

# The integrated experiential executive coaching model: a qualitative exploration

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## Abstract

*The aim of this research was to qualitatively explore the learning experiences of senior managers during a six-month executive coaching intervention at an information technology company in South Africa. The Integrated Experiential Executive Coaching Model was designed on the basis of Wilbur's developmental and Kolb's experiential learning models. The empirical study consisted of a transcendental phenomenological analysis of the reflective essays of 13 managers who were participating in the executive coaching intervention. Eight themes manifested, namely, a difficult beginning, building trust, a growing awareness of the self, the self in relation to others, entering the transpersonal realm, learning how we learn, from dependency to autonomy and transference of learning to the workplace. It was hypothesised that this coaching model facilitated the transformational dimension of experiential learning in individuals through the experience of being empowered to work towards cognitive insight, the experience of emotional meaningfulness and the challenge of taking responsibility for their own growth and career development.*

## 1 Introduction

In the new world of work, characterised by new economic thinking, globalisation, transformation, diversity, mergers and acquisitions (see Clutterbuck 2003), executive coaching is seen as one of the new management tools (Price 2004c; 2004d), to help the executive cope with constant organisational change, increasing competition and complexity. It offers a highly focused and fast learning opportunity as an alternative to cumbersome and outdated training methodology.

Many definitions of executive coaching exist (see Brotman, Liberi & Wasylyshn 1998; Clutterbuck 2003; Garman, Whiston & Zlatoper 2000; Goldsmith, Lyons & Freas 2000; Kilburg 2000; King & Eaton 1999; Meyer & Fourie 2004b; Peltier 2001; Peterson 1996; Sperry 2004; Witherspoon & White 1998). All these definitions refer to the core of executive coaching as a specific form of organisational and staff development and a specific kind of interpersonal relationship. Some refer to the process of personal growth in the executive, while others refer to outcomes such as enhanced performance in leadership and transformation roles. The above could be integrated in defining executive coaching as a formal, relatively long-term relationship between an individual having executive (including managerial and leadership) authority and responsibility in

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an organisation, and a coach who possesses in-depth knowledge of behaviour change and organisational functioning from a relevant psychological perspective (Hall & Duval 2004; Hillary 2003; Huffington, Armstrong, Halton, Hoyle & Pooley 2004; Lowman 2002; Peltier 2001; Schein 2005; Sperry 2004; Tönsing 2003).

The South African literature on executive coaching is mainly to be found in popular journals on general and human resources management (Clutterbuck 2003; Meyer & Fourie 2004a; 2004b; Price 2003a; 2003b). These articles focus on practicalities (how to do executive coaching) and imply that the implementation of the ideas they contain will result in increased management and leadership competence, and will improve strategic thinking, intellectual capacity, wisdom, empowerment, relationship management and the ability to solve business problems (Johnson & Cohen 2004; Knouldts 2004; Price 2003c; 2004b; 2004c; Van Wyk 2003; Will & Codrington 2004; Willem 2002; 2003). Whether these assumptions are valid and how they work in the modern and complex world of work are questions that have not yet been tested and that need to be explicated by means of rigorous and scientific research.

An analysis of the above literature indicates that executive coaching is generally presented from the behaviouristic and humanistic paradigms in psychology. For example, the enhancement of self-efficacy is seen as the aim of behaviouristic coaching and that of wellness as the aim of humanistic coaching (Price 2004a; 2004b). Unfortunately, these claims are not based on scientific research, for example along the lines of how psychological wellness is conceptualised and operationalised within positive psychology (see Linley & Joseph 2004; Sheldon & King 2001; Snyder & Lopez 2002). The one scientific South African research study found (Cilliers 2005) focused on a qualitative interpretation of executive coaching experiences from the systems psychodynamic consulting stance (a depth psychological methodology).

The aim of the present study was to add to the body of knowledge on coaching by designing a new Integrated Experiential Executive Coaching Model, incorporating various models in psychology and learning, and to assess its effect on the coaching experiences of individuals. The research design was qualitative and exploratory in nature, generating a research hypothesis about executive coaching.

The theoretical background to this coaching model is based on an integration of Schumacher's (1977) four fields of knowledge, Smuts's (1973) holistic thinking and Wilber's (2000) integral model on development through various levels of consciousness (especially the personal and transpersonal levels). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model is used as the injunction and Jaques' work (Jaques & Clement 1997) on complexity provides an interpretive stance of the coachee's management and generating of complexity. The model is operationalised by using Harri-Augstein and Thomas's (1991) concept of learning conversations. The primary aim of this executive coaching model is to facilitate integrated experiential learning for individuals towards personal growth and development on the one hand and individual and organisational performance, described in terms of Jaques and Clement's (1997) leadership competencies, on the other.

