

Been there, done that

Can executive coaches' prior career experience be helpful in coaching, asks **Robin Hindle Fisher**

When I ask HR or L&D directors that I work with what credentials they look for in the coaches they select as potential matches for senior colleagues, they invariably say, among other things, that they like them to have direct experience of working in senior executive positions themselves.

They feel that such prior experience is important in giving coaches the credibility they need to be 'thinking partners' or sounding boards for their exco and board members.

Perhaps the buyers of coaching I talk to are just being polite to me – because I had a senior executive career at CEO, managing director and board level myself before re-training as an executive coach. However, I note that the views I hear so regularly are at such odds with those of many of the leading commentators on coaching. What the academics call 'the dominant discourse' in coaching is still much influenced by views like John Whitmore's that "coaching requires expertise in coaching but not in the subject to hand" (Whitmore, 2012, p14).

The ideas that coaching's role should be limited to facilitating

clients' self-learning and that it should be strictly non-directive are relatively recent (Ives, 2008). Until some time in the late 1970s or early 1980s the coach was expected to be more skilled, knowledgeable or experienced than their client (Garvey et al, 2014), and to be able to provide some sort of guidance or instruction.

How this was achieved varied and coaching styles were not all directive – some were based more on experiential learning with support and constructive challenge. But this earlier manifestation of coaching almost always included some experience or knowledge transfer from coach to client.

SHIFTING NATURE

The nature of coaching changed in the latter decades of the 20th century for a combination of different economic, societal and organisational reasons.

Two specific factors also contributed to the metamorphosis. First, the supply of coaches burgeoned as psychologists sought new sources of income following the decimation of their own profession by changes in the US healthcare system (Filipczak, 1998). Second, a number of entrepreneurs with little or no prior business experience themselves identified coaching as an opportunity to build successful businesses. Both of these

groups had vested interests in promoting styles of coaching that didn't rely on coaches' prior experience being relevant to clients' working contexts.

Psychologists working as executive coaches and entrepreneurs keen to promote their coaching businesses have together exercised a profound influence on the commentary surrounding executive coaching. A notable effect of this influence is the very sparse coverage in the research on coaching of the role that coaches' backgrounds play in coaching and in coaching relationships (Kauffman & Bachkirova, 2009; Athanasopoulou and Dopson, 2018; Pandolfi, 2020).





In a forthcoming article to be published in the *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, my academic colleagues, Bob Garvey and Lloyd Chapman, and I outline some recent research on this topic we think might be of interest to the buyers and end users of executive coaching.

RESEARCH

Our research was avowedly qualitative. We weren't trying to 'prove' anything, certainly not to make any general rules about what does or doesn't work in coaching (Danermark et al, 2002). Instead, we sought to describe and examine what it's like to be a coach

with prior career experience of contexts similar to those of your clients and to be the client of a coach who has themselves experienced the sort of environment you work in.

We interviewed two cohorts of participants in May to July 2021.

First, four experienced executive coaches, all of whom were formally trained and accredited, and who had had 20 years plus prior executive careers including in roles as CEO, managing partner or executive team member. Second, a client of each of the coaches who were all working in senior executive corporate positions themselves.

The interviews were analysed thoroughly using a respected methodological approach (*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Smith et al, 2009*). Our findings about how the coaches' prior career experience influenced their relationships with their clients were grouped into five themes: *credibility, confidence, learning from mistakes, risks and the degree to which prior experience was sufficient*.

Let's look at these.

Credibility

Perhaps most predictably, both cohorts felt the coaches' prior experience

“I certainly enjoyed and feel I benefitted hugely from my training but any mention, let alone discussion, of how I might use my prior career experience in my coaching was notably absent from my part-time study”

influenced the credibility of the coaches. The coaches felt it helped them attract and win new clients but also that it underpinned building peer-to-peer relationships and made their questioning, challenging and probing more credible. Similarly, the clients felt their coaches’ experiential understanding of organisational life lent particular credibility to their interventions.

Confidence

Second, both cohorts also expressed the view that the coaches’ career experience boosted their confidence. The coaches felt that having tackled issues similar to those of their clients encouraged them to make interventions they might otherwise avoid and allowed them to empathise especially effectively. The clients felt that knowing that their coaches had experienced issues like theirs boosted their confidence in them and in their coaching. In particular, they felt it encouraged them to reveal more of themselves in their coaching and to be more open to feedback.

Learning from mistakes

Third, the coaches felt that learning from mistakes they may have made in their own executive careers was notably important in their coaching. They felt it affected how they cared for their clients – they wanted them to avoid similar ‘failures’. Perhaps more potently, they felt it allowed them to normalise their clients’ vulnerabilities and fears of failure particularly

effectively. Although not directly related, the clients felt the opportunity to ‘sense check’ their ideas with someone who had ‘been there, done what I do’ to be particularly valuable.

These three potentially additive effects of coaches’ prior experience were qualified by two themes – one from the coaches only and another from both the clients and the coaches.

