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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: THE BUSINESS OF COACHING

Good business coaching is so powerful that if it were a drug, it would be illegal. A client walks into a coaching session stressed, overburdened, ready to give up – and an hour later emerges transformed: clear, focused, calmer, fit again to fight and win.

Coaching this good looks like magic – but it's actually about consistent and disciplined application of the right tools at the right time. This book is about how to become that almost-magician, whether as part of your 'day job' or as an external coach. It is the serious introduction to the field – 'serious' because it is for people already living in the complexities of business or organisational life, and 'introduction' because it gives you a thorough, well-grounded knowledge of the basics and how to do them well, then a 'map of the territory' of all the rest.

First, though, this chapter gives you an overview. It describes what's driving the market, where people use coaching – and when they shouldn't. Then Chapter 2 describes the plethora of ways of earning a living with it. Or you might like to hop straight to Chapter 3, 'Do you have what it takes?'. Or even plunge right into Chapter 4, 'Developing your coaching: first steps'.

Market drivers

Still here? Great!

In 2003, *The Economist* magazine estimated the coaching market was worth \$1 billion worldwide, and in the fast-growth stage of doubling within 24 months.¹ They were right. Less than two decades on, coaching in organisations has grown to the point where a 2019 *Harvard Business Review* article says it is a skill all leaders and managers must now have.²

Causes of market growth

What is driving all this?

Think, for a start, of the change in just one generation. My mother didn't need a coach. She lived in the same house from marriage to death, had a single clear role, which she filled capably and confidently, and a strong, unchanging network of lifelong friends and neighbours. News arrived via a solitary daily paper and the radio; over half her life was lived before there was a television in the house. I, on the other hand, am now on my third career, plus hiccups and byways *en route*. I have travelled on business to over 40 countries (flights; delays; brief fascinating glimpses of new places), lived in several of them, remarried and, along with time zones, languages, retrainings, new colleagues, new tasks, have always had multiple roles – team member, boss, subordinate, leader, finding something to thaw for dinner. My world is bursting with emails, meetings, phones, tasks, travel, the news, the bustle. It's exhausting but it's fun and stimulating.

That level of stimulation is the point. Compared with only one generation ago, the level of *cognitive load* (i.e. the amount of incoming data we have to process) has multiplied hugely. But my brain hasn't, so coaching is, for me and many others, the equivalent of plugging in some extra processing capacity. With a great coach, it's like plugging into the National Grid – a surge of energy and clear focus that recharges the batteries and hauls me back up to peak form.

At the systemic level, there are many other drivers, some of them cumulative over more than one generation. They include:

- *Job leaps*. The fashion for stripping out layers of management has left surviving managers with much greater leaps between job levels. And when they arrive up there they're surrounded by people so pressed with their own targets they have little time to help.
- *Time stretch*. The 40-hour working week may still be a reality somewhere, but in investment banks and law firms, closing a deal can mean working 48 hours straight. Young doctors work similar hours. But the human body hasn't, in fact, changed to permit this, so the consequences impact individuals, teams and organisations.

- *Space stretch.* To be up to date, I need to be alert to what's happening in my field on three continents. I can't, of course, but technology gives the illusion it's possible, so I need to struggle on trying.
- *Time shrink.* Though our working days are longer, and work corrodes rest and holidays, the time horizons for delivery of results is much shorter. When asked his view on the French Revolution, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai is alleged to have replied gravely, 'It's too early to tell.' Now firms' performance is measured in quarter-years, and average time in post for CEOs is shrinking fast. Fast, convulsive change has spread to politics, adding further turbulence to organisational contexts.
- *Fragmented support structures.* Few of the people working in the City of London, or any of the other great world intellectual, political or financial centres, were actually born there, so family, school and college friends can be far off. Increasing numbers have never, or are no longer, married.³ Solo parenting is common, and the number of people living entirely alone is so high it's affecting the housing supply. Our increasing isolation is endemic, significant and concerning policy-makers: see Robert Putnam's data-rich yet compelling book, *Bowling Alone*.⁴
- *New pressures.* Senior executives are under intense pressure to deliver shareholder return – but now they must also pull around the supertanker of their firm, to be at the same time deeply responsible to society, on top of ever-changing political correctness, and make fundamental change for the climate emergency – while performing in a media spotlight of increasingly savage intensity. And after almost 600 years of business as we know it in Europe, bad luck, you're in just the second or third generation where there's no one at home to do the laundry: your partner's working too, so don't forget to pick up the dry cleaning on the way home.

