

Brief Executive Coaching

by Jan Ardui

A somewhat provocative way to summarize this article is to begin by presenting three mistakes often committed by a coach in any form of coaching:

1. Trying to change the coachee
2. Claiming to have understood the coachee's problem
3. Coming up with effective solutions to increase his or her performance

The Brief Executive Coaching approach presented here follows a different avenue that is not interested in or directly focused on changing the coachee even if this is apparently extremely desirable.

The three processes used with key questions are, in short :

1. Explore what is present:
 - How is it possible to have such a problem?
 - How is it possible that having such a problem makes complete sense?
2. Deepen what is present:
 - What needs to be present for the coachee to have this problem?
 - What needs to be present for the coachee to continue operating, even with this problem?
 - What needs to be present in this context so that the coachee can keep an eye on this problem?
3. Utilize what is present:
 - How is it possible to access attributes that can be attained in one context and transferred to another situation?
 - What is the difference between someone who is excellent in a particular field (manager, expert, chef ...) and someone mediocre?
 - How can we reorganize the "ingredients" to create another dish?

Foreword

In this article I wish to share with you a summary of the experiences I have been able to deploy over the last fifteen years in the field of executive coaching (since 1994, I have had the privilege of coaching over a hundred managers in companies in Belgium, France, Russia, Italy, and Morocco). A coach accompanies coachees for a short period during which the latter must be able to make a leap in their performance level as well as their specific role identity.

So, I have decided to begin with the example of my first coaching at a company. With an undeniable dose of luck, this coaching proved a success. The initial thoughts that inspired me, since confirmed by more and more sessions in companies, eventually helped me to develop a method that uses and decodes the dynamics at work on the professional plane, and gives a positive result as measured by both coachees and their close circle.

1. Executive Coaching of the CFO of an insurance company

History

Seventeen years ago, at my NLP institute 'In Mind' in Antwerp, the training courses for Practitioners and Master Practitioners in NLP attracted many business professionals who wanted to improve their communication skills and their influence on their employees.

There I met Monique L., Director of Human Resources at an insurance company, very excited about the teaching and power of NLP. She invited me to train managers from her company, particularly in 'soft' skills (communicating, motivating, delegating, asserting, having patience, listening openly...) for leadership. At the end of this training, having acquired sufficient credibility, the CEO asked me to coach his Chief Financial Officer (CFO).

The interview with the CEO was very tense. This gentleman – a Dutchman – had been appointed CEO to restore order in the Brussels department and break the old "*crocodile mentality*" that prevailed there.

Upon his arrival, he had tried to exert an influence on his CFO who had become the very symbol of that spirit of favoritism that hinges on a strong hierarchy. A vicious circle had established itself in which the more the CEO pushed his CFO towards a change in mentality, the more the latter became anchored in his stubbornness, becoming more and more aloof. Meanwhile, the CFO felt more and more comfortable in his position which he kept thanks to a strong financial and technical reputation.

The CEO was prepared to consider the dismissal of his CFO while knowing that it would cost the company a fortune; (seniority pay and the favors he had stacked up for himself during his 18 years would amount to a heavy burden).

The CEO asked me if I was willing to work with this hopeless case with a short deadline: 'This is his last chance to change his behavior towards his colleagues and subordinates.' And so I accepted a contract for 3 sessions of 3 hours to try to reverse the stance and mentality of his CFO. Without really knowing all the implications of this request, I made it a condition of this mission that the CEO was perfectly clear vis-à-vis his manager, and he made it clear that that was a last chance.

14 days later I began my first session.

The first session

'Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.' James Baldwin

I found myself in front of a 49-year-old man, impeccably dressed and very formal in his general attitude.

'You're here as a coach to try to change me ... I am at your disposal.'

This first sentence – typical of coaching requested by a company and not by the person in question – already expresses a coachee's ambiguous attitude towards the coaching process.

My answer was clear and unambiguous: *'I'm not here to try to change you and it is I who am at your disposal.'*

The goal I set myself for this first session was to create an environment of trust in which Gérard could connect with the plight he found himself in.

Two interventions proved important to achieve this goal:

- Asking questions that would lead the coachee towards his current situation.
- Providing reflective feedback to create visibility of the present.

