3.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the process of group-coaching itself as enacted in an international diversified executive program. For the benefit of the reader I have tried to explain and elucidate key aspects of the process in order that it can be replicated abroad. The ambition of this chapter is that it will not only explain the mechanics of the process but also provide the key pointers to underlying theory that ultimately, when conflated, may provide a unified theory of psychodynamic group-coaching.

It is commonly assumed that assembling individuals of great talent in a group will produce great results. Often sport can produce great analogies for organizational life. For this we need look no further than the top flight of the English soccer scene, or in entertainment the Cirque du Soleil.

For those with an interest in leadership, organizational dynamics, and performance these examples raise interesting questions. Of particular interest is how to effect change and improve performance when working with groups of talented people. How can one effectively coach them into winning ways and with a positive mindset?

INSEAD Business School in Fontainebleau, Singapore, and Abu Dhabi assembles groups of professionals who attend the various executive management programs on offer. These executives are selected by the faculty on the basis of seniority and suitability. On many of the programs they are split randomly into task groups to collaborate on projects and assignments. The results, as one might expect, vary. Some groups perform very well together; others fail miserably. From the faculty perspective, it is hard to predict in advance what the outcomes will be. Some groups, populated with wholly functional individuals, when given collaborative tasks to perform, become wholly dysfunctional. Squabbling, tantrums, and walkouts are not uncommon and more subtle resistance techniques like feigned illnesses or “phantom” meetings back at participants’ workplaces have been observed. Other groups perform perfectly well, even outperforming their peers, while populated with seemingly average individuals. In these cases the sum of the parts is greater than the units within the group.

The IGLC (INSEAD Global Leadership Centre) is one of the centers at the school that deals with leadership development. Coaches from the IGLC intervene in these same groups during management programs to facilitate a segment on leadership development (LDP) using the psychodynamic-oriented group-coaching process. This entails the solicitation of 360-degree multi-source feedback, delivery of the material in a group-coaching context, sometimes a one-on-one meeting with the coach and very often either a group reconnection via a conference call or physical meeting between a month and three months later. The point of the exercise is to elicit, discuss, and work with aspects of the executives’ leadership behaviors that require work, whether historical weaknesses, or as has become a more recent trend, honing

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1 This chapter is partly based on the article: Ward, G., (2008) International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring, Vol 6, 1. Elements of this chapter appeared in the article.
strengths. By improving self-awareness around these issues, recent research suggests leaders experience a positive effect on performance (Kilburg, 2000).

3.2 The psychodynamic group-coaching process

There follows a description of the process, which is referenced later in this study from a number of perspectives. This description should afford the reader the opportunity to fully understand what is being studied here.

3.2.1 Arrival

Executives arrive on campus with a battery of feedback material—some positive, some critical—and are apprised during the process of leadership characteristics that are in need of improvement or change. Moreover, they learn how to leverage their strengths. My observation over the years is that often at the end of this process, a high percentage commit to making important changes. Why do they do this and how does this process work?

Before the coaching intervention the IEP participants have been on campus together for just over a week. They have worked together in small groups on task-oriented projects where robust discussion is required to complete the challenge. These groups are kept intact and also experience a leadership orientated outdoor day. The outdoor day consists of a number of cognitive challenges that they have to perform under time pressure. Each group member is leader for a task. There is an element of competition between groups. After each task the group receives feedback from trained instructors and the group members and they move to the next challenge. I have observed many such days. The tasks have a way of bringing to the fore what is positive and negative in the participants’ leadership skills as they struggle to complete them. For example, some become frustrated, some rush headlong without consultation, some are measured or cautious, others sulk when things fail to go according to plan. The participants write a short reflection on how they performed during the day when it is over, what they have learned, what they could do differently and what the feedback was from the group. In this way they get used to giving and receiving feedback with each other. These groups in turn remain intact for the group-coaching day.

