Chapter 21: Psychodynamic Executive Coaching

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Introduction

Psychodynamic executive coaching takes into account three major perspectives arising from three theoretical traditions—classical, object relations, and systems. This chapter explains many elements of these three frameworks as represented by three leaders in executive coaching—Levinson, Kets de Vries, and Kilburg. Also included are discussions of organizational role analysis and Bion’s theory of group dynamics. Each of these theories illuminates different dimensions of what executive coaches encounter relative to leadership, groups and organizational dynamics, the context in which executives experience a sense of self, actions, and outcomes.

Contemporary psychoanalysis is predicated on the value of authenticity and the idea of a true self hidden behind the veil of a false self. The false self, like the ego, is a stable and recurring, continuously operative structure. Pediatrician and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) observed that some individuals suffer a false self-disorder—a particular way of viewing the schizoid character—but he repeatedly asserted that this separation of self into true and false is also normal. True and false thus refer not to a moral order, but to qualities in self-other experiences that support spontaneous expression (true self) or reactive living (false self) (Moore and Fine, 1990). Authenticity is an element of the idea of true self, which requires self-consciousness and attentiveness to the executive’s own impact on others and in turn others affect on the executive in role. Thus, psychodynamic executive coaching is, at its core, about self-understanding and truth. These truths include the ideas of psychological (or psychic) reality and sense of self (consciousness, awareness) in the world of work.
Psychological (or psychic) reality, which is synonymous with the terms inner reality and subjective reality, is a cornerstone of executive consultation. The relational and experiential disposition of the executive in the context of his or her organization becomes the pivotal point of investigation and consciousness. The concept of self (or self-organization) refers to the individual’s manner of cognitively and emotionally organizing experience and perceptions of self and others at work (Diamond and Allcorn, 2009).

This notion of self is a critical concept in attending to executive dispositions, psychological defenses, and anxieties, and in promoting conscious and reflective practice. Psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching focus on unconscious (emotional and cognitive) processes, and relational and group dynamics in the executive’s mind. Articulation between consultant/coach and clients about unconscious dynamics facilitate deeper understanding of the meaning of actual interpersonal exchanges and influences in the external world of work. The psychodynamic process moves the consultant’s and client’s attentiveness beyond behavioristic observations and toward the defensive sources of inattention and deficiency in (false, inauthentic, compliant and reactive) self and other relations at work. As noted above, the development of psychodynamic coaching is explored by describing and explaining approaches to executive coaching and consultation in the writings of Levinson (1962; 1968; 1970; 1972; 1981; 2002), Kets de Vries (1984; 1991; 2006; 2007; 2010), and Kilburg (2000; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005). These three approaches were chosen due to their overall influence on psychodynamic coaching and consultation and their use of different psychoanalytic schools of thought—classical ego psychology, object relational, and an integrated and cross-disciplinary systems model, respectively. Organizational role analysis (Newton, Long, and Sievers, 2006) originating with the group relations traditions of Tavistock and A.K. Rice Institutes is also
briefly discussed. In the following, psychodynamic theories and concepts are applied to understanding organizations and to practicing coaching and consultation. Finally, a summary of psychodynamic approaches to coaching and recommendations for future research are presented.

The Development of Psychodynamic Coaching

Psychodynamic approaches to organizations have evolved most visibly over the last 25 years or so. This evolution and emergence is rooted in the clinical paradigm of psychoanalysis and in particular the psychoanalytic study of organizations (Kets de Vries and Associates, 1991; Czander, 1993; Diamond, 1993; Gabriel, 1999; Sievers, 2009). Within psychoanalysis there are a number of competing schools of thought that are also represented in the work of psychoanalytically-oriented consultants to organizations, which is reflected in a multiplicity of psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching and consultation.

Psychoanalytic theory is comprised of at least three major schools of thought: classical psychoanalytic theory (and ego psychology) rooted in the Freudian drive and structural model; psychoanalytic object relations theory rooted in the (Kleinian and Winnicottian) relational (object-seeking) model; and (Kohutian) self psychology rooted in a mixed model with a particular focus on the developmental lines of narcissism and self-organization. One of the better overviews of the evolving psychoanalytic paradigms and schools of thought is *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983). Contemporary approaches to executive coaching take a pluralistic approach relying primarily on object relations theory, but not exclusively. Thus, most psychodynamic approaches integrate ideas and concepts from all three schools of thought. And, while these three schools of psychoanalytic thought are predominant, it ought to be mentioned that Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and other
postmodern and poststructuralist approaches are also applied to social and organizational phenomena as well (Arnaud, 2003; Driver, 2009). In the following section, the works of Levinson, Kets de Vries, Kilburg, Newton, et al, are discussed. First, the contributions of organization psychologist Harry Levinson and his introduction of the idea of a psychological contract are reviewed.

**Psychodynamic Models**

**A Focus on Desires, Needs, and Expectations in Context**

Levinson (1962) introduced the concept of a *psychological contract* where he explained how a particular dialogue between employer and employee might shape mutual expectations as a key ingredient to successful organizational membership and affiliation. Levinson’s notion of a psychological contract encompassed an acknowledgement of conscious and unconscious human needs and desires as well as the complexity of authority relations. Employees are emotionally invested in their relationship to the organization and its leadership—a *transference* of emotions tie individuals and their identities to their work organizations. In psychoanalytic theory, transference dynamics represent the degree to which past experiences from childhood shape and influence perceptions of others particularly those in positions of authority in the present moment, often projected emotions from the past may distort present relationships. Transference dynamics are often characterized by mirroring, on the one hand, and idealizing, on the other. Mirroring transference refers to the individual unconscious desire for others to reinforce a need to be seen as omnipotent and grandiose, the narcissistic leader who requires admiring and adoring followers and who view him- or herself as god-like. Idealizing transference is the opposite side of the coin
in which followers are in search of leaders to idealize and admire—the unconscious need for an all-powerful leader where followers feel safer and grander simply by being in his or her proximity. Unless management is psychologically aware of and attentive to these manifest and latent dimensions of worker motivation, it is highly unlikely that employees will feel adequately taken care of by their employers. For Levinson, this managerial oversight and deficiency can lead to demoralization and poor performance.