## **2 Wilber's integral model**

Wilber (1995; 1998; 2001) built on Smuts's (1973) and Schumacher's (1977) ideas to develop his integral model. He is best known for his integration of western psychology and eastern spirituality. His four-quadrant model represents a synthesis of various disciplines (see figure 1).

Interior	Exterior	
Individual Experience & Consciousness •Thoughts/ambitions •Feelings •Mood •Sensory input •Images	Body & Behaviour •Neuro – muscular system •Genetics •Body sensations •Behaviour •Actions	Individual
Group Membership •Language •Social World •Rituals / History •Customs •Culture – organisation/ family	Social System •Natural & Human made Systems •Technology •Processes & Structures •Physical laws •Objects	Communal or Collective

**Figure 1**  
**Wilbers integrative model**

(Adapted from Wilber 2000)

Wilber's (1995) four quadrants correspond to Schumacher's (1977) four fields of knowledge. According to Wilber (1998; 2001), any integrated model or theory has to take cognisance of all four quadrants. A central postulate of the model is that everything exists within a given context. In individual coaching, this means understanding the collective consciousness or communal body out of which the individual arises. The models axes include the individual / communal and the exterior / interior domains.

- The top right-hand quadrant refers to the individual's exterior domain. This includes the body, the senses, the neuromuscular system, genetics and behaviour that can be seen and measured. For example, for depression a cat scan will measure neural patterns which can be diagnosed as clinical depression, which anti-depressants can cure (although the scan will not help to determine the cause of the depression).
- The top left-hand quadrant refers to the individual's interior domain. This includes consciousness and experiences such as thoughts, feelings, moods, images and ambitions. This domain is described by Schumacher (1977) as being critical for the higher advancement of mankind. Although these experiences are vaguer than those described in the top right-hand quadrant, they are used to explain behaviours (such as the depression above) through human dialogue.
- The bottom right-hand quadrant refers to the exterior domain of the collective. This includes social systems, processes, technology, structures, physical laws and objects that can be identified with the aid of the human senses. In Wilber's (1995; 1998; 2001) model this is the domain of systems thinking. Unlike many theorists who believe that systems thinking is holistic and the solution to reductionism, Wilber (1995; 2001) is of the opinion that it is not. He refers to systems thinking as subtle reductionism in that the general tendency of systems thinkers is to deny the inner

domain of the system. Classical systems thinking focuses its attention on that which can be seen or measured. It can tell how a system behaves or what its behaviour is.

- The bottom left-hand quadrant refers to the collective's interior domain. This includes language, customs, rituals, history and culture. This domain explains why the system behaves the way it does. Individuals are powerfully influenced in this domain by the culture in which they grew up. In terms of organisation, the processes involved in coping with structural and cultural change and transformation are to be found in this domain.

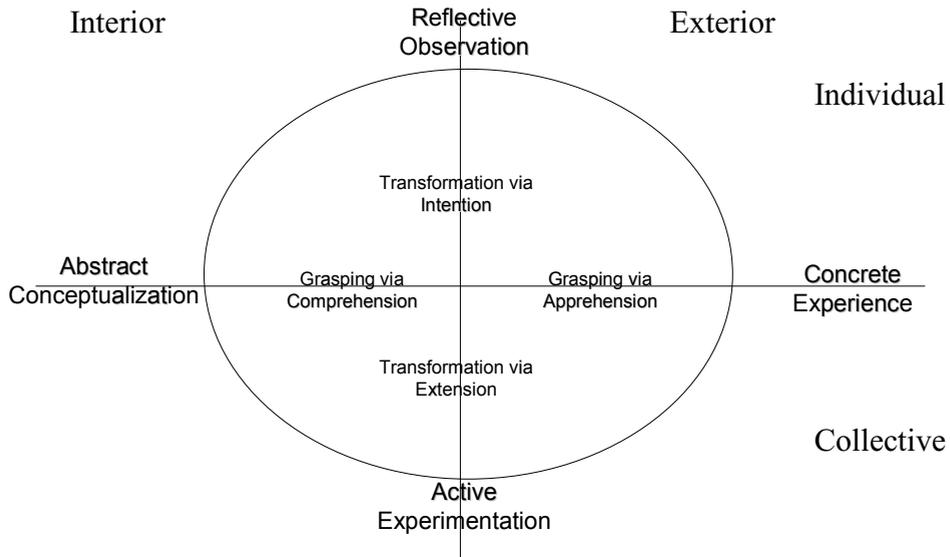
Wilber's (1995; 1998; 2001) model is, however, not limited to the four fields of knowledge. The model incorporates the evolutionary levels of consciousness. Like Smuts (1973) and Schumacher (1977), he believed that life has evolved from matter to life, from life to mind, from mind to soul, from soul to spirit, and that human development is an evolutionary processes from the pre-personal to the personal and then the transpersonal levels of consciousness. A disadvantage of the model is that it does not provide an integrated developmental methodology to facilitate growth and development within the individual, or in the culture within which the individual lives and operates.