During our conversation, repeatedly, Gérard oscillated between two attitudes: the fact of having someone open, interested in his experience and his point of view, stimulated in him an association with his present; at the same time, he asked me regularly if there really was time to explore this present, worried that it would take too long.

'If we don't have much time, we need to go very slowly to avoid wasting time by trying to go too fast!'

Another **ambiguity** was strongly present in him: he could not conceive of being perceived as a problem for the company, but at the same time he was fully aware of the seriousness of his situation. This was expressed by moments of great resistance towards the coaching process.

I would put this information to him through reflective feedback as important pieces of the jigsaw we were assembling.

During this first session, as a coach, I gave myself a lot of freedom to combine two ways of being present:

- I was present with great **compassion**. I could really feel the frustration, hopelessness, and feelings of injustice that Gérard was expressing both explicitly and implicitly.
- I was **ruthless** at times. I confronted Gérard with his irresponsibility for letting the situation get out of hand over the years, distancing himself from his colleagues in times of conflict, due to his rigidity.

At the end of the session, I was able to explain to Gérard why we had taken a third of the time, "just" to explore what was present inside him, in him and with him, and where there existed a basic presupposition for this work.

Before having really appreciated what one is doing and what one feels in the **present moment**, all processes of change are useless.

Consequently, I asked Gérard to do the following **exercise** in view of our second session planned for a fortnight later: finding out what good reasons he had not to change, not to budge, when the situation was so serious.

The second session

'A certain freedom comes out of the recognition of what is necessarily present. From this recognition stems the knowledge of how to act.'
Gregory Bateson

During the first session we instilled an attitude of openness to "be present with what is now," and we left again from that state to explore a little more in depth.

Another assumption of the coaching process is that the two protagonists are in a relationship of adult to adult: we consider coachees as people **able to** take responsibility, to tackle problems and make effective decisions. In his leadership, Gérard was an example of the opposite.

'How is it possible to be so blocked, frustrated and rigid? '

'How is it that being so blocked, frustrated and rigid *makes complete sense?* '

These two questions were used to deepen Gérard's **mental understanding and emotional acceptance** with respect to his current stance.

We found two fundamental reasons that formed the nub and were the source of the present situation:

1. Gérard – without being aware of it – worked with a clear separation between the *task* component and the *relationship* component. He was not able to recognize the difficulties of others in their relationship with him, when – in his opinion – his own work was excellent. For him, focusing on relational elements was a way to escape professional liability.

2. Gérard felt 'old, conservative, and one who always arrives too late.' During our conversation, he was more intrigued by the fact that this formed a governing principle, a constant, in his life. His brother was 12 years older than him, Gérard had repeated two years at university, he had married late, and had become the father of a little girl at the age of 44. He recalled that even when he was young he already felt old.

The criticism most often leveled against him in the company was that he dragged his feet, blocking necessary changes. His favorite reaction in life was to fall back on itself, isolate himself, and continue his journey alone.

This illumination led him to a **new understanding** that brought genuine **relief**. Gérard had found recurring patterns in different contexts of his life and at different times that validated his experience.

The quote from Gregory Bateson touches the essence of this step in coaching: a certain freedom is created by the "simple process of recognizing the source of what is present."

A second foundation stone had been laid, to move on to the next step in the coaching process.

The **task** I prescribed Gérard, before our last session scheduled for three weeks later, was to find contexts in which he felt old, late, but still full of resources.

The third session

*There are trivial truths and the great truths.
The opposite of a trivial truth is plainly false.
The opposite of a great truth is also true.*

Niels Bohr

The objective of this last session was mainly to find out how the coachee could use the **dynamics and characteristics present in his life** to bring about a different effect within his professional circle.

After telling me that he felt more at ease in his work, he gave me back the results of his research on the task I had given him: Gérard, with a fully open face, began to speak about his daughter and their relationship; he felt an old father and at the same time very young and full of resources. He told how he role-played with her, how he hid for her... Even if he returned home late he always felt ready to use these brief moments to connect with his daughter.

Therefore, everything Gérard needed in his role as manager was already present in his family context.

A simple invitation to imagine that his daughter followed him around for a whole day at work sparked a big smile. *'She wouldn't recognize me at all. She would probably give me the title of "Mr. Serious".'*

The crucial question became: how could he access the relational qualities he had with his daughter in his work? We explored different times when he imagined these qualities in relationships with his partners, colleagues, and finally with the CEO. He felt that he could combine a youthful spirit with his "old" attitude, a mixture that would allow him to be more present with different qualities.

