

Integrating action learning practices into executive coaching to enhance business results

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Abstract

Coaching-based development is growing in prominence as a means of enhancing the achievement of leadership outcomes in Australian business. This article seeks to demonstrate how the application of the practices associated with action learning can be applied to support the achievement of practical outcomes within group-based executive coaching, namely a more rigorous focus on business results. The work draws on an illustrative case study: a group-coaching program conducted with the executive leadership team of an industry-based service organisation. The theoretical and methodological basis of coaching and action learning are explored and contrasted with the conclusion that an integrated approach has the capacity to support coaching participants to achieve extensive developmental and practical outcomes.

Key Words: action learning, executive development, executive coaching, leadership, human resource development

1. Introduction

Whilst coaching is rapidly emerging as a widely applied means of human resource development (HRD) in business, there is recognition of the need for a solid theoretical framework to inform practice development (Eggers and Clark 2000), and an acknowledgement of the lack of such in empirical literature (Grant 2001). With this comes the risk of inadequate depth and rigour in coaching practice. Theory may be informed by practice in the fields of psychology and sociology, and, given the business context of executive coaching, may also draw on economic and systems theory (Swanson 2001). However, an opportunity also exists to draw on well developed frameworks from the social sciences, particularly those that appear to resonate in terms of their practical and theoretical similarities. With this comes the opportunity to leverage from the past efforts of others also concerned with the theory and practice of HRD.

The intention of this article is to compare and contrast the theory and practice of coaching, as espoused in a selection of modern coaching literature, with that of action learning, a developmental process that has been extensively applied to leadership and management development (Dotlich and Noel 1998; Goleman et al. 2002; Marquardt 1999; Passfield 2001), with a view to proposing an integrated approach that can be readily and appropriately applied by a coach within group-based executive coaching. This work seeks to demonstrate, through

a case study, how the application of action learning practices can strengthen the form and structure of the executive coaching engagement. Action learning emphasises the achievement of tangible business outcomes within the development, and seeks to explicitly develop the individual's capacity for learning through reflective and inquiry-based practices. When delivered within a supportive, client-centred coaching framework, such integration can support rigour, theoretical depth and the achievement of intangible and tangible outcomes.

This article is structured in three sections. The first provides a comparative analysis of both coaching and action learning in terms of their underlying theoretical frameworks, a necessary activity to support meaningful inquiry into practice (Zuber-Skerritt 2001). The analysis explores the implicit assumptions underlying the coaching and action learning approaches in relation to human nature and reality (ontology), knowledge creation and learning (epistemology), and how theory is integrated into practice (praxis or methodology) (Guba and Lincoln 1990; Morgan and Smircich 1980). The analysis was informed by a range of literature, albeit limited, because authors do not always explicitly state the underlying theoretical framework.

The second section provides an overview of how the two methodologies can be integrated. This requires examination of some of the key aspects of methodology, drawing on experiential learning theory, and highlights the implications for an integrated approach.

The third section outlines an application of an integrated approach to a group-based executive coaching engagement. The article concludes by examining the coaching outcomes and suggesting the value of the integrated approach in this case.

2. Comparative analysis of the theoretical frameworks underlying coaching and action learning

2.1 Overview

Both executive coaching and action learning (as applied to management development) are concerned with change within dynamic, largely unpredictable business environments. Coaching within the workplace, taken from a psychological perspective, may be defined as:

“...a solution-focussed, result-oriented systematic process in which the coach facilitates the enhancement of work performance and self-directed learning and personal growth of the coachee” (Grant 2001, p. 8).

The key principles highlighted by Grant in this definition include acknowledgement of the autonomous and intrinsic nature of adult learning, including motivation for learning, and the existence of extensive tacit knowledge based on prior learning and experience. With these factors in mind, and in recognition of the complex and dynamic business environment, executive coaching seeks to achieve an impact on participants that leads to learning, behavioural change and business results, all of which are essential to the achievement of a return on investment (McGovern et al. 2001; Sherman and Freas 2004): “It [executive

coaching] helps people know themselves better, live more consciously, and contribute more richly” (Sherman and Freas 2004, p. 85). Executive coaching may be one-to-one or one-to-group based, usually occurs over time and often over many months, and seeks to achieve both tangible and intangible outcomes. Such coaching also recognises that the personal qualities, knowledge, experience and skills of the coach are essential to the creation of the collaborative, developmentally focussed, client-centred relationship that is assumed to be critical to outcome generation.