The participants are given two articles to read as primers for the coaching one reflecting some broad based leadership principles, the other on the ways leaders approach giving and receiving feedback. The articles serve as a trigger for getting them to begin thinking about the way people respond to their leadership. Together, these serve to have them think about their leadership style and what makes a good leader. It is a way of beginning the process of focusing on the coming task. They also are given an introduction by one of the coaches on what to expect during the coaching day. For many the fact that the coaching will take place in groups is a surprise. The process is explained and the instrumentation to be used is also explained in full. This allows the day to begin smoothly without the need for logistical and technical explanations.

There is an axiom that states: “It’s never too late to become what you might have been.” Yet many of the executives have spent much of their career watching the clock tick and resisting changes that, strangely, by the end of the LDP process, they are itching to implement. Why do high percentages of these executives on the LDP make radical changes to their professional and personal lives? I have observed over the years executives making radical shifts in their thinking and activities. These range
from one executive, working for a FTSE 100 company who not having taken a holiday in 13 years, immediately booked three weeks vacation, to more subtle changes around leadership techniques like delegation of authority or adopting more engaging styles with their people.

3.2.2 Key variables

I have identified four key variables in the group-coaching scenario:

1. The constructed environment and process
2. The coach
3. The group “as a whole”
4. The individual participant.

With four variables it might be reasonable to assume a somewhat random distribution of outcomes and results. Yet a recent exploratory study exposed positive self and observer assessments up to a year after the process (Kets de Vries, Hellwig, Ramo, Florent-Treacy, & Korotov, 2008). The indications were particularly positive in areas including self-awareness, coaching behavior, rewarding, feedback, and team building. In order to understand how this happens we need to deconstruct the process and analyze what actually happens.

3.2.3 The role of play

In order to reduce the variability of possible outcomes, the intervention is deliberately constructed in a rigorous way, with firm boundaries. With that in mind, however, within the space, there needs to be sufficient room to experiment and play. This “play” takes place in what Winnicott called transitional space. Winnicott described the notion of transitional space thus:

“It is in the space between inner and outer world, which is also the space between people—the transitional space—that intimate relationships and creativity occur” p89 (Winnicott, 1971).

The space in which executives find themselves during these group-coaching days could plausibly be described as “transitional space.” What do the supposed playful aspects of transitional objects and space have to do with this type of coaching environment? As Winnicott said:

“Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible, then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play” p51 (Winnicott, 1971).

The notion of transitional space is relevant and potentially important to the developing theory. It is a place wherein executives can experiment with other “selves” in a non-threatening environment and with low risk. I will examine this notion of experimentation and play in more detail later.

3.2.4 The role of feedback

Feedback is a serious business. Executives tend to attend management programs expecting to acquire a battery of theoretical tools to apply in the workplace. So what
“play” are we talking about? How can that play be extended into the learning environment to facilitate growth?

Executives generally receive feedback through official channels in their organizations, if they are lucky enough to be working in sophisticated places with executive development departments. Normally they receive this feedback during their annual performance review from a superior. With luck they are given a few behaviors to work on over the coming year that they might agree to. Follow-up though is rare and by the time the ensuing review takes place often the same issues are raised again. Change is either occurring at a glacial pace or not at all. Moreover, receiving and integrating any negative feedback, (the predicate on which such a meeting is often based) is not easy to handle. How one handles such a meeting puts at stake one’s professional persona, potential for advancement, and future career opportunities. It is an emotionally loaded gun.

And yet with this in mind there is systematic evidence that leadership behavior is affected by multi-source feedback if it is handled appropriately. A 2002 study at senior level in five organizations demonstrated enduring individual, team, and organizational improvements (Green, 2002). Our interest as social scientists is naturally to try to understand the sustainability of any change intervention. A 2006 study of 145 leaders across the usual organizational groupings of subordinates, peers, and managers demonstrated that leaders undergoing a 360-degree feedback process after one year exhibited greater consideration, performance orientation, and employee development. Moreover, subordinates were deemed to be more engaged and less likely to leave following 360-degree feedback to their leaders (Atwater, 2006).

Importantly for this research, Smither et al. determined that leaders who worked with coaches were able (after 360-degree feedback) to deal more adequately with their own managers, soliciting ideas and subsequently improving (Smither, London, Flautt, Vargas & Kucine, 2003). Finally, Luthans and Peterson in an empirical study showed that combining 360-degree feedback with coaching focused on self-awareness and behavioral management resulted in improved manager and employee satisfaction, commitment, turnover, and indirectly, firm performance (Peterson & Luthans, 2003).