Is this just whining? As Alex Linley points out,⁵ the last 50 years have been, before COVID-19, the most blessed that humankind has ever experienced in the whole history of this planet: no world war, several distressing diseases beaten for the first time, more people than ever before with enough to eat, and an unparalleled profusion of consumer goods.

He's right, of course. But that very abundance means choice, and many now face disruptive change, so I come back to arguing: the single biggest reason for the explosion of coaching is it helps us deal with cognitive (over)load.

What coaching tackles

If you haven't experienced coaching yourself, what might you expect? We'll say more shortly, but as a 'starter pack':

- The coach should quickly put you at your ease, then help you clarify what precisely you would like to get from the session.
- They then help you marshal ideas, solutions and plans quite quickly, by serving as a sounding board for you to try out your thinking, providing space to reflect and challenging where appropriate.
- Typical topics that people often sort out through business coaching include prioritising the use of time, managing key relationships, building the right team and using it well, building confidence, raising self-awareness, and understanding and improving one's impact.
- And it's often energising, thought-provoking, liberating, inspiring.

The limits of coaching

But, before we all get too excited, coaching is not a panacea. Powerful, yes. The answer to everything, no. Circumstances where it cannot or should not be used include:

- *Where the coachee doesn't want to.* Rule no. 1: the coachee has to have free choice on whether or not to be coached. Because its essence is digging the answers out of a high-performing mind, if the mind doesn't want to cooperate, it won't work.
- *Where the coachee can't.* Coaching needs not only the coach but also the coachee to be sane. None of us is fit to be coached all the time. In the short term, personal issues such as relationship breakdown at home or sudden bereavement can send us enough 'out of our mind' for coaching not to be the answer. (The answer is a counsellor or therapist, trained, qualified and highly experienced in the specific issue. Why need they be highly experienced? Because immensely able senior businesspeople are perfectly capable of pulling the wool over the eyes of a gullible therapist and hence not get the help they really need; I've seen it happen. Specialist therapists accustomed to working with senior business folk and getting past their defenses can be found through corporate wellness centres, Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), specialist GPs and/or by word of mouth.) The prospective

coachee alternatively might have a personality disorder which no amount of coaching can change.

- *Cultural difference.* It should not be assumed that coaching can be applied in every cultural context. In some cases, where the culture of a global organisation is so powerful that it to some extent overrides local variation, at least while employees are in their ‘work’ mindset, it could be fine. Motorola Corporation, for example, has such a powerful, positive and pervasive organisational culture that coaching, which works at global HQ in Chicago, Illinois, may well be equally productive for their people in Singapore and Beijing. But it might not.
- *Hostile context.* Coaching is for more or less healthy people, and more or less healthy organisations. The coachee needs to trust the coach, if they are to open up and tell the truth. And both coach and coachee need to trust the organisation being open to reasonable individual and organisational change, if their plans are going to have any chance of succeeding. So coaching works fine in Microsoft, where it is deeply embedded and widely used. But I have seen toxic law firms where it doesn’t work at all, backfiring on both coach and coachee.*
- *Personality difference.* Some healthy high-functioning people just don’t like the coaching approach. In Myers–Briggs terms (see Chapter 7), typically Ns take to coaching like a duck to water, while ISTJs can strongly prefer a more structured training or mentoring approach to development (see below for the difference). But not all Ns, and not all ISTJs – hence more reason, yet again, for the individual being given the choice.

Now we’ve got our feet back on the ground – this stuff is good, but it’s not Superman – let’s look at some basic definitions and distinctions.

* I don’t single out law firms by accident: they are statistically among the most depressed of all occupations. See Seligman, M. (2003) *Authentic Happiness*, London: Nicholas Brealey, pp. 177ff. A firm where more people are depressed than anywhere else, and some of the cheerful ones are psychopaths, isn’t likely to be a healthy work environment. (Lawyers are exceptional in their incidence of depression, but they’re not alone on psychopathy: its incidence is high compared with the general population in all the glittering pinnacles of global business: see Babiak, P. and Hare, R. (2006) *Snakes in Suits*, New York: Regan Books/HarperCollins: gripping and essential reading for anyone working in the high-stakes contexts that attract them.) There are, of course, law firms, investment banks, hedge funds, etc. with healthy cultures, but coaches practising in global financial centres need to be alert as to who is offering them work. For more, see Laura Empson’s remarkable 2017 book, *Leading Professionals: Power, Politics, and Prima Donnas*, Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Defining terms

As coaching has become a ‘good thing’, the word has been spread thinly over almost everything, like raspberry jam. At worst, I once heard a senior accountant say, ‘We coached him out.’ No, you didn’t – you fired him.

