

Towards Executive Change: A psychodynamic group coaching model for short executive programmes

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Abstract

Coaching in different forms is prevalent in many European organisations. However, individuals typically receive coaching in the traditional dyadic form. Groups are generally formed only for training. In this article, it is argued that coaching executives in groups to leverage collective experience in an experiential encounter and provide ongoing support, is an efficient and potent way for executives to transform. Drawing on elements of psychoanalytic theory and group dynamics, the article presents a model which practitioners at educational establishments and in organisations can deploy with sustainable results

Key words: Group Coaching, Leadership, Group Dynamics, Motivational Interviewing, Brief Therapy.

Introduction

At INSEAD Business School in France, a number of different pedagogical programmes are available. These serve to facilitate executive learning using traditional methodologies utilised the world over on executive programmes. Uniquely, at INSEAD a portion of the programme is devoted to a Leadership Development Process (LDP) in which senior executives, typically in transition from functional positions to leadership roles, participate in a group coaching process underscored by psychodynamic techniques. This article presents an explanation from a psychological perspective of what takes place during this process, followed by a model for practitioners to implement.

Group coaching at INSEAD has been developed primarily through the seminar “The Challenge of Leadership” which around 30 senior business leaders attend annually. At the INSEAD Global Leadership Centre (IGLC) we have collected data on around 3000 group coaching participants over 7 years, much of which testifies that the group leadership coaching process is not only powerful, but in many cases life changing.

Initially, no cohesive methodology was deployed during group coaching sessions. The coaching faculty used a variety of methods in their work. Having facilitated these coaching groups for a number of years, I set out to discover why group coaching appears to be so effective, what are the commonalities of approach, and what conditions should exist to optimise the process.

In this paper a model is presented that answers the above questions. I look at the necessary conditions for a successful group process and explain the concepts which underpin the model, looking at the combination of psychological processes that combine during a single session to create a dynamic in which change can unfold.

Psychodynamic Group Leadership Coaching (PGLC)

Despite the many different approaches to coaching, the methodology in this paper might be usefully called Psychodynamic Group Leadership Coaching (PGLC). PGLC is directed at senior executives often at the boundary of functional management and general leadership positions. These executives are essentially in transition, wrestling with the challenges of relinquishing their functional roles to adopt a more strategic, far-reaching and visionary approach. As Bennis and Nanus (1997) have suggested, leadership activities are those of vision and judgement.

The abilities of a psychodynamic group coach (PGC) encompass not only the essentials of psychotherapy but also the essentials of organisational management (Kets de Vries, 2005). Distinct from psychotherapy, where executives may be treated for their emotional and behavioural problems, in which the major focus is to identify the root causes of emotional distress and help individuals deal with that distress, the role of executive coaching is to change behaviours in the short run, not emotions in the long run (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Williams, 2003; Palmer, 2003).

Psychodynamics are centred on the idea of a maladapted function development early in life which is, at least in part, unconscious (Norcross & Prochaska, 2002). It is the role of the PLC to take into account these maladapted functions as part of the coaching process. As Levinson claims, when coaching executives, usually the basic task is to help the client free him/herself from unsatisfying or conflict laden work. Often these conflicts emanate strongly from the past (Levinson, 1996). Levinson goes on to suggest that the coach who uses a psychoanalytic frame of reference must help clients understand the potential destructiveness of the actions they contemplate to themselves, those who work with them and to the organisation (Levinson, 1996).

In group coaching the client is subject to many different perspectives about their behavior. The clinical paradigm seeks to short circuit those behaviours helping people to understand the causes of resistance and to recognise where and how they can become more effective (Kets de Vries, 2007).

The Clinical Approach

During LDP sessions the clinical approach is used. The clinical paradigm uses as its basic assumption that unconscious or “out of awareness” phenomena exist within people *and* organisations. However, the individual units of analysis are the executives that comprise the organisation, contributing to its social processes and defences. All executives have a history and import part of that history to the workplace. Dysfunction is common and at times neurosis is evident. When examining executive dysfunction, especially negative repetitive behaviour, we find it useful to take into account the subliminal processes at work which other coaching models often neglect.

