INTRODUCTION

Executive education is an ever-shifting landscape that only the canniest of organizational leaders would try to grasp. Its beginnings in the late 19th century at Wharton and later Harvard were essentially a formative attempt to take executives at the senior level further and quicker. It was around this time that the first MBAs were created.

Since the Second World War executive education has proliferated into three broad areas: On-campus education, corporate universities and customized in-house training by consultants. Each has its merits and demerits. University executive education is deemed to be stronger in global reach; corporate universities are better promoters of thought leadership, whereas consulting firms show up stronger in areas such as alignment with strategy and business results. Notwithstanding this, the plethora of choice is potentially perplexing.

My own journey into this world has been circuitous. For over 20 years I worked in the City of London’s financial district. At the time when I joined this closed society, a strictly academic education was less valued than an intangible: common sense. Consequently, development had an experiential feel and apprenticeship was common. Fast learning on the job garnered more respect than academic qualifications. In the early 1990s, however, the terrain began to shift. American banks came to town with a more sophisticated and structural approach not only to business but also to executive training. Fortuitously at this time, I moved from a wholly European Bank, ABN AMRO, to an American one with global aspirations, Goldman Sachs. Both were to pursue divergent paths over the ensuing years and I was in a position to observe the differences close up.

As soon as I arrived at Goldman, education and re-education started. There were in-house functional trainings, involvement in the recruitment process, (previously only done by senior managers), and inclusion in all aspects of business from IT decisions to strategic planning. This was a marked difference to my prior experience at ABN. What was most striking was the level at which the bar was set for new entrants. Over the first five years of the 90s, Goldman went from hiring streetwise professionals to excluding anyone without a substantial academic record. What became interesting as the firm developed and grew was that these new recruits, who were quickly fleshing out a globally expanding firm, were hungry to learn more and Goldman was eager to reward them. At this time I was co-leading the European Equities business. It was in time to grow from 20 people to over 200 employees and with a global spread.

In early 2000, just after the puncture of the dot-com bubble, I was invited to join an internal executive education program at Goldman Sachs. Unlike many of the other trainings I had attended that concerned themselves with functional skills, this was billed simply as a leadership journey. The faculty were two professors from INSEAD, both of whom had clinical psychological training. We were flown to Connecticut and ensconced in a fine hotel for three days. What unfolded was for me and to most of the other participants, a revelation. It was experiential in nature and forms the basis for much of what I researched thereafter.
It was at this seminar I decided that my life would thereafter take an entirely different course. It was reflective, active, and intense. It was a group process in which each member would engage cognitively and emotionally. I found it profoundly moving and unexpected. Many of us returned from that course and made significant changes to our lives both professionally and personally. For my part I moved away from a career in business to one in people development, staying with the bank as head of leadership development for the equities division for a further three years.

At the same time I travelled to INSEAD on several occasions. The same professors I had met at Goldman were in the process of creating a leadership center where executives attending open enrolment programs and later company specific programs would experience a similar group process to the one I had been through, as part of the overall management program experience. By that time I had trained as a coach and consultant and was able to work first hand with these executives. Admittedly, notwithstanding my own experiences, I was profoundly sceptical of how much could conceivably be achieved. My supposition was that a more intense, and well tested one-to-one coaching experience would be more efficacious than a group one with all its inherent instability and randomness. Looking back, that was probably a product of my own insecurity.

Over the last few years I have worked more closely and increasingly with groups in these executive sessions. The process developed from simple group-coaching sessions in 2000, to a rigorous and structured process with follow-ups, peer learning, psychologically reflective exercises, action planning and, at times, group reconnection. The reception this part of the program has received at INSEAD has been outstanding. To date over 8,500 executives have participated, on whom we have collected data.

Leadership is a critical building block in executive education. Marketing, strategy, branding, and finance are knowledge requisites for leaders. The ability to put that knowledge into action by engaging others is something that can be learned but not taught. Participants are therefore invited to reflect on their preferred leadership style, and in the presence of a group of peers deconstruct, define, and refine it. The starting point of that is to understand themselves. This experience can be intensely emotional, moving, problematic, joyful, and profound. What I have discovered is that many executives make lasting changes in their lives as a result.

I think this is important. Building in this leadership development process to executive programs gives the participant a useful tool with which to operate on return to organizational life. Without the process, they might only have accumulated a plethora of theoretical information without the means of implementation. By putting themselves under the microscope, recognizing where and how they are most and least effective, and working on that in a structured environment is a critical building block not only in making them better leaders but making organizations more efficient.