If we’re really going to help people, then the terms need to be crystal clear. Hence my basic definition of what coaching is:

traditional mentoring (or training or advising or consulting) *puts in* advice, content, information. Coaching, by contrast, *pulls out* the capacity people have within.

So the essence of everything else is downloading – telling people what to do. But the essence of coaching is uploading: drawing out from within, people’s own ideas, hopes, dreams, plans. Already, you’ll see why it works so powerfully:

- People are much more likely to implement things they’ve thought up for themselves.
- Most people, even already successful ones, have very considerable untapped potential just waiting to be brought out.
- And, anyway, intelligent people often resent being told what to do and don’t listen, so you might as well ask instead.

(For more on why coaching works, see Chapter 12 entitled, imaginatively, ‘Why it works’.)

So mentoring, training, consulting *put in*; coaching *pulls out*.

Of course, in practice they blend a little: a good mentor will coach some of the time, and coaches may lob things in occasionally to keep clients on their toes. But, at the heart of coaching, is this ability to pull out from people clear thinking, higher achievement, inspired vision, leadership and fee-earning game-changing performance. (For how to do this, see Chapter 5: it’s simple, but not easy!) Clients vaguely knew they had it within them, but the scale of what they actually leap up to achieving often astonishes them. A bit rubs off on us too: we learn to self-coach, and I observe that coaches are a pretty clear-sighted, quick-thinking bunch: perhaps this is another reason why many have weathered recessions better than most.

Continuing on definitions and distinctions, let’s now look at some of the different flavours coaching and its near-cousins come in.

Coaching v. mentoring

You know the mantra: mentoring puts in, coaching pulls out. Fifteen years ago, some organisations weren't clear on this distinction, and indeed one famous organisation had it the wrong way round. But there is now widespread agreement, as there jolly well should be, for the distinction has the ultimate pedigree of Classical antiquity. In Greek myth, Odysseus was about to go off on a voyage. Concerned about his son Telemachus, he consigned the youngster to the care of Mentor, an older, wiser man – and according to some versions of the myth, actually Athena, the Goddess of Wisdom, in disguise. A good thing too, as, what with one thing and another, Odysseus ended up being away 10 years. In the meantime, Mentor/Athena brought up the boy, and well – but there was no nonsense about asking questions, Goddesses tell mortals what to do.

Directive/non-directive

Because in modern practice each borrows a little from the other, in day-to-day reality, coaching may not be entirely pull or mentoring entirely push. Instead, two very useful terms define the difference more generically: 'directive' means telling (and variants), wherever it occurs, and 'non-directive' means drawing the answers out of the client, wherever it occurs. These terms will keep reappearing throughout the rest of the book.

Life coaching v. business coaching

Life coaching covers the whole of your life: diet, fitness, relationships, etc. Business coaching is about business, so the content differs. In terms of the *skills* used, there is some overlap, as both draw on the same basic skills, but there is one important difference: business coaching is generally a business-to-business sale, while life coaching is generally sold by the practitioner direct to the end user. This has significant implications for *contracting*. There's much more on this in Chapter 5; here, I just note that business coaching, where there are several clients, sometimes with conflicting demands, and often across different cultures and time zones, involves considerably greater *complexity*.

In fact, a better distinction would be between single-stakeholder ('life') coaching v. multiple-stakeholder or organisational ('business') coaching. The complexity in any organisational context, whether the Government, civil service,

military, Church, non-profit, or many other sectors is the same as in business as narrowly defined. But we tend to use the term ‘business coaching’ to subsume all these, perhaps because it’s shorter to say.

Business coaching v. executive coaching

In the USA, the two terms are very distinct, with executive coaching meaning working solely with the most senior executives in the organisation, and business coaching usually meaning working with those lower down the organisation chart. In the UK, however, the two terms are more interchangeable, with business coaching usually taken as a comprehensive term to cover both.