The psychological contract became a valuable conceptual tool for managers, consultants, and executive coaches as they considered failures of supervision and communication between supervisors and subordinates, executives and their staff. Application of the psychological contract between employer and employee requires perpetual dialogue between the parties, acknowledging the dynamics of mutual emotional needs and expectations, conscious and unconscious. Levinson highlighted the significance of the ego ideal for individual motivation. He came to view the management of the ego ideal as crucial to successful mentoring and central to the psychological contract. He simply defined the idea of the ego ideal as one’s image of oneself at one’s future best. The value of this concept was shaped by his earliest thinking about motivation, career development, mentoring, and emotional well being at work. Most fundamentally, his emphasis on the ego ideal acknowledged the nature of emotional attachments to organizations and the world of work.

Levinson (1964) observed that supervisors had difficulty managing. In particular, he saw a problem for managers that some individuals understood intuitively yet had no psychological basis for articulation and correction. Managers often felt conflicted, that is guilty, about evaluating subordinate performance, especially when the evaluation required negative and critical feedback of the employee’s work.
Levinson not only explained the psychodynamics of guilt, he emphasized the human compassion inherent in and necessary for providing subordinates with unambiguous, direct, and honest feedback in performance evaluation. From the notion of “management-by-guilt” supervisors came to better appreciate their ambivalent feelings surrounding the act of subordinate evaluations. They also came to appreciate the value of sincere feedback in the development of subordinate career opportunities. Consultants and executive coaches learned to pay attention to these difficulties of supervision and provide help to their clients. Out of these insights surrounding the individual ego ideal of workers, managers, and executives, Levinson came to stress the leadership’s role in mentoring and educating workers and managers.

In his book *Executive*, Levinson (1968; 1981) directs managers to pay attention to three primary human drives: ministration, maturation, and mastery. In the caretaking practice of *ministration* needs for gratification, closeness, support, protection, and guidance are served. In supporting human developmental requirements, *maturation* needs for creativity, originality, self-control, and reality testing are supplied. And, given the demands for self-competence and confidence, *mastery* needs that encompass individual demands for ambitious striving, realistic achievement, rivalry with affection, and consolidation are satisfied. With these human needs in mind, executive coaches and consultants might assist executives by engaging in more thoughtful and reflective dialogues with their managers and workers thereby establishing management systems more responsive to individual potential and desire for advancement. Motivation could be understood as multidimensional and leaders with the assistance of coaches might facilitate growth and maturation in their own executive careers and the careers of their employees. One cannot help but reflect on how challenging such sensitivity to human needs of workers has become in our contemporary global economy of volatility, downsizing and re-engineering.
In *Executive*, Levinson (1968; 1981 revised) provides a psychoanalytic framework for problem diagnosis. The framework is designed to assist executives and managers in problem solving focused on personnel conflicts and performance issues, providing a template for analyzing troublesome human relations at work and a practical application of a psychodynamic approach to executive coaching.

Starting with the concept of the ego ideal in the work setting, the executive coach or consultant might consider the degree to which the individual executive feels he or she has lived up to their ideal self-image, and the degree to which that ideal may or may be out of reach of what is plausible for them given their current self-image and the organizational realities they must contend with. Many consultants and executive coaches can appreciate the frequency with which executives, managers, and workers feel they fall short of their personal goals or are not working at their level of competency and training. A large gap between one’s self image and ego ideal may produce low self-esteem according to Levinson. It also might produce anger and resentment as a consequence of disappointment.

Next, individual needs for *affection* and the desire to develop closer ties with colleagues and fellow workers ought to be considered. One might reflect on the value of attending to human needs for affection among workers and their relations to executives. This might entail taking into account an executive’s proclivity to “move toward or away from” others such as his staff and fellow workers. Paying attention to the emotional tensions of *transference and counter-transference* dynamics as evidenced by the executive’s patterns of relationships at work is critical to accessing insights into what is happening to feelings of affection in the workplace.

Next, how the individual executive copes with *aggression* at work is considered. Here the influences of classical psychoanalytic drive theory and ego psychology come through in an
implicit acknowledgement of the role of work as a form of sublimation. As executive coaches or consultants we might look at the degree to which the individual executive “moves against” others in a manner that might be experienced as intimidating, hostile, abrasive or intrusive to employees. Opportunities to observe, discuss, and reflect on these destructive proclivities is constructive dimension of executive coaching and consultation. Fostering awareness of *transference and counter-transference* dynamics as evidenced and contextualized in patterns of behavior and conflicts between executives and their colleagues is critical to self and other awareness.

Finally, Levinson’s model encourages paying attention to how executives (managers and workers) manifest human *dependency* needs (1981: 33). Given the hierarchic structure of most organizations, the phenomenon of dependency enables executive coaches and consultants to examine once again the psychodynamics of *transference and counter-transference* in the context of super- and subordinate relationships. Is the degree of dependency appropriate or inappropriate, constructive or destructive, progressive or regressive? Co-dependencies can emerge as well in which executives provoke, often unconsciously, subordinate behavior that renders adult workers in un-adult-like roles—what in psychoanalytic theory is called psychological *regression*.

Levinson (1976) formulated a framework for problem analysis that remains helpful to executive coaches and consultants. In the context of a comprehensive consultation (including organizational diagnosis and assessment) with the leader and her organization, the executive coach or consultant considers the following general questions: Who is in pain? When did it begin? What is happening to this individual’s needs for: aggression, affection, and dependency? What is the nature of their ego ideal? Is the problem solvable? How? In so doing, Levinson illustrates how one can arrange and interpret data (in a psychodynamically-informed way)
around problems and conflicts that might otherwise leave executives and their managers perplexed and seemingly without recourse.