Plausibly, many executive dyads in the annual feedback review fall into a repetitive game of mental tennis, defined by the history of their superior/employee relationship. The situation rather than being simplified is complicated by the transferences within the relationship that the individual has with his or her superior. For example, too little respect and the executive will not be truly listening; too much and the executive is a metaphorical puppet on a string. Objectivity is a commodity in short supply.

My many years of working at a leading investment bank illustrated all too clearly that the internal 360-degree feedback process alone with insufficient debriefing is more likely to leave employees grumbling about bias and gaming the system, than really dealing with the important issues of professional development at hand. Hence, delivering feedback in a group setting (with peers at least) raises the probability of reducing extreme polarities of opinion, known as the “halo and horns” effect.

3.2.5 Creating the right conditions for the process

How the facilitator introduces the LDP day is the key to constructing the appropriate clinical conditions in which the group can thrive. Group-coaching, like group analysis, takes place within a carefully constituted setting that is conducive to “group-as-a-whole” phenomena. Group-as-a-whole theory hypothesizes that groups have an
existence as entities beyond the characters that comprise them. Group analysts and group coaches, appreciate the reality of the group-as-a-whole, and try to make clinical use of various features of it. They appreciate the possibilities for applying an understanding of group dynamics to clinical work. Hopper posits that particular processes occur in groups-as-wholes that cannot be located in dyads and in single persons. For example, basic assumptions, discussed later, are properties of groups-as-wholes (Hopper, 2003). And Ettin likened knowing, communicating with, and affecting the group as a whole as a task akin to dancing with an alternately benign and malevolent ghost, suggesting how complex and potentially challenging this work can be (Ettin, 1992). Hence, to temper and manage this complex environment effectively, dynamic administration is required.

The term dynamic administration refers to the various activities that the facilitator performs in order to create and maintain the setting (Behr & Hearst, 2006). In any case, the space should be a place where ideally the client might have the opportunity to meet neglected ego needs and allow the true self to emerge. To that end, the following is done:

All detritus has been previously removed from the room. If the room is a classroom, graphics and models left from previous classes are erased or taken down. Computers are switched off and papers and any printed materials put away. 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 center for the group (Behr & Hearst, 2006). The facilitator may then make the following remarks:

- The session is entirely confidential. No information will leave the room or be shared with anyone other than those currently in the room. It is vital, if the session is to be successful, that this is observed.
- The facilitator’s copy of the feedback and any notes he or she makes will be returned to the participant at the end of the day.
- The purpose of the day is that the 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. Everyone will be called on to speak.
- The facilitator will do the same and, moreover, will contain the environment.
- Each participant will be dealt with in turn for approximately an hour and a quarter. During that period they will be expected to set the agenda for themselves with respect to the feedback they have recently received. What are the key challenges, and how would the participant want the group to help them address the issues they face?
- Participants are asked to switch off mobile communication devices for the duration of the session to avoid interruption.
- Finally, the facilitator may ask what the participants want to achieve during the day.
- Essentially the physical environment must feel contained and containable, comfortable but not informal, open yet intimate and free from distractions. It is a place wherein the participants can feel psychologically safe. This space
facilitates experimentation, openness, confrontation, production of meaning and understanding of the self and the world (Kets de Vries & Koratov, 2007a). It is a place where, like psychotherapy, the boundaries are absolutely clear and with a total absence of interruption.

3.2.6 Early stage of the process

Sitting with a package of feedback material weighs heavily on the group members. Often they are in a state of high anxiety as a result of what their colleagues, safely ensconced back at the office, have anonymously said about them. The group setting can exacerbate this anxiety. Often, their individually expressed preference is to work through the material in private with the coach. In order to allay the anxieties of exposing their feedback publicly, we break the ice by asking them to do something playful that removes them from the anxiety, at least temporarily.