Using the clinical paradigm, we have observed a number of different executive dysfunctions which contribute to aberrant behaviour. Our task is to assess and diagnose the dysfunction quickly, sure in the knowledge that all human behaviour has an unconscious rationale. It is not certain whether this can be changed in a short time-frame, however. The assumption is that most of these dysfunctions are driven by a vast unconscious (Kets de Vries, 2007). The psychodynamic aspect of the model also allows for reflection on the past because, as Pine (1985) has argued, we are all products of our past, influenced until the day we die by the developmental experiences given by our caretakers. It is therefore of vital importance to consider the past in order to affect the future.

Levinson cautions against making interpretations to early experiences unless the clients themselves spontaneously make the comparison (Levinson, 1996). In the LDP we use a self-portrait exercise, described in detail later, to facilitate this spontaneity. Moreover, given the psychological nature of the process, coaches must be able to “manage their own emotional and psychodynamic responses to clients and change initiatives and to assist their clients in doing the same” (Kilburg, 2000). Hence, to deploy the method which will be described in this paper, a degree of psychological training is essential.

Yet, while a degree of knowledge is useful, Levinson (1996) points out that in executive coaching, one should avoid becoming psychotherapeutic because executive coaching does not allow time for a therapeutic alliance to develop, dealing with the transference problem or the ambivalence when the client becomes dependent on the coach. Thus, the methodology is not strictly psychotherapeutic; it merely borrows some of its attributes, while staying firmly within the coaching sphere.

Group Coaching Process

The Introductory Session

Attendees hail from across the world and are senior executives from a range of industries. They are invited to an introductory session the night before the LDP. This session lasts approximately 45 minutes and looks broadly at positive and negative leadership archetypes (functional), the role of out of awareness behaviour and its interplay with the forthcoming experience (psychological) and two feedback instruments (practical). In particular, the group is given an overview of the graphical output of the feedback instruments. This precludes time being spent during the LDP day itself analysing data, which is often rationalised and can contribute to the process of defence formation.

Feedback instruments

Two psychometrically tested instruments with differing perspectives are used. The Global Executive Leadership Inventory is a leadership evaluation which scrutinises 12 different leadership dimensions (Kets de Vries, Koratov, Florent-Tracy & Vrignaud, 2007). Around ten observers are drawn from the participant’s professional sphere including subordinates, co-workers and superior(s). The Personality Audit assesses seven different dimensions of human behaviour and is unique to executives, in that it incorporates observers from both public and private spheres (Kets de Vries, 2003). It was developed out of a need to clarify various motivational characteristics of executives (Kets de Vries, Koratov, et al., 2007) and allows the individual to discern how they manage their private and public selves. Participants select the observers themselves.

Presenting the process

A simple model for transformation is presented to the group to initiate thinking about change, since many of them will be in what Rollnick and Miller (2002) described as the pre-contemplator stage. They are unaware they have a problem behaviour or are unwilling or discouraged when it comes to changing it.

Explaining the rationale for a group process can be problematic. Participants are generally apprehensive of having their weaknesses exposed publicly. Therefore, the benefits of a well-managed group process are highlighted. A supportive environment, a diversity of opinion, and mutual exploration and support are proffered as reasons. Furthermore, self-discovery and an

opportunity to experiment with coaching skills are positioned as by-products. Finally, it is stated that change, if desirable, is most likely to happen through a combination of group support and group pressure. Little detail, however, is elicited of the process itself. This is neither to obfuscate nor to be evasive but simply to avoid long inquisitions about programme structure, which often stem from anxiety.

Time is given at the end of the presentation for questions. This is kept to a minimum and again, questions about the process itself are limited. As the session ends, the feedback responses are distributed and the group is encouraged to take an evening of solitary reflection to consider privately the implications of their individual reports.

The Group Coaching Day

On the day of the session a brief introduction is made. Each coaching group comprises five executives. This allows around an hour and a half to focus on each participant in turn. It has proven logistically difficult to process more than 5 people in an eight hour working day. The day can be emotionally intense and requires a high degree of concentration and engagement from all participants. To work with more than five coachees invites malaise and unfairly penalises the tail-enders.

