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# **Commissioning Executive Coaching for Directors and Senior Managers**

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements of Bournemouth  
University for the Degree of Doctor of Business Administration

May 2002

Bournemouth University

# Abstract

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## Commissioning Executive Coaching for Directors and Senior Managers

Executive coaches are a relatively new and high profile addition to the supplier ranks offering development services for directors and senior managers in the UK. There is a paucity of theory about executive coaching, despite its widespread purchase and use in practice. The research and thesis examines current practice from two different perspectives - suppliers and commissioners - in order to advance understanding of the issues that affect the commissioning of executive coaching for directors and senior managers. Being one of the first in an area has a number of implications for the research design. The research environment is the real world of commissioners from a number of organisations who are members of the IES Research Club (and its successor body an IES Research Network) and the real world of executive coaches themselves. The chosen iterative research approach of action research and co-operative inquiry involved collaborating with three different sets of practitioner co-researchers in shaping the nature of the research and reflecting upon what was being learned. A particular contribution to the knowledge about the subject is made in categorising, for the first time, what organisations hope to gain by commissioning executive coaching on behalf of their most senior employees. The thesis also explores the 'how' of the work of executive coaches through situated research in one organisational context where 17 directors were coached by three executive coaches, including the researcher. A model of the executive coaching process, from the coach's perspective, has been developed and is presented and described here. The model is a significant contribution to theory in the field.

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# Acknowledgement

The author is indebted to all the co-researchers, participants, study sponsors and the host organisation involved in the research. I would like to thank the following people: my supervisors, Dr. Julia Kiely and John Gattrell for their excellent guidance and feedback over the last five years; my colleagues at IES for their encouragement and generosity; my partner Mike for his positive mental attitude throughout; and my parents Jennifer and Roger for their belief in the value of education and their continuous support over so many years.

**CHAPTER ONE: WORKING WITH  
COMMISSIONERS – AN INITIAL  
EXPLORATION  
(SEPT 1999 – SEPT 2000)**

# The Issue and the Research Club Context

My starting point was a concern about the practice in organisations of commissioning suppliers of executive coaching. Executive coaching is becoming a 'hot topic' for meeting senior management development needs in many organisations. As originally conceived, executive coaching was seen as being a remedial process: a method of personalised, short-term, intensive training to address and cure management performance deficiencies (Thach and Heinselman, 1999). However, a change in this perception has occurred and executive coaching is now just as likely to be seen as a force for positive change and a method of reinforcing and stimulating success in any organisation's high fliers (Hall et al., 1999).

The organisation I work for is the Institute of Employment Studies, which undertakes research and consultancy into a range of employment policy and human resource management issues. IES has close relationships with some 65 large employing organisations in the UK. These are corporate members of IES and between them they employ some 2.6 million people. Twenty six of these employers support the IES Research Club by financing, and often by participating in, applied research on HR issues. In the autumn of 1999 it became clear that a number of these IES Research Club members were becoming increasingly concerned about the use, cost and impact of executive coaching. This concern came to light during a series of visits to all the liaison contacts in Research Club members by IES 'account holders' who were enquiring about members' research priorities for the following year 2000/2001 as part of an annual consultation process. These account holders are eight senior members of IES research staff who between them form the primary mechanism by which IES strives to keep in touch with the business and HR issues of the member organisations. I am one of these account holders and I also have a secondary role in that I co-ordinate all the activities of the Research Club at IES on behalf of the members.

I volunteered to work collaboratively with a group of Club members in an initial exploration of the executive coaching topic on our collective behalf. The Club allocated a small amount of funding to help me on my way. This initial exploration proved to be the first cycle of my research.

Given the constraints of time that inevitably fall on those who choose to study part-time, it has always been important to me that my choice of research topic should be aligned to my employer's needs. The resentful reactions of previous NHS colleagues to any time I spent on my Master's research (even though that was all unpaid leave) had perhaps also made me overly sensitive about seeking the commitment of my employer to support the time I would need. Over the previous two years I had identified two other potential projects but subsequently discounted them because they did not fulfil this criteria. Embarking on a Research Club project seemed perfect. The funding allowed me the equivalent of 12 paid days to devote to the initial cycle of the research, plus Research Officer support and access to any of the Club member organisations. This I felt would be a good way to legitimise the research in the eyes of my new colleagues since it involved a well established process. It would also result in certain publication and profile-raising opportunities for the topic and my employer. There would also be no need to negotiate issues around who owns the research outcomes, as the Club custom and practice would come into play. Outcomes and publication of Club funded research always rests with IES. The topic was also one for which I had tremendous enthusiasm.