Action learning shares a similar intention. In essence, action learning is a developmental process, which supports task-oriented individuals to systematically embed the capacity and capability for continuous learning and improvement. As originally designed (Revans 1990; Revans 1982), action learning is a means by which managers are supported to achieve both action on real issues, and learning in and through action. The underlying premise of the approach is that “managers are people of action who learn from action” (Dotlich and Noel 1998, p. 121) and that within a supportive environment, managers will share and help each other solve problems. Over time, due to the wide variety of contexts and applications, action learning has taken diverse forms in many domains of adult learning including education, organisational learning, team building and management development (Keys 1994; Smith 1998). The approach has been applied by a range of companies including Citibank, Shell Oil, General Electric, Johnson & Johnson (Dotlich and Noel 1998), Pepsico (Raelin 1997), Motorola, General Motors, Marriott and British Airways (Marquardt 1999). In particular, when applied to management development, action learning seeks to enhance critical twenty-first century leadership abilities, including systems thinking, innovative thinking, risk-taking, visioning and the ability to manage change (Dotlich and Noel 1998).

Action learning is a developmental process that extends over time, usually many months and is project-based, in that participants in an action learning group seek to make practical progress on a complex, important issue or problem. In general, the action learning approach has two praxeological aims: the first, to help managers to learn to take action, and the second, to help them to learn what action is effective. The process of action learning, therefore, is cyclic and iterative in nature moving between action and learning and back to action: “‘Action learning’ means learning from action or concrete experience, as well as taking action as a result of this learning” (Zuber-Skerritt 2001, p. 1). Mumford (1995) suggests the following essential elements of the action learning approach:

1. Managerial learning requires taking effective action
2. The best way to really learn to take effective action is to actually take action
3. The most effective form of action for learning comes from working on issues or projects of significance to the managers and their organisations
4. Whilst managers retain individual responsibility for outcomes, the process of learning is social: “Managers learn best with and from each other” (Mumford 1995, p. 36).

Clearly, both coaching and action learning as applied to management development, share the intention of improving both capacity and capability for leadership in-context, facilitated

within a supportive relational environment. Both are client-centred, encourage self-directed learning and tend to extend over time to support consolidation and integration of learning into practice. Notably they differ in terms of the role of coach, as action-learning groups may not always have a coach, and in terms of the number of participants, since action learning is designed and intended as a group development process.

2.2 Paradigm (ontological and epistemological assumptions)

Any approach to human development is founded in a set of assumptions about the nature of human reality (ontology) and knowledge creation (epistemology), which inform the choice of methodology (Mouton 1996). Therefore a useful starting point for any comparative analysis is to uncover these assumptions and make them available for scrutiny.

2.2.1 Assumptions underlying coaching

From the coaching literature surveyed, the ontological and epistemological assumptions are often difficult to decipher because of a lack of disclosure or exploration by the author. However, this is not true for all cases. The Ontological Coaching approach is founded on a core set of beliefs about the nature of human existence and means of development that have been explicitly laid out by Seiler (2003). The approach draws heavily on biological science, particularly the biology of perception, cognition, language and communication from the work of Maturana (1988) and integrated with existential philosophy and the philosophy of language. The approach presents a coherent, interrelated model of human 'way of being' that identifies the core constructs of language, emotion and physiology (or body) as the means by which human reality is constructed and maintained. Each of these ontological domains interacts to shape the individual's experience of, and reaction to, his/her subjective reality. The epistemological approach taken is that an individual's capacity for learning and change is contingent on the achievement of an 'ontological shift' resulting from an increased capacity to observe their way of being, and thereby create purposeful change in each of the three domains. Essential to this process is the 'ontological coach' who is deemed to be "an acute observer of all three domains" (Sieler 2003, p. 9) and can bring these observations to the coaching conversation.

Flaherty (1999) is another author who intentionally describes a set of underlying assumptions in the application of coaching as a developmental approach. The author describes a phenomenologically based theory in terms of behaviour as a manifestation of an individual's "structure of interpretation": "...it's not the events, communication, or stimuli that lead to behaviour, it is the interpretation an individual gives to the phenomenon that leads to the actions taken" (Flaherty 1999, p. 9). Consequently, the epistemological assumptions are that learning and change is possible when an individual, within the coaching relationship, becomes aware of the limitations of their structure of interpretation, and takes purposeful steps to alter the structure so that subsequent actions lead to more desirable outcomes. Similar to ontological coaching, this approach also emphasises the role of observation and language as key to the acquisition of knowledge.

