8.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the evidence from ten senior professional coaches who work or have worked for more than three years on senior executive programs at INSEAD, specifically on the Leadership Development part of the programs. The interview questionnaire can be found in the table below. Interviews were conducted at an approximation of the midpoint between two modules of an IEP program (around eight weeks) in order to maximize the mitigation of any after effects from recent experiences or anxiety from forthcoming experiences. Not all the interviewees worked on the program but all had done so in the past. Moreover, the interviews roughly coincided with the follow-up telephone call with participants. These phone calls throw light on what behavioral changes the participants have made in the eight weeks since the program. Hence, it would serve as a refresher for the coaches and give them a chance to reflect objectively on the work they had done eight weeks prior. Included in the interviews was Manfred Kets de Vries. He did not coach on the program but has been identified as the creator of the process and provides extra insight into its development and theory.

8.1.1 Methodology for the interview process

My research drew me to try to understand how each coach went about his or her business. It was apparent to me that while the results of the coaching were similar in terms of the way it was rated, each of the coaches had been trained separately, with different technologies and in different schools. Among the coaches there are two psychoanalysts, one psychologist and seven who have undergone clinical training in psychodynamics and psychology. Some of the coaches are graduates of an INSEAD diploma program (now an Executive Masters) called the CCC (Consulting and Coaching for Change). This 18-month long program centers its learning around the psychodynamic approach to organizational life. Its title is a misnomer though in that it does not offer specific coaching training. However, it does attempt to give the participant an insight into the unconscious processes alive in modern organizations. Many of the participants go on to become consultants or executive coaches and over 75% of the approximately 40 coaches that the IGLC contracts are graduates of this program. Moreover, other coaches who serve on the IEP program have not participated in CCC but are exponents of other institutions like the Tavistock or are trained psychotherapists. Hence, each brings differing methodologies to the table and it was this that in the first place I wanted to discern. Furthermore, an examination of how the various methodologies were applied felt important if I were to understand how and why change takes place in small groups. The overall methodology as related to the interview technique is discussed in Chapter 2. Table 14 below reproduces the interview questions:

1. Could you describe your basic methodology when doing psychodynamic oriented group-coaching?

2. Do you have any specific objectives going into the session?
3. How do you go about creating a safe space?
4. How do you deal with resistance?
5. How do you deal with anxiety?
6. How do you manage transference and counter transference?
7. How do you deal with emotion?
8. Are you able to judge if someone is open to change and if they are likely to change?
9. What role does storytelling play?
10. How do you know if your session has been successful?

Table 14 Interview questions

While doing the interviews, I was increasingly aware that the core components of the theory—short-term dynamic psychotherapy combined with group processes—had great applicability to the group-coaching process. I therefore wanted to understand from the practitioners what elements of these two core processes came into play in their work. For example, I mentioned earlier that coaching is more specifically goal-focused, compared with therapy, which is not. In Question 2, I sought to understand whether the coach had a goal other than the dual therapy/coaching goal to provide insight. In Question 4, I sought to elucidate how resistance is dealt with, given the brevity of the intervention. I have tried to discern if there was overlap between the comparable fields of coaching and therapy by posing these open-ended questions and analyzing the responses.

8.2 Group-coaching techniques

To get to the core of the question of how and why change happens, I felt it was necessary to look at the methodologies that each coach uses to see if there were differences of approach. The training that the coaches receive via the CCC program offers a basis for systems theory and psychodynamic group processes. Four other coaches I interviewed have not participated on this program but they have taught on it, leading to the assumption they will have a similar orientation.

8.2.1 Creating a safe transitional environment

In addition, I wondered about the extent to which the coaches paid attention to the group-as-a-whole phenomena. The group as a whole can be considered as a background against which everything is heard. For example, Foulkes says: “It is axiomatic that everything happening in a group involves the group as a whole as well as the individual member. Every event involves the whole group” (Foulkes, 1984).

One may infer from this observation that the group becomes the agent or vehicle through which change happens. Bion regards members of a group as part of a single, integral body creating a regressive unconscious fantasy that is generated in the group. It raises the question of how this “group-as-a-whole” might be experienced either differently or collectively (Cooper, 1999). In spite of this complexity, Foulkes is clear: In group-therapy it is the individual who is being treated. “Our ultimate object is the individual, our focus is the individual-in-the-group” (Foulkes, 1990).