Levinson (1972; 2002) depicts the complexity of diagnosing and assessing organizations with the mishmash of data: factual, historical, genetic, and interpretive (narrative), which taken together comprise open systems as integrative and adaptive processes of operation. This diagnostic/clinical framework is an adaptation of an open systems model for the purpose of studying and analyzing organizations. If properly contextualized, strategies of intervention and change such as executive coaching ought to be governed in part by organizational diagnosis and assessment. In the case of executive coaching, the organizational diagnosis provides needed context for examining relational and experiential psychological dynamics. As a product of organizational diagnosis, the organizational story with its thematic patterns and points of urgency is significant and proffers concrete examples of the executive’s key relationships and cognitive-emotional schema. Levinson’s legacy for executive coaching is one that seriously questions coaching without context, and context for reflectivity produces more thoughtful and humane leadership. This emphasis on context in the form of independent organizational diagnosis and assessment adds validity, greater opportunities for reality testing, client ownership, claimed action and personal responsibility, depth and richness of understanding to the examination of transference and counter-transference dynamics between executives and staff as well as between psychodynamically-oriented executive coaches and their clients.

A Focus on Character and the Inner Theatre of Leaders

In contrast with Levinson’s application of psychoanalytic ego psychology to executive coaching, and his emphasis on the management of human needs and expectations, Manfred Kets
de Vries (2006) takes psychoanalytic object relations theory (and, to a lesser degree, self psychology) as the clinical paradigm for interpreting executive character and individual dispositions. He writes: “Character is the sum of the deeply ingrained patterns of behavior that define an individual” (p. 52). Psychoanalytic object relations theory starts from the maturational premise of healthy, primary narcissism as a byproduct of good enough parenting during infancy and early childhood. In this developmental schema, the emerging sense of self evolves from a state of attachment and total dependency. Thus, the infant begins life from a symbiotic and dedifferentiated position, one in which the child is in fact at the center of the parent-child universe. In this primitive state, cognitive capacity, nascent brain and emotional development, are signified by part-object relationships where the other is experienced and perceived in simplistic absolutes such as either all good or all bad, always loving or always hating, only accepting or only rejecting. In developmental transition the young child eventually and ambivalently moves physically, cognitively, and emotionally, away from primary caregivers and toward a more independent, holistic and integrated, sense of self. For example, with the child’s early mobility in crawling away from the parent and simultaneously turning back toward the parent for cues to see if all is okay. Assuming a positive and reassuring signal, the child continues onward in exploration of the external yet unknown object world. Developmental experiences of separation, differentiation, and individuation confront the child with a jumble of contrary emotions. These maturational realities of separation and loss include acknowledging paradox and an imperfect and depressive object (self and other) world of pain and pleasure, acceptance and rejection, love and hate.

Kets de Vries’ clinical paradigm is shaped by several psychoanalytic and developmental theorists starting with John Bowlby’s attachment research. Bowlby’s developmental stages of
attachment, separation and loss, are critical ideas for interpreting the psychodynamics of significant (self and other) adult relationships. Highlighted in these clinical and developmental findings and also found in Levinson’s work is the treatment of change as emotional loss—a concept important to working empathically with participants undergoing organizational transitions. Also, Kets de Vries’ clinical paradigm is shaped by the ground-breaking theories of (pediatrician and psychoanalyst) D.W. Winnicott, who like Melanie Klein emphasizes the emotional and developmental significance of self and other (internalized object relations) concepts from infancy and early childhood. Winnicott’s transformational childhood highlights of “good enough mothering” and “holding environments” signify object (self and other) relationships that at their best facilitate and nurture psychological safety, interpersonal security, emotional bonding, and maturation—attributes at the core of self-cohesion and integrity. For Winnicott, good enough mothering and adequate holding environments are characterized as transitional and potential spaces for playing and creativity and are represented in childhood by transitional objects such as teddy bears and blankets. Correspondingly, in adulthood, individuals engage in playing and creative imagination through music, art, entertainment and culture. These activities serve as transitional objects—objects of our creative efforts derived from the psychological and experiential space located between fantasy and reality. Ideally, work and vocation serve as transitional, if not transformational, objects. In addition, Winnicott’s ideas of true (authentic) and false (compliant) self shape Kets de Vries’ emphasis on the value of authenticity between leaders and followers, and with the organizational cultures they promote and reproduce. These values of true and false self and their relevance are revisited later in the chapter. Next, analysis of leaders and followers requires an understanding of group psychodynamics.
Kets de Vries’ clinical paradigm is also shaped by W.R. Bion’s writings on the experiences of groups. In particular, his conceptions of work groups (primary task group) operating in parallel with underlying (unconscious) basic assumption groups, such as fight-flight groups, dependency groups, and the phenomenon of pairing or utopian groups. Bion’s theory of groups is discussed in relation to organizational role analysis later in the chapter. This interpretive framework for group dynamics is particularly instructive in identifying psychologically-regressive interpersonal dynamics within organizations under stressful conditions. Both Levinson and Kets de Vries stress that it is important to keep in mind that groups and organizations are the context in which executive coaching and consultation take place. Next, I discuss the vital concept of narcissism followed by a brief description of leaders’ and followers’ dispositions as presented in the clinical theory of Kets de Vries. He writes: “The aim of clinically informed leadership coaching is not a temporary high, but lasting change. They [leaders] want to move beyond reductionistic formulas to sustainable transformation” (Kets de Vries, Korotov & Florent-Treacy 2007: Li).

