A THEORY OF EXECUTIVE COACHING IN GROUPS: THE CLINICAL PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

The inception of this work originated in 2002 when I was first invited to work as a trainee group executive coach at INSEAD with executives on the advanced management program. I worked with a practicing psychoanalyst as an understudy and then subsequently with a clinical psychologist. Both interventions were disastrous. In the first case, the psychoanalyst ranged around making loose interpretations and using concepts that were to the participants (and I have to admit to me too,) way over our heads. In the second, my own intervention was implausibly poor, ill timed, ill intentioned and nearly catastrophic. That notwithstanding, the intervention was generally well received and seemed to be having positive effects. I was, however, cautiously skeptical.

The deeper I got into the work, the less I understood why it was making a difference. It was as if the more I learned the less I knew. Yet the participants not only loved it, but also were making consequential changes to their lives. I resolved to discover what was happening, why it happened and how. What made it easy was that nobody had ever studied the intervention before. This was what also provided the stiffest challenge. A theory was required.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the relevance and potential importance of researching this intervention. Over one thousand people a year at the various INSEAD campuses experience it. It seemed a reasonable area to investigate. I have looked at the origins of group coaching and begun the process of breaking down its components, namely psychodynamic psychotherapy, group process and coaching as change methodologies. Here I also frame the research question, essentially “Why does this intervention work?” By making a cursory investigation of some commentary emanating from the participants in the process, I was able to establish not only their positive regard, but also the consistently good scores over time.

Chapter 2 deals with the research approach I chose. By attempting to develop a theory it was necessary to collect qualitative data. This type of data not only has limitations but requires disciplined and accurate collection within highly specific boundaries. Here I explain why such an approach was deemed relevant, justify the constituency I chose for data collection and also explain the different biases that can emerge in a qualitative research. The overarching theme of the chapter is to explain and rationalize the grounded theory approach, most often used in social sciences when developing a theory inductively.

Chapter 3 is a disclosure of the process examined. Having worked with this process for many years it was straightforward to break it into its granular component parts. Therein can be found a number of emergent composite pieces, known and well researched in social science literature but not obvious to an observer. For example, storytelling, play, transitional spaces, working alliances and even such logistical elements as dynamic administration, all contribute to the overall process and can be observed to have an effect. Here I try to offer the reader a “fly on the wall” understanding of the process while at the same time dissecting it for further examination later.
Chapter 4 focuses on the different components that emerge in the process and examines them through the eyes of the participants. I looked at the psychodynamic executive group coaching process, with the ambition to unearth not only their reactions but also the meanings they inferred. By this point a working hypothesis is underway: namely that the combination of psychotherapeutic nodes, group processes and a coaching methodology creates an efficacious intervention. By looking at the roles of the respective elements, the group process, the coaching process, the storytelling among others and referring to some of the literature around this, the non-causal links are illustrated between what the participants experienced and the theory of the individual components that support them. Finally I investigate one of the most important aspects of the process, how the participants were able to make change.

Chapter 5 is essentially the heart of the work insofar as it became important to investigate in the scientific literature to what extent the three core ingredients, psychodynamic psychotherapy, group psychotherapy and executive coaching are considered to be effective as separate interventions. Gathering meta-analyses of the three elements across the various databases that include them generated the literature review. Drilling in, the literature review also looks at the analogue of psychodynamic psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral therapy as a comparative measure to analyze whether a purely behavioral approach may also work. The review illustrates that all three elements work in isolation. I hypothesize a consequent syllogism, deductively based on the interviews with participants, the positive output of the sessions and the successful follow up from the majority of participants that the independent elements merge to create a single unified, workable, functional and successful intervention.

Chapter 6 examines the theories of two of the three independent elements from a historical and epistemological basis. As so much has been written about psychotherapy, group process and coaching it is challenging to survey the whole landscape. However, the core theories pertinent to my investigation can be found here. Moving from psychotherapy to short-term psychotherapy and object relations theory as a foundation, I have plotted a course through group psychotherapy taking in key theorists of each discipline.

Chapter 7 deals solely with coaching theory. Coaching being a relatively new discipline in the social sciences, theory is harder to find. Group coaching in particular is practically un-researched. However, a historical antecedent of group coaching, can be found in the work of Lewin. We also begin to see how some of the defense mechanisms generated in both individual and group psychotherapy also show up in coaching. The chapter ends with an attempt to clarify the role of a group coach as distinct from a psychotherapist and a group psychotherapist.

Chapter 8 synthesizes commentaries from a number of practitioners who spent many years developing and delivering the intervention. I was interested to explore to what extent some of the key elements in psychotherapy and group psychotherapy showed up in their group coaching practice. Here we find that defenses are attended to and transitional space is created. Yet some of the strictures of the psychotherapeutic traditions are treated more flexibly. We begin to see the group coaching intervention revealed as one that is distinct and unique.
Chapter 9 provides the conclusion to the work and notes myriad opportunities for future research. A model is proposed to substantiate the theory that is a representation of the different components I discovered at play within the intervention. Knowing the intervention worked was not good enough. Understanding why and how it worked was the principle ambition of the research. Here I propose that having investigated the intervention turning it through a number of lenses, that it’s efficacy has a theoretical basis grounded in three hitherto separately studied interventions. However, no causal link is hypothesized. What I propose is that powerful elements of each of the three combine, to generate positive outcomes in a fourth unique and separate intervention.

To conclude, this work was built on two premises. An intervention in the social science sphere that was deemed to work needs a supporting theory. None was available. Lack of quantitative data required me to investigate from a qualitative perspective using grounded theory as a methodology, and to look at the individual “ingredients” that had been investigated previously. I was driven to investigate the underlying theory of the different components, the practice of the intervention itself and to gather information around technique. I have concluded that a number of different non-competing factors are in play, from Winnicott’s theory of transitional space, to the working alliance most often seen in the psychotherapeutic field, to the need for a holding environment, to name a few. I have hypothesized that at the intersection of these factors a powerful, workable efficacious intervention exists. Future research opportunities are great: from intact executive teams to geographically dispersed groups, group executive coaching has almost limitless applications as a change methodology. Coaching continues to grow quickly as a practice and the economies of scale of executive group coaching are compelling. Add to this the psychodynamic aspect, where executives can reflect, learn and develop themselves, the intervention has a chance of contributing to organizational as well as societal development. My hope is that this work lays one of the foundation stones of understanding.