

The Future of Executive Coaching

By Todd Lapidus and Kim Payton

We know that executives are frequently “stuck and cannot move beyond their interpretations of events.”¹ When a survey-based coaching model identifies a need for change, C-level executives aren’t always ready to act on a message emanating from their staff, and the momentum for change crashes to a halt. It’s common for the C suite to push introspection downward and away from itself.

The insight that unleashes individual potential comes from within. Those who have arrived in the C suite know this. Typically, they have engaged in years of professional development and assessment: they understand their strengths and weaknesses, and they know how to improve their performance. What they usually lack are the time and space to achieve an insight, initiate a transformation and pursue a reorganization of their previous learning.

The transformation we’re talking about—reflecting on your ways of thinking, reframing your opinions, renewing your approaches to relationships—can only take place in a context that is clear and challenging, yet safe from the distortions of intense performance pressure. This type of context is seldom available in the executive suite.

Fundamentals of Change

Different organizational cultures and structures make a difference in how change plays out. In addition, the experience and temperament of the individuals involved—and the mood of their teams—have significant impact on the implementation of change. But most profound is the influence of the following four basic assessments.

C-level professionals:

- can be unaware of their blind spots about strategically important issues.
- need a clear view of requirements and a properly constructed context to significantly shift their thinking.
- can solve problems in spite of isolation and distortion in C-suite dynamics.
- have the most impact on the success of the enterprise.

A Different Approach

The C³ approach, based on these four assumptions, puts the executive—not the consultant or the survey results—at the center of the effort. It begins when the executive commits to engineering a breakthrough on a specific issue of importance to his or her professional future. This commitment creates the conditions for productive work. Executives who simply go through the motions of development or who have this task thrust upon them by a corporate board are not candidates for our approach. An executive’s choice to undergo this process promotes the full-fledged engagement—without the burden of resentment—required for the hard work that translates insight into action.

Choice and urgency set the stage for clearly framing the issue and achieving awareness and an acute knowledge of what is at stake. This knowledge serves as the fuel to heat a crucible for change that creates insight, sparks transformation and concentrates impact.

1. C. Argyris and D. Schön, *Theory in Practice* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1982).

Transformation requires a solid infrastructure, so we ask the executive to provide:

- a written statement of the issue.
- supporting facts relevant to the issue.
- his or her work history.
- written and oral examples of the issue in action, both formal and informal.

This infrastructure becomes the framework to support three activities identified by Porras and Silvers: reflection, focus and insight. These three are key contributors that affect the ability to produce intentional change in organizations.² Only after this framework is in place can an event be scheduled to engineer a breakthrough in the issue at hand. This event is the crucible—a compressed, high-energy, one-on-one interaction, lasting two to three hours—that is designed to make the executive aware of one new insight.



Fresh Distinctions

Fresh distinctions—new ways of looking at the situation can provoke a reframing of the issue and lead to insights that can produce fundamental change. It is here that the specialized expertise of an executive coach is a valuable, highly leveraged asset. The ability to facilitate insight and transformation comes from the coach's deep experience and willingness to fully enter into the flow of the executive's world. The coach becomes attuned to things that on the surface seem to be unimportant or irrelevant. These small, seemingly minor observations in reality can generate substantive insights that can make a significant difference.

We all have entered into strategic conversations distinguishing between what is important and what is not, what is relevant and what is not, which leverage points are the ones to work on and which are not. The act of drilling down to work with a narrower set of information for a particular purpose establishes a pattern of thinking that makes decision making more efficient. However, to the detriment of the process—

at the same time—it *excludes* from awareness significant amounts of information that could lead to new ways of looking at an issue. The mind is extraordinarily well practiced at supporting its own patterns and assumptions, rejecting evidence that contradicts an already-formed judgment.

Fresh distinctions are powerful because they alter the perceived possibilities for action. A fresh distinction interrupts the existing pattern and allows for new associations. Christensen, Dyer, and Gregersen spent six years testing and observing three thousand executives concluded that the most powerful driver of innovative thinking was *associating*—making new connections “across seemingly unrelated questions, problems, or ideas.”³ Conceptualizing a fresh distinction reopens the executive's field of awareness to new possibilities and connections.

2. J. Porras and R. Silvers, “Organizational Development and Transformation,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 42 (1991): 51–78.

3. C. Christensen, J. Dyer, and H. Gregersen, “The Innovator's DNA,” *Harvard Business Review* (December 2009): 60–67.

Example of Fresh Distinctions in Action

A large government organization was in the early stages of an organization-wide, multi-year reengineering program. The director, a man of great vision and courage, was dismayed by the poor progress. He believed that with his energy and brilliance and the vast funds at his disposal, he could achieve his vision. He became aware of a critical insight—the distinction between his appetite for change and his managers' capacity to implement that change. The next level of management—his direct reports—were long-term government managers, who lacked the motivation and competence to lead change. After the director considered the distinction between his appetite and his managers' capacity, the solution became apparent: he installed a layer of temporary executives, who successfully led the change and trained the next generation of leaders.

The Challenge

The future of executive development must take place within an intensely concentrated crucible for change in the midst of the pressures of the C suite.

Can a single conversation on a clearly focused issue produce the beginning of an important change?

Yes.

The moment of insight generated by a fresh distinction occurs suddenly. The insight must lead to gradual integration and reorganizing of what is already known, enabling a more fruitful approach and deliberately productive habits. With effective coaching, executives can access their own resources in a way that produces profound thinking and innovative action.



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