In *The Leader on the Couch: A Clinical Approach to Changing People and Organizations*, Kets de Vries (2006) reviews narcissism in leaders, and in particular examines the nuance of constructive versus reactive narcissism. In the psychoanalytic literature the degree to which narcissism is constructive or destructive is frequently identified by the idea of “primary narcissism” typical of early life and “malignant narcissism” as defining compensatory and pathological forms of narcissism in adulthood. Ironically, narcissism is a relational concept and therefore it ought to be seen through the lens of a two-person psychology such as object relations theory and self psychology. A key concept in the interpretation of narcissism is the psychoanalytic idea of *transference*—what Kets de Vries (2006) calls the “t-word.”
In his clinical application of object relations theory to organizations and their leaders, Kets de Vries (1984; 2006) draws on Melanie Klein’s (1946; 1959) important discovery of the infantile roots of adulthood (paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions) and on Heinz Kohut’s (1977) notion of the prevalence of narcissistic personalities through *mirroring and idealizing transference* dynamics. On the matter of *mirroring* Kets de Vries (2006) writes:

“Within organizations, the mirroring process between leaders and followers can become collusive. Followers use leaders to reflect what they want to see, and leaders rarely resist that kind of affirmation. The result is a mutual admiration society. Leaders…tend to take actions designed to shore up their image rather than serve the needs of the organization. In times of change, embedded mirroring processes can be fatal to the organization”. (p. 43-44).

While, on the complimentary matter of *idealizing transference* he writes:

“Through this idealizing process, we hope to combat feelings of helplessness and acquire some of the power of the person admired. Idealizing transference is a kind of projective shield for followers. Reactive narcissists are especially responsive to this sort of administration, often becoming so dependent upon it that they can’t function without the emotional fix. It’s a two-way street, of course: followers project their fantasies onto their leaders, and leaders mirror themselves in the glow of their followers”. (p. 44).

Mirroring and idealizing transference dynamics represent an inescapable paradox of narcissism and leadership. Leaders require followers who legitimize their power and authority (real or imagined), and of course followers need leaders who direct and inspire them. Mirroring and idealizing transference is a dyadic relationship in which the leader defines the character and emotionality of the follower and vice versa. In sum, narcissistic leaders demand idealizing and
adoring followers who reinforce their defensive and compensatory need for idealization and grandiosity. Whether leaders are constructive or reactive narcissists depends on the nature and quality of these transference dynamics, and the degree to which organizational strategies and structures minimize unilateral, expansive, and grandiose leadership style.

In particular, the degree to which the personality of the narcissistic leader is driven by infantile narcissistic injuries and associated rage and hostility matters when it comes to the character of executives in role. Discovering leaders with flexibility and the capacity to openly reflect and consider change as opposed to leaders who react with rigidity and inflexibility as manifested in persistent resistance distinguishes constructive from reactive narcissists.

Constructive narcissistic leaders are transformational and inspiring role models. They are capable of assuming responsibility for their actions and less prone to blaming others. Their vision extends beyond themselves. In contrast, reactive narcissists are troubled by inadequacies, bitterness, anger, depressive thoughts, lingering feelings of emptiness and deprivation.

Attempting to master feelings of inadequacy and insecurity, they construct an exaggerated sense of self-importance and self-grandiosity along with an associated desire for admiration. Reactive narcissists lack empathy and are unable to understand what others feel and experience. This latter observation may be critical in one’s expectations about the value of executive coaching and consultation with “reactive” narcissists. If empathy is seemingly absent in our executive clients, one might ask whether or not it is sufficient and helpful to engage in coaching rather than recommending psychotherapy. Similar to arguments made by psychoanalyst Otto Kernberg who has written on the subject of regression in leadership and organizations (1998), Kets de Vries (2006) suggests “downsizing” the negative and potentially destructive impact of narcissistic leaders on workers and organizations. Writing specifically of boards of directors, he states:
“...organizations need not be helpless in the face of reactive narcissistic leadership. They can take action, both preemptive and follow-up. Strategies include distributing decision-making and erecting barriers against runaway leadership; improving the selection, education, and evaluation of board members; and offering coaching and counseling to executives showing signs of excessive narcissism” (p. 46).

In working with varying degrees of narcissism in leaders, executive coaches and consultants might consider the following questions: How dependent is this executive on the admiration of his staff through the mirroring transference? To what degree is staff dependent on their need to admire and aggrandize their leaders through idealizing transference? To what degree are followers responsible for projecting omnipotent qualities onto their executives? To what extent do leaders move against or away from followers as opposed to moving toward followers in the form of cooperation and collaboration as opposed to unilateralism and deception?

Finally, on the spectrum of personalities in the dispositions of leaders and followers Kets de Vries (2006) writes: “...prototypes aren’t depictions of mental disorders: each one includes a range of human behavior, from normal to dysfunctional, because normality and pathology are relative concepts, positions on a spectrum” (p. 57). Reflecting on their proclivities for leadership and followership, eleven prototypes on a continuum of personalities include: 1) the narcissistic disposition with very high leadership tendencies and low follower tendencies; 2) the dramatic disposition with medium leadership tendencies and high follower tendencies; 3) the controlling disposition with high leadership tendencies and high follower tendencies; 4) the dependent disposition with very low leadership tendencies and high follower tendencies; 5) the self-defeating disposition with very low leadership tendencies and high follower tendencies; 6) the
detached disposition with medium leadership tendencies and medium follower tendencies; 7) the depressive disposition with low leadership tendencies and low follower tendencies; 8) the abrasive disposition with medium leadership tendencies and low follower tendencies; 9) the paranoid disposition with high leadership tendencies and medium follower tendencies; 10) the negativistic disposition with very low leadership tendencies and medium follower tendencies, and 11) the antisocial disposition with high leadership tendencies and low follower tendencies.