### **3 Kolb's experiential learning model**

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model offers a practical integrative developmental model, synthesising the work of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget on cognitive development into a four-stage learning cycle involving four adaptive learning modes. These are concrete experience (the ability to involve oneself fully, openly and without bias in new experiences), reflective observation (the ability to reflect and observe experiences from many perspectives), abstract conceptualisation (the ability to create concepts and to build logical and sound theories from the observations) and active experimentation (the ability to use the constructed theories to make decisions and experiment with new behaviours and thoughts). Within this model there are two distinct dimensions that represent two dialectically opposed adaptive orientations, namely, concrete experience versus abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation versus reflective observation. These dimensions are independent but mutually enhancing, and each makes a contribution to the learning process. Learning and development require the resolution of conflicts between the conflicting dialectical orientations - learning and development are seen as consisting of processes filled with conflict and tension.

### **4 The integrated experiential executive coaching model**

The above have been integrated into a higher synthesis, which is known as the Integrated Experiential Coaching Model (see figure 2). Wilber's (1995; 1998) model is used as a meta-theory for holistic and integrated growth and development (because of its various developmental stages and comprehensive framework). Because of this model's weakness in terms of the praxis for human development, Kolb's (1984) model has been drawn on to add practical, experiential and integrated modes of learning and growth to the research.



**Figure 2**  
**Integrated experiential coaching model.**

(Adapted from Kolb 1984:42; Wißner 2000)

The individual will generally experience something concrete in the context of the collective, unless the individual lives in complete isolation. To make sense of that experience, he or she needs to make use of the dimension of intention, move inwards and reflect on the experience. Having reflected on it, the individual begins to develop a theory or concept of some kind about the experience. Abstract conceptualisation, however, is not something that belongs purely to the individual. It is influenced by the culture or system in which the individual finds himself or herself.

Having developed a theory, the individual then needs to engage the extension dimension and actively experiment within the collective environment. The advantage of Kolb's (1984) model is that it is independent of context and content in that it can be used in any application. The same methodology can be used to facilitate the learning of meditation, personal fitness training, designing organisational processes and structures or learning how to manage people. If it is applied correctly and in a disciplined way, experiential learning will move the individual through all four quadrants and develop all four learning capabilities, which are seen as a prerequisite for human growth and development. The model hypothesises that the more developed the individual becomes, the more integrative, advanced and complex the nature of his or her experiential learning becomes, thereby facilitating personal growth, development and the transformation of consciousness (Chapman, 2006). This implies that the model can be used for managerial and leadership development based on the way the individual explores and integrates learning opportunities during coaching.

## 5 Managing complexity

Most executives understand the concept of strategy formulation and organisational design, but not its actual implementation. The answer to this issue may be found in the work of Jaques (Jaques & Cason 1994; Jaques & Clement 1997) on stratified systems theory, which refers to the level of complexity of the task. Thus, the complexity lies not in the formulation of the strategy but in its implementation, because it has to be implemented within a continuously changing environment – thereby becoming a real-time strategy. It is hypothesised that executives find it difficult to implement designed strategies because they underestimate the levels of complexity and then become overwhelmed by their roles as modern and transformational leaders.

According to Jaques (Jaques & Clement, 1997), the following competencies are required to effectively manage the levels of complexity involved.

**(CP) Cognitive power.** This refers to the potential strength of cognitive processes in an individual and it is therefore the maximum level of task complexity that the individual can handle at any given point in his or her development. CP therefore represents the maximum number, ambiguity, rate of change, and interweaving of variables that an individual can process in a given period. It is the necessary level of cognitive complexity required to manage the level of task complexity of the specific managerial role.

**(V) Values.** This refers to a strong sense of values for the required managerial work, and for the leadership of others. Even if an individual has the required cognitive complexity he or she must want to do and must value the work at hand. Personal values have to be aligned with the work people do so that their mental energy can be focused and unleashed. If the individual believes in what he or she is doing, more energy will be available to do the work. Sadly, the converse is also true, even if the individual is a genius - if work is no longer meaningful, mental and physical energy evaporates.

**(K/S) Knowledge/skills.** Appropriate knowledge and skills are supplemented by experience.

**(Wi) Wisdom.** This applies to people and things and has to do with the soundness of the individual's judgments about the world and people - the ability to make good judgments about people and how they are likely to react in various situations. However, experience on its own is not enough. Wisdom requires both concrete experience and abstract conceptualisation. The acquisition of wisdom involves Kolb's (1984) comprehension dimension of experiential learning.