To that end, we ask them to draw a self-portrait on a large piece of paper. This becomes in effect a transitional object. Armed with this *carte-blanche* and a bag of colored marker pens, it is always interesting to note how those who had groaned at the thought of making a drawing only a few moments before, enthusiastically bolt for the door clutching their transitional “teddy bears” shortly after. In truth, while they may hate the idea of doing a drawing that will be shown to the group, their saving grace is they know that it is something that they are *able* to do. This mitigates thinking about the sessions to follow where they might have to swallow some bitter medicine publicly.

Plato remarked that you could learn more about a man in an hour of play than in a year of conversation. Play is creative, liberating, and for executives with their heavy routines and schedules, unusual. In the context of our executive workshops the self-portrait is a first step in breaking up formulaic thinking. We ask them to represent dimensions of their life in images only. Future, past, work, and leisure are simple examples of the dimensions. More challenging can be the metaphysical dimensions representing their head, heart, and gut. The executives typically spread themselves out around the campus, utilizing floor spaces and taking over cubicles usually reserved for eight people. It can be like watching toddlers playing with Lego. We often find that the 20 minutes we afford them are insufficient, so engrossed do they become in this creative undertaking. Its rather useful side effect is it often begins the process of breaking down defenses, as it puts the individual into a reflective mode, bringing unconscious and hidden aspects of the self into the public arena.

Csikszentmihalyi wrote of the criteria that makes free play enjoyable, that there should be the ability to concentrate on a limited stimulus field, (in this case the self-portrait) in which individual skills can be used to meet clear demands, (in this case a formal drawing process with ground rules) thereby forgetting personal problems, and his or her separate identity, at the same time obtaining control over his or her environment which may result in a transcendence of ego boundaries (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). The coach may make the remark that the participants may draw whatever comes to mind in whatever colours and form that they decide and that they control it and the outcome, albeit within certain boundaries and frameworks.

Our observations have been that many of these criteria are often present, making the exercise successful and rewarding. It is unsurprising, given the nature of transitional objects, that at times when the participants return to the room after drawing their portrait they are reluctant to let them go and hang them on the walls.
3.2.7 Creating a working alliance

In the first place the psychodynamic group coach needs to establish what in therapeutic terms is known as the working alliance. The working alliance may be defined as the joining of a client’s reasonable side with a therapist’s working or analyzing side. Bordin (1979) conceptualized the working alliance as consisting of three parts: 1) tasks, 2) goals, and 3) bond. The working alliance is distinct from the therapeutic alliance inasmuch as it is deemed to be one of its component parts.

1. Tasks are what the therapist or coach and clients agree needs to be done to reach the client’s goals.
2. Goals are what the client hopes to gain from therapy or coaching, based on his or her presenting concerns.
3. The bond forms from trust and confidence that the tasks will bring the client closer to his or her goals.

There is a kernel of truth that breaking down our stories, and trying to make sense of them, could provoke a heap of anxiety. After all, most of us operate well within our security zone. Most of us keep our inner theatre a closely guarded secret.

3.2.8 The role of storytelling

In the next stage of the workshop we invite participants to reveal publicly their life stories through the medium of the portrait.

In Winnicott’s work on identity, he posits that in infancy transitional space allows the child to become separate from the mother, and become an autonomous and creative individual in the world (Winnicott, 1953). In other words it is a process driving toward self-efficacy. In order for that to happen, the child needs to experience the ambivalence between what is and what might be, but is being defended against. It requires a trigger. In infants this process pivots on the “good enough mother.” The “good enough mother” allows the infant to experience the frustration of becoming self-sufficient to facilitate maturation. She does not over protect. In the executive setting I am examining, as we shall see, the coach plays that role (Dubouloy, 2004).

Before the storytelling begins, the four or five other participants in the room are invited to comment on, free associate with, and analyze the portrait of the person to be discussed. The artist listens quietly without comment. Often the group elicits the unconscious processes that have been at work as the portrait was executed. Surprising analysis gives rise to deeper reflection. A portrait drawn in a monochrome for instance, when compared with others that are multi-colored, might cause the participant to reflect on the inner richness of his or her own life. Or there are those participants who place themselves large, central and in great detail on the portrait with their family represented as stick-like bit part players. Often here a streak of narcissism is unveiled, but is can be comfortably swallowed by the humorous yet pointed intervention of the other group members.