Self-Portrait

The coaches are introduced to their groups in a plenary session. Then, in order to initiate a playful “right-brain”, each executive is invited to draw a “self portrait” using a variety of dimensions. They are given a pack of multi-coloured pens and a sheet of A2 paper. The portrait may only contain images, or a single image, with no words or symbols allowed. The participants draw these images as a metaphorical representation of their life and feelings. Specifically, they draw images of their past, future, work, leisure, and representations of what is in their head, heart and guts. Around twenty minutes is allotted for this, usually in a quiet space, alone and with limited explanations other than the portrait will be used to introduce their session. This exercise generally heightens emotions ranging from resistance to pleasure. The resulting (usually extraordinary) works are hung around the room in which the coaching is to take place in the small groups. The plenary session is closed and the participants break to form groups with their coaches.

Dynamic Administration in the Small Group

How the facilitator introduces the day is key to constructing the appropriate clinical conditions in which the group can thrive. Group analysis is enacted within a carefully constituted setting which is the physical representation of the group as a whole. The term “dynamic administration” refers to the various activities which the facilitator performs in order to create and maintain the setting (Behr & Hearst, 2006).

All detritus has been previously removed from the room. Ideally the room should be small to create conditions of intimacy. A circular table is optimal giving the participants the greatest opportunity to maintain eye contact with each other. It also forms a symbolic centre for the group (Behr & Hearst, 2006). The facilitator may then make the following remarks:-

- Each participant will have around an hour and a half to raise the one or two major issues or challenges that they face and with which they wish the group to help them. They will be called upon to introduce their portrait at the beginning of this session to give context to their session

- Participants will listen to the agenda set by each participant and in turn offer feedback, coaching, reflection and advice as appropriate. Care must be taken to do no harm. Every one will be called on to speak.
- The session is entirely confidential. It is vital if the session is to be successful that this is observed.
- All written feedback and notes will be returned to the participant at the end of the day.
- The facilitator will take part in the session in proportion to the group size and moreover will contain the environment.
- Participants will be expected to set the agenda for their own session, not rely on the coach or participants to do this for them. They are expected to lay out the challenges they face, and how they want the group to help them address the salient issues.
- Mobile communications devices are discouraged not only during the session but during the breaks to encourage and deepen reflection.
- Finally the facilitator may ask what the participants want to achieve during the day. An action plan template will be filled out by each participant by the end of the day. A learning partner will be appointed from the group to coach the participant over the following three months. Each participant will both receive this coaching and be a coach to someone else.