**T / (-T) Traits.** This refers to the presence of leadership traits and qualities and (-T) to the absence of temperamental or emotional characteristics in the individual that disrupt his or her ability to work with others. The focus on personality traits is misguided, in that the particular pattern of qualities that constitutes emotional make-up has little effect upon the individuals' in-role leadership. This dimension only comes into play if these characteristics are abnormal and affect the individual's ability to work with others. (This is a very valuable insight that Jaques brought into the business world. It relates to the large number of so-called coaches who have built a practice by purely focusing on and working with the (-T) factor.)

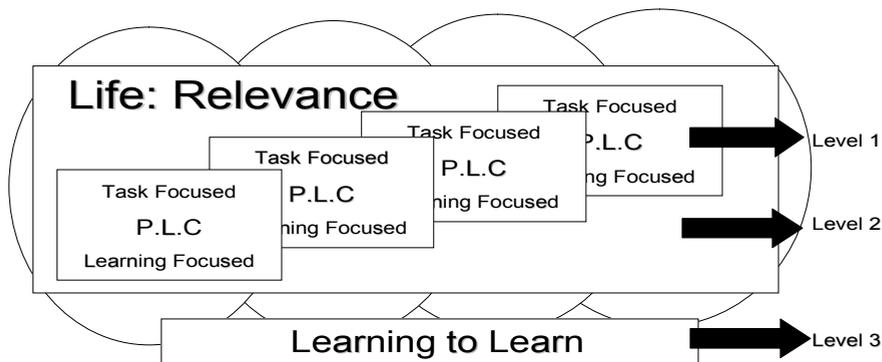
Jaques and Clement (1997) conclude that effective managerial leadership in highly complex environments demands four basic conditions. Firstly, the individual must have the necessary level of cognitive competence to sustain the required role and must strongly value the work and responsibility associated with that role. This addresses

interpersonal requirements. Secondly, the individual must be relatively free from any severely debilitating psychological traits that interfere with his or her ability to work with others. This is a combination of interpersonal and intrapersonal requirements. Thirdly, these authors refer to organisational conditions such as the appropriate business processes, organisational structures and specified managerial leadership practices, all of which are systemic requirements. Fourthly, each individual must be encouraged to be free to use his or her own leadership style. This view believes that there is no "magical leadership" style that works for everybody – situations are unique and the individual has to develop an individual leadership style, depending on his or her specific competencies and applicable role.

From a complexity point of view, an executive coaching intervention should be aimed at working with CP, V, K/S and Wi within the system in which the individual operates. Within the Integrated Experiential Coaching Model, executive coaching is about facilitating integrated experiential learning in individuals while striving for personal growth and development, as well as individual and organisational performance.

## 6 Learning conversations

Integrated experiential coaching is best facilitated by means of a learning conversation, consisting of three different levels of conversation conducted over time (Harri-Augstein & Thomas 1991) (see figure 3).



**Figure 3**  
**Learning conversations**

(Adapted from Harri-Augstein & Tomas 1991:151)

Every learning conversation (whether at level one or level three) will always take place within the context of a bigger situation that is relevant to life (level two conversation). Typically, the conversation moves between levels one, two and three. It might start at level one (task-focused), after which the individual might start questioning his or her bigger life purpose or the value of doing the particular task. In so doing, he or she moves the conversation into a level two learning conversation. Once the issues have been dealt with, the conversation might move back to level one. The aim is to move the conversation to level three, where the individual becomes aware of how he or she learns, which leads to increased independence and autonomy. Thus, the primary task of the Integrated Experiential Coaching Model is to help the individual become a self-organised learner (Harri-Augstein & Thomas 1991). This has been described as the

journey towards self-realisation, characterised by ever-increasing self-awareness and responsibility for growth and learning.

## **7 Executive coaching re-defined**

Defined from the above, executive coaching is seen as a one-one-one learning and developmental initiative within the context in which the individual operates. Using the integrated experiential coaching methodology, the coach works with the individual executive's behavioural and intentional content within the context of the social and cultural systems in the organisation (Lowman 2002). By emphasising the holistic and systemic approach to executive development, this methodology is in agreement with O'Neill's (2000) systems approach to executive coaching. Because a systems approach tends to be limited to the bottom right-hand quadrant, this model is more holistic than a pure systems thinking approach.

## **8 Research methodology**

The methodology described below was used.

### **8.1 Participants – co-researchers**

The population consisted of all the senior managers (2 females, 15 males -- 15 whites, 2 non-whites) participating as coachees in a six-month executive coaching intervention in an information technology company in South Africa. At the end of the coaching project, participants were invited to become co-researchers (Moustakas 1994) in the research project by submitting a reflective essay. Thirteen co-researchers did so (a response rate of 76%). The resultant convenient sample consisted of eight white Afrikaans-speaking males, three white English-speaking males, one white Afrikaans-speaking female and one non-white English-speaking male. In terms of diversity, this sample is not representative of South African demographics, and therefore no interpretations relating to diversity will be made.