This first step is helpful in getting the participant to see his or her world through the lens of other people’s thoughts and feelings. Strangely, it also fosters trust. If the participants, monitored by the facilitator, are careful in their interpretations, the participant may start to feel others empathizing with his or her story. This is important if the participant is going to take some risk in the next phase—the telling of the story itself.
In the next phase, as the work deepens, we invite the participant to talk the group through the portrait. Great attention is paid to the words chosen, or as Harold Bridger put it “the music behind the words”—the order and emphasis that is placed on events, and the emotions that surface as we begin to understand their inner world (Amado & Ambrose, 2001). When the participant comes to the dimension of the past, we ask them to go as far as they are comfortable in expounding their personal history, from as far back as they can remember. For many people this can be a moving experience. The highs and lows of their lives are often revealed in their entirety for the first time. Participants are often surprised at how far they are prepared to go talking about very private matters, from family breakdowns and divorce, deaths in the family to more serious career issues that have given rise to both pleasure and pain. Tears are not uncommon. When participants eventually return to their seat, they generally realize that they have now entered an unusual psychological space. Executive participants experience the dual benefit of being in a place where they can now confront important issues but with minimal career risk. As one executive remarked in a recent paper: “The process of talking out loud offered the opportunity for reflection; you get to hear your own voice in a fuller dimension. In addition to hearing the coach’s voice, I could hear myself better” (Stevens, 2005).

Coaches at the IGLC have often heard remarks like “I have never told anyone that story before.” The other participants engage with the story, ask questions, empathize, tell stories of their own that relate to what they have heard, all of which contributes to an emotional safety net, not only for the person in the “hot seat” but for those in the room. As Kets de Vries and Korotov said:

“The empathy and support shown by other participants, the appreciation that other people truly care, encourages participants to embrace experimentation and eventually take control of their executive behavior” p147 (Kets de Vries and Koratov, 2007a).

Typically as each story is revealed more risk is taken. The transitional space begins to fill.

Organizational theory has been late in taking an interest in stories that people tell in and about organizations (Denning, 2006). Whether in or out of organizations, people often recount experiences in story-like forms and listen to stories of others. By placing themselves at the center of their stories, they often begin to make sense of these experiences, whether happy, trying, or painful. Organizational theorists have now become aware that much learning in organizations takes place through storytelling. Stories can open windows into the cultural and emotional lives of individuals, allowing people to express deep and sometimes hidden or conflicting emotions.

Ibarra talks about the importance of storytelling, how telling your story over and over, noticing the changes that occur as you tell and retell the story, gradually reveal an insight into the drivers and themes that have led you to the point where you are (Ibarra, 2003). An African proverb explains, “It is the story that outlives the sound of the war drums and exploits of brave fighters, that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence.” By having our executives tell stories we are trying to help prevent them blundering into their own metaphorical minefields. Hence, in the leadership development process we put great emphasis on storytelling. As an accelerator of transitional space it is important.

For many people, their first memories are of lying in bed being read to by their mother or father. These were moments of great comfort as they slipped into peaceful
and childlike unconsciousness. When we tell stories as adults, we unconsciously re-
engage with that feeling of comfort. It feels safe and engages the often-underutilized emotional “right” brain. Listeners to these emerging stories start to play the role of detectives. In many stories there are paradoxes, ambiguities, and inconsistencies. The audience not only plays the role of “bedtime children” but at the same time, cross-
questions the storyteller about motivations, and meanings hidden in the script. If the situation is handled well, the teller will feel the empathic engagements of the listener, not a drive toward pedantic inquiry.

Lest we forget, there is an important side benefit for the listeners too. The experience of listening to stories being told, whether deeply personal or simply about experiences in organizational life, gives the listener the opportunity to connect the story to their own experience. As each plot line unfolds, the listener may well begin a process of working through his or her own issues, either by identifying similarities but dreaming of different endings or even by recognizing these similarities for the first time and lifting the veil on what had hitherto been a blind spot. The stories typically have resonance of some sort. If nothing else, they play the part of creating “emotional glue” that binds the members of the group closer together—important criteria for the risky business ahead.

