders in transition may influence not only the coachees' openness but also the perceived value from the coaching experience.

It is my assertion that coaching seems to have particular meaning for newly appointed senior leaders in helping them overcome their sense of vulnerability and risk of failure. A new leader's transition seems to be supported by the coach enabling a process of self-examination and discovery through which the leader finds a new identity and purpose not only in the role but in other life spheres. The work appears challenging for the profession as new senior leaders are demanding in the wide range of issues they want to address and the pace at which they want to progress. Coaching such ambitious, intelligent, energetic and restless individuals seems to require a wide range of skills and experience and is perhaps, therefore, not for the faint-hearted.

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