Other coaching approaches imply a humanistic ontology, emphasising the notion of an intrinsic human capacity for growth-oriented change. One example is the Co-active coaching approach (Whitworth, Kimsey-House and Sandahl 1998, p. 3) which states one of four foundations of coaching as: “The client is naturally creative, resourceful, and whole.” Similarly, Eggers and Clark (2000) state that the practice of executive coaching is founded in humanistic psychology, with the belief that “people are basically good, healthy and rational” (p. 68). The epistemology of this approach assumes that the client has the answers to their own issues, which can be surfaced through conversation and inquiry with the coach.

2.2.2 Assumptions underlying action learning

The theoretical framework of action learning is founded in a phenomenological paradigm (Zuber-Skerritt 2001), with the assumption that “knowledge is socially constructed and created from within, and for, a particular group and context” (Zuber-Skerritt 2001, p. 5). Within this paradigm, learning is assumed to be a social process, facilitated by questioning insight and reflection on action (Passfield 1996), with less emphasis placed on surfacing generalisable truths and more on surfacing the honest accounts of participants, relative to their current context and issues. Learning from other pre-existing knowledge (known as ‘P’ or programmed knowledge) is of secondary importance as most emphasis is given to surfacing and developing theories of practice by drawing on the individual and collective experience of the action learning group members (known as ‘Q’ or questioning insight) as they engage in action. Inquiry and reflection, both of which are part of the generation of questioning insight, seek to surface tacit knowledge and uncover assumptions (Passfield 2001; Raelin 1997; Zuber-Skerritt 2001). In this way, action learning seeks to make “meaning from experience” (Raelin 1997, p. 26) for the purpose of creating a different relational reality.

2.2.3 Summation

Elsewhere the distinction has been made between the natural science or positivist paradigm and the non-positivist paradigms (Morgan and Smircich 1980) or ‘human sciences’ including constructivism (Guba and Lincoln 1990), interpretivism and phenomenology (Mouton 1996). Drawing on this analysis and recognising that coaching and action learning are relationally-based developmental processes, a conclusion may be drawn that the underlying assumptions informing the practice of each approach lie in the non-positivist domain. Within this domain, core assumptions include the proposition that reality is a subjective experience. At an individual level, reality is a projection of human imagination, and at a social level, reality is dynamically co-constructed through the interactions of individuals – conscious and collusive – and through the creation of symbolic modes of being (Morgan and Smircich 1980). This notion is well summarised by Sieler in relation to the Ontological Coaching approach: “We do not see how things are; we see them according to how we are” (Sieler 2003, p. 31). The implication is that in both coaching and action learning, we may assume that individuals have the innate capacity for change and that change can be facilitated through processes that support inquiry into their individual constructions and social interpretations, together with processes that support experience of alternative constructions. In this way, individuals may be active in creating alternative (and preferred) realities. This aligns well with the core constructs of self-regulation and goal-directedness within coaching psychology (Grant 2001).

Although this only represents a sampling of available literature, both coaching and action learning demonstrate a similarity in their underlying paradigm in that both are underpinned by belief in the human capacity for self-directed change. This provides, at least, a theoretical basis for looking at integration as a possible mode for management development.

3. Comparative analysis of coaching and action learning methodology

Although coaching processes tend to vary in terms of form and structure, analysis has identified three core themes that are also common to action learning: the centrality of relationship, the desire for insight and learning, and the conduct of intentional action. This section of the article explores the methodological implications of integration according to these three core themes.

3.1 The centrality of relationship

3.1.1 Coaching

The coaching relationship is at the heart of the creation of outcomes in coaching of all kinds. Indeed, the capacity of the coach to establish and maintain a trusting relationship with their client was identified as being of primary importance in effective executive coaching since it is through this relationship that the coach can challenge their clients 'comfort zone' and thereby support behavioural change and ultimately, transformation (Paige 2002). The coaching relationship itself is a 'designed alliance' empowered by both coach and client to fit the working, learning and communication style of the client (Whitworth et al. 1998). The coaching relationship forms the background for all coaching efforts and should be principles-based: a mutually satisfying environment of respect, trust, and freedom of expression (Flaherty 1999). The coach achieves these aims by remaining politically neutral (Goglio et al. 1998), approaching the client as a legitimate other (Sieler 2003) with unconditional positive regard (Eggers and Clark 2000), observing the clients "way of being" (Sieler 2003), and their structure of interpretation (Eggers and Clark 2000; Flaherty 1999) and then reflecting these back to the client as data to expand their self-awareness. Further to this, the coach supports the achievement of change by enhancing the client's capacity for, and commitment to, purposeful action to achieve desired outcomes.