Risks

The coaches were very clear that there are risks to being a coach after an executive career in the corporate world. Being keen to provide answers too quickly, rather than helping clients explore their own thinking thoroughly first, was identified as an obvious pitfall. All of the coaches recognised this risk and highlighted that gaining self-awareness of it was one of the principal benefits of their coaching training. Similarly, the possibility of some clients choosing coaches who they hope, either consciously or unconsciously, will give them ‘all the answers’ was identified as a risk for coaches with relevant career experience.

Insufficiency of prior experience alone

There was unanimity across and among both cohorts that the coaches’ prior experience was important but not sufficient in providing effective coaching. All participants in the study felt that any benefits of prior experience need to be combined with well-developed coaching skills and appropriate personal characteristics.



The skills and characteristics mentioned included being able to build strong working relationships, being trustworthy, empathetic and sensitive, with the ability to listen, and to listen attentively and actively, predominating.

FURTHER REFLECTIONS

Overall, our research suggests that coaches’ prior career experience in organisations is valued and that it can be additive to coaching – for some coaches working with some clients in some contexts. But there was no return implied to a traditional, ‘this is how to do it’ style of mentoring – we observed coaching that was informed, not shaped, by the coaches’ prior experience.

Our findings reminded us of one of Whitmore’s (2012, p42) less quoted comments: “The ideal would seem to be an expert coach with a wealth of technical knowledge, too. It is, however, very hard for experts to withhold their expertise sufficiently to coach well”.

If ‘the’ ideal, or, perhaps more appropriately, ‘an’ ideal, form of

executive coaching combines expertise in coaching with what Whitmore terms 'technical knowledge', why is more attention not paid by the coaching industry to how coaches could use their prior career experience in their work with clients?

How coaches are trained may be part of the answer. I certainly enjoyed and feel I benefited hugely from my training but any mention, let alone discussion, of how I might use my prior career experience in my coaching was notably absent from my three years of part-time study. This anecdotal observation was confirmed by recent research I conducted for doctoral studies (but unpublished) of a programme delivered by one of the UK's premier coaching training organisations.

The study concluded that the programme provides superb training in non-directive techniques and in listening skills but pays little attention to how to incorporate prior knowledge and experience in questioning or in coaching in general – it focuses much more on mitigating the risks highlighted above than on capitalising on the opportunities coaches' prior career experience can present.

That coaching training courses don't focus on how would-be executive coaches might harness their prior experience in their coaching is perhaps not surprising. The organisations that confer accreditation of training programmes don't mention it. The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC), for instance, refers in its most recent Global Competence Framework to coaches being able to use "an active listening style" and "a range of questioning techniques to raise awareness" but makes no reference to where the understanding required to underpin active listening or questioning might come from.

The plurality of approaches and styles practised within the UK

coaching market is arguably one of its greatest strengths. But in order to operate efficiently, a heterogeneous marketplace requires transparency and clarity regarding the characteristics of the various approaches and styles on offer.

I believe the attributes of professionally trained coaches who can combine their coaching skills with insights gained from having had experience of similar organisational situations to their clients' are currently under-understood in our marketplace.

The coaches I refer to obviously have a role to play in providing the clarity I suggest is needed. In addition, I believe the industry would benefit from its accrediting bodies recognising the value some coaches' prior career experience can bring to their work and by the training sector focusing on how coaches with relevant prior experience might bring it to bear appropriately in their coaching.

Senior executive coaching remains a highly individual experience and success depends on selecting the right coach for each individual client in their specific context. For some clients, having a coach who has 'been there' too, can have notable advantages. **G**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

● **Robin Hindle Fisher** is a business coach and executive mentor at Hay Hill Partners. He became a coach in 2010 following an executive career in financial services, which included CEO, managing director and board roles. He has a master's degree in executive coaching from Ashridge Business School; another from the Metanoia Institute in Coaching Psychology; and is currently a PhD student with the Professional Development Foundation.

Robin's coaching practice is exclusively one-to-one and clients are generally in board, exco or head of function roles. He is also on the boards of two FCA regulated investment management companies and a trustee of a major UK charity.

References

- A Athanasopoulou and S Dopson, 'A systematic review of executive coaching outcomes: Is it the journey or the destination that matters the most?', in *Leadership Quarterly*, 2018: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2017.11.004>
- B Danermark, B Ekstrom, L Jakobsen and J Karlsson, *Explaining society: An introduction to critical realism in the social sciences*. Routledge, 2002
- B Filipczak, 'The executive coach: helper or healer?', in *Training*, 35(3), 30-36, 1998
- B Garvey, P Stokes and D Megginson, *Coaching and Mentoring: Theory and Practice* (2nd ed.). SAGE, 2014
- Y Ives, 'What is "Coaching"? An exploration of conflicting paradigms', in *International Journal of Evidence Based Coaching and Mentoring*, 6(2), 100-113, 2008
- C Kauffman and T Bachkirova, 'Spinning order from chaos: How do we know what to study in coaching research and use it for self-reflective practice?', in *Coaching: An International Journal of Theory, Research & Practice*, 2(1), 1-9, 2009
- C Pandolfi, 'Active ingredients in executive coaching: A systematic literature review', in *International Coaching Psychology Review*, 15(2), 6-30, 2020
- J Smith, P Flowers and M Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. SAGE, 2009
- J Whitmore, *Coaching for Performance* (4th ed.). Nicholas Brealey, 2012