The process of diagnosing member concerns involved a series of follow-up telephone calls during the winter of 1999 with the member liaison contacts who had originally voiced particular concern about the topic and expressed an interest in the outcomes of any research the Club might undertake. The organisations these contacts represented were British Telecommunications plc, Marks and Spencer plc, the Scottish Executive and the Cabinet Office. These discussions resulted in an initial agreement that the ultimate issue was to help them improve their practice in the commissioning of executive coaching interventions in their organisations. In order to help them better understand how to do that, the initial exploration (or first cycle) of the research should start from the point of seeking answers to the following four questions:

- What is executive coaching?
- Why do we, as organisations, commission it and what is it that we hope to gain?
- What are the issues we as commissioners should be aware of?

- Where does it fit in terms of management learning theory?

## **Taking the Action Research Route**

The need for research was that advice on commissioning and implementing executive coaching was not readily available. There is however an ever growing band of individual coaches or groups of coaches eager to offer their services for hire to executives and organisations (Carter, 2000). Previous experience of consultants and the 'nightmare' stories of some Research Club members that had made use of such services induced a certain scepticism in the Club. Rather than looking to these coaches to provide a solution for Club members, I was keen on developing an organic approach.

Being one of the first in an area has implications for the research design. Executive coaching involves three distinct groups - the organisational representatives who commission executive coaches, the coaches and those who are coached. From an ontological point of view, the kind of knowledge I was particularly keen to create was that which will actually enable effective action and secure changes in the commissioning practices of Club members. I saw data collection as being about linking knowledge, action and its practical consequences in a way that would also allow generalisation beyond the immediate situation of the Club members to other organisational commissioners of executive coaching. My need was for a research methods design that would facilitate a valid collection and interpretation of the relevant data, affect a change in commissioning practice and allow its release into the public domain. I regarded an action research approach as the most suitable vehicle, particularly for effecting the desired practice improvements. A process of collaborative enquiry with commissioners inside Club member organisations as co-researchers seemed the best epistemological position.

Action research, an approach first associated with the work of social psychologist Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1946), has been a valuable if somewhat neglected approach to management research (Gill and Johnson, 1994). It starts with problems in concrete settings and redefines them within a framework of concepts and operations that presents the problem in a generalised form. The solution to the problem unites thinking through theory and doing through practice (Jones, 1998). There are a range of definitions for action research and its variants (Brooks and Watkins, 1994; Eden and Huxham, 1995), but the approach adopted in this research is that offered

by Eden and Huxham (1995), who explain action research as an approach that contains three key features. Firstly: an intent to take action on an organisational issue. Secondly: an explicit concern with theory formed through the characterisation or conceptualisation of the particular experience. Thirdly: a process of continual reflection should underpin the entire intervention.

Lewin's (1973) basic approach involved successive cycles of diagnosing, setting objectives, gathering data, action and reflection, and was designed to tackle a real-world issue as well as to generate new knowledge. This research strategy stressed collaboration, involvement and participation, all of which seem well suited to a club membership context.

Eden & Huxham (1995) highlighted the importance in action research of considering the role that the client and other participants play in the generation of theory. The roles the participants and the researcher play were also discussed by other writers such as Rowan (1981) and Chisholm & Elden (1983). According to Chisholm & Elden (1993) classical social science research views organisation members as 'subjects', a term that indicates clearly that the researcher is in charge and the subject's task is merely to follow the researchers instructions. They argue that fuller member roles result from assuming that both outside researchers and organisation members have critical contributions to make. They described it thus:

The outside researcher brings general knowledge of systems, social science, and the research process; internal members bring in-depth understanding of their system, how individuals perceive phenomena, and how to get things done. Highly participative AR attempts to integrate these two strengths through the research process. It is also willing to surrender control of the research to organisation/system members (Chisholm & Elden, 1993).

There are variants on Lewin's basic approach, each emphasising particular strategies and nuances. Ellis and Kiely (2000) provide a typology of action research technologies based on the degree of risk. This framework recognises four basic types of action research:

- 'Action research' (Chisholm and Eden 1993, Eden & Huxham 1995) which is perceived as having a low level of risk and is concerned with individual and organisational effectiveness

- 'Participatory action research' (Whyte 1991, Reason 1994) where the focus is on empowerment and emancipation through enhanced awareness of the need for groups to transform their lives and social conditions through co-inquiry. This category type includes co-operative inquiry and collaborative inquiry approaches. Here there is usually considerable risk for individuals their organisations, especially in a business context
- 'Action science' (Argyris *et al.*, 1985, Argyris 1999) which seeks to challenge behaviours in organisations through surfacing the personal defence mechanisms and revealing barriers to organisational learning and transformation. Here there are significant risks to the individual and the group unless the culture of the organisation is mature
- 'Action learning' (Raelin, 1997) is identified as a separate genre that emphasises peer learning in sets, with a relatively low risk to the individual and the organisation.

There a number of weaknesses in adopting an action research approach. Firstly, any consideration of action research is hindered by confusing and sometimes contradictory accounts in the academic literature about what the action research even is (Peters & Robinson, 1984) and methodological debates about how 'rigorous', 'scientific' and legitimate it is as a research approach. For instance, writers such Susman & Evered (1978) propose that action research is legitimate within a context I would identify as positivism. On the other hand, writers such as Argyris and Schon (1991) seem to suggest that there is a choice between rigorous scientific (presumably positivistic) research and action research that seems to concede there is no rigour to the approach.