Business coaching v. leadership coaching

The word ‘leadership’ is getting spread around rather; everyone is now a leader. But leadership (or ‘C-suite’ – chief executive officer/chief operating officer, etc.) coaching has somehow avoided that, and still means coaching the toughest people in the firm: those right at the top, who whether their title happens to begin with a ‘C’ or not, have all the executive toys but in some sense the jobs from Hell.

Business, executive and leadership coaching differ little in the skill sets used, but a leadership coach needs to be able to work as an equal with, perhaps, a raging ‘Alpha male/female’ at full throttle – or, these days, a cerebral hedge fund squillionaire. Those who can, come from varied routes, but whatever else they have, they need a tough hide, personal gravitas and the ability to capture a leader’s attention in split seconds.

Coaching v. counselling

Much simpler: the clients of a coach are presumed to be well; the clients of a counsellor – or therapist, or clinical psychologist, or psychiatrist – are not: they may be vulnerable, and hence extra procedures are needed to protect their interests. There is also a subtle but important difference in the power relationships. The situation is changing, but, within the ‘medical model’, there is still a slight power differential: practitioners, particularly the white-coated ones, have expertise and the people they work with are called ‘patients’. Coaches by contrast work with ‘clients’, and the power relationship is absolutely that of equals. (For the difference between the various mental health practitioners, see the following box.)

Mental health professionals

In approximately descending order of the severity of conditions they work with:

- *Psychiatrists*: trained in medicine, plus postgraduate specialist training in psychiatry; as medically qualified doctors, are certified to prescribe medication.
- *Clinical psychologists*: trained in psychology and then specialise in clinical psychology; work with more chronic conditions; in the UK, typically employed in the National Health Service. Occasionally, further licensed to use medication, but generally control symptoms with 'talking therapies'.
- *Psychotherapists*: intensive and lengthy training in one or more of the different forms of psychotherapy, typically undergoing personal therapy themselves.
- *Counsellors*: trained in counselling (courses typically half the length of psychotherapy training). Work with people facing life transitions, less severe forms of depression and anxiety, and personal growth issues, typically in private practice.
- *General practitioners (GPs)*: trained in medicine; may prescribe medication or refer on to other professionals. The first place for a coach to refer to if there is any question of any of the above professionals being required; the GP is the proper 'gatekeeper' and can diagnose/assess in order to make the right referral.

How coaching is used

Now let's look at who uses coaching and what they use it for.

Coaching tends to be bought for senior people. From the organisation's perspective, this is partly because it's expensive, whether provided internally or externally. From the supply side, you might think coaches, like everyone else in business, 'follow the money' – senior levels are where you can earn most. True, but I also think coaching is naturally more useful in the later stages of a career. At the beginning, young professionals, like it or not, need to be told a great deal. Law, accountancy and medical students spend many years stuffing down technical information, then when they arrive in the workplace it begins all over again as they learn their profession in practice. MBAs structure the intensive learning bursts differently, but they're still typically in the first half of careers. And along the way there are regular periods of retraining.

But from about mid-career on, it is no longer just a matter of technical competence. The higher you climb, the less charted the waters and the more you have to make your own, often difficult, judgement calls. In addition, to be authentic and charismatic, leaders have to draw out their own genuine vision from within and convey it compellingly. Little of that can be taught, but a lot of it can be coached.

How else is coaching used? In essence, business leaders have coaches for the same reason that athletes do – it’s a mind game. More specifically, typical tasks include:

- transition: for example, VP Latin America promoted to the global board;
- ‘first 100 days’, i.e. planning ahead of time how to land best in a new role;
- strategy, sales or marketing planning: digging out the fresh new ideas, and challenging stale or habitual thinking;
- decision making under uncertainty: minimising downside risk and increasing the likelihood of success;
- managing exceptional load or its sometime consequence, stress;
- keeping a clear head through turbulence, e.g. mergers, acquisitions, downsizing;
- developing high potentials;
- fixing whatever’s holding someone back, e.g. improving interpersonal skills;
- ensuring an expensive new hire integrates well, and stays.

Who provides the coaching?

In this chapter we’ve talked about the pressures on us all in business and how coaching is a growing response to that. You might be beginning to see the lure coaching has for its clients.

But what motivates *coaches* to enter this fast-growing profession and what do they actually do? In the next chapter we switch from the ‘demand’ to the ‘supply’ side and meet the coaches, in all their various manifestations: some may surprise you!