3.1.2 Action learning

Action learning differs in its focus on the coach as the key relationship, an issue that does generate some tension in relation to an integrated approach. As a group-based process, which may or may not have a coach, considerable power is also given to the relationships with other group members: recall the social constructivist basis of the approach. In a sense, group members act as 'coach' for each other. However, some authors emphasise the importance of an external coach (Dotlich and Noel 1998; Marquardt 1999; Raelin 1997), defining the coach as having both strategic and tactical roles. The strategic role involves monitoring the group participants in terms of the overall aims of the development process, whereas the tactical role concerns facilitating individual and social development (Marquardt 1999). Indeed a capacity to understand and develop the group 'architecture' is seen as essential, given that the coach must intervene in and accelerate the learning of participants by confronting, challenging,

questioning and complimenting (Dotlich and Noel 1998). The coach is required to keep the process learner-centred (Raelin 1997), help group members establish an environment that enables open communication and sharing, and encourage inquiry and reflection in such a way that raises new insights and ideas:

“More than anything else, the coach gives participants issues to think about and work on. The coach catalyses reflection after every action. The alternating currents of action and reflection power the transformational process” (Dotlich and Noel 1998, p. 27).

3.1.3 Summation

Despite the tension related to variants in the use or otherwise of a coach in action learning applications, the overall intentions and orientation of the coach in both approaches appear to be very similar. In both approaches, the coach is primarily concerned with the creation of a developmental environment and process that forwards the clients learning agenda, and builds sustainable capability. The coach is clearly accountable for effective application of process; however accountability for the achievement of results belongs to the client. Therefore we may assume that the engagement of a coach, as is required within executive coaching, also has the potential to add considerable value to the action-learning component of an integrated approach.

3.2 The desire for insight and learning

3.2.1 Coaching

Learning within the coaching relationship is cited in terms of self-awareness, self-regulation and goal-directedness (Grant 2001); insight into structure of interpretation (Flaherty 1999); and capacity to observe ‘way of being’ (Sieler 2003). In particular the capacity to observe is considered an essential precursor to intentional change (Flaherty 1999; Sieler 2003).

The mechanisms of learning include the coaching conversations, which are intentionally pragmatic (Flaherty 1999) and effective in surfacing the “right things at the right time” (Jay 1999, p.7), and may incorporate a feedback process (Crane 1999; Dotlich and Cairo 1999). This is an ‘outside-in’ process actively facilitated by the coach often using a pre-defined model that generates information and, when well administered, insight. At its best, such feedback “jars perceptions”, creating “epiphanies” and the impetus for change (Dotlich and Cairo 1999, p. 27). Learning and insight requires the development of language, including the language of emotion, to expand capacity for observing and describing complex experiences (Flaherty 1999; Goleman 1995; Sieler 2003). Insight however is not sufficient on its own as the individual must also have the commitment to pursue a path of development and action in the anticipation that change will be possible (Dotlich and Cairo 1999; Flaherty 1999).

3.2.2 Action learning

Learning is the overarching intention of action learning (Revans 1990; Revans 1982). The mechanisms of learning (L) are programmed knowledge (P), which is based on what is already known, questioning insight (Q), and reflection (R), such that $L = P + Q + R$ (Marquardt 1999). Questioning seeks to pose the “right questions”, shifting the focus away from the

typical search for the “right answers”, to generate insight (Marquardt 1999), and is strategically oriented searching for ideas that are relevant within the context of the learning. Effective questions within a supportive environment cause people to stop, and think, and adopt an open mind to alternatives. Within the context of action learning, questions are not intended to find answers, but rather to encourage deeper exploration.