By the time the portrait has been examined and the story told, a process that can take up to half an hour, the participant is primed to begin the most important phase of the journey. The audience is engaged and typically the executive is ready to face his or her deepest challenges.

3.2.9 Challenging conversations in transitional space

The transitional space thus created, executives now need to attempt the real work of change. Like the infant child with its transitional object, ambivalence is rife. The 360-
degree feedback instruments concern themselves with both positive and negative commentary around the individual’s performance. Most executives naturally focus on the negatives and generally pay particular attention to the critique of their superior. The critique can range from the mundane: “Must learn to truly delegate and not micromanage every outcome” to the downright personal: “Has a tendency toward arrogance and rudeness.” In either case, to read the words of one’s peers, direct reports, and boss can be a painful and exasperating experience, especially since there is no immediate right of reply.

Like the experimental infant, the executive’s psychological tendency will be on the one hand to retreat into his or her comfort zone in defense of territory, while the more rational side will be attracted to making the requisite changes to grow professionally. These are delicate moments. Learning through experience is indeed bitter and that bitterness can be dampened by emulation and reflection.

In any group situation, whether on the basketball court or in group-coaching, it is important that the whole team plays. The marginalization of any group member to that of a “bit part” is damaging. The facilitator’s skill is to bring in every actor and use his or her experiences to good effect in the space. It will require much talent in positive reframing. To be avoided is a situation where, while the facilitator goes through the coaching routine with the person in the “chair,” the other group members sit idly by and observe. Everyone should fill the space equally. The coach will, therefore, request the reflections, free associations, and experiences of the other participants pertinent to the situation being dealt with. Moreover, the other participants act as detectives
looking for clues as to the sources or triggers of the behaviors, act as friends by offering helpful tips and suggestions, and act as coaches by asking relevant questions and challenging the evidence. If the dynamic is sufficiently healthy, the facilitator almost fades from view and the group takes on a life of its own. The participant will feel challenge, support, and hope that his or her situation can be successfully resolved.

Bridger remarked that there is no such thing as a group without a task. The task of the group that finds itself in this transitional space is to participate totally in the process, to listen helpfully, and to do no harm. The explicit task of each executive is to examine their feedback and then, having reflected on it and heard the comments of the group, to decide if they want to react to it and change their behavior. The group may exert pressure but in the end the decision to change lies with the individual.

Ambrose cited four criteria for transitional space to materialize: time, place, sanction and toleration (Amado & Ambrose, 2001). The first three of these are determined by the dynamic administration discussed above. The fourth is the most difficult to achieve. Executives in these learning spaces can exhibit extraordinary behaviors. They can get angry, cry, argue vociferously, and even walk out (and hopefully back in again). The psychological space needs containment and a toleration and acceptance that this kind of deviation will lead to development and learning. As Ambrose said, the individual participant needs to be able to feel free enough to express their thoughts and feelings, even if they are uncharacteristic or feel odd. By doing this he supposes that strong emotional reactions may arise requiring competent facilitation (Amado & Ambrose, 2001).

The session needs to be closed properly. To seal the process the facilitator may sum up the content of the session, make his or her last reflections and invite each member to offer as a way of completing the task, one final piece of advice as a friend to the executive. Finally, having heard everything, the executive is asked what he or she is going to do.

3.2.10 Action planning

Executives attending leadership development programs no more want to find themselves in a state of suspended animation, than the human adult would want to find itself clinging helplessly to its transitional teddy bear. There comes a time to move on, to break the space and to allow the executive to re-access and prepare for the real world he or she will encounter soon enough.

The process of easing the executive out of transitional space needs careful handling. The purpose of creating the space was to generate change. Rushing to closure risks ruining the investment. Too quick, and the executive may feel bereft of the tools he or she needs in order to make the required changes. Too slow, and there is a danger that the momentum for change will be lost in a mire of introspection.