In this approach to executive coaching and consultation, these dispositions or core conflictual relational themes not only have consequences for relations between leaders and followers, but also for productive and counter-productive strategizing, decision making, delegating and structuring, and organizational dynamics. In the end, beyond individual proclivities and character, and when true to the ethic of psychoanalytic theory, psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching and consultation value authenticity and truth. In that spirit practitioners of psychodynamic approaches are engaged in the removal of individual and organizational defensive screens, which typically distort the quality and reality of cooperative relationships at work. Next, an integrated and comprehensive approach to psychodynamic executive coaching by Kilburg (2000) is examined.

A Focus on Complexity and Chaos: Systems, Psychodynamics, and Reflective Containment

Kilburg’s (2002) *Executive Coaching: Developing Managerial Wisdom in a World of Chaos* is a detailed and relatively comprehensive articulation of psychodynamic executive coaching. His model is complimentary to Levinson’s focus on needs and expectations and Kets de Vries’ focus on the character and inner theatre of executives and their organizations. In contrast, Kilburg places greater emphasis on systemic chaos and complexity in addition to
Kilburg constructs a 17 dimension model of systems and psychodynamics, which is an elaborate conceptual framework joining external components of systems with internal components of psychodynamics. This linkage between systems and psychodynamics is supported by the notion of the executive character as a complex self-organizing adaptive system. Here is a model for executive coaching grounded in psychodynamic and systemic processes, which incorporates the conceptual and contextual complexity of leadership in contemporary organizations, public and private, along with the challenges of helping executives become more reflective and thereby better at adapting to changing and unpredictable environments.

For Kilburg psychodynamic executive coaching demands a “fully connected” (p. 44) overarching dimensional model, linking open systems and psychodynamic processes. Awareness of these connected components of people and systems, consultants and coaches, means paying attention to organizational structure, input, process, output, content, and throughput along with psychodynamic components such as psychological and social defenses, relational dynamics (past and present), transference of emotions, instinctual dynamics, conflicts, idealizing dynamics, focal relationships, cognition, and conscience. Ultimately, Kilburg is after what he calls a “foci for executive coaching” (p. 61) in which the mutual spotlight on open systems (structure, process, content, input, throughput, and output) and reflective, self-aware executives (rational self, conscience, idealized self, instinctual self, cognition, emotion, defenses, conflict, knowledge, skills, abilities, personality styles, jobs, roles, and tasks) produces a mediated focal point on relationships (past, present, focal) and behavior (system, whole organization, subunit, organizational work unit, group, individual). It is in this intervening hub of relationships that the work of executive coaching and consultation occur in practice.
Kilburg’s notion of a mediated focus is rooted in contemporary psychoanalytic object relations theories. These psychodynamic theories are presently shaped to some extent by attachment research, theories of postmodernism and complexity, as well as findings in neuroscience and brain research. Fundamentally, Kilburg’s mediated focus shares much in common with concepts in object relations theory literature (Winnicott 1971, Ogden 2004, Benjamin 2004, Diamond 2007) such as transitional objects, intermediate areas, intersubjectivity, thirdness, potential and transitional space. For Winnicott (1971) these concepts signify a psychological reality embedded in the mother and baby dyad. “Good enough mothering” means adequate holding and containment of the baby’s toxic feelings and emotions. Under these optimal circumstances, the child learns to adapt to the coming and going of mother and the shifting emotions of love and hate, good and bad, acceptance and rejection. Maturation for the child requires containment of projected emotions displaced from the “contained” infant onto the “container” mother (Bion 1967). Holding and containing are considered critical care-giving object functions of the parent in the emotional and cognitive development of the child.

Winnicott’s (1971) notion of a “facilitative holding environment” as characteristic of “good enough mothering” provides the child with the interpersonal security and safety necessary for healthy separation and individuation. The critical nature of the quality of earliest attachments is supported by research in attachment theory and neuroscience (Fonagy and Target 1997; Fonagy 2001; Siegel 2001; Leffert 2010). Winnicott refers to a “facilitative environment” that fosters a transitional and potential space for the emergence of play and imagination, curiosity and reflectivity. Transitional and potential space so vital to infant development, represents according to Winnicott the psycho-social location of culture. Culture as derived from play and imagination. Culture as the area of human experience situated in-between reality and fantasy--the source of
imagination and creativity, art and music, the reflective practices of theorizing and problem solving. The effectiveness of Kilburg’s comprehensive model of open systems and psychodynamics depends on seeing and working with the executive as a self-organizing complex system. Consistent with the ideas and functions of containment and transitional or potential space in object relations theory, Kilburg’s concept of “reflective containment” is at the core of his method of psychodynamic executive coaching (p. 72).

Next, awareness of one’s sense of self in the world of work requires paying attention to the affect of organizational roles, which is briefly reviewed next.

Psychodynamic Coaching and Organizational Role Analysis (ORA)

The genesis of ORA stems from the Tavistock and A.K. Rice traditions of group relations education and training, where the analysis of authority, responsibility, and roles in groups, and the combination of open systems theory and psychodynamics, are prominent features of method and application. ORA is influenced by the original thinking of W.R. Bion (1959) and his book *Experiences in Groups and Other Papers*. His psychodynamic model for understanding groups emphasizes the parallel processes of work groups. Bion’s hypothesis is that groups operate on two levels, conscious and unconscious. At the manifest level of group activity is the task of the group—the group’s purpose or mission. Concurrently, at the latent level of group activity are three basic underlying assumptions of fight-flight, dependency, and pairing (or utopia). This model provides analysts, consultants, coaches and facilitators with a richer and deeper appreciation of the complexity of group psychology. For instance, it is observed that groups come together behind a leader to engage in fight against or flight from some designated scapegoat or enemy. It is also observed that groups emerge behind a leader who members
collectively believe they can depend upon and feel comforted and safe in following his or her lead. Finally, it is observed that within groups, individual members are frequently attracted to pairings of members who offer hope and a sense of a better future for members in contrast to a disturbing or disappointing present. These are Bion’s basic assumptions, which in some instances support the primary task of the work group and in other instances contradict or pull groups into unproductive, destructive, and psychologically regressive, psychodynamics.