Reflection seeks to raise awareness to implicit assumptions and surface tacit knowledge, by a conscious process of connection and meaning-making (Dotlich and Noel 1998; Marquardt 1999; Passfield 1996; Passfield 2001). This is based on the belief that, as cognitive beings, people hold assumptions that have considerable influence over how they think about, and react to, the situations they face. Unchallenged, these assumptions have a presumed validity, which may or may not serve the individual (Smith 2001). Dick (1997) suggests that such assumption sets or “theories” act at an intuitive level and inform action. Reflection therefore allows theories to be surfaced and made available for critique. Such intent is similar to that of action science (Argyris 1995; Raelin 1997).

At a praxis level, reflection may be considered a process of “debriefing experiences at non-trivial personal and contextual levels” (Smith 2001, p. 32), which requires individuals to become acute observers of themselves and their environments, particularly in relation to managerial action taken. Recall that this notion was also considered essential to some of the examined coaching approaches (Flaherty 1999; Sieler 2003).

An integrated model of learning that incorporates these ideas is the experiential learning theory (ELT) proposed by Kolb (Baker et al. 2002; Kayes 2002; Loo 2002), where sensory information arising from experience (apprehension), and cognitive abstractions (comprehension), are given meaning through reflection (intension) and put to practical application through purposeful behaviour (extension). Indeed, the ELT is considered foundational to many who practice action learning developmental approaches (Marsick and O'Neil 1999).

3.2.3 Summation

We may surmise that an integrated model of coaching and action learning can draw on the strengths offered by the practices of both. In particular, action learning offers strengths in questioning and reflection. Such practices are fundamental to learning as defined in ELT and therefore offer a rigour, structure and emphasis to enhance coaching outcomes.

3.3 Intentional action

The conduct of intentional action is central to a range of coaching methodologies and is fundamental to the achievement of learning outcomes within the coaching process. The same is true of action learning. In this context, ‘intentional action’ refers to action that is informed, designed, and undertaken with a view to achieving a specific purpose or outcome.

3.3.1 Coaching

Performance enhancement through action is a common theme in coaching literature. Flaherty’s (1999) three products of coaching typify an orientation toward action: long-terms

excellent results, self-correction and self-regulation. Jay (1999) suggests that “purposeful behaviour”, arising from the conduct of appropriate action, is critical to the development of increased competence in executive coaching, and Landsberg (1996, p. xi) proposes that “coaching aims to enhance the performance and learning ability of others,” a definition with a clear action orientation. Grant (2001, p. 29) highlights action orientation as one of the constructs underpinning a psychology of coaching: “There is a fundamental expectation on the therapist/coach’s part that positive change will occur and therapist/ coach expects the client to act to create this change outside of the coaching session.” Whitworth *et al.* (1998, p.79) propose that sustained change arises from the “cycle of action and learning, over time,” and action is central to the purpose of coaching because it is the mechanism by which the client maintains their momentum toward desired outcomes, the means by which they “forward the action.” Crane (1999) also subscribes to the notion of “forwarding the action” as a means of building momentum and commitment for change. Dotlich and Cairo (1999, p.20) quite explicitly emphasise the central importance of intentional action: “Action coaching is a process that fosters self-awareness, resulting in the motivation and the guidance to change in ways that meet the organizational goals.” This statement holds for executive coaching because of the importance of achieving business results and a return on investment (McGovern *et al.* 2001).

3.3.2 Action learning

Synonymous with its name, action learning also emphasises the conduct of intentional action. Indeed, real learning is not considered possible unless action is taken (Marquardt 1999). This aligns with Kolb’s notions of experiential learning where learning is consolidated through practical application and purposeful behaviour (extension). As previously discussed, action taken by group participants is issue or project-based because of the desire for in-context learning.

“What is distinctive about action learning in an organisational context is that it involves learning through engagement with the dynamics of the ongoing organisation. This means dealing with the realities of politics, power, procedure, culture and systems. It also entails dealing with who we are and how we define ourselves, our role and our capacities within that context” (Passfield 2001, p. 39).

3.3.3 Summation

In relation to action, coaching and action learning differ in terms of emphasis. Action learning strongly emphasises the conduct of action on issues or projects of importance, and it is the outcomes of action that inform learning. Coaching also emphasises action, but it is described more generically, possibly due to coaching’s broad ranging application. In the executive coaching field however, where a strong emphasis is given to business-based outcomes, the adoption of a more ‘action learning’ like methodology could conceivably enhance the achievement of desired business results and return on investment.