I felt strongly that my work was complete when he expressed the idea of using his daughter as his work coach. I **suggested** to him that he be completely alone in the elevator in the morning to go to the 5th floor where his office was, and to imagine during this time how he would prepare to "spend the day with his daughter". He was delighted with this idea and, as he told me six months later, he continued to perform this small morning **ritual** for another 4-5 months.

The resource was a **connection** between task and relationship, and the combination of old and young, between being late and being in the present.

Conclusion

Gérard is operating a metamorphosis at work. The CEO was deeply surprised and asked me several times what magic I had used to make this happen, and if he could really count on this change lasting.

We stayed in contact for many years. Gérard's radical change seemed so natural that he always spoke of it as a simple step that he had taken at just the right moment.

2. The crystallization of what happened

This first coaching for a company was a great success and I must admit that I began this process without really being aware of the steps to be taken to create a positive outcome.

It was rather **experimentation** accompanied by a strong mixture of curiosity, passion, innocence, and a certain amount of risk-taking.

After years of experience and reflection, I began to understand better what factors made the crucial difference in this kind of coaching.

In the context of this chapter, I have chosen to identify three fundamental processes that are essential in Brief Executive Coaching for excellent results:

- *Exploring* what is present: the importance of association
- *Deepening* what is present: finding the organizing principle
- *Utilizing* what is present: reconnecting with internal resources

Exploring what is present:

Almost all coaching courses I have guided began with the same **ambiguity** concerning the coachee's own desire to enter the process: changes are desired but at the same time there is still significant resistance towards these changes. This ambiguity is deeply related to the fact that a person – consciously or unconsciously – *seeks a balance between the desire and the need to change... and the desire and the need to maintain internal stability.*

Early on in the process, the coach creates the necessary conditions so that coachees are sufficiently open and ready to couple their desire and need to change, and their desire and need not to change. Since the capacity for association depends on coachees' internal and external situations, we can find that one person has more problems to connect with his or her desire and need for change, while another will have more difficulty entering in partnership with the desire and the need to remain stable (not to change). With Gérard, the difficulty was twofold since both aspects were implicated.

During our first session, he could not stop criticizing the CEO, his colleagues and his staff who could not understand the importance of the values he was trying to safeguard within the company. The CEO was particularly taken to task for his Dutch mentality, described by Gérard as pretentious, too direct, and abrupt. The problem was not him, it was the context, other people.

In a coaching requested by the hierarchy and not by the coachee, there is always this tendency for coachees to **dissociate** themselves from the problem. The coach is there to help coachees associate with a space problem, and this sometimes requires the coach to have a ruthless attitude, in order to confront a coachee with his or her problem. In the case of Gérard, I was greatly helped by the simple fact that coaching was his last chance.

Urgency and external pressure often favor the establishment of conditions that result in the subject developing a strong association with things that are not going right.

The other association needed to cover the entire system is linked to the desire to maintain points of stability and not change. Often this unconscious desire to remain stable is expressed by phrases such as: *'People ask me to change but I want to be myself, I cannot become someone else!'* In fact, everyone tries to maintain the dynamic characteristics he or she considers an integral part of his or her own identity.

In the coaching process, we must encourage this link with the identity of the coachee. In fact, someone who is too willing to change is someone who lacks internal consistency and sustainability over time.

So the coach stimulates coachees to be very aware (mentally and emotionally) of their healthy resistance and their will not to eliminate the qualities they have developed throughout their life.

In the first phase of coaching, the coach sends two paradoxical messages:

- It is really important that you change, that you break these old patterns that always give a negative result.

If you do nothing, your situation will become even worse.

- It is really important that you remain yourself and that you can defend and safeguard the elements that are part of who you are.

It is not because you are going to change what you are that the problem will be solved.

By combining these two approaches, the coach encourages the implementation of a subtle difference between identification and association.

All identifications are sources of difficulty. A person cannot be reduced to his or her behavior, capacity or values. Identification, by definition, leads to a reduction in people's potential. Coaching aims to do exactly the opposite: to open up potential.

If a person identifies too much with his or her problem, he or she cannot imagine that the problem is at the same time a resource. If a person identifies too much with resistance to change, it will be in denial of what goes in and around him or her.