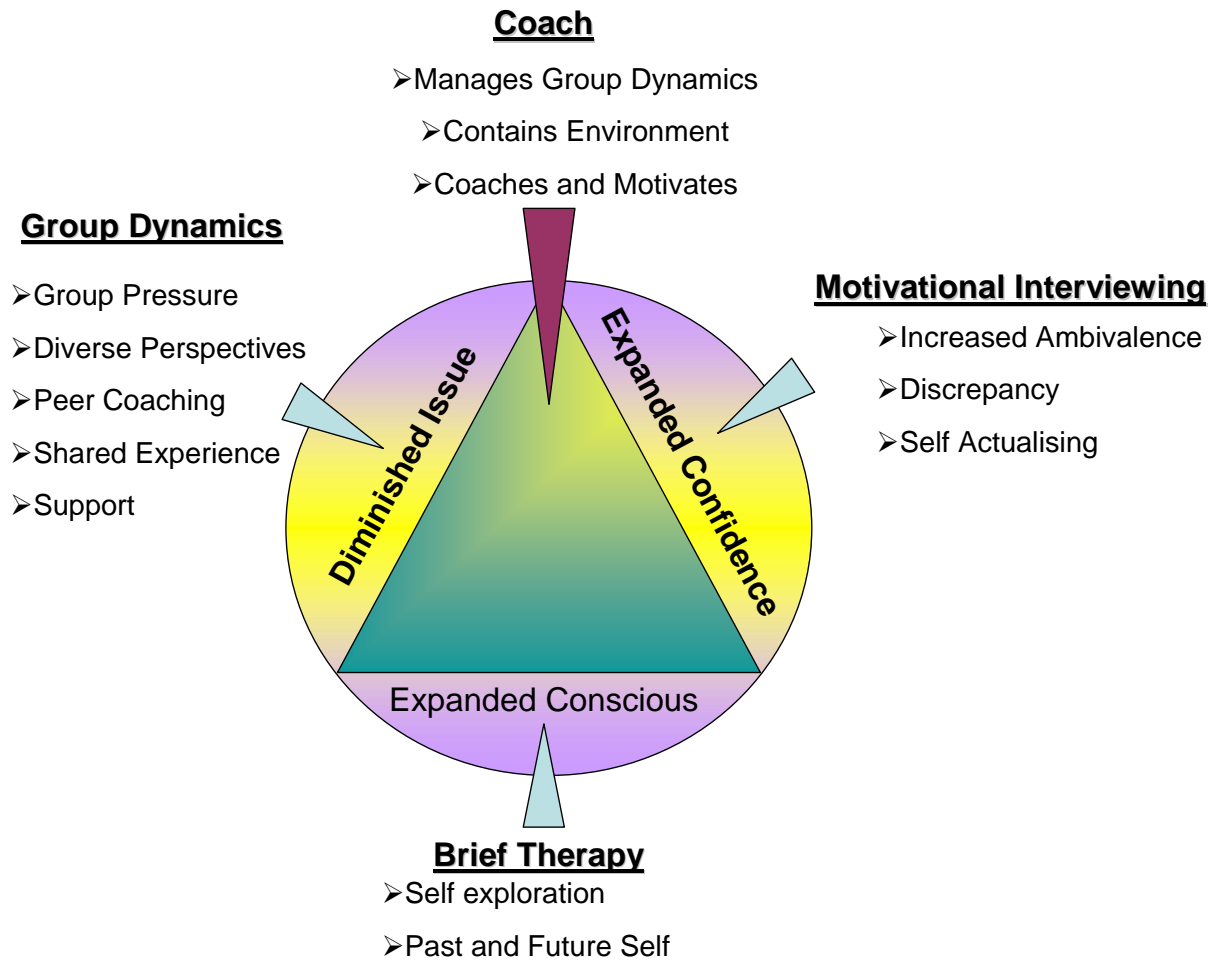
Model and Methodology

A standard outcome for most research is the construction and application of a portable model, in order that practitioners can apply the research in different contexts. In starting to think about the major contributors to a transformational environment in the situation described, my conclusions were that there were three. Bearing in mind Whetten's (1989) treatise on theoretical contribution, I have tried to walk the fine line between parsimony and comprehensiveness:-

1. Group dynamics is a unique differentiator from the usual dyadic coaching relationship. It is a well researched and documented subject. Skilfully utilised, a good grasp of group dynamics accelerates the transformation process. The field of group dynamics is primarily concerned with small group behavior.
2. The abbreviated timeframe, specificity of the issues and necessity for a solution is a unique differentiator, since coaching in general takes place over several months and several sessions. The use of Short Term Dynamic Psychotherapy (STDP) techniques work well. STDP is an umbrella term for a variety of approaches to psychotherapy. It differs from other schools of therapy in that it emphasises (1) a focus on a specific problem and (2) direct intervention. In STDP, the therapist takes responsibility for working more pro-actively with the client in order to treat clinical and subjective conditions *faster*. It also emphasises precise observation, utilisation of natural resources, and temporary suspension of disbelief to consider new perspectives and multiple viewpoints.
3. The use of a short term coaching model is necessary to create a psychological shift. An adaptation of the brief therapy technique of Motivational Interviewing (MI) has proven effective. MI is the catalytic process deployed, given the above two contexts, to move the client swiftly towards a mindset of change. Tackling the most difficult of cases (drug addicts, alcoholics and other addictive behaviours), Rollnick and Miller's research utilised a simple model: If the clients ambivalence was elicited and the discrepancy was amplified, often the client would unwittingly begin to "talk themselves" into a change mindset.

In fig 1 below, we see the client situation after this three pointed approach has been applied. MI addresses the ambivalence and the confidence issues around the challenge. The brief therapy approach allows the client to identify and reflect on the unconscious processes at work. The group provides support, diversity, coaching and shared experiences thus diminishing the issue in the client's mind.