4. An integrated model of executive coaching and action learning

Informed by the prior comparative analysis, the model proposed in this article and utilised in the case study was designed to support executive level clients to consolidate and integrate their learning and create practical outcomes. The coaching process, which has emerged from the author's own theory of practice, includes four interrelated, dynamic dimensions as described in Table 1: the foundational, exploratory, integrative and evaluative dimensions.

Table 1: The four dimensions of coaching integrating action learning practices

Foundational	<i>Laying the foundation of the coaching engagement</i>
This stage is concerned with the logistics of the coaching engagement, outcome identification drawn on the perspectives of key stakeholders, and initiation of the coaching relationship in terms of roles, responsibilities, values, and so on.	
Explorative	<i>Developing self-awareness and clarifying the learning agenda</i>
This stage typically involves the initial coaching conversations where the coaching and learning agenda is clarified. Often this stage involves the collection and introduction of feedback to the client. Although there is a considerable personal development emphasis at this stage, a strong strategic orientation is also established to ensure that the developmental focus is aligned with organisational needs and issues.	
Integrative	<i>Creating the environment and opportunity for learning through action</i>
This stage involves the application of a multi-cyclic developmental process incorporating many of the key practices of action learning (Refer Figure 1). During this stage, the client identifies an issue (project) that is sufficiently ambiguous and important to warrant attention. The client is supported through a cycle of multiple coaching conversations and multiple business applications, and in this way is supported to consolidate their learning through experimentation and integration into their managerial practice. Of particular note is the emphasis given to: <ol style="list-style-type: none">Inquiry, as a means of uncovering assumptions and uncovering deeper meaningObservation, as a necessary precursor to effective change agencyReflection, as a means of surfacing tacit knowledge and creating awareness During this stage, the role of the coach is both tactical and strategic, however the overriding intention is to ensure that the client is explicitly aware of the links between thought, behaviour and outcomes whilst vigilantly supporting the client to address developmental issues as they emerge.	
Evaluative	<i>Assessing the extent of alignment between development intent and actual outcomes</i>
The evaluative stage is a concurrent process involving regular evaluation and assessment of coaching outcomes both tangible and intangible whilst the client is working within the integrative stage. This may also be an evaluation process that is conducted formally outside of the coaching process if the work forms part of a broader developmental initiative.	

5.0 Case study: Group executive coaching

5.1 Background

The group consisted of the CEO and four senior managers of an industry-based research and technical support organisation. At the time that the work was undertaken, the group operated facilities in several locations around Australia, with approximately 40 professional and administrative staff.

The coaching development was initiated by the CEO due to his significant concerns about the executive team's capacity to work effectively together to manage the strategic direction and growth of the organisation. In contrast his experience was that team members tended to focus too much time on day-to-day issues, sought his involvement far too often in such issues, and were often unable to come to consensus about complex workplace problems that tended to remain unresolved for extended periods of time. Consequently, important issues associated with the longer term strategic development of the organisation were overlooked.

5.2 The coaching program

5.2.1 The Foundational dimension

In consultation with his staff and managers, the CEO identified the following developmental outcomes:

1. Greater trust and collaboration between individual managers.
2. More frequent unprompted communication between individuals, particularly when work impacts on the role, responsibility or interests of another member of the team.
3. Increased capacity for managing and progressing strategically important issues. (Nominally, during costly team meetings, 80% of time was given to argument and haggling over key issues, and 20% given to generating outputs of questionable quality)

The last of these was considered of utmost practical importance because it implied the need for the development to also achieve the aim of improved managerial performance. Clearly, the coaching needed to address practical skill deficits, enhance the achievement of specific goals, as well as address more complex developmental needs associated with the relational environment of the team.

5.2.2 The Exploratory dimension

During two one-day coaching sessions, the team was supported to define the developmental priorities in relation to the current status of their organisation, drawing on their organisational vision and purpose. Feedback was facilitated by means of developmental frameworks and tools (such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator), as well as by engaging the team members in dialogue-based and psychodynamic processes, such as human sculpture.

The outcomes of this stage included establishing a more resilient relational foundation for the team, with greater self and other awareness, and a shared developmental agenda; a necessary

step prior to the introduction of the next stage, which would challenge the team to put their learning into practice.