I feel it is necessary to explain how elements of this narrative join together and triggered my interest in researching this subject. From the outset, when I left to do the training at Goldman Sachs, it became clear that the company was prepared to invest a substantial amount in my colleagues and me. Back of the envelope arithmetic shows that the cost of our group of ten people alone cost around $250,000 back in 1999. We did a second module that cost around $200,000. Ten other cohorts did the program. Thus the cost to Goldman at that time to put 100 executives through this program was around $4m. When you look further afield these numbers pale.

According to the Harvard Business Review, GE spends around $1bn per year on training and development. If this number seems stupendous, a study by Bourgoyne at Lancaster University Management School estimated that the global spend, purely on management and leadership development, is between $36–60bn or around 1% of global GDP, corroborated by a similar number elicited by a study in Personnel Today in 2004. (Reade & Thomas, 2004).
In considering these numbers I started to wonder if the return on capital was really evident, especially given that one executive resigned shortly after our program and I too started to consider a radical career change. If leadership development matters then what kind of leadership development, at what cost and does it really work? Around the time that I followed this program, a study by Csoka showed that 91% of senior managers surveyed felt leadership was a critical growth factor, whereas only 8% of the same considered leadership at their place of work to be excellent (Csoka, 1997). If the enormous figures spent above were leading to an 8% satisfaction rate then what, if anything, constituted leadership development worth experiencing? Many of the participants in the Goldman Sachs program went on to develop in their careers, whether moving to senior management positions, leaving to pursue entrepreneurial opportunities or, like me, making significant career shifts. To experience this program, one might say “something happened but I am not sure what.” I began to wonder what the ingredients were that constituted such an effective intervention.

I later learned that the intervention was not so much “magic dust” being sprinkled liberally around but was in fact based on a set of fairly rigorous clinical psychological principles. The sessions followed a certain protocol and were administrated in a predictable way. The exploration of the self was thorough but relied on the Hippocratic axiom to “do no harm.” Furthermore, the outcomes were tangible. An operational action plan was more or less demanded as the price of participation. It was far from woolly and therefore in essence replicable.

The program also embodied as a thread that ran through each session (but also linked different sessions) an exploration of the “below surface” issues, the irrational processes that at times serve to control our actions. This was my introduction to psychodynamics and I was fascinated. Each session seemed to be perfectly pitched to leave the participant on the threshold of something new. I wondered how such a technology could be so broadly applied to a range of smart, seemingly rational executives with even results.

Until that time I had been a businessman. Any training I had undertaken had utilized purely behavioral and operational models. It felt unorthodox (and yet exciting) to be introduced to psychology in the workplace. With hindsight that notion is preposterous. All human interaction is based on psychology and organizations are populated with humans. How could psychology not play a part? However, it seemed that at the intersection of psychology and organizations some interesting concepts could be found that lay beyond the traditional boundaries of executive education. As it turns out psychology has been used in management theory since the end of the Second World War when countries and organizations were in the process of rebuilding themselves rapidly.

Through the work of Lewin, Bion (1948, 1961) with his emphasis on groups as composite, as well as holistic systems organizations such as the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, arose the process of what is now known as action research in organizations: namely to explore organizational life using a clinical approach. Psychodynamics is only one perspective among a wide-ranging set of disciplines that organizational psychology engenders. The field, known as Industrial and Organizational Psychology was defined in 1968 by Blum and Naylor as “simply the application or extension of psychological facts and principles to the problems concerning human beings operating within the context of business and industry” (Naylor & Blum, 1968). Within the field of I-O Psychology as it is known are included such areas as psychometrics, compensation training and training evaluation, motivation, work/life balance, leadership and executive coaching and diversity.

Over time I have become increasingly interested in how one can create what psychoanalysts describe as the “good hour,” in this case in a group-coaching context. In the knowledge that, in reality, such things are not possible, what really aroused my curiosity was how one might perfect a
process so that the greatest amount of participants would benefit and, most importantly, achieve a possibility of effecting lasting change. The unit of analysis is of course not only the participant but also the coach. I was curious to research what tools and methodology the coach might need to deploy in order to get a consistently good result, not only as reflected by the view of the individual participant at the end of the program (when emotions and the feel-good factor probably run higher) but also when the follow-up was undertaken several months later. To what extent did participants follow through on their commitments to change and what affected that?