### **8.2 Data gathering**

The reflective essay, which is a critical component of the learning review process in Work Based Learning (Lane & Corrie 2006) was chosen as the data gathering method for the following reasons. Firstly, the method enhances the co-researchers' reflective abilities, thereby enhancing the experiential learning process, and secondly, co-researchers could give a first-hand textural and structural description of their own experience. The assumption is that this method provides a more accurate account of the experience than (for example) an interview, in which the experiences are filtered through the interpreter's eyes (Camic, Rhodes & Yardley 2003:82-83).

Co-researchers were asked to write a three-to-four page reflective essay on what they had learnt, by answering the question, *What have I learned from this coaching experience?* The essays were received electronically and then printed out as the raw data.

### **8.3 Data analysis and processing**

To best accommodate the explorative nature of the research as well as the complexity of the executive coaching experience, the transcendental phenomenological

methodology of Moustakas (1994) was selected for analysis. This methodology consists of the following steps:

- \* The epoche process. This entails reading through the responses (essays) a couple of times, involving oneself in a new experience in a new way. It requires the researcher to set aside prejudices, biases and preconceived ideas about things and to create new ideas, new feelings, new inwardnesses and understanding. It is a way of genuinely looking and experiencing that precedes reflection, the forming of judgments or the reaching of conclusions.
- \* Phenomenological reduction. Here the task is to describe in textual language just what one sees, in terms of not only the objective reality but also the internal acts of consciousness, the relationship between the phenomenon and the self. Reduction refers to leading the researcher back to own experience of the way things are. The co-researcher's essays are transformed to arrive at a complete textual description of the experience.
- \* Imaginative variation. The researcher tries to derive structural themes from the textual descriptions that have been obtained through phenomenological reduction.
- \* Synthesis of meaning and essences. The final step is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textual and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essence of the experience.

Trustworthiness was ensured (as defined by Brewerton & Millward 2004; De Vos 2002) by having the findings examined by another researcher, to whom this research method and interpretive stance were well known.

## 9 Findings

The following themes manifested from the analysis.

### 9.1 A difficult beginning

A number of the co-researchers started the coaching relationship deeply entrenched in patterns of dependency that included the transference of power to the coach. This manifested in one of two dominant patterns.

The first pattern related to not taking responsibility for own behaviour or the learning process. These participants felt cynical about the value the coach could add to their lives and to the business. These feelings were rooted in the fact that they had been nominated by their managers because they had attended an assessment centre twelve months prior to the coaching programme. The assessment centre experience and their transference of power to the psychologists resulted in feelings of having been labelled and judged. One co-researcher said, *"As coaching or informal tuition was a new concept to me, my first reaction when introduced to coaching was that of uncertainty towards my abilities as line and technical manager. The assumption was that all managers not performing, were targeted for some kind of evaluation sessions with some outsider that would categorized the target group of managers in pre defined blocks."* Another said, *"This feeling was further enhanced by being interrogated, my strengths and weaknesses discussed in front of a number of people..."*. They questioned management's intentions and whether management was serious about the assessment (or *"was this just another fad?"*). The co-researchers felt victimised and therefore entered the coaching experience in fear of receiving another label. During the first coaching session the co-researchers were invited to either use their assessment

centre and management feedback or, on the other hand, start working with what was on their minds at that time.

The second transfer pattern involved unrealistic expectations of what the coach could do for them. There was the expectation that as the expert the coach would be teaching them a tremendous amount. *"I was also brand new in a new job and I needed to gain some content knowledge about the subject - fast. I was in the lucky position that my coach came from the same background. Since I had a small baby, studying was not an option at that time and I was very excited that I would be able to learn from him as I go along and draw from his experiences in similar fields."* The transference of power lies in the perceived responsibility of the coach to do something for the co-researcher. Coaching was seen as (hopefully) a quick fix or shortcut around having to experientially learn and explore their own work roles. There was even an expectation of receiving *"formal learning documentation"*, which was interpreted as being entrenched by the *"more comfortable"* and dependency-provoking training paradigm in organisations, where the transfer of knowledge takes place only in a 'I know - you listen' manner.

The first coaching session started with an invitation to the co-researchers to join the coach in the mutual exploration of their life stories in an open and inquiring manner that stimulated curiosity. . In this way they could start exploring who and what they were. The more they made use of the opportunity to tell and explore their stories in a nonjudgmental and open way, the more willing they became to investigate the mystery of the self. Over time, defences started to drop and a sense of vulnerability began to set in, based on the realisation that both coach and co-researcher were human. There was a growing realisation that there was no "expert" at work here - only people on a journey of exploration into life, the mystery of being human and all that that entails.

## **9.2 Building trust in a contained and reflective space**

Through telling, exploring and inquiring into each other's stories, a relationship started to form between the coach and the co-researchers. The evidence showed that without the establishment of trust in that relationship, it would not have been possible to learn about the self. The trusting relationship was experienced as the foundation of all that was to follow. As the trust grew, the experience of containment and safety in the relationship became real, and so did the willingness to inquire and reflect at various levels.

It is important to mention that trust building was not experienced in a linear way, but rather as a process that took the form of a spiral journey, with various complex and dynamic levels of progression and regression up and down the spiral. This was particularly evident from the reflection data. The level of reflection depended on where the participants found themselves on that day, their feelings and energy levels and the level of trust prevailing at that time. There was fluctuation across the whole spectrum, from task-based reflection to reflection on the higher self.

For many, reflection was a new experience and a vital new skill to be appreciated in their development. This was contrary to their organisational task and output orientation, where they had never afforded themselves the opportunity or luxury of reflecting, even though they knew that they needed to. Thus, coaching provided a disciplined and structured time and space for them to reflect on their roles and the quality of their working life. It was hypothesised that the work enhanced their level of meaningfulness and hope as dimensions of trust building (see Cilliers & May 2006).

### **9.3 A growing awareness of the self**

Co-researchers explored their realisation that the self was a belief system that had either been adopted from within or accepted from others and was a product of social conditioning. Their understanding of the self therefore had to be deconstructed. This deconstruction included such fundamental questions as: What is my relationship with God? (stated by a Christian individual), What is right and wrong for me? What is marriage? Is it possible to love two people at the same time? What does it mean to be gay in the workplace? Am I good enough? How have I become these labels that have been given to me? What does my continuous need to perform mean? Why do I need to succeed to prove myself? Am I more than pure IQ, logic and reason? How have my failures resulted in my getting stuck with a certain self image?

Within the context of an open, inquiring and trusting relationship, coaching provided a safe environment in which the deconstruction of these fundamental beliefs could take place. More importantly, however, coaching provided the environment and support required for the reconstruction of and experimentation with new beliefs and insights. The coach did not do the work, but merely provided the opportunity and support that allowed the work to be done by the co-researchers. This reconstruction included creating their own belief systems on the topics of their God, marriage, exploring alternative religious belief systems (not possible before), being gay and the way this contributed to leadership, and learning to forgive oneself for past failures and move on. These reconstructed beliefs of the “self” were their own, free from the labels and beliefs that other people had imposed on them. This brought with it a feeling of freedom and lightness. There was joy in relinquishing the ideal self (or “untrue self”; the one “that plays organisational games”) and discovering a “truer self” which had more meaning for them.

### **9.4 The self in relation to others**

The second level of reflection concerned a growing awareness of the self in relation to others. Having realised how their self concept had often been formed as a result of social conditioning, the co-researchers became aware of how their own feelings, beliefs and behaviours had an impact on their teams and clients. Their own insecurities, need to succeed and perform, to be liked, their fear of rejection and failure, and own agendas were often being projected onto their teams and management. Within the context of the coaching relationship, they were able to reconstruct their belief systems and explore and experiment with alternative behaviours. New behaviours included proactive communication and interaction with management; giving their teams the opportunity to develop and learn, succeed and fail; transferring responsibility and accountability onto the teams; making people more responsible for their own development; reducing the focus on task and output; learning to coach and support teams as they began reflecting and becoming more aware of things; and making use of a more facilitative approach to management. They learned that people are not labels; in fact other individuals are different and unique just as they are unique. The tendency to label others was replaced by their willingness to be open to others and listen to feedback from their teams. As an adjunct to the theory of transformational leadership, it was hypothesised that coaches experienced the enhancement of inspirational motivation as a dimension in their relationships with their colleagues (Van Eeden 2006).

## **9.5 *Entering the transpersonal realm***

For a few co-researchers the level of awareness extended to the transpersonal realm. This level of awareness is closely related to the level of self-awareness as the one leads into the other and vice versa. Awareness of the self was intimately related to the concept of God. This is not uncommon among people who have had a strong religious upbringing (Underhill 1995). Here the tension was between what had been taught, via various institutions and belief systems, and the person's actual experience. There was a clash between the belief system and the felt experience. This led to questioning and challenging the old belief system about God and then the creation of a new belief system via reflection, deconstruction and active experimentation. The transpersonal awareness led to the realisation that the self is not limited to the mind. This immediately raises the question, "well then, who am I?" For them, it is the realisation that who they are is not limited to the body and the mind -- there is the experiential realisation that "I am". In all major spiritual traditions the "I am" is recognised as the Higher Self, the realisation that God and I are one (Underhill 1995). The evidence suggested that the open, inquiring and trusting coaching relationship facilitated the freedom to reflect (deconstruct) and to experiment (reconstruct) with fundamental existential beliefs, feelings and behaviours.