5.2.3 The Integrative dimension

This stage involved the conduct of a cyclic and iterative process (see Figure 1), which extended over a period of six months. Individual managers identified projects that became the focus of their individual effort, and collective review within regular coaching sessions that were conducted three to four weeks apart. A total of five half-day and full-day coaching sessions were conducted, representing a considerable investment of time. Insight and awareness gained through their actions and discussions were put to the test, such that each manager developed grounded, more effective theories of their managerial practice, and developed their capacity to apply them. Team members were provided with resource materials to help them to understand and develop their abilities in regard to the observing, questioning and reflective processes. Apart from this, the development was self-directed with the coach responding to developmental needs as they emerged, and providing instruction on process as required.

Examples of projects include:

1. To design and implement a participatory and simplified business planning process, and develop a forward business plan using this process.
2. To identify and establish quantitative measures of success in relation to marketing development activities.

5.2.4 The Evaluative dimension

Although evaluation discussions formed a key part of the means by which relevance and accountability was kept on track during the integrative stage, the end results of the coaching program were also of concern. Each team member achieved tangible business results in their project of choice, although in some cases the projects were not completed.

In an evaluation discussion with the team, post-program outcomes were summarised from client comments (Table 2). A surprising range of development outcomes was reported by participants in a range of categories including personal, leadership, decision-making and strategic focus. In terms of return on investment and perception of value, participants perceived value largely in terms of developing new skills and abilities as a leadership team. Progress on their projects was seen as important, but secondary, to a sense of effective and fulfilling team-membership. The CEO however, who was looking for broader coaching outcomes, noted that the improved team functioning translated to his increased confidence in his teams managerial ability, and allowed the team to significantly reduce the time required for costly team meetings; they covered more in less time, at less cost, with better quality decisions and improved commitment to action.

Table 2: Group coaching program outcomes

Outcome category	Examples of outcomes achieved as perceived by team members
Personal	Increased understanding of individual differences Greater sense of contribution Increased awareness of self and ability to modify behaviour
Teamwork	More constructive behaviours within team Improved interpersonal trust See team membership as more important Behaving as a more integrated unit Increased patience for diverse views More open to discussion, input from others, criticism and willingness to share the burden
Leadership	Recognition of the need to lead by example Understanding of how to create motivation for change Understanding of how to create workplace participation Recognition of the need for providing a vision and scope, then letting others get there More awareness of the need to understand what others are thinking and feeling Speak to the listener's concerns
Decision making	Improved capacity for openly sharing and coming to consensus about critical issues Better quality decisions, with evidence of greater levels of commitment to following through on decisions made Less procrastination in dealing with difficult issues
Strategic focus	Greater recognition of the need for a 'change' culture, given the persistently demanding and changing operating environment Improved focus on the whole business

The integrated approach however did raise some tensions in the team, particularly in relation to accountability and individual commitment. The accountability carried by team members to report on and engage in team-based critique and reflection of their project outcomes during the regular coaching sessions made inactivity, resistance or ambivalence more difficult to hide. Individual commitment was therefore available for scrutiny and challenge, and as the relational capacity of the team developed, so did their ability to deal constructively with such tensions.

6.0 Discussion

This work has raised the issue of executive coaching practice in terms of the need for theoretical frameworks to be made explicit, and to inform ongoing practice development. This is considered essential to the development of coaching practice that is theoretically and practically sound. In exploring the common features of the coaching and action learning methodologies, the analysis revealed enough similarity in the underlying paradigms and praxis to warrant further consideration of how the two approaches may be integrated to bring a stronger focus on business results and return on investment (ROI) to the executive coaching

engagement. Given the high profile of ROI issues at this time, and the dearth of investigation into how ROI can be best achieved in executive coaching, it would seem that the integration of an approach that has already proven its value to enterprises over the world could provide some level of amelioration to this concern.

Although the application of the proposed integrated approach is case-based and therefore not posited as being generally applicable, the extent of outcomes achieved provides some evidence that an integration of the two approaches has potential to enhance group-based executive coaching outcomes. Of course it is not known, as with any social inquiry, whether a coaching approach without explicit integration of action learning practices would have generated similar results, since in this domain notions of control are incongruent with practice. Needless to say, participants in the work who were all veterans of training and professional development were universally impressed with the extent of their progress over the time of the coaching. The integration stage, which was where the action learning practices were explicitly applied, was believed to have played a considerable role in this achievement.

The outcomes of this work are encouraging and support further investigation and application in a range of executive coaching and organisational contexts. The process needs to provide means of explicating and addressing emerging team issues, such as the accountability and commitment tensions experienced in the case. It is possible that this work only offers a glimpse into the possibilities of the approach.

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