



THE EMERGENCE OF PROFESSIONAL COACHING

Four Early Influences for the Growth of Executive Coaching

The Beginning

Professional Coaching has been around for many years, long before it was called "Executive Coaching", and achieved its current popularity. For at least the last 20 years, one-to-one consultancy programmes have been available to help develop the performance and effectiveness of individual senior managers.

The four early influences for the growth of executive coaching are as follows:

- the recognition of an increased need for managers to take responsibility for *managing their careers*
- the need for a *new type of leadership* to cope with the demands of an increasingly fast paced competitive business environment
- the acknowledgement of the increased use and *importance of professional coaching in the world of sport*, and fourthly
- the *growth of business psychology practices* able to meet the demand.

Taking Responsibility for Managing Your Own Career

The early 1980's saw the first signs of change in the business culture in the UK, which was to create a climate for the explosion of coaching in the last five years of the twentieth century. At the time the UK showed a lack of competitiveness when compared with Japan for example, and there was great emphasis on achieving efficiency gains, which also precipitated some corporate downsizing. Consequently, there was an increased sense of job insecurity for senior managers, and an increased realisation that each individual needed to take responsibility for managing their own careers and be more proactive in positioning themselves as favourably as possible.

New Type of Leadership

In the 1990's, competition intensified and there was more overt recognition that managers had to continually adapt, learn, innovate and even reinvent the ways that they contributed to their business. In this changing, unpredictable business world, there was a need for managers who could initiate change and leaders who demonstrated a new skill set. Such skills included the ability to be an idea leader, and

the ability to inspire others to 'buy-in' to those ideas through open dialogue and good influencing skills. This was also a time when transformational leadership replaced the traditional transactional management model, and when learning and empowerment replaced instruction.

The business case for coaching intensified with the recognition that individual managers needed to think in a different way in order to lead, drive and stimulate the development of increased competitive advantage. It was becoming clear that companies with more capable people at the top had a much greater chance of producing higher returns to their shareholders.

The Importance of Professional Coaching in the World of Sport

It was also in the early 1980's that the concept of coaching was also gaining in popularity in the world of sport. It became evident that any sporting performer who was serious about achieving excellence worked with a professional coach who provided both challenge and motivational support in order to raise performance levels. The analogy of sport was also very useful in getting managers to appreciate that coaching was not a remedial activity, but a performance enhancing activity for the highly aspirant individual wishing to fulfil his or her potential. Sport also helped individual managers appreciate the incremental nature of performance which is a fundamental concept underlying the whole approach to coaching.

The traditional approach to management development has tended to be binary in nature in the sense that you go on a training or development programme and it is assumed that you have acquired a skill. The coaching model assumes that you will have acquired a skill to a certain level of performance and the quest for further improvement becomes a continuous journey throughout the rest of your life.

The Growth of Business Psychology Practices

If the demand for professional coaching was beginning to accelerate in the late 1980's and 1990's, then the growth was only sustained by the increased availability of service providers which originally came from business psychology practitioners and more recently has been provided by other types of management development consultant. In the very early 1980's there was no more than a dozen private business psychology practices in the UK, but this number increased to over 300 by the start of the 1990's. The main services traditionally provided by business psychologists in the 1980's were assessment services, usually at senior management levels, where the cost of poor selection decisions was clearly more apparent. It wasn't long however, before business psychologists were being asked to follow on from their assessment work to help individuals address the development opportunities that had been identified as part of the assessment process.

Then in the late 1980's, business psychologists were increasingly asked to provide a more direct one-to-one development programme for managers who were seen to be underperforming, and the context of this work was essentially remedial in nature. In the 1990's however, executive coaching began to lose its association as a "remedial activity", and by this time clients were generally senior managers, directors and managing directors. Coaching had become a strategic personal development intervention to help senior employees maximise their potential and contribute more effectively to the business.

The Future

Although professional coaching is only about 20 years old, it seems inevitable that it will be increasingly used by businesses in the future to ensure distinctive competitive advantage. It has become clear that professional coaching helps support leaders in addressing the challenges they face, and more importantly, helps them develop the leadership competence necessary to achieve improved business results.