The skill of closure in these circumstances is to create a metaphorical snap of the hypnotist’s fingers, followed by a lengthier process of re-acclimatization. This can be done in the following way. After the portrait, the questions, free associations, and reflections, there comes a need for action. The coach needs to get to the question: “What are you going to do with all this?” Interviews with people who undergo significant personal change suggest that a good indicator of commitment to change is a public declaration of intent (Kets de Vries & Balazs, 1998).
Jarring though that may be, it has the effect of taking the participant out of their reverie. Suddenly accompanying this question is a weight of expectation, compounded by the presence of the audience of four or five others. Executives are competitive and in general rise to the occasion and respond with some specifics. Of course there are those who remain vague about their intentions. In this case the group can be re-engaged in a pragmatic effort to pin down the participant to commit to some specific goals.

It is important to cross-reference the goals of the participant with the group. Sometimes the effect of the transitional space can cause people to come up with very different action plans to the issues they have discussed during their sessions. The group must of course tackle these issues with sensitivity. It is not uncommon for an individual, while reflecting on the challenges facing other executives in the group, to project those issues onto himself, rightly or wrongly.

For example, an executive may have spent most of the session talking about her need to display more long-term vision as a leader. When it comes to wrapping up, however, she may concentrate her goals around the need for more work-life balance, exercise, spending time with her family and indulging personal interests. Thus, another group member facing these same challenges will have provoked these thoughts. The first executive recognizes these challenges in her own life and prioritizes them.

Finally, we give time for the participants to draft a written plan of action to cement in their minds, and that of the group, what they will actually do differently when they return to work. Armed with this, we appoint a learning partner from within the group to support coach and engage with them for a further three months at regular intervals.

3.3 Some drawbacks to the intervention

For any coach or therapist working with groups in this kind of setting there are risks. Transitional space is not a scientific phenomenon, it is an abstraction. The facilitator can do his best to create conditions wherein the group will thrive, but there are no guarantees. As Whitaker and Lieberman said, one cannot create a feeling of safety by edict. So while some of the conditions listed above are useful, they cannot be imposed (Whitaker & Lieberman, 1964). If the executive feels anxiety it is important to give voice to that. If they can be raised openly, the concerns of the individuals will in the end give rise to feelings of acceptance. This in turn should allow the executive to open emotionally.

One executive I worked with pointedly refused to draw the portrait. She said that she did not see the relevance of drawing on an executive education course and was more interested in leadership theory. Her manner of delivery was extremely forceful and disruptive, leading me to suspect she was very angry. I told her that it was a useful exercise but that I supported her wish not to do the portrait if she did not want to. I felt, however, that in order not to disrupt the group further we would let them do their portraits elsewhere, while we sat and talked. It transpired that she had been stirred up by the feedback from her boss that she had read the night before and had barely slept. The realization that she had transferred her anger onto the process allowed her to open up to what was happening and re-engage in the process. She drew the portrait and had a fruitful session relating her issues with authority.

Judging the right amount of pressure to apply in order to create change in each individual could be seen as somewhat akin to driving a racing car round a tight bend in the wet. Too much on the throttle and the car will spin from the track. Too little and
the car will hug the bend and not take the correct competitive racing line. To manage
the individuals in the group, each with a differently tuned “engine,” is a nuanced
process. After all, to change means to give up a part of oneself that was previously
valued or as one executive remarked to me, “giving away my valuable DNA.” It
raises ambivalent feelings. Moreover, Obholzer wonders if the question of changing
behavior is in the service of that which truly facilitates organizational improvement,
or does it in fact relinquish an important facet of organizational sustainability
(Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle, & Pooley, 2004). Transitional space, because
of its nature, can give full vent to the emotions that swirl around these issues.

A group-coaching process also undoubtedly gives rise to intrinsic leadership issues.
The coach or facilitator is the de facto leader of the group. Bion (1961) suggested that
any group is likely to be imbued with an encompassing “basic assumption,” discussed
in more detail in Chapter 6 in the section headed *Key group theories*. The most likely
configuration in group-coaching, from my experience, is that of dependency. Here the
group falls into a state of mind of looking to the coach for answers or solutions to
their challenges. If this gets out of hand, harm may be done when executives
eventually cut loose and find that without the coach or the group to support them they
are adrift. In group-coaching it is essential that the facilitator should keep strictly to
the coaching protocols of active listening and intelligent questioning, leaving solution
orientation to the group. Any solutions provided by the coach should be strictly by
permission.