Openness, freedom, and the coach's courage to embrace this ambiguity between the desire and the need to change, AND that of remaining stable, is a subtle way to transform reducing attachments into healthy connections AND transform identifications into associations.

Deepening what is present:

Please excuse this very trivial formulation that must not be forgotten: *the coachee is not stupid*. Before the coach comes on the scene, coachees have tried several strategies to change or transform their situation. An issue that is not yet resolved is an issue that is not yet fully understood.

This second phase, which consists in "deepening what is present" is paramount in the coaching process.

Bateson suggests focusing attention on the process of recognizing what is necessarily present: '*A certain freedom comes out of the recognition of what is necessarily present. From this recognition stems the knowledge of how to act.*'

What needs to be present for the coachee to have this problem?

What needs to be present for the coachee to continue operating, even with this problem?

What is necessarily present in the context of this person so that he or she can take care of this problem?

For these questions, we try to find the underlying structure: the essential ingredients that make up this issue. We integrate the fundamental concept of systemic thinking: **a problem is always a relationship, never something in itself**. Hence, we are looking together, with the expert (the coachee?) HOW he or she organized his or her own life, his or her thoughts and internal and external connections in order to create the present situation.

To be a little provocative, we can say that every problem is an example of superb, consistent and credible organization. The result is always acquired, even when it is considered negative. Hence, we take coachees through a process of connecting with what I called their "organizing principle".

This organizing principle is a stable and repetitive dynamic that has the capacity and function of organizing a system.

We find the ingredients and their interconnected essential nature. Understanding that someone like Gérard makes a clear distinction between the 'task' component and the 'relationship' component is to recognize in that person how he or she organizes his or her internal and external world. At the same time, this understanding opens up a more subtle view: separating "task" and "relationship" creates at one and the same time barriers, AND opportunities, openings. We have therefore broken down the problem. The actual ingredients of the problem can be components of a state of excellence or high performance.

A certain freedom is born because our initially reduced perspective has been extended through the process of coaching. The problem is not the problem. Connection with the problem is now changing.

Utilizing what is present:

What is the difference between an excellent chef and a mediocre chef?

An excellent chef does not need a lot of ingredients to make a delicious dish. He is capable of recognizing the specific quality and uniqueness of each ingredient, and finding a way to accompany it with others in a refined and sometimes surprising way. The result is a dish in which each ingredient is necessary and present in the best way possible.

Recognition of the principle of organizing a problem gives us the opportunity to reassess the interconnection of its ingredients.

How can we reorganize the "ingredients" to create another dish?

What ingredients can be put together that had always been kept separate?

What ingredients can be separated, dissociated?

Without abandoning the idea that, behind these questions, we are trying to use what is present, without adding or removing an element.

In a Brief Executive Coaching, we do not have the time to develop new skills, new qualities. We are committed to bringing about a transformation utilizing only the elements that are already present in the coachee.

Gérard had all the qualities to be in an intense, joyful, flexible relationship... simply that the link between his professional context and his private context had not been made. This separation was a fact, a bias never questioned.

Utilizing what is present is often associated with the introduction of an 'ET - ET ' thought. When you live with the idea that if you are old you are not young, and that if you are young you are not old, you are necessarily in a dynamic of elimination. For Gérard it was essential to consider **that he could be both at the same time and in the same context**. Accepting this **paradox** is a source of profound freedom, a generative openness.

In recent years, I have been doing research into the field of excellence: what makes someone excel in one area? The key element in the deep structure – the organizing principle of excellence – is the presence of **generative complementarities**.

Someone is excellent when, for example, he or she is able to combine fear with courage; one not excluding the other. Someone is excellent **when knowledge and non-understanding are paired**. Someone is excellent when he or she **combines freedom and strong discipline ... at the same time**.

Helping the coachee connect with all of his or her resources often involves **resolving an implicit conflict between two complementarities** which the person has hitherto experienced as opposites. Overcoming this conflict creates conditions for a surprising connection. The organizing principle accepts a 'bitter-sweet' connection.