Figure 1



1. Short Term Dynamic Psychotherapy.

The first building block of the model uses aspects of short-term dynamic psychotherapy which deals with exploration of human drives and motivations from the perspective of the unconscious. Whilst executives are not electing for therapy when they enter management programmes, an understanding of where they have come from and why certain behaviors exist is helpful in starting the process of change. Usually, in brief therapy patients come to treatment expecting focal problem resolution to their problem (Garfield, 1986). Similarly, executives entering the LDP session are asked to raise the one or two central problems that they face themselves. Mainly “type A’s”, they certainly expect some form of resolution by the time the session has ended.

Requiring them to identify their issues is a first step in building self-efficacy and implicitly mitigates resistance. The coach will investigate background causality as well as environmental

factors to assess what the client needs to become unstuck. Indeed, a major intervention strategy used by therapists in getting their clients unstuck from their problems is indeed this first session task. It involves getting clients to pay attention to previously ignored aspects of their lives and/or to think about the positive aspects of their lives. Presentation of their self-portrait and an explanation of their journey and significant milestones along the way, initiates that process. Often, as the participant presents the portrait and looks at his/her life holistically, patterns become evident both to them and the group. Depending on how these patterns are handled, they can form the basis for deeper discussions around defences and dysfunctions that exist in the person's professional life.

Change in a single session

Over time, short-term therapy has become briefer. Malan, one of the founding fathers described a technique which lasted 40 interviews (Malan, 1963). Mann (1973) created a time limited therapy which lasted 12 sessions. Davanloo, another founding father, developed a therapy for phobias which dealt head on with defences over several months and produced impressive psychodynamic resolution of patients' problems (Davanloo, 1978). Finally, Sifneos (1987) developed a focal, goal-oriented therapy for oedipal or triangular conflicts in which the amount of sessions could be reduced further.

Perry notes that "research consistently indicates that briefer modes of therapy are as effective as (or even more effective than) longer term therapies" (Perry, 1987). As it turns out, the majority of interventions are short (Garfield, 1986). Contrary to what one might expect, the average length of therapy is four sessions and the median is one (Phillips, 1985). This raises the question of whether such brevity can indeed be effective. Sperry notes that therapeutic transactions can take place in the course of a few moments, with only a few words being exchanged (Sperry, 1989). Assuming they are the right words spoken in the right way, the patient is quite likely to profit from the transaction. Thus, there is little practical reason why a psychodynamic coaching approach, using the principles of therapy, cannot be effective, especially when utilised in combination with other approaches. Often, clinicians will approach a therapeutic encounter as if it were the only session and instill in the client a sense that change will be effected (Sperry, 1989). Moreover, the brief therapy movement has shifted to solution focused (Miller, 1997). This is especially helpful given the demanding requirements of executive coaching.

We find it useful to help executives explore unheeded aspects of their behavior, to become aware of defense mechanisms and to understand the source of their often irrational behavior. However, our object is to help them look at current reality and move to a place where the critique they have received from their colleagues is addressed. Hence, having given them input on possible past drivers, we then set out to achieve change using an adaptation of a short term therapy known as Motivational Interviewing (MI) applying it in a coaching context.

2. An Adaptation of Motivational Interviewing (AMI)

Most coaches use a model or framework. Many readers will recognize the well-known acronyms GROW, ARROW, ACHIEVE and POSITIVE (Libri, July 2004). In 1992, Rollnick and Miller developed a therapeutic model for change, for use with alcoholics and drug addicts which became known as Motivational Interviewing (MI) (Rollnick, Heather, & Bell, 1992). Based on Rogerian principles, MI has been a much-vaunted intervention for over fifteen years as a brief and effective intervention in mental health settings.

Carl Rogers felt three identifiable characteristics would need to be in place in the therapist in order for a patient to effect change, namely, 1) being self aware and accepting one's own feelings,

2) acceptance of the other person as someone with intrinsic self-worth whatever their condition, and finally 3) profound empathy with the other person (Rogers, 1949). Rollnick and Miller built on this, developing a brief therapy with astounding results. The methodology is simple and effective. In the context of the work we do with executives, when coupled with brief therapy principles and the use of group dynamics, powerful change chemistry is provided.