Newton, Long, and Sievers (2006) Coaching in Depth: The Organizational Role Analysis Approach proffer a collection of papers on the theory and practice of ORA. Practitioners stress the value of staying in role and on task by expanding their awareness of underlying basic assumptions. Many of the proponents of ORA claim the approach is intended to focus on the role, not an individual’s character. Thus, ORA is a process for clarifying roles within organizations. It is a peer driven inquiry that focuses on the systemic dimension of work problems and role performance. It is a psychodynamic approach that “assists clients in examining the dynamic process of finding, making, and taking up their organizational roles.” ORA attends to the interaction between psychological and social pressures on the individual-in-role “by the consultant assisting the client discern his or her organization-in-mind and test this against the goals of the system.” It is a process of coaching-in-depth and exploring how the organization becomes “an object of the inner world of a client, entangled with authority structures derived from childhood experience and made accessible through the use of work drawings within the ORA process” (Newton, Long, and Sievers, 2006).

It appears that roles are peculiarly shaped by character and therefore one can imagine conflicted and ambivalent relationships to organizational roles. Thus, one might expect frequent tensions between the external organizational demands for belonging, affiliation, adaptation and
compliance, and the internal individual needs for independence, autonomy, self-identity and authenticity (Diamond, 1991). The idea of authenticity is a critical theme of the self-narrative in psychodynamic executive coaching and consultation.

In the section to follow, a review is offered of important articles and issues considered on the matter of research evidence in psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching.

**Research evidence**

Executive coaching has roots in the “development counseling” of the 1940’s and emerged as a widespread practice in the 1980s (Kampa-Kokesh, 2001). The study of executive coaching falls into three distinct categories: psychological, training and development, and management (Kampa-Kokesh & Anderson, 2001). Empirical studies of the efficacy of executive coaching date back to the mid-1990s (Kampa-Kokesh & Anderson, 2001). However, there are relatively few (less than ten in the Kampa-Kokesh and Anderson’s review) chapters and only one skims the surface of psychodynamics (self-awareness and self-other relationships).

Executive coaching has been empirically shown to increase executive productivity and the effectiveness of the organization as a whole primarily through executive learning and self-awareness (Kilburg, 2004). Most executives seek coaching to help them change their relational patterns, cope better with change, and build trust (Kampa-Kokesh & Anderson, 2001). These motivations are especially well-suited to a psychodynamic approach. The push for empirical research follows an increased demand for executive coaching services as the consequences for poor leadership grow more severe in the current global context. Executive coaching is intended to assist executives with the pressure to do more while facing increasingly complex environments and rapid change (Blattner, 2005).
Research supporting the efficacy of psychodynamic consulting is based primarily in case studies. The case study approach has an extensive and respectful history in developing the theory and practice of organizational assessment and consultation (Lowman, 2001). Case studies are significant because they provide a foundation from which generalizable truths are developed (Lowman, 2001). Case studies offer a way to examine theory in practice and generate hypotheses that are then subject to quantitative analysis. The apparent lack of quantitative approaches to understanding executive coaching, especially from a psychodynamic point of view, stems from the difficulty of quantifying relational phenomena and predicting human behavior.

Quantification and prediction of human behavior is difficult because much of it lies outside of conscious awareness.

Executive coaching is uniquely based in psychological theory, especially systems and psychodynamic theory (Kampa-Kokesh, 2001). Kilburg (2004c) argues that events, feelings, thoughts, and patterns of behavior that are outside the conscious awareness of executives can significantly influence what they decide and how they act. Highlighting the importance of consciousness and awareness of self and others (what some might call emotional intelligence) in the practice of executive coaching, Kilburg’s article offers an overview of conflict and object relations approaches to understanding psychodynamics. Conflict here refers to intrapersonal conflict or tension between the forces of id, ego, and superego as indicative of the classical Freudian drive model. So the conflict approach may be considered synonymous with carrying-over some of the key concepts and clinical experiences of the classical psychoanalytic model into the contemporary object relational model. Kilburg suggests in his work that he also embeds the material (emotional and cognitive) of executive coaching in “scientific reviews of unconscious mental and emotional phenomena”. Research evidence linking psychoanalytic object relations
theory, attachment research, and neuroscience, is considerable, which might surprise coaches and consultants unfamiliar with brain research and contemporary psychoanalytic findings (Jurist, Slade, Bergner (2008); Fonagy (2001); Modell (2003); Kandel (2006); Edelman (2006); Stern (2004); Karen (1998); Siegel (2007)).

In his critique of the existing literature on executive coaching, Kilburg (2004c) calls for detailed case studies that describe the process of executive coaching; Lowman (2001) also supports the practice of executive coaching move towards the path of scientific psychology, a “deficit-repair model” (Kilburg, 2004c, p. 205). Despite the rise of scientifically validated treatments in clinical psychology and psychotherapy, it is difficult to pin down what actually causes those positive outcomes (Blattner, 2005; Kilburg, 2004c; Rosenzweig, 1936; 2002; Wampold et al., 1997). There are almost as many psychological therapies as disorders, and the empirical finding show little difference across therapies although they indicate positive outcomes (Wampold, 2001).

Lowman argues that the lack of a “scientific” base may result in executive coaching going the way of the dodo bird. In other words, non-empirical approaches can only go so far, and the narrative, self-report case study approach on which the bulk of the coaching literature is based has created a slippery slope for practitioners. Similarly, in an earlier article Kilburg (2004a) suggests that “the traditional routes that psychologists take from their scientist-practitioner models may lead us to the land of “Dodoville” in which everything is equally valid and everyone is entitled to a prize” (p. 91). Kilburg wonders, at least by implication, if it is worth “trudging to Dodoville” if all we find when we get there is nonspecific effects that presumably would not match the available theory-driven approaches (p. 91).
It seems that the nonspecific characteristics of the coaching process and psychotherapy are the most meaningful, that aside from technique the intense involvement of coach with the client, the interpersonal connection is at the core of the success of coaching as an intervention. Empirical approaches to understanding the truth about executive coaching reflect this assessment of its success and reaffirm what psychotherapists and clinical psychologists have reported for over 100 years (Kilburg, 2004c).