3. Generative Patterning and Brief Executive Coaching

Generative Patterning – a model I developed with Peter Wrycza – brings out a great sensitivity to the patterns woven within each of us and our immediate circle, in each system and its context. Appreciation of these patterns is the basis of an alignment with one's own life and life in general. The Generative Patterning process includes as a main process, **embracing the complexity of whatever is present**. Through an active presence and refined attention, we are able to recognize the organizing principle of a person, a system or an organization. This recognition helps release latent potential as an energy source to unblock frozen dynamics.

Brief Executive Coaching, if poorly understood or practiced, can be interpreted as a tendency to go fast, and to focus on the actions to be undertaken to create change *now*. But trying to go fast results in a forced change. And a forced change strongly imposed is a change that has no chance of lasting over time. Change based on an injection of new behavior contains the great risk of activating an immune system that will ultimately reject this new element.

This is why the Generative Patterning used in Brief Executive Coaching (which, we must remember, aims to get to the point in a short time) chooses a paradoxical approach that is exactly the opposite ... slowing down to speed up better.

In this approach, change is not a goal to be pursued but an effect of the combined actions of exploring and recognizing what is present. And this is then developed on a basic assumption, namely, that rigidified dynamics are ones that have become isolated from the rest of the system; this shelving is mostly due to non-recognition, a negative judgment or simply a lack of information.

As in the NLP approach, Generative Patterning presupposes that **all the resources needed to solve a problem are an integral part of the system that is showing the problem**.

Generative Patterning – even in a short session – prefers to take sufficient time to explore what is present and to promote the meeting of disconnected components of the system. Because reconnecting the different components of a system, especially items that are considered incompatible, gives the freedom to be, and the feeling of being able to become more complete. This freedom and profound recognition cannot help but bring forth new possibilities.

Change is then a wonder and not an effort.

Lexicon:

Being present: A state of focused attention on what happens inside and outside in order to become aware of the richness and "constellation" of the present moment without judgment.

Identification: the process that allows one to connect and sometimes confuse one's identity with a part inside (e.g. behavior) or outside a person (e.g. a car, a job).

Association: the process to put together everything that is present to create an asset greater than the sum of its parts.

Reflective feedback: feedback we offer someone or a system that describes what is necessarily present in the other so that he or she can live, speak, have experiences as long they are present. Reflective feedback never contains a judgment, neither positive nor negative.

'You are at one and the same time in the system and outside the system ... ' is a message that does not contain a judgment about what is good or bad, but is trying to describe what is currently present.

Organizing principle: a description of the underlying dynamics of a system, an individual, an activity. When the description is pertinent, expressions and everything that is present can be deeply understood and bestow real meaning.

Generative Complementarity: a set of two poles which remain distinct and in tension have the ability to create something that transcends and includes at the same time.

Pattern: a perceptible constellation of similarity and difference that repeat in space, time, or across different levels of abstractions, hierarchies, or levels of logic.

Patterning: Perception, creation and sorting of patterns

Generative Patterning: The use of our ability to perceive, create, remark on and sort out patterns to transcend their limitations.

Bibliography:

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With the description of the four keys of personal control (attention, reflection, discernment and commitment), we have tried to introduce trans-contextual skills that help to live with more refinement, satisfaction and wisdom.

Bateson G. - *Mind and Nature. A Necessary Unity* , Wildwood House Ltd, 1979

One chapter of this book is dedicated to what every young high school student should know. For a coach, there are 16 basic presuppositions that are deeply inspiring and necessary

J. Flaherty - *Evoking Excellence in Others* , Butterworth Heinemann 1997

In this book James Flaherty creates the first steps to a coaching approach based on the integration of "everything that is present."

Gladwell M. – *Outliers : The Story of Success*, Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2008

Frequently, a book contains just one great idea that we need to go through 200 pages to find. Gladwell explains with great precision the idea that we can become great only after a period of exercise and preparation lasting approximately 10,000 hours.

Keeney B. – *Aesthetics of Change*, The Guilford Press, New York, London 1983

Keeney has written a work of art taking the ideas of Gregory Bateson and linking them to the foundation of change. The systemic spirit is present in each chapter, in each example and each concept in this book.

O'Neill M.B.– *Executive Coaching with Backbone and Heart*, Jossey-Bass 2000

Mary Beth O'Neill really has written a book with a systemic approach to Executive Coaching. The three basic principles: *Be yourself as a coach - Keep a systemic perspective - Apply any coaching method without forgetting the first two principles* - render the spirit of this work.