Here is the response of one coach when asked to explain his basic methodology:
“If you are running a group session it is essentially the group who you want to harvest. You create the boundary, a protected confidential group space and process. Some people speak too much, and they need slowing down, others might be bored or demonstrating boredom. Any anti-task behavior can be brought in and interpreted not only as individual doing their thing but as a reflection of the group and part of its process. One focuses one’s interpretations on what is the group and ask what the echo is within the group. There are two schools of thought. Bion addresses the group as if it is ‘coherent sludge.’ Foulkes addresses each individual as part of the group. An analogy for that is the hermit who even though he lives alone is part of a group. For without the group the role of hermit cannot exist.”

Having coached over 500 participants in over 100 programs I have never come across a participant who had nothing on which they wanted to work. The stages at which we meet these participants differ. Many are at the stage of pre-contemplation which, according to Miller’s motivational interviewing theory, is simply where they know what they don’t know. When I spoke to Kets de Vries, he remarked:

“People already know their problems. You have to find original ways to have them work on them. If you get them to make a commitment, a public statement of doing something about it, that can be very powerful. I also try to create an ‘Aha’ experience, to make connections between past and current behaviors. I try to go beyond the clinical process. It is an exploratory, iterative, and working through process.”

The question becomes how is that “aha” moment created? Here is the reflection of one coach:

“I have a structure in mind before I go in. I lay out in broad chunks how the day will go. I write welcome on the whiteboard and my email address. I define the work of the IGLC as sustainable development. I tell them I am not looking for revolution but for behavior changes. I ask them for their expectations and I then do some self-disclosure. I think this helps to set the tone of the day. I talk about my own transition to a different career and about my sabbatical. I do believe that if you lift the lid on your own life a little bit, then it sets the tone appropriately.”

This coach puts some emphasis on structure. Putting structure is a way of creating the safety discussed earlier. Going on to position his own expectations as behavioral change, not revolution, may lower the group feeling that they have to live up to the facilitator’s demands. The facilitator does not produce the group’s ideas he brings them to the surface. Moreover this coach provides self-disclosure and rationalizes it in a way that makes him part of the group or humanizes him.

8.2.2 The objectives of the coach

In order to answer my research question it was important to discern if the professionals conducting the intervention had any predispositions or an agenda for making change happen before meeting. While the outcomes would still be similar, if the coaches set out to make change then the research question would then only be answered by gaining a thorough understanding of the strategies that each individual coach deployed.

In purist terms the coach should not have objectives for the client. A wealth of information exists on the precepts and concepts that contribute to effective coaching. Not unlike psychotherapy the goal is to create an environment where the subject can
learn and grow from their insights. When the coach has an agenda to create change the participant can be disadvantaged by feeling dominated, and may even enjoy the fact of the coach being in control. Moreover, the coach then assumes that he or she has the right answers; the focus of the session is shifted to “I must find the right answer” instead of insight and learning arising (Starr, 2003).

Maintaining that neutrality in a group poses a tougher challenge not least because the other participants may not know exactly what is expected of them. Even if they do, they may stray from the rules. The coach plays a dual role in maintaining his or her neutrality and calibrating the neutrality of the group. Given that the coach has read the material of the participant before arriving how can he or she be neutral? Here is the response of one professional:

“...I tend to have a thorough preparation and identify questions or insights that may come through my mind at that time, but then I go to the session quite open minded, even when I am aware of potential difficulties (individual or collective)...I find it useful to set ‘making a difference’ as a criteria for the process with the understanding that the difference will vary in each case...the commitment of the participants to undertake and implement some level of change is often more important than the scope of the change itself.”

To this coach it is clearly important not only to be well briefed but in spite of that to put the material to one side in order to approach the subject with neutrality. Building on it further another said the following:

“The desire to achieve something with each individual. To work equally with the individuals and the group. To keep an open mind. To get the whole group engaged. To focus on the process since what will materialize at that point is not foreseeable. That each person gives something to the group and receives something from it.”

Here we see a clear illumination of the need to simultaneously balance the needs of the group with that of the participant. One new dimension creeps in, that of engagement. To summarize the objective of these two professionals is to be fully briefed with the materials available, to find relevant questions about the participant that may reveal some further insight, to have an intention to make a difference but keeping an open mind and without concern for the scope of the change, to engage the whole group, and to keep to the process and steer it as it unfolds in its unpredictable way. Furthermore, it is critical that the participants garner something from all of this and contribute to it.

