

Some thoughts on Executive Coaching and Action Research

*“No one has ever taught anyone anything,
you need to create an environment so that learning occurs”.*

Executive coaching is not about teaching how to do something like perform financial calculations or setup a work roster. Rather, coaching is about helping the client to refine perspectives of his or her roles within the organisation and beyond, and focussed on understanding how to act effectively on that perspective. That refinement is the result of new learnings arising from the coaching environment.

The *environment* from the quote above is developed jointly by the client and coach and the quality of their relationship determines its effectiveness. Each of the methods of coaching rely on this relationship as it develops within the particular circumstances faced by the client.

Action research is a well-established approach to organisational research and is a very effective modality for executive coaching. It is defined by Wikipedia to include: *“either research initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others ... to improve the way they address issues and solve problems”*. The principles of action research provide a framework for the coaching environment.

In action research terms the *immediate* problem is the reason for coaching. To consider the problem anything else would change the engagement from coaching to consulting. Applying the *reflective process* to the *immediate problem* is the cornerstone of coaching and represents the *environment* of the quote above.

References for principals of action research are provided at the end of this note. In my experience and essential principle is that client and coach are each learning from the *reflective* processes, guided by the coach and maintained by them both.

The day-to-day activities of the client’s world provide the situation of coaching. This is the usual and effective milieu for coaching. Clients under some circumstances can greatly benefit from the end-to-end process offered by well-defined and measured action research.

Creation of a new initiative gives immediate structure to specific areas such as effective relations with particular levels of stakeholders. Development of a new project can provide opportunities for the client to develop stakeholder approaches within its boundaries and between those boundaries and the broader organisation and beyond. The client can have any role in the activity so long as it involves the stated issue with all stakeholders.

Within the client and coach *environment* various approaches to stakeholders can be undertaken, observed and discussed. The client’s thoughts and management of his/her role, personal proclivities, and desires within the context of the project, the organisational dynamics and beyond, formulate with their results during the concentrated processes of the project. It is this environment that creates the learnings and developed expertise of the client.

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The same results can be achieved when coaching occurs within the normal day-to-day business but may take longer than insights from a specifically designed and initiated project. Of course the continuation of the new initiative over time naturally becomes absorbed as part of the day-to-day.

Some references: Here is a very small sample of the many excellent resources on the action research topic.

- David Coghlan, Professor Emeritus (Business & Administrative Studies) Trinity College Dublin has published extensively on action research topics.
- Jan Robinson's *The three Rs for coaching learning relationships* (2008) provides an educational perspective and is downloadable as a pdf.
- John Newton, Susan Long and Burkard Sievers provide an excellent exploration of role analysis in their text: *Coaching in Depth: The Organisational Role Analysis Approach* published by Karnac Press.
- National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia (NIODA) provides academic and training programmes in action research
- Rory O'Brien, *An Overview of the Methodological Approach of Action Research* (1998)
- Wikipedia as usual provides an excellent introduction

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