Motivation

MI has been chiefly used in clinical medical settings. It is described as a “directive, client-centered counseling style for eliciting behavior change by helping clients explore and resolve ambivalence” (W. R. Miller & Rollnick, 1995). Contrary to traditional approaches, where change was something that had to be dealt with through aggressive confrontation (Britt, Blampied, & Hudson, 2003), declaimed by Rollnick and Miller as a folk belief, they posited change thus: - That in an empowering, safe atmosphere, one can generate motivation for change, *assuming that the client can explore the present in return for what might be better or more valued in the future*. More importantly, they felt that people get stuck, not because they do not realise how damaging their behavior is *but because they feel two ways about it*.

Motivation to change is therefore viewed as a condition to be elicited from a client rather than a precondition. In this way it dovetails with coaching well. As Kilburg postulates, lack of motivation is one of the hypothesized factors contributing to negative coaching outcomes (Kilburg, 2000). Furthermore, it is the prerogative of those in the coaching profession to increase the ability of the client to find their own solutions. As Bandura said, self-efficacy is a predictor of outcome (Bandura, 1977), and MI as a technique supports this

Rationale

The reason for the adoption of the AMI intervention as opposed to any of the other available models is twofold. On the one hand it has been used to great effect on hardened addicts. On the other, Kets de Vries believes that executives who claim to believe in the value of change do so half-heartedly. Either they pay lip service to change, prefer to see change in others, have the will but not the skill or are simply stuck in ideas that worked in the past (Kets de Vries, 2007).

Ambivalence

According to Rollnick and Miller, most people feel at least some ambivalence around their negative behaviors. The aim of the motivational interviewer is to try to heighten and accentuate this via skilful questioning. Typically a client might be asked:- “On a scale of 1-10 how important is it to you to make a change?” If the client answer is “5,” the coach may respond:- “So why is that not zero?” This creates an important first dynamic. Notice the client is not asked:- “So why is that not a ten?” . Thereafter the client is forced into arguing *for* change, *not* against it. Once this change talk has developed, the coach will then create discrepancy between the client’s current behavior and important potential outcomes in the future, creating what Festinger (1957) termed cognitive dissonance. Rollnick and Miller (1995) state that using the technique, brief interventions yield similar outcomes to those with longer treatment. Thus in the context of a one or two session executive coaching session, we extrapolate similar results. Rollnick and Miller described adaptations of motivational interviewing as AMIs, applicable to interventions that incorporate non-MI techniques while retaining the principles of MI at the core (Rollnick et al., 1992).

This adaptability of the technique is another compelling reason for its use. It has been used in a broad variety of clinical settings and lends itself to boundary-less adaptation. But why does it work so often?

Methodology

MI uses four guiding principles: Express empathy, develop discrepancy, roll with resistance, and support self efficacy (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). Rogers felt that it was possible to express empathy without necessarily endorsing the others point of view. Developing discrepancy borrows from Festinger as mentioned above. In order to do so, MI clarifies the discrepancy by first dealing with the importance of change. This is distinct from what Miller and Rollnick call “behavioral gap” i.e. the amount of behavioral change that needs to occur. Specifically it requires the client to measure and articulate the importance of change themselves. Furthermore, when the gap is large, MI deals with the confidence factor, which is generally the area where the ambivalence lies. As Miller and Rollnick (2002) suggest, where many people who seek consultation already perceive significant discrepancy between what is happening and what they want to happen: they are already caught in an approach-avoidance conflict.

A goal of MI is to develop discrepancy, make use of it and amplify it until it overrides the inertia of status quo. Rolling with resistance help the coach avoids advocating change while the client argues against it. Jay Haley referred to this as psychological judo (Haley, 1963). As with coaching, MI turns client questions back to the client. It is not the counselor’s job to provide all the answers and generate all the solutions. It is assumed that the person is a capable and autonomous individual with important insight and ideas for the solution of his or her problem.

Finally, self efficacy recognizes that hope and faith are important element for change (Shapiro, 1995). The coach is instrumental in developing confidence in the client in his/ her capability to overcome the obstacles that might impede progress. Miller and Rollnick sum up these four principles thus: MI is about helping to free people from ambivalence that entraps them in repetitive cycles of self-defeating or destructive behavior” (Miller and Rollnick, 1992).