Lowman (2003) notes we cannot have it both ways, we cannot be “exempt from the rules of scientific psychology while also laying claim to the mantle of psychology” (p. 92). He suggests that there is no reason to suppose that executive coaching is valid or has specific effects, or even which techniques work and under what circumstances. Empirical findings about the effectiveness of executive coaching are too broad to be the basis for drawing any firm conclusions. He argues that “scientific” approaches to understanding the outcomes of executive coaching are a needed partner for case study findings. Lowman’s purpose is not to offer one approach over another, but simply to suggest that both “logico-deductive” and “constructivist-narrative” approaches have something to offer the theory and practice of executive coaching. On the one hand, case studies are important for generating hypotheses, and on the other hand empirical analysis is important for validating the self-reported successes and favorite techniques of the authors of case studies. “In the grip of this eternal dialectic between the narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought and study, we surely will continue to grow and hopefully prosper” (Kilburg, 2004c).

Wasylyshyn’s (2005) case study of a long-term coaching relationship illustrates several clinical principles important to the practice of executive coaching along with several “meta-principles” of executive coaching: traction, trust, and truth-telling. The case also addresses role
management for both the coach and the client. Key psychological elements of the case include anxiety, narcissism, attachment, leader-follower dynamics, and transference dynamics.

Blattner’s (2005) study of an executive over the course of job change illustrates additional concepts that are important aspects of a psychodynamic approach to coaching such as the importance of the perception of self, coping mechanisms, and emotional intelligence. In this case the coach takes a strengths-based approach and emphasizes the awareness of the emotional states of self and others, especially as a tool for developing behavioral and supervisory strategies that enhance the effectiveness of employees and thus the executive.

Schnell (2005) presents a case study of long term coaching to a leadership pair in a rapidly changing organization. Psychodynamic aspects of this case include identification and attachment between members of the leadership pair, leader-follower dynamics and the effects of leadership style on organizational performance, and transference dynamics as the emotional experiences of each executive are processed within the coaching session. Schnell (2005) points to executive coaching as contextualized within a broader array of consultative interventions. The case also discusses the important aspects of the contracting phase of the coaching intervention. A systems approach is also illustrated in light of the pair and their interactions with the organization as a whole. While (Kralj, 2001) also demonstrates the systems approach, it does not present individual coaching interventions. Finally, like Wasylyshyn’s (2005) coaching as a successful support for leadership succession is illustrated. This section is concluded with a note of reservation on the matter of “research evidence.”

As a social and human science theories of psychodynamic executive coaching are rooted in what Aristotle in The Nicomachean Ethics called phronesis or practical wisdom. Phronesis differs from episteme (epistemology as basic science and predictive theory) and techne or
technical skills and crafts. Phronesis is the reflective practitioner’s ability to deliberate between the universal and the particular by drawing from a wealth of universal knowledge, which is then practiced in everyday situations. “The goal of the phronetic approach becomes one of contributing to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.167). The study of organizations and individuals who lead, and reproduce systems, and who are in turn shaped by these very same cultures, is the study of reflective human subjects, not of dead objects (2001). Constructing meaning and mutual understanding, not prediction, is the aim. The goal of self-consciousness by attending to what Bollas (1987) calls the “unthought known” or unconscious thoughts and emotions, distinguishes psychodynamic executive coaching. Developing cognitive and emotional capacity for reflective action on behalf of executives and leaders are at the heart of this enterprise of organizational intervention.

Case examples and qualitative approaches to the study of organizations and their leaders are critical to advancing the psychodynamic paradigm in executive coaching and consultation as they are important to more deeply understanding human organizations and their executive leaders in pursuit of value-laden action, power and interests.

**The development of psychodynamic approaches in coaching**

The development of psychodynamic approaches in coaching is covered in the earlier section on psychodynamic models with reviews of Levinson, Kets de Vries, Kilburg, et al. This reflection continues with the subsequent discussion below that addresses the heart of psychodynamic executive coaching in theory and practice, and by further articulating its paradigmatic origins in object relations theory and the contributions of D.W. Winnicott as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in particular the ideas of true and false self systems
and transitional phenomena such as the ideas of holding environment, potential and transitional space discussed elsewhere.

However, it is critical at this juncture to articulate the following epistemological position. Executive coaching is a form of organizational intervention. It is a step in a larger process of working with systems and individuals. Executive coaching is an idea situated within a larger conceptual framework that links theory and practice. And, while there are varied approaches to executive coaching, the psychodynamic approach as presented here combines psychoanalytic theory and practice with systems and group relations theory. Psychoanalytic theory is over 100 hundred years old and continues to experience evolution rooted in clinical, historical, cultural and global tensions—one might say it has advanced despite and because of internal and external pressures.

Earlier on in this chapter the emergence of object relations theory was discussed. Yet, psychoanalytic theory is a school of thought with competing paradigms. Many scholars and practitioners believe this state of affairs represents a healthy and productive paradigmatic tension. Beyond the paradigmatic conflicts and tension, all of the psychodynamic approaches discussed in this chapter concern themselves with minimizing defensiveness, enhancing awareness of self and others, and promoting authenticity. Levinson’s approach emphasizes the value in understanding executives’ desires, needs, and expectations, not in isolation but in the context of organizational diagnosis and assessment. Kets de Vries’ approach debunks the rational economic man model and proffers categories of character dispositions and individual executive proclivities rooted in the realities of the workplace. His extensive typology of dispositions provides insights into the characteristics that shape key relationships, organizational strategies, decision-making and performance. Kilburg’s systemic approach to psychodynamics and
organizations stresses complexity and chaos, and the challenges of self-organizing adaptive systems. Finally, organizational role analysis highlights the significance of analyzing roles over individual character, and stresses the importance of the group (over individual) level of analysis. An integration of these approaches may be preferable.