In addition to this confusion on rigour, Robinson (1993) cites a writer on action research in education – Kemmis (1988) – as suggesting that by the mid-1980s the label 'action research' was widely misapplied to field experiments and types of process consultation that do not qualify as action research. This combination of perceived misunderstanding about the approach, rigour and the inappropriate use of the term, can lead to a lack of credibility among the academic and business communities (Reason 1993, Eden & Huxham 1995). This in turn discourages practitioners in 'real world' situations who wish to pursue legitimate management

research from considering action research, as they fear the research community may not take their findings seriously.

A second weakness in action research is external validity. If an intervention is expected to result in organisational change (as in action science) or change in practice and behaviour (as in participatory action research), this will challenge the status quo. Some people will anticipate being disadvantaged by emerging or proposed changes and, as Argyris & Schon (1991) point out, it is unlikely that the interventionist or researcher will gain full trust from all the parties. Eden & Huxham (1995) describe the implications as follows:

The politics of organisational change are thus a force acting against getting fully reliable data from all concerned... (Eden & Huxham, 1995).

It is difficult to justify the use of action research when the same aims can be satisfied using approaches (such as controlled experimentation or surveys) that can demonstrate the link between data and outcomes more transparently. (Eden & Huxham, 1995).

There are also internal validity weaknesses in action research. Included among its limitations are that action research is generally not an appropriate research strategy for theory testing because each organisational context will be slightly different from other contexts. Eden & Huxham (1995) suggest that organisational 'intervention settings' are much more amenable to theory generation and development than theory testing. Lack of repeatability is also a frequent criticism, for the same reason that interventions of this kind each within a unique organisational context means each can appear as a 'one-off' and, as outlined earlier, therefore lacking in perceived academic rigour.

The need to share or hand over control of the research process with research participants (Rowan 1981, Chisholm & Elden 1993, Reason & Bradbury 2001) also makes action research potentially difficult to implement successfully. Action researchers would need to be very confident and experienced in order to cope with the lack of control and uncertainty this implies. In addition, action researchers would also need to understand the nature of organisational power, politics and change that implies experience of consultancy interventions (Eden & Huxham, 1995).

There are however also strengths to action research. It has been argued that its strengths include:

- Involvement with practitioners over matters of importance to them, matters which otherwise may not have been identified (Reason & Bradbury, 2001)
- Providing a richness of insight which could not be gained through any other method (Whyte 1991, Eden & Huxham 1985)
- Bridging the gap between the theory and practice (McNiff,1988) and in developing and elaborating theory from practice i.e. theory generation (Eden & Huxham, 1985)
- Seeking out multiple stakeholder views allows the method to go beyond traditional attempts at triangulation by promoting cyclical data gathering and reflection (Argyris *et al.*, 1985).

Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggest that trying to define the various subsets of the action research genre can seem divisive rather than integrative. Certainly I do not think one form of action research is better than another *per se*. Rather I feel that the business context and the research aims should be important elements in any research strategy decision. This means preconceived ideas about the approach to be taken are inappropriate. It also means that researchers need to consider that the history and existing relationships within the organisation context may be limiting factors in the degree of collaboration and access to member information that is possible (Chisholm & Elden, 1993).

### **ADOPTING COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY**

I would describe my basic epistemological position as strongly interpretative. I am drawn to wanting to: interpret meanings; look for pattern relationships; explore ideas, complexity and relationships; draw out theoretical significance. I am also a believer in inviting dialogue and comment on findings from research participants.

I am also in harmony with action research approaches in general to the extent that it is about: understanding the importance of the perspective of others involved in the research; enabling change; increasing my own self-awareness; and recognising the impact of the veil of my own values through which I observe and experience any interactions. It is also suited to the Research Club business context of multiple stakeholders with different degrees of interest and involvement in the research.

Collaborative, or participatory, inquiry is the right approach for me for this research because of the research aims as I believe it is more likely to meet the needs of all the practitioners involved by encouraging others to change their practice and by giving me an opportunity to reflect on and change my own practice. In addition the research process will mirror the process of executive coaching in the sense that both are collaborative processes. Executive coaching is one to one based and collaborative inquiry in this context will be group based, but philosophically both processes will be in harmony and this I feel will be appropriate.

I am also a pragmatist and a realist, in that I assume that people will say what it is that they see, think and feel. This means that I choose not to get into too much depth. It also means that at the outset I am willing to re-shape the nuances of my position based on what other people involved in the research and part of the business context think is important.

I do not anticipate, however, that I will experience the high degree of risk that Ellis and Kiely (2000) associate with participatory (including collaborative) action research approaches. This is because I am not immersