**What is Coaching?**

The word “coach” originated from the Hungarian word “kocs”, the name of a small town near Budapest where cart makers and transport experts honed their craft. Just as a coach carries people and/or goods from one place to another, the act of “coaching” intends to transport clients from where they are to where they want to be. Despite a shared origin of the word “coaching”, coaching scholars and practitioners have not reached consensus on a definition of the term.

**Coaching Defined By Scholars**

Drawing upon three reviews of coaching literature (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Hamlin, Ellinger, & Beattie, 2008; Maltbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014), almost 50 distinct definitions of coaching exist. Fifteen of the most commonly referenced definitions are provided in chronological order in the table below.

Table 1: Scholarly Definitions of Coaching

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| SOURCE | DEFINITION |
| Kilburg, 1996 | A helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to help the client achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and, consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organization within a formally defined coaching agreement (p. 142) |
| Tobias, 1996 | In its narrowest sense coaching is seen as help to someone who has irritated others in the organization, on a broader sense it would refer to someone who has conflictual relationships with others or trouble in adjusting to organizational or personal changes and crises (p. 87) |
| Witherspoon & White, 1996 | A confidential, highly personal learning process – an organized, personal learning provided over a specified period of time to bring about the possibility of effective action, performance improvement, and or growth (p. 127) |
| Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 1999 | A practical, goal-focused form of personal, one-on-one learning for business executives and may be used to improve performance or executive behavior, enhancing a career or prevent derailment, and work through organizational issues or change initiatives (p. 40) |
| Garman, Whiston, & Slatoper, 2000 | One-on-one consultation, provided by outsiders (individuals who do not have organizational ties), regarding the consultee’s individual performance as it relates to a specific organizational context or contexts (p. 202) |
| Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001 | A systematic feedback intervention aimed at enhancing professional skills, interpersonal awareness, and personal effectiveness (p. 208) |
| Peltier, 2001 | One-on-one services to top level leaders in an organization, on the principle that positive changes can be leveraged to filter down and enhance the entire organization (p. xv) |
| McCauley & Hezlett, 2001 | A series of one-to-one interventions between a manager or executive and an external coach in order to further the professional development of the manager (p. 335) |
| Orenstein, 2002 | A one-to-one intervention with a senior manager for the purpose of improving or enhancing management skills (p. 356) |
| Stern, 2004 | An experiential, individualized, leadership development process that builds a leader’s capability to achieve short and long-term organizational goals – conducted through one-on-one interactions, driven by data from multiple perspectives, and based on mutual trust and respect (p. 154) |
| Feldman & Lankau, 2005 | A process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective (p. 830) |
| Dingman, 2006 | A one-to-one interaction between a coach and an executive in a helping relationship offering experiential learning and dialogue that facilitates an executive’s desire to reach specific goals and may affect individual self-, job-, and organizational-related outcomes…the effects of which are intended to extend to improve organizational performance (p. 2) |
| Sperry, 2008 | A form of executive consultation in which a trained professional, mindful of organizational dynamics, functions as a facilitator who forms a collaborative relationship with an executive to improve his or her skills and effectiveness in communicating the corporate vision and goals, and to foster better team performance, organizational productivity, and professional-personal development (p. 36) |
| Stokes & Jolly, 2009 | Focuses on the executive becoming more self-aware in order to carry out their leadership role more effectively (p. 225) |
| Passmore & Fillery-Travis, 2011 | A Socratic based dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (client) where the majority of interventions used by the facilitator are open questions which are aimed at stimulating self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant (p. 74) |

**Coaching Defined by Practitioners**

In addition to scholars, practitioner-based coaching organizations have constructed five additional definitions of coaching.

The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) defined coaching as “a practice in which the coach and coachee collaborate to assess and understand the developmental task, challenge current constraints while exploring new possibilities, and ensure accountability and support for reaching goals and sustaining development” (Nelson, Boyce, Hernez-Broome, Eli, & DiRose, 2011, p. 11; Ting & Hart, 2003, p. 116).

The European Mentoring and Coaching Council (EMCC) defined coaching as “establishing a relationship with people in a series of conversations for the purpose of serving the clients to improve their performance or enhance their personal development or both” (Gray, Garvey, & Lane, 2016, p. 302).

The Graduate School Alliance of Executive Coaching (GSAEC) defined coaching as “a development process that builds a leader’s capabilities to achieve professional and organizational goals” (Maltbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014, p. 165).

The International Coach Federation (ICF) defined coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (ICF, 2018).

The Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC) defined business coaching as “the process of engaging in a regular, structured conversation with a ‘client’: an individual or team who is within a business, profit or nonprofit organization, institution or government and who is the recipient of business coaching. The goal is to enhance the client’s awareness and behavior so as to achieve business objectives for both the client and their organization” (WABC, 2018).

**Agreement Around What Coaching Is Not**

Despite a lack of consensus around the definition of coaching, some scholars (Athanasopoulou & Dopson, 2015; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Maltbia, Marsick, & Ghosh, 2014; Passmore & Gibbes, 2007; Stern, 2004) have reached agreement around what coaching is not. They have argued that coaching is not managing, consulting, mentoring, therapy, or facilitating. Distinctions among the helping professions are depicted in the table below.

Table 2: Comparison of the Helping Professions

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **PURPOSE** | **RELATIONSHIP** |
| **Coaching** | Emphasizing goal setting and reflectionFocusing on situation and context | Coach-client |
| **Managing** | Controlling and directing people/processPlanning and monitoring action and risks | Supervisor-subordinate |
| **Consulting** | Advising individuals, groups, organizationsSupporting large-scale change initiatives | Expert-novice |
| **Mentoring** | Developing individual potentialTransferring domain knowledge | Mentor-mentee |
| **Therapy** | Treating pain, discomfort, or conflict within or between individuals | Doctor-patient |
| **Facilitating** | Empowering individuals and groupsCreating frameworks for social interaction | Instructor-student |

**Dichotomies Among Coaching Definitions**

In a collective analysis of both scholar and practitioner definitions of coaching, at least five dichotomies emerge: (1) performance versus potential, (2) process versus relationship, (3) individual versus organizational, (4) individual contributor versus executive, and (5) learning versus development. A dichotomy is a division into two opposing groups. For each dichotomy, example definitions are provided.

The first dichotomy is performance versus potential. The purpose of the coaching engagement can be to improve past performance or to increase future potential. Tobias’ (1996) definition of coaching as helping “someone who has irritated others in the organization … [or] someone who has conflictual relationships with others or trouble in adjusting to organizational or personal changes and crises” (p. 87), focused on performance. In contrast, the ICF’s definition of coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential” (2018), focused on potential. Is coaching focused on performance or potential?

The second dichotomy is process versus relationship. The driver of the coaching engagement can be the coaching process or the relationship between coach and client. Feldman and Lankau (2005) defined coaching as “a process of equipping people with the tools, knowledge, and opportunities they need to develop themselves and become more effective” (p. 830). Alternatively, the EMCC defined coaching as “establishing a relationship with people in a series of conversations for the purpose of serving the clients to improve their performance or enhance their personal development or both” (Gray, Garvey, & Lane, 2016, p. 302). Is coaching a process or a relationship?

The third dichotomy is individual versus organizational. The beneficiary of the coaching engagement can be the individual or the organization. Passmore and Fillery-Travis’ (2011) definition of coaching as a “Socratic based dialogue between a facilitator (coach) and a participant (client) where the majority of interventions used by the facilitator are open questions which are aimed at stimulating self-awareness and personal responsibility of the participant” (p. 74) underscored the individual participant. However, Peltier’s (2001) definition of coaching as “one-on-one services to top level leaders in an organization, on the principle that positive changes can be leveraged to filter down and enhance the entire organization” (p. xv), highlighted organizational benefits. Are the beneficiaries of coaching individuals or organizations?

The fourth dichotomy is individual contributor versus executive. Clients can sit at multiple levels in the organization, including individual contributor and executive. The WABC (2018) defines clients as “an individual or team who is within a business, profit or nonprofit organization, institution or government and who is the recipient of business coaching”. Conversely, Dingman’s (2006) definition of coaching as “a one-to-one interaction between a coach and an executive in a helping relationship offering experiential learning and dialogue that facilitates an executive’s desire to reach specific goals and may affect individual self-, job-, and organizational-related outcomes” (p. 2), mentions the executive. Are coaching clients individual contributors or executives?

The fifth dichotomy is learning versus development. Coaching outcomes vary and may involve client learning or development. Hall, Ozato, and Hollenbeck’s (1999) definition of coaching as a “practical, goal-focused form of personal, one-on-one learning for business executives” (p. 40) emphasized learning. On the other hand, Stern’s (2004) definition of coaching as an “experiential, individualized, leadership development process” (p. 154), emphasized development. Does coaching result in learning or development?

The five dichotomies of coaching definitions are just one of the many debates underway in the scholarship and practice of coaching. This technical note invites you to recognize the contested nature of the field and engage in meaningful discourse about the nature of coaching and its inherent tensions.

**WHAT IS COACHING?**

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