## **9.6 *Learning how we learn***

The fourth level of awareness focused on learning. The initial awareness was brought about by making use of the Learning Styles Inventory. Each co-researcher was asked to complete the Learning Styles Inventory (Kolb 1984). The coach and co-researchers then worked through the scores to determine their preferred learning style. The coach in turn shared his learning styles profile with each of the coachees, the assumption being that the mutual openness facilitates optimal learning, and illustrates diversity in learning and leadership styles, facilitating understanding of others and other learning styles. Co-researchers found significant meaning in realising how and why they learn in the way they do. At the same time they gained an understanding of what the coach's profile was and what his learning preference was. This created a level playing field. They knew as much about the coach as the coach knew about them. The coach was not an expert doing something to them, but rather a companion who could journey and explore their lives with them. Once they had been made aware of their learning styles, awareness about themselves was facilitated. The awareness varied from being aware of their strengths and weaknesses to realising that they had powerful abilities, like conceptualisation skills and the ability to apply those concepts in practice.

Understanding their preferred learning style and the experiential learning processes enabled co-researchers to experiment and work with Personal Learning Contracts in their everyday work environments. In this way the learning experience was made explicit. This in turn enabled co-researchers to start reflecting on how they learn. Many of the co-researchers then realised how important reflection was for effective learning. Given the context of their work in an information technology organisation, the emphasis had always been on doing (concrete experience) and learning new technologies (abstract conceptualisation). They learnt new technologies and applied them in an environment that emphasises and rewards output. What was missing in their learning experience was the ability to reflect and to actively experiment with new thinking, beliefs, feelings and behaviours. The coaching provided a safe space where co-researchers could reflect on and experiment with their own learning in an explicit way. It was this reflection and active experimentation that led to learning and personal growth.

One co-researcher said, “*The learning I have experienced in this time through coaching can not be accounted for in terms of some ‘desirable business or efficiency based outcome’ or some improved test score - it has been a deeply personal journey which has resulted in a more whole being and as a natural result a more focused and efficient employee. This seems counter culture, but it’s true.*”

### **9.7 From dependency to autonomy**

As the co-researchers became more self-aware, aware of the self in relation to others, aware of the Higher Self and about how they learn, they moved from dependency to autonomy – a form of interdependency. As a result of the reflection, inquiry and trust, co-researchers became aware of what they believed, what they felt and why they behaved as they do. Because co-researchers came to this awareness by themselves they started to take responsibility for their own life issues. In so doing they transferred (or claimed) the power back from the coach to themselves. The truth dawned on them that the coach would do nothing for them except sincerely inquire and point out their defences regarding their self-awareness and their underlying assumptions. Hence the movement away from “What can the coach do for me?” to “what can I do for myself?” The first manifestation of the movement away from dependency to autonomy was when the co-researchers started taking responsibility for their own learning and setting their own agendas for the coaching sessions. There was even the “owning” of the idea that they should have changed the coaching approach when they realised that it was not working for them. This included the owning of their own projections.

As they started to take more responsibility and accountability for their own lives, their autonomy started to expand into areas like being more assertive, empowered and confident. Being more assertive and confident led to co-researchers’ becoming more focused on what is expected of them, what they have to deliver and what their parameters are. Hence they were more able and confident to say no to issues that they could not identify with. Through reflection, co-researchers were able to identify what real value they could add to the organisation, and with that came a feeling of being more empowered and authorised. This in turn gave them more confidence to break with the norm and to challenge people on issues that they felt strongly about. The rise in confidence and assertiveness as well as the awareness of themselves in relation to others made co-researchers more willing to delegate, and to push responsibility and accountability down to the level of where the work should be done. By delegating some of the day-to-day activities, co-researchers began to apply what they had learnt from coaching by starting to coach their own teams and subordinates. Applied learning is a powerful example of increasing self autonomy (Harri-Augstein & Thomas 1991).

As their autonomy grew, co-researchers began to shed their victim mentality. Instead of sitting around and waiting to see what would happen during organisational restructuring, some co-researchers started to experiment with alternative ideas on how to influence the outcome. Given the current sociopolitical environment in South Africa, where affirmative action is the order of the day, a white male victim mentality prevailed. For some of the co-researchers the shedding of this mentality was a truly liberating experience and led to the realisation that “*with my training, education, skills and experience I am still very marketable even though I am white, male and over forty*”. The growth in autonomy was confirmed by the feedback from managers and peers.