Much is made in advertising of executive educational programs of the transitional nature of such experiences. Countless testimonials combine with highly assertive charges that each program is better than the next. Unpicking that could prove to be infinitely complex. What I have set out to do in this piece of research is to try to understand how leadership change is effected on short-term executive programs using a psychodynamic group-coaching methodology. Deconstructing this part of the program from different perspectives seemed to be the best way to achieve it.

Thus, I have looked at the key elements of a successful group-coaching intervention: Psychodynamics as a tool or driver of the process, groups as a context, and coaching as the method to achieve change. I looked at each of these key elements in turn in order to properly elucidate their importance. I have conducted a series of interviews with participants who have been through the program to elicit their views on how and why things worked the way they did. I have interviewed practitioners from the field. Moreover, among others, I have interviewed Manfred Kets de Vries, the pioneer of the process, in order to define further how such a process works.

One of the biggest challenges has been that practically nothing has hitherto been written about this subject. Group-therapy (a useful analog) is not group-coaching. Neither is psychodynamic psychotherapy. Nevertheless, aspects of both combine to provide some of the necessary ingredients of this clinical intervention. Academic references of the specific intervention are negligible. As a result, the evidence has been largely qualitative and metaphorical. While this may be off-putting to those who require quantitative support for the thesis, to others it may act as a springboard for further inquiry.

Coaching as distinct from training became increasingly popular after the 1970s. Between the 1930s and 1970s a number of general research papers focusing on the benefits of coaching in organizations surfaced (Zeus & Skiffington, 2002). In spite of the first coaching citations dating back to the 1930s, the bulk of academic coaching literature and research has been written since the year 2000 (Grant, 2009). According to Grant until May 2007 there were 519 articles listed in the Psychinfo database that focused on business, executive and life coaching, excluding sports, forensic or educational coaching (Grant, 2009). Between 1937 and 1999 only 93 articles were published, whereas between May 1999 and May 2009 425 articles were published. There has, however, been a paucity of randomized outcome studies, the gold standard of academic research, as I have touched on in the literature review. It is therefore necessary to satisfy ourselves with other aspects of coaching theory, while keeping in mind that it is nascent.

In Fig. 1 below I have described a basic model of coaching adapted from Grant (Grant & Cavanagh, 2007). This model can broadly be applied to most goal-oriented coaching in the executive setting.
Coaching definition

Coaching in its executive or business form is widespread and I will make some remarks about its aims. Douglas and McCauley (1999) define the aim of coaching as “sustained cognitive, emotional and behavioral changes that facilitate goal attainment and performance enhancement, either in one’s work or personal life.” Earlier debate focused on whether coaching was instructional or facilitative (Druckman & Bjork, 1991; Parsloe, 1995). Whitmore, in 2003 proposed that coaching was a way of unlocking a person’s potential and helping them to learn rather than teaching them (Whitmore, 2003). Hudson (1999) supports this and Kilburg (2000) gives a complete rendering of the role of the executive coach, albeit with a psychologically informed perspective. It is generally accepted that this facilitating role is the methodology that should generally be deployed in an executive coaching relationship. Stober and Grant (2006) offer a number of core themes. Coaching should:

1. Be collaborative and egalitarian not authoritarian.
2. Focus on goal solutions and attainment not just analysis of problems.
3. Assume that clients do not have clinically significant mental health problems.
4. Emphasize collaborative goal setting.
5. Understand that coaches have learning facilitation expertise not high levels of domain specific expertise.
6. See the coaching process as a systematic process directed at fostering the ongoing self-directed learning of the client. Dailey (1984) cites the underpinning necessities that clients are autonomous, have a foundation of life experiences, have a readiness to engage in reflective practice, and learn and wish to be treated with respect.

*Coaching taxonomy*

The field being new creates a challenge, as theories abound as to the optimal techniques required to create the conditions for change. As I have stated, I do not seek to claim in this research that the psychodynamically driven approach is optimal or better than any other methodology, merely that it is effective and to see if it is scientifically valid.

Coaching techniques include the systemic approach, positive psychology approach, and cognitive behavioral (Stober & Grant, 2006). Because of the lack of randomized trials we are not yet in a position to judge which work best in which circumstances. Indeed Stober and Grant even go so far as to argue that the whole coaching field does not lend itself to the same type of evaluation that exists in the clinical medical field, the same point as Wampold (2001) argues similarly for psychotherapy.