In order to begin to investigate further how change arises though, one needs to take a more granular look at what can happen during the group process.

“I have a vision that during the day it will not be one coach but that six people will be involved in the coaching process. That they will be able to connect the dots between their instruments, their group projects, etc. My job is to make that connection.”

Another says:

“To get the whole group involved.”

And another:

“You have to link the task to what the group is there for.”
Introducing this element not only of group presence but group involvement and group engagement is the departure point from where group-coaching leaves dyadic coaching behind.

The role of the coach as leader in a group process is one to be dealt with and disarmed early. 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 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).

One needs to try to get to the heart of why one 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 helps instill a sense of hope and change for the future. Furthermore, listening...to the stories of others and seeing their dysfunctional patterns, helps participants recognize their own. This...paves the way for cognitive and emotional restructuring” p179 (Kets de Vries, 2007).

Typically the group provides for each other analogous examples of 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.

8.2.3 Dealing with anxiety

Bion puts groups into two categories: work groups (getting things done) and basic assumption groups (acting out primitive fantasies and preventing things from getting done).

As I have mentioned previously, the three basic assumption groups are fight-flight, dependency, and pairing (Klein, 1975). Basic assumptions are a substitute for thinking and a way to avoid the pain of reality, which would require the understanding of unconscious, psychotic processes (splitting and projective identification) in the individual. When coaching groups form we observe a combination of all of these aspects.

As discussed earlier trust and safety is a critical factor in the group process. Perhaps the pioneer of group-therapy, Foulkes, set the scene for how group-therapy should be conducted when he said that

“The answer to the question of how group concepts are applied to the individual in the group has been so far: by exposing him to the particular dynamics which prevail in the condition created by the group, and which act upon and through him. If the therapist looks after the group, the individual will look after himself” (Foulkes, 1984).
Foulkes was of the opinion that the setting in which group-therapy was conducted was correlated to its therapeutic potential. He returns to this often in his work. Broadly he means the environment in which the group meets and performs its task. The Foulkesian notion of dynamic administration has already been dealt with earlier. Beyond this the individuals often express an apprehension around revelations they may be called upon to make in the group setting. Our experience has shown that failure to address that anxiety reduces the desire of the group to dialog from the outset. To actively seek to create a safe space in which the group can function, and actively express how, relieves some of this anxiety. Here are the thoughts of a clinical psychologist:

"My most important intervention is to keep everyone on the room when they are drawing. This creates the feeling that they are all engaged in the same task and at the same time makes it safer...I have the participants describe their portraits one after the other. For me it is not safe if one person has to self disclose and share information while the others do not do that until later in the day."

Most of the other coaches I interviewed do not use this approach where every person discloses at the outset. However, there should be some flexibility in the process. That said, the following remarks are broadly representative and indeed epitomize the other responses:

"In the very first place I ask what their expectations are. I take the emotional temperature of the group. I try to demonstrate that I will take their expectations into account. I also ask them what beliefs and what understanding they have of coaching. That is because I want them to participate. I use a model from CCL which is in essence 'Challenge Support and Assess.' I let them know that there is a contract of rules. That there are rules of engagement. Not literally of course. But that confidentiality and respect and 'no judgment' are imperative. I ask them to put things through their own filter, that is to say, that when making comments about others that the commentary is expressed as their own not as a generalization. I set the time boundaries too since that is always a factor. I try to address what I see and what is there initially. It is all about setting a foundation."

Furthermore there is the issue of time. One psychoanalyst said:

"...I am very demanding on time management and boundaries. This comes from my psychoanalytic training. I never overrun. That is containment but of course it can be seen as insensitive."

In the psychoanalytic group setting the structure tends to be looser in as much as the group meets regularly for one overall session. The system in our group-coaching methodology as can be inferred from the above comment is one where each participant has a similar amount of time allotted to him or her to assure fairness and equality. This can lead to sessions ending abruptly and anxiety from the group, the facilitator, and the participant that all aspects of their issues have been covered. It is for this reason that we provide the opportunity to reflect again overnight and bring up any resonant issues the following morning in a closing one-to-one session, described earlier.

