

Book Review

The Psychology of Executive Coaching Peltier, B. (2010), Routledge: New York

This second edition of the 2001 book by the same name presents an enhanced and expanded text with updated references and four additional chapters. The book is aimed specifically at those who wish to work within the area of executive coaching and demonstrates a heavy focus on the perspective required by those working with senior leaders in highly commercial organisations, where the 'bottom-line' is a key consideration. So while it would still be useful for those working within the public or third sector it may prove less relevant in such a context, especially in the UK.

The stated aim of the book is to 'translate psychological theory into practical executive coaching skills'. This is set within a framework where coaching is seen as 'typically action orientated, data driven, present-moment focused, and designed for a high-functioning client' (pxxxix). It will therefore prove of most value to those who share and work within this framework

Essentially the author believes psychology to be 'useful if not essential' to the executive coach and this book seeks to give an overview of a number of psychological approaches that can then be applied in coaching. Basic psychological theories are described, reviewed and then applied to coaching corporate or organisational executives.

Almost half the book is given to summarising various therapeutic approaches that can be applied in executive coaching. The psychological approaches covered stem from therapy and include: Psychodynamic, Behavioural, Person-Centred, Cognitive and Existential, with a further chapter devoted to Family Therapy and Systems Thinking. A number of other psychological concepts are included such as Developmental and Social Psychology. In addition, the book also picks up on other topical ideas such as Emotional Intelligence, Hypnosis and the role of assessment in coaching. One recurrent theme is to highlight how coaching can be distinguished from therapy or counselling and one of the new chapters now attempts to define mental health and to describe the kinds of psychopathology that a coach may face when working in an organisational context. One of the other new chapters is titled 'Leadership' and presents a very brief summary of aspects of leadership theory. Trying to do justice to such a broad topic in one chapter is necessarily limiting but it will give the reader a starting point for further investigation if this area is of interest.

The book is written for two audiences. It is primarily aimed at psychologists, counsellors, social workers, and other trained psychotherapists who wish to move into the corporate world of coaching by applying their clinical experience. The second audience is the executive or management coach who would like to learn more about the psychological theories that can be used in coaching.

In addressing the primary audience the book achieves its aims by highlighting the differences that such clinical experts need to be aware of. It aims to encourage practitioners to think about how they enter the business context and to give practical tips on how the transition can be achieved. This culminates in a final chapter titled 'Transitions' that gives specific advice on aspects of the transfer into corporate life that need to be managed. However this is not a book that will enable readers to set up a coaching business as it stops short of being a 'how to establish a coaching practice' guide. While it highlights

some of the benefits and applications of coaching it would not be an adequate business start up text for the novice coach. The focus is to convert a number of therapeutic ideas into a business context which enables the reader to see how the ideas might be applied in a different setting.

In supporting the second audience the book does give a broad overview of many psychological concepts but would be of most value to those who can combine it with an appropriate coach training programme. Some chapters cover a whole philosophy and therefore necessarily focus only on aspects that the author feels can be applied to executive coaching. While experienced and qualified helping professionals will appreciate some of the background to each chapter the manager coach may find the founding principles more difficult to grasp. This can limit understanding of the tradition as a whole and the danger is that inexperienced coaches see the approaches as a pick and mix selection which could be at best ineffective, and at worst damaging to clients. It is therefore not a beginner's book. There are no specific coaching models or chapters aimed at questioning or listening so in this respect it is a useful addition to the bookshelf of the experienced executive coach. Certainly the greatest value would be obtained by someone with existing executive coaching experience who will be able to identify with the situations and examples.

When first launched this book was one of the first to bring psychological theory into the language of executive coaching. It has been followed by a host of alternatives which are now available and even the author admits that some of these new texts may be better suited to the UK market.

But this book does not aim to focus only on therapeutic approaches and does make explicit the relationship to leadership coaching. In addition it picks up other more unique themes such as the chapter on 'Coaching Women'. The result is a broad text with many academic references that can be followed up. However, the price of breadth can be the lack of a coherent binding theme. While all the chapters may be of interest to those working in executive coaching it fluctuates from philosophical approaches steeped in psychological history to hypnosis and then 'Lessons from Athletic Coaches'.

Each chapter does raise issues, potential challenges or strengths and weaknesses however the author is making an interpretation of each approach and relating it very specifically to his view of executive coaching. In trying to cover such a lot of material in the space available there is obvious filtering which the author has done in order to make the material manageable. Therefore readers should be aware that some ideas, while stated as facts, may be open to debate in other circles. For example 'Remember that executive coaching must be results orientated and positive in tone.' (p.77), may not match everyone's view! The author's definition of coaching and his perception of what this involves in corporate life therefore colours the advice and best practice principles advocated.

Having said this many executive coaches will be attracted by a fast moving, definitive text on psychological approaches in executive coaching. It clearly states its perspective and minimises the amount of discussion around debatable points. The language is clearly business focussed and many will appreciate how the ideas have been translated into a context and style with which they are familiar. The step by step action points can be a useful road map although may be too formulaic for some. It covers a lot of ideas in a concise and effective way that gives enough grounding for the educated reader to go further. Once the key terms and ideas have been grasped experienced professionals will be capable of raising their own questions and interrogating the concepts in more depth.

Overall then, this book does introduce a number of psychological ideas and provides a snapshot for experienced and trained executive coaches who want to introduce more psychological ideas to their practice. However the most value will be obtained by helping professionals who may be assessing the

potential to move into the corporate world. The book details how to translate existing psychological ideas into the context of executive coaching. It also gives a flavour of what some corporate environments may be like and raises questions and considerations for achieving the transition. It is then down to individuals to decide if this is a context within which they feel they might want to work.

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