From a psychodynamic perspective, executive coaching and consultation is often an exercise in reflecting upon conflict and character, which is why Winnicott’s notion of authenticity, true and false self, is addressed in the following section.

The Challenge of Authenticity: True versus False Self

Winnicott’s (1965) theory of infancy and childhood development describes a nascent self of potential spontaneity and authenticity. This emerging true self, however, fades away behind the defensive forces of an acquiescent and reactive false self where inadequate, “not good enough” parenting and holding are present. This phenomenon of false self normally occurs in adulthood and in particular is commonplace among narcissistic executives unconsciously defending themselves against the pain and discomfort of conflict (internal and external) and against the threat of rejection by underlings who might question the “wisdom” of their leadership, thus losing subordinates’ idealization and reinforcement of their need for aggrandizement.

Employees are frequently required, implicitly and explicitly, by managers and executives to be submissive and obedient. This compliance requires that subordinates function psychologically from behind the fortress of a false self. Simultaneously, managers and executives shun personal responsibility for their actions and tend to blame subordinates for failed
or flawed organizational strategies whenever necessary and convenient. Workers under these stressful and alienating conditions will experience demoralization and become disgruntled.

Under conditions of stress and demands for change, executives find with the assistance of psychodynamically-oriented executive coaches and consultants that reactive and defensive solutions to anxiety are no longer manageable or acceptable. They may also find that secrecy and withholding of information is ineffective and that it further deflates workers’ sense of self confidence and competence. Rigid dispositions of executives’ character are challenged by circumstances in which resilience and openness to change in the status quo are imperative yet seemingly absent. Profound change can come about with mutual authenticity, respect, and shared responsibilities among leaders and followers (executives, managers, and workers). Followers (or subordinates) despite having limited power and authority need to assert themselves as well. They need to acknowledge their shared responsibility for perpetuating inauthentic and defensive leadership and culture. Executive coaches and consultants help by supporting and facilitating a transitional space or reflective containment for participants engaged in change. To reiterate, transitional space refers to the need to provide a safe and creative emotional and psychological, virtual room for people in their attempt to produce radical change and solve complex problems. By directing feedback to address unconscious reactive and defensive behavior patterns and dispositions that block positive change, executive coaches work to enhance participants’ self awareness and emotional intelligence. Heightened self awareness and consciousness in executives is the first step toward minimizing the toxic consequences of reactive narcissism and giving voice to the true self of authentic leaders and followers while limiting the prevalence of the false self and the negative impact of excessively defensive operations on organizational culture.
In the concluding section, the advancement of psychodynamic executive coaching is addressed by promoting organizational ethnographic and action research.

**Psychodynamic Executive Coaching and Future Research**

The study of psychodynamic executive coaching and consultation is advanced by qualitative and idiographic approaches to the study of organizations and leadership, and by the interpretive power of case examples. Not simply more but better case illustrations of psychodynamic coaching in theory (conceptual frameworks) and practice (concrete applications) are required. Reconstructing narratives between coaches and clients with a better understanding and illustration of what psychodynamically-oriented coaches and consultants are thinking and precisely what sorts of questions they are asking and at what times they seem most effectively and appropriately asked. In what manner and to what degree do psychodynamic coaches take into consideration the importance of organizational culture, diagnosis and assessment? If they do so, examples depicting the influence of independent organizational diagnoses on executive coaching sessions and the sorts of psychological issues and dynamics discussed would be helpful. How do they manage the anticipated transference and counter-transference dynamics? Psychodynamic executive coaching and consultation differ from psychoanalytic psychotherapy. These differences and commonalities need to be better clarified and further explored.

While some might argue that the practice of psychodynamic executive coaching ought to be grounded in current organizational circumstances supported and informed by organizational diagnoses and assessments; other practitioners might argue about this requirement and might articulate the value added for clients in processes in which organizational assessments are not a precondition. Psychodynamic executive coaching, and for that matter other forms of executive coaching, are intervention strategies that can increase reflective learning among executives,
managers, and workers, and therefore can contribute to positive organizational change. However, when executive coaching is not a component of comprehensive organizational change efforts, there might be a tendency to take executive-client issues and psychodynamics out of context, providing little assistance to the collective whole of the organization, its members, and executives. Without the benefits of independent organizational diagnoses, some argue, executive coaching efforts carry serious limitations and at best ought to carry modest expectations.

Psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching and consultation as principally influenced by the works discussed in this chapter and other works referenced are abundant with case examples and illustrations. Works by Zaleznik (1984a; 1984b; 1989; 1991), Sievers (2009), Stapley (2002), Diamond (1993; 2007), Diamond and Allcorn (2009), and Stein (1994; 2001) offer case illustrations and vignettes that support conclusions drawn and interpretations espoused. These examples are instructive and could benefit from more elaborate organizational ethnographies and case narratives that better depict and account for the actual interpersonal dynamics between executive coaches/consultants and clients in particular organizational interventions. Psychodynamic theories and approaches to organizational consultation and executive coaching are not intended as theories for prediction; rather, they are designed for more deeply understanding and interpreting the significance and meaning of complex human relationships and work roles, groups, and organizations. The psychodynamic approaches to executive coaching outlined and briefly discussed in this chapter offer consultants a more profound understanding and consideration of the impact of psychological reality on organizational roles and working relationships; it is intended to help leaders and executives by engaging them in authentic and reflective dialogue that expands awareness and consciousness of self and others in the workplace.
References


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