Confidentiality is stressed both at the opening presentation as described in Chapter 2 but also at the beginning of the day. We tell the participants that they own the material. We say that it is theirs and only theirs to use and that any material supplied to the coach will be returned to them at the end of the session.
Patients are typically anxious about joining a group. Members worry about sharing intimate details of their personal lives, and meeting strangers, and there are concerns about trust and safety (Rutan & Stone, 1984). The same observation can be made about people who engage in a group-coaching session. One cornerstone beneath the concept of the group process is that the group will contain the anxiety. As one professional commented when asked how he dealt with anxiety:

“Reassurance. I try to let them know that we all feel that way. They are not alone. That they are worth something. If the session is done well the group will become a support structure.”

This was built on by another comment:

“I try to remind them that we are all together and that we are all sharing this journey and have stories that create anxiety for us. I keep eye contact and use positive body language, leaning forward even touching them to raise the level of trust.”

Behr and Hearst (2006) suggest that sometimes the level of anxiety is so great that individuals may need to be dealt with between sessions. This is borne out by the following professional who makes such an intervention:

“I talk with them in the break so that the anxiety does not spread. There is generally relief when they realize that others in the group have similar issues. I very often let people choose when they want to take their turn. Anxious people often try to go early in the game. I enroll others to support them. I try to get them to see that others are comfortable sharing.”

While this intervention outside of the session is unusual, it is probably better to deal with the anxiety inside the session:

“I listen to the messages they are sending and then try to rephrase the content. I show I understood and that I have been listening. I use a range of responses from addressing it directly or being supportive to going round it. I also try to organize support from the peer group and pull in the group to help out, letting the group deal with the anxiety by proxy.”

In fact a certain amount of anxiety is not only to be expected but may be healthy. Vella (1999) posits that the conductor of a therapy group presides over what he described as a storm of unconscious destructive forces that threaten to re-emerge later during times of tension. Hence the coach has to accept a degree of anxiety while at the same time needs to keep it in check so as not to allow it to pollute the process:

“It is still important to recognize the source of the anxiety which can be found in the process itself, the nature of the feedback or participant individual situations. Different sources call for different interventions. The objective is not to ‘eliminate’ anxiety which is a contributor to the process but bring it to a manageable level.”

8.2.4 Dealing with resistance

Humans tend to resist change because an acknowledgment that we need to change something is an admission that what we are doing now is wrong. Most people would rather feel right than effective (Peltier, 2001). Thus when coaches meet their client it is likely that they will feel at best ambivalent about what they need to undertake.
Ambivalence when approaching conflictual matters is prominent in psychological work. According to Van Harreveld:

"Ambivalence is experienced as psychologically unpleasant when the positive and negative aspects of a subject are both present in a person's mind at the same time. This state can lead to avoidance or procrastination, or to deliberate attempts to resolve the ambivalence. When the situation does not require a decision to be made, people experience less discomfort even when feeling ambivalent (Van Harreveld & Van der Pligt, 2009).

In the executive coaching arena we most often see the approach-avoidance paradigm: a person knows what the right thing to do is, attempts it, it either has not worked or they do not enjoy doing it and they subsequently resist doing the right thing and fall back into an old pattern. One task of the coach is to identify that pattern of resistance and help the client to break through it.

With that said, I wanted in my research to bring forth characteristics that specifically exist during group-coaching. How does one deal with resistance to change in a group? According to one coach:

“It comes in a variety of flavors. I use my intuition when I think it is there but I mentally park it in the first instance. I bring the group into play and use their observation so that I play the role of facilitator coach. I might approach it from a different angle. I call on them (the group) to give feedback to each other especially if they have worked together in project groups. So sometimes the resistance is in context. If they are in denial, I encourage them to talk about it, to isolate the elements from their professional context and to bring in their own observations. I try hard not to provoke them, as this would typically increase the resistance."

The professional technique here is to go around the potential conflict, first by not dealing with it directly, and then by using the group as a mechanism to address the issue. Another professional provides a similar metaphor independently and builds on it by considering the possible reaction of the group:

“The choice is to acknowledge it and try to find a side entrance, or sometimes to look at it in the group and bring in the others or at other times if one cannot deal with it in the time available to encapsulate it. I try not to step in the minefield as it can have an effect on the group, so it has to be left alone sometimes.”