3.4 Managing re-entry

Smoothing the path to re-entry is a critical last step in the process. The executives
may begin to feel a separation anxiety or even helplessness around leaving the group.
One often witnesses heavy idealization, the notion that this group above all groups
was the best/most successful/most insightful/most creative, etc. There can be a
frenetic swapping of business cards and other paraphernalia that represents an
unwillingness to relinquish the safety of the environment. Sometimes group members
bring presents. Appealing though all this is, on a purely mundane level, it is
symptomatic of the power of the process.

Offering the executives some tools for re-entry is helpful in bridging the gap between
the “now and what is to be.” Our suggestions are pragmatic:

- Thank your observers for their comments when you return.
- Ask them to expand further any aspects that were not clear to you.
- Create an environment where your direct reports have an understanding of
  what you have experienced.
- Tell people what you plan to do differently both at home and at work.
- Keep your action plan visible and refer to it regularly.
- Keep in touch with your learning partner for regular coaching conversations of
  support, challenge and encouragement.
- Tell your boss what you learned and what you plan to do better.

It is crucial to leave the executives feeling supported emotionally and psychologically.
The temptation to revert to old dyed-in-the-wool behaviors will be great without the
knowledge that there is something to underpin their new experimental operating
system. We often joke that what makes the difference is the chemical mix of shame, guilt, and hope. The shame can come from the feedback that they know has been kicking about for too long and has not been acted upon. The guilt will arise if they now, with their new shiny suits, do nothing about it. The hope is that they will return to the safety of the group, in three to six months (which we view as imperative) and report back their successes.

A study by Marshall Goldsmith, a leading coach, published in 1996 demonstrated that 50% of managers receiving feedback with no follow-up were deemed 18 months later to be unchanged or less effective, while for those engaged in follow-up, 89% were seen as being more effective (Goldsmith, Lyons, & Freas, 2000). Thus at the very least, we reconvene the group for a two hour conference call within a few months to discuss progress and help further with any obstacles. Many groups come back to campus and spend a full day together, not only working on some of the old issues but taking on new challenges too. One can see how the behavioral change begins in the group setting to become self-supporting. Many groups continue to meet literally or virtually for years after the initial event.

3.4.1 One-to-one coaching

On the IEP program we offer the participants the opportunity to work one to one with the coach the day after the group session. At this point cynics may remark that we revert to type, dyadic coaching being more the norm. The one-to-one sessions are built in with good reason though, and act as a supplement to the group-coaching intervention.

1. They give the opportunity for the participants to reflect further overnight.
2. They mitigate the need to come to closure in the group.
3. They are specifically designed for the creation of an operational action plan.
4. They tie up the loose ends. Any unearthed material or unfinished business can be addressed.
5. They offer a private moment with the coach so that any material that was kept back by the participant in the group session can be dealt with, although this rarely happens.
6. They deepen the working alliance between coach and participant.

While they are integral to the overall process and I refer to them at times throughout this research, the one-to-one sessions are not my primary area of investigation. Much has been written about one-to-one coaching and its efficacy, explored in the literature review. Suffice to say that it seems to work well as a supplemental intervention in the IEP but is not a necessity since many other programs run group-coaching interventions without it and these work well.

3.5 Conclusion

Creating a psychological transitional space for executives as a form of temporary outplacement during the rigors of working life can have a salutary and cathartic effect on them. Executives, by opening up emotionally, playing, and being creative, generate new ideas for themselves. Many of us have experienced the feeling of taking a plane ride and coming up with an idea for a new business, a book title, a life change, or simply a self-indulgent yet motivational reverie. Creating structured transitional
space can do just this for executives. With a set primary task, coaches and facilitators can help groups of executives to optimize the probability that they will change for the better. This is not only of benefit to them but also to the people that work for and with them, and thus to the organization as a whole. If, as a result, participants become happier and self-actualize, the effect can be incremental in their organizations.

Having seen how the intervention works, I now turn to the experiences of the participants, who experienced the intervention first hand, to gather data around some of the important theoretical constructs that seem to underpin it.