Through the building of a trusting, non-judgmental executive coaching relationship, a growing ability to reflect and the willingness to take personal responsibility for their own

learning and development, the co-researchers became more willing to experiment with alternative ways of thinking and behaving. This experimentation was evident in the way they conceived and behaved towards themselves, their colleagues, and the Higher Self. Experimentation was also evident in the way they learnt, and this enhanced their autonomy.

### **9.8 Transference of learning to the workplace**

Their autonomous behaviour, reflection and active experimentation were extended into more complex levels of work. As co-researchers began to question the value that they added to the organisation, they started to develop more strategic levels of thinking and behaviour. The first step was to start thinking beyond their functional areas, into understanding the business as a whole, to think in terms of processes instead of isolated functions. In doing that, co-researchers were able to improve their ability to distinguish between day-to-day and strategic issues. They realised that they could only do this effectively if they took the time to extract themselves from the detailed operations they were engaged in and reflected on *what* they were doing. This in turn enabled them to start aligning themselves with the organisation's strategic business objectives and themes, to reflect on the current strategy and to take corrective action where necessary.

Despite the company's public profession that they had a Balanced Scorecard in place, there was evidence that some co-researchers were beginning to work with the Balanced Scorecard for the first time. When they tried to find the company's Balanced Scorecard they could not find it. As in many organisations, there was a difference between the espoused theory and the theory in use (Kaplan & Norton, 1996). This made it difficult for them to align their functional area with that of the larger organisation. Next, they started to design Balanced Scorecards for their functional area of responsibility. Thus, they really started to experience the difficulties involved in trying to operationalise strategic thinking and then to align people with those strategic thrusts. This in turn raised their awareness of the difficulties and complexity involved in leading large complex organisations at the strategic level. They realised that "*action without disciplined review and reflection was a useless activity*". The question became, "What is the use of a strategic plan when it is not used to determine whether the business unit is on track with the desired strategy or not?" At this level, review and reflection seem to become more critical. The co-researchers experienced the joy of having developed a strategic vision and plan which was aligned with the organisation's vision and getting their teams to buy into the vision and plan.

A number of co-researchers realised that they had to put certain organisational structures and processes in place in order to achieve their desired strategies. Strategies are often not realisable because the appropriate structures and processes are not in place to support them.. Worse still, it may be found that the existing structures and processes actually work against the desired strategy.

The coaching experience is best summarised in the words of one of the co-researchers, who said, "The aims that I set out for myself for coaching did not materialise. I did not get the content I was aiming for; instead I got the me I was looking for. I can't say I would not have survived the year without coaching, or would have been divorced by now, without coaching. What I can say is that where there should have been a scar there is now thankfulness and peace."

## 10 Concluding hypothesis

It was hypothesised that the Integrated Experiential Executive Coaching Model facilitated the transformational dimension of experiential learning in individuals. The evidence showed that their coaching experience empowered them to take up their management and leadership roles in a much more authorised manner. Their newly learned behaviours included cognitive understanding and insight, experienced emotional and spiritual meaningfulness and a capacity for taking personal responsibility. The “object” of their awareness was the dynamics inside themselves, between themselves and other significant colleagues, their role in the organisation, and the way the system’s dynamics influence them personally and in their organisational roles. This underlines the possibilities of coaching as a staff development intervention to facilitate self authorisation by working through internal unconscious and dynamic behavioural issues.

It was concluded that this study represents a contribution to the field of executive coaching in South Africa. It specifically addresses human resources and organisational development practitioners, who often allow their organisations to implement executive coaching without proper scientific research into relevant models, paradigms and the professionalism of coaches. These findings underline the importance of a rigorous and scientific approach to executive coaching and its effects on coachees.

## 11 Limitations and recommendations

The research focused on the experiences of the co-researchers in a specific coaching and organisational context using a qualitative design. Seeing that no other scientific research studies are available on the learning and or psychological effects of coaching inputs in South Africa, this study cannot be compared with any other at present. The present findings do show some resemblance to the Cilliers’ (2005) findings in terms of the coachees’ movement from dependence to inter-dependence.

It was recommended that the above explored Integrated Experiential Executive Coaching Model be used in more South African organisations, in coaching contracts with senior management. It also needs to be said that coaches should have sufficient training and experience in this model before it is applied in coaching. In terms of research, it was recommended that the same type of research and design should be used to ascertain the psychological effect of coaching from a positive psychology and wellness point of view. It could be hypothesised that coaching will enhance the individual’s sense of coherence, resilience, engagement and locus of control to a significant degree, leading to the taking of more responsibility for the self and others in creating growth opportunities for all in the organisation. Lastly, it was suggested that executive coaching in a South African diversity context should be researched, using this coaching model.

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