3. Group Dynamics

The final part of the triangulated process is to use the group process, and its underlying psychology, to further the work of change and cement it. Lewin founded the movement to study groups scientifically but Bion was the founding father of the movement to study groups from a psychoanalytic perspective (Bion, 1961). Known as *group dynamics*, its application again is generally used as a therapeutic intervention.

What is a group?

Foulkes saw the group as a matrix, or transpersonal network, reacting and responding as a whole, an interactive and reactive organism within which there was a constantly changing constellation of figure ground configurations (Behr & Hearst, 2006). Importantly, a group can provide what Winnicott called “the environmental essentials of healthy development” (Winnicott, 1949). In short, a group can sometimes do what an individual coach cannot.

Coach, facilitator or participant?

The role of the coach as leader in a group process is one to be dealt with and disarmed early. Adorno, a leading social theorist preferred the term conductor (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950). In our workshops we use the term facilitator, in the sense of

facilitating a group discussion. If this is not clearly expressed there might be a tendency for the group to observe, while each participant is publicly coached, with the group as witnesses. In fact what is desirable is for the group to become the containing environment wherein “the circle encompasses both physical and psychological space and is bounded by the members of the group” (Pine, 1985). The Foulksian view, which we share, is of a group interacting as a whole, a network of influences and influencers embodied in each group member, with many of the underlying psychoanalytic concepts such as transference, the unconscious and projection still in evidence (Foulkes, 1948).

T-Groups

The coaching groups are not dissimilar to T-Groups. Lewin pioneered T-Groups (or action learning groups), which according to Yalom, are noteworthy by the following criteria:

1. Feedback (an important tenet of which is when the feedback comes from “here and now observations” around performance).
2. Unfreezing, from Lewin’s change theory: “Motivation for change must be generated before change can occur. One must be helped to re-examine many of one’s cherished assumptions about oneself and relations to others (Lewin, 1951). Here one can see a very direct link back to MI.
3. Participant observation, the essential task of which was to connect concrete experience and analytical detachment.
4. Cognitive aids e.g. models, brief lectures and handouts connecting participants in a way that the group primary task was to facilitate learning for its members (Yalom, 1995).

For group coaching to function well, the four principles of the T-Group must be in place. Finally, the coaching group set-up borrows heavily from what Lewin termed “action research.” Namely, the approach has to be collaborative, yet the research (or learning) of the group is only achieved through the critically examined action of the group members (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988).

Why Groups not Dyads?

It is necessary to try to get to the heart of why we would attempt to effect change in a demonstrably more difficult situation than the usual dyadic coaching setup. Partly this can be depicted by context. Kets de Vries explains this as follows:-

“Group experiences...are journeys of self-discovery. If done in a safe environment, telling stories about significant events and situations...(it) helps an individual work through internal conflicts and crises and arrive at meaningful, personal life integration. The acceptance and support given by other members of the group help instill a sense of hope and change for the future. Listening...to others stories of their dysfunctional patterns helps participants recognize their own. This...paves the way for cognitive and emotional restructuring” (Kets de Vries, 2007).

Typically the group provides analogous examples of similar workplace issues. They are often able to provide alternative solutions or coping strategies. They form alliances and networks so that transformation transcends the physical group process. Moreover they often coach each other after the event, supplying simultaneous pressure and support. Groups often take on a life of their own during group coaching sessions. Participants challenge each other, provide context in the form of their own experiences and make suggestions for change and improvement under the watchful eye of the facilitator. Most importantly they share each others journey. From unearthing old scars and histories of aberrant behaviors publicly, to thinking about issues and committing to

change, they are all witnesses to the transformative process. Thus, from the moment that change becomes requisite, there are stakeholders attendant who are psychologically “bought in”. It is this final block, which initiates cementation of the change process.

Conclusion

In this article we have seen how the combination of three different branches of psychoanalytic theory serves as a powerful change medium in a group setting. I have consistently found that the opportunity for executives to examine some earlier life experiences, coupled with relief from ambivalence around their key challenges and a peer group support structure is highly effective as a change agent. Follow up conversations after three and six months substantiate that change is often in place and that both leadership effectiveness and feedback are positive affected. As a basis for discussion and research these are significant and findings will be reported in a future paper.

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