In Fig. 2 I have described the psychodynamic group-coaching process as a series of interlocking gears. If psychodynamics is the drive wheel (or tool) that is used to drive the process, then groups are the setting or context and coaching is the method to get the work done. Common to all is the coaching methodology. The driver, psychodynamics, is in the end a choice that will be elected by the practitioner according to his or her level of skill and training. It is not the purpose of this research to argue in favor of one particular methodology over another.
Coaching vs therapy: Key differences

It may be useful for the reader at this point to differentiate between the counseling or therapy model for achieving change and the coaching consulting model. Hitherto, in the research, I have examined the psychotherapeutic approach as an analog to executive coaching. While the intention may be the same, there are also significant differences that need to be highlighted before examining the different approaches to coaching. Table 1 reflects one view of the essential differences between a therapeutic counseling relationship and individual executive coaching as it is generally accepted.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Therapy</th>
<th>Coaching</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past focus</strong></td>
<td>Present focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive orientation</td>
<td>Active orientation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Troubled clientele, possible pathology</strong></td>
<td>High functioning clientele</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intra-psychic problem</strong></td>
<td>Person/environmental mix problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information private</td>
<td>Information possible shared with stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client is person you work with</strong></td>
<td>Client may be organization, HR, or person</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Client must feel enriched</strong></td>
<td>Client must feel enhanced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Confidentiality is absolute</strong></td>
<td>Confidentiality is complex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 minute sessions</td>
<td>Variable length sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work in therapist’s office</td>
<td>Neutral site or executives office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rigid boundaries</td>
<td>Flexible boundaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work through personality issues</strong></td>
<td>Work around personality issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client chooses therapist</td>
<td>Organization may choose coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 1 Differentiating individual coaching from therapy
Adapted from Peltier (2001)

In the table above are the key distinctions between therapy and coaching (Bluckert, 2005; Peltier, 2001; Sperry, 1993). The bold type in the therapy column indicates where psychodynamic coaching distinguishes itself from the standard practice of executive coaching and might constitute a third column. I propose that psychodynamic coaching lies at the intersection of psychotherapy and coaching. The West and Milan model below, from 2001, is premised on the view that the development coach draws primarily on two related disciplines—consulting and counseling (where counseling is synonymous with psychotherapy)—and synthesizes these into his or her practice (West & Milan, 2001). Their model, which they refer to as a “marriage of two disciplines,” looks like Fig. 3 below:

![Fig. 3 The West & Milan “Marriage of two disciplines” model](image)

It can be assumed that psychodynamic coaching lies somewhere at the interface of pure behavioral coaching and a consulting relationship. But that said, it is a means to an end. As Peltier (2001) says, there is a danger that when a coach becomes associated with Freud, coaching in an organization may become linked to damaged...
executives, or remedial work. He goes on to say that if coaching works best for executives looking for an edge, and for ways to expand their effectiveness, then the trick is to integrate analytic or dynamic thinking into the relationship without “pathologizing” the client. It is for this reason that the psychodynamic aspects of the intervention are downplayed in the introduction. From my experience, executives seem to be mistrustful of psychology.

Coaching is, however, widely practised in a number of ways. In Table 2 using a breakdown analysis, I have shown three types of coaching used in the executive setting and referencing the simple gears and cogs (Fig. 2 above). The list is far from exhaustive, particularly since most coaching is still done individually and practitioners may use a variety of different methods to make change occur.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TOOL</th>
<th>Psychodynamic Group-coaching</th>
<th>Behavioral Group-coaching</th>
<th>Holistic or Systemic Team Coaching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CONTEXT</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>METHOD</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>Coaching</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Table 2 Three types of coaching used in the executive setting

Psychodynamic coaching

Kampa and White (2002) summarized five empirical studies. They stated that executive coaching may positively impact individual productivity at the most senior levels, that the productivity has leverage for the whole organization, and that coaching results in increased self-awareness and development, and more effective leadership. What is not yet clear is which approaches to coaching are more effective than others. Passmore (2007) makes a case for an integrative model, adding the caveat that sophisticated approaches appear limited. His model hypothesizes multiple approaches: cognitive, behavioural, and the incorporation of unconscious processes, blending them into multiple streams.

It should be noted in the light of Passmore’s model that the psychodynamic group-coaching approach neither rules out nor expressly includes any of the above methods. Moreover, psychodynamic group-coaching will only be effective in certain situations. Since the views of many of the writers on executive coaching hold that the primary objective of executive coaching is to enhance behavioral change in the workplace, the coach and/or sponsor will likely determine the methodology desired. As a practitioner I have been told often that a certain executive might resist a “psychological approach,” or that a different coaching client would like to understand the root of the issue and where it comes from. These signposts are helpful in creating the initial coaching “contract” whereby one forms what is known in psychotherapeutic terms as a working alliance.