Rutan and Stone (1984) suggest that in the psychoanalytic group construct, therapy groups offer special advantages in facilitating the working through process, provided by the variations on a single theme via a multitude of relationships. They go on to suggest that not only do members try out different and new ways of working through conflict but moreover the group members provide instantaneous feedback on the success or failure of these approaches. Pointing out that while therapy groups are not real life they are more analogous to real life than dyadic therapy, he suggests also that in psychodynamic therapy it is the elaboration of the defenses that is the point of inquiry. This allows the patient to “make friends” with the resistance. Psychodynamic group-coaching is not altogether different. Here the words of another professional:

“My approach is therefore to acknowledge the resistance, address any specific issue that may need attention on a one-on-one basis and let the participant in fact bring the ‘confrontation’ to the surface if he/she chooses to. My role is then to contain it and pay attention to the impact on other participants. Resistance is reinforced or diminished by the level of conscious or unconscious resistance from the coach.”
It is not clear that resistance can always be dealt with effectively. To ignore it might be considered professionally bereft. It is the job of the coach to identify what needs to be done with the help of the feedback and the group and then investigate the participants’ willingness to deal with it. Most coaches stress the need to be careful when dealing with resistances. Pushing too hard is not to be recommended.

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8.2.5 Dealing with transference and counter-transference.

Transference is a phenomenon in psychoanalysis characterized by unconscious redirection of feelings for one person to another. One definition of transference is “the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship that was important in a person’s childhood.” Another definition is “the redirection of feelings and desires and especially of those unconsciously retained from childhood toward a new object” and “a reproduction of emotions relating to repressed experiences, especially of childhood, and the substitution of another person ... for the original object of the repressed impulses” (Merriam Webster, 2004).

In a therapy context, transference refers to redirection of a client’s feelings from a significant person to a therapist. Transference is often manifested as an erotic attraction toward a therapist, but can be seen in many other forms such as rage, hatred, mistrust, parent-ification, extreme dependence, or even placing the therapist in a god-like or guru status. The focus in psychodynamic psychotherapy is, in large part, the therapist and client recognizing the transference relationship and exploring what the meaning of the relationship is. Because the transference between patient and therapist happens on an unconscious level, psychodynamic therapists who are largely concerned with a patient’s unconscious material use the transference to reveal unresolved conflicts patients have with figures from their childhoods.

Counter-transference is defined as redirection of a therapist’s feelings toward a client, or more generally as a therapist’s emotional entanglement with a client (Etchegoyen, 2005). When Freud encountered counter-transference in his therapy with patients, he initially felt it was an obstacle to treatment success. What he learned was that analysis of the transference was actually the work that needed to be done. A therapist’s attunement to his own counter-transference is nearly as critical as his understanding of the transference. Not only does this help the therapist regulate his or her own emotions in the therapeutic relationship, but it also gives the therapist valuable insight into what the client is attempting to elicit in them. For example, if a therapist feels a very strong sexual attraction to a patient, he or she must understand this as counter-transference and look at how the client is attempting to elicit this reaction in him or her. Once it has been identified, the therapist can ask the client what her feelings are toward the therapist and examine the feelings the client has and how they relate to unconscious motivations, desires, or fears. As has been noted above, transference is seen to exist in all important relationships. The relationship between coach and participant is not insignificant and one expects it to appear in that setting. Peltier noted that coaches do not use transference in the same way as therapists. He did feel, however, that they still must be aware of the ways that clients behave toward them, because it provides important clues about the way they behave in important work
relationships (Peltier, 2001). Coaches may not only meet executives who have remedial issues. They may also meet executives who they envy or embody aspects of themselves they aspire to. In this way counter-transference is as important. Furthermore, as Rogers suggests, as therapists (or in this case coaches) witness the struggle within the client to change, the therapist may become in “awe” of the client who may have difficulty accepting this (Rogers, 1961).

Managing transference and counter-transference in the group setting adds another layer of complexity to what is already complicated. For example, in group-therapy, the therapist may consider the group as a whole, the transference reactions between group members, and moreover the transference and counter-transference between therapist and clients (Hough, 2002). The group therapist will usually have extended timeframes to witness and diagnose this since sessions take place weekly over many months. Indeed, the twin notions of transference and countertransference may play a substantial part in how the group forms and therefore proceeds:

“The unconscious common group tension may therefore be described as the total of the various unconsciously determined pushes and pulls exerted by the members of the group upon one another and upon the therapist, in leading to a certain structuring of the group.” (Ezriel, 1959)

My research sought to find out how professional coaches dealt with this aspect in the short time that they have—typically a day. Kets de Vries helpfully distils this into a simplified model:

He explains the model as specifically utilized in executive programs:

“Thinking consciously about the triangle of relationships helps participants clarify those intolerable feelings that originally were experienced towards family members in the distant past, are repeated in relation to the person’s current life and during the course of the workshop become directed towards the other participants and the workshop leaders. This triangle, highlighting the similarity of the past relationships to what happens in the present, provides a conceptual structure for assessing patterns of response” p231 (Kets de Vries, 2007).

This passage neatly links the notion of transference and counter-transference to the executive group scenario that I am studying. I wanted to know to what extent coaches who were psychodynamically trained utilized the theory. I posed the question “How do you manage transference and counter-transference?”. According to one respondent:

“I try to be aware of it. I try to keep a camera on what is happening to me. I also try hard to step back and see what is happening at the group level as if looking in from the outside. This is not easy. ”

Another coach concurred:

“It is always there. They will come in with some. For the most part it happens in your mind but is not interpreted. It might guide you, for instance if it is hostile, you might name it and ask a question around it. You might get a clue. But it is to be treated with kid gloves, unlike in analysis. I treat it as private evidence and use it cautiously.”

Another response highlights again that to deal with it may be a derailer and disturb the group but is suggestive of a mode of dealing with it constructively:
“I am aware of it. If I feel it too much between the participant and me I try to deflect it towards the group. I will not put it on the table. It becomes too theoretical and then one has to stop the group process. This would lead them to be both in and out of the process at the same time (which would not be helpful). I wait until the end and then I might deal with it.”

Finally, one response incorporates some of the above, building on it a stage further by delineating how far to utilize it and introducing a Hippocratic idiom to support it:

“Difficult question. Not sure I ‘manage’ either aspect but I believe I have enough awareness interestingly more on counter transference than transference. There are definitely times when these aspects are at play and I can feel the impact. I think I have so far been able to avoid any direct impact in the group process but it has led me to consider some personal aspects mainly related to transference. I therefore do not feel fully equipped to manage these aspects but keeping clear limitations on ‘how far not to go’ limits possible damage. ‘Do no harm’ to others and myself apply in these circumstances.”

It is tempting for the last word on this subject to turn to Bion. Bion was not sure that there was such a thing as a group transference demanding what he called “a good deal of evidence from groups” for it to be considered a fact, but nevertheless put a pragmatic slant on what he experienced saying that we are constantly affected by what we feel the attitude to be of the group to ourselves, and are consciously or unconsciously swayed by it (Bion, 1961).

8.2.6 Dealing with affect

In my experience there have been countless examples during group-coaching where emotions can become heightened. The most frequent is sorrow, but there have been outbursts of anger, and to a lesser degree frustration, ecstasy, boredom, and even fear. Given the time limited nature of the intervention I was interested to discover how professionals dealt with emotion. While emotion is a normal human reaction, executives are unused to dealing with it close up and often have a limited capacity to respond appropriately. Armstrong (2004) argues that the emotional world of organizational life is split off from the task and that emotions are a kind of extraneous “noise” that needs containing or managing. It is therefore unsurprising that when executives experience high emotion in what is essentially a business setting they are likely to feel ambivalent. Most often, executives in a heightened emotional situation are taken aback and turn toward the facilitator to manage the situation, producing the idealization defense. Moreover, if Bion was right, then as groups flit between the three basic assumptions referred to earlier then typically in these emotional situations they adopt the position of the group dependent on the powerful leader (Bion, 1961). When I questioned Kets de Vries, he said the following:

“It is acceptable to be tearful. I keep people on their toes. I constantly ask people questions. I try to do it in a non-threatening way. My advantage is reputational so I have to be careful. What is interesting to me is to see other males’ reactions when a male cries. They may feel a sense of discomfort. It is my role to make clear that it is OK to cry—also for men”.

8.2.7 The coach’s approach to storytelling

Organizational theory has been late in taking an interest in stories that people tell in and about organizations (Denning, 2007). During many of the sessions I have
witnessed the participants have relished telling stories about themselves and their lives. They have often anecdotally reported being astonished not only that they had been willing to go as deep as they had in revealing aspects of themselves, but also how it had contributed to their understanding not only of themselves but of others’ journeys. I felt in my research it would be important to uncover how other professionals relied on and encouraged storytelling and what role it played in their sessions. Gabriel sums up the use of stories as a path to understand individuals thus:

“As avenues to the truth, stories are of questionable value. As signs of what they believe to be true and what they want to be true, stories are absolutely invaluable. Instead of offering us ‘facts of information’ they offer us ‘facts of experience,’ merging wish fulfilling fantasy with reality. Hence the truth in stories is not to be found in the events that they describe but in the meanings they contain. Psychoanalysis, with its techniques of interpretation of dreams, symptoms, works of art and other phenomena is uniquely equipped to reveal some of the meanings of stories...” (Gabriel, 1999)

As one coach said:

“Because you appeal to peoples gut not to their brain. You are not in telling style when you relate a story. You are expressing a concept in your own words. When you ‘tell’ you are limiting your hit rate of impact. When you relate stories however you allow people to make their own connections plus stories contain emotions. People listen to stories in a different way. It makes things visual for them, and one’s voice becomes more musical.”

Coaches who want to use these stories as an extended instrument in their sessions must be prepared to sacrifice at least temporarily some of the core values of their trade (for example reliance on hard facts or data) and adopt instead a rather alien attitude toward their respondents and their stories. They must rid themselves of the assumption that quality data are objective, reliable, and accurate and must be prepared to engage with the emotions and the meanings that reside in the story itself. Faced with distortions and ambiguities, coaches must resist the temptation of setting the record straight. Instead, they must learn to engage with the story, seeking to establish the narrative needs, and through them the psychological and individual needs, which distortions, ambiguities, and inaccuracies serve. Kets de Vries said the following when I interviewed him:

“In public, telling your own story is cathartic. And it is a vicarious experience for others. It is powerful. You listen to other people’s inflection points. It creates greater self-awareness. It helps you to become a reflective practitioner. It makes you organize your thoughts.”

Elsewhere, Kets de Vries and Korotov refer to storytelling as an enable of vicarious learning, use of projection and a way to identify tools to better understand themselves. (Kets de Vries & Korotov, 2007b) This organizing idea is relevant. At times participants can use the opportunity to tell stories as a defence mechanism to avoid getting to the point they would rather avoid. One professional commented on this process and harks back to the basic assumptions of Bion:

“Metaphors and symbolism are very important. The portrait can sometimes capture a story when it is freshly laid. It can be useful to stop them dead as soon as they have said it. Nevertheless it has to be linked to the task and in the service of the task.”
So while the job of the coach is to maintain a link to the task, it might be suggested that even in avoiding the task there is learning for both coach and participant. It could be that talking about shaping experiences, receiving feedback, and telling life stories is a cathartic change mechanism in itself and helps participants to undergo a journey of understanding. This following comment from another professional takes this idea further:

“It has a very important role, it is key. Stories are where you construct your reality, how you make sense of the world and of your life. When people make choices about how or what stories they tell these are all conscious or unconscious decisions. These decisions are taking place as they tell the story. Storytelling is the tool. Others listening have the chance to connect cognitively and emotionally and thus they begin to understand you.”

This brings in the role of the listener. Often the listeners will ask questions and try to fill in the gaps. If the gaps have been left unconsciously, the teller may derive insight from the questions. Kets de Vries sums it up thus:

“Listening to stories is a powerful learning experience. It allows for the vicarious instruction of role modeling and gives empathic understanding of the questions the speaker is struggling with…As a form of healing, storytelling and listening to others’ stories is second to none” (Kets de Vries, 2007).

8.2.8 The coach’s perspective on change

While as discussed above the coach does not nor should have an agenda, participants approach the leadership development process knowing they will receive feedback on their behavior. It is both implicit and explicit that they will be required to address the feedback they receive, and attempt to change thereafter. My research led me to try to understand whether the coach could adequately judge if a person was open or likely to change and how they might react to that. In the therapeutic process, Rutan and Stone (1984) posit that in order for change to happen patients need to regress a little. This happens differently in a dyadic process to a group process where regression is stimulated by stranger anxiety and group process. Their position is that the presence of a network of relationships rather than the one to one with the therapist increases the opportunities for multiple emotional experiences that can produce change. It is nevertheless a hard thing to judge:

“One is so often wrong. People who are the most resistant can change the most. Sometimes you can challenge people not to change but they do anyway to prove you wrong. One tries to assess the flexibility in a person but I don’t make bets on it.”

Another coach talked about resistance and how the group can be instrumental in change:

“Some are like polished surfaces and reflect things straight back. Others relate strongly to the comments of the fellow participants and a type of mulling over can happen. I feel these people have more insight and are likely to change.”

One coach talked about the different components of the session (and of what happens outside the session) as pathways to understand the change process:

“Participants reflective processes during the session, at times conversations during breaks give a sense of willingness to change. In the absence of a structured follow-up action, I really do not find that I have a way to assess how likely the change is to
happen. Confrontation and integration are really the only two parts of the process we can somewhat evaluate.”

Rutan and Stone (1984) highlight two specific factors that contribute to change in the group environment, namely a cohesive group, and interpersonal learning by which they mean the ability of individuals within the group to communicate what is required. Foulkes, in turn, talked about groups as “halls of mirrors” (Foulkes, 1961). Group members reflect back to each other salient truths when the feedback is exposed. In psychoanalytic terms this is known as confrontation. Facilitating change though is never easy. Consider the following:

“From their interactions in the group, I see people with great action plans who do nothing. Others don’t have too much and then do a lot. It might paralyze me if I thought about it too much. I encourage small change. But in the end it belongs to them. I concentrate on creating the right space.”

That final remark refers the reader back to the importance of dynamic administration in Chapter 3.

“I am usually optimistic that people will act on their insights. Can I predict it? No! I am often surprised by the comments people make. Most people try to do something about it. At the end of the session I tend not to know what the effect will be. I think it is important to ask questions that they do not have the answer for which might cause the possibility of change. People can sometimes make the changes many months later by acting on that insight or reflecting on that difficult question. “

8.2.9 Indications of success

As a practitioner it is difficult to know if the session has been successful, indeed to understand what that really means. Is it a good rating from the participants, a good feeling that people have gained some insight? Is it only measurable if and when you become aware that each person has made a positive change in their life? As I have stated previously, it is not the purpose of this research to measure change or efficacy. That is a subject for future research. However, practitioners often have a reasonable view of their work and know if the session has worked.

“My intuition is the best gauge. Sometimes you see change during the session itself e.g. improved listening or slower speech. Sometimes we ourselves are the best instruments though. On a good day I will feel exhausted like how a farmer feels when he has ploughed furrows. On a bad day I will feel sort of emotionally drained exhaustion…”

This comment was echoed elsewhere:

“...often a combination of feeling tired and energized…”

“...I can feel drained but elated…”

“Personal satisfaction occurs when I am energized but at the same time tired.”

“On a good day I am energized by the group. ”

These remarks are suggestive that a good day creates a sort of energetic contagion within the group which can transfer to the coach. A less successful day tends to drain the coach, as if effort has been required to make things happen.
Thematically two other measures of a good session as observed by the practitioner was a feeling that the group had connected and bonded and that the individuals had received some insight and learning.

“If they have realized certain things that they had not been aware of. If the resistance has been mitigated. If they had applied the vision I had at the beginning of the day and truly gave feedback to each other.”

“To bring someone to a realization or if they decide to do something differently. If they have truly connected to the session and participated.”

“In short one-off programs I would go back to my own measure of success in terms of seeing at least one participant going away with a different perspective.”

Summing up the above it would seem that there is a desire on behalf of the professionals that the group would truly connect with each other. Moreover, the essence of the work seems to be that each individual would leave with an insight they had not been previously aware of and/or would decide to act differently.

8.2.10 Discussion

Part of the purpose of interviewing professional practitioners was to ascertain what level of overlap exists between pure executive coaching and psychodynamic psychotherapy in this intervention. In executive coaching, elements like transference, safe space and the role of storytelling may not be in focus. Moreover, in executive coaching, there is rarely group interplay as it is more often than not dyadic. The commentary above highlights that the psychodynamic training which the practitioners of this particular intervention use, and which relies on psychotherapeutic theory, is material to the session and changes its complexion beyond that of a usual executive coaching session. By listening and recording the testimony of the professional practitioners, I draw the following conclusions which I propose as a contribution to the theory: The practitioners come from many different backgrounds, both culturally and professionally, and differ in age and experience. Nevertheless, they utilize this group-coaching construct and achieve broadly similar results. The key components are the same in terms of content: A psychodynamic approach (including storytelling and revisiting the past), a group approach (using the training each has had in group theory and group dynamics), and a coaching orientation (meaning the participant knows what they need to do, and delivers something actionable). All of this is wrapped in a contained, transitional environment which offers the participant a certain type of experience. I hypothesize finally that if the coach has the appropriate skills in psychodynamics and ability to manage a group with all its fluid dynamics and inferences, he or she will, if they construct this process similarly, achieve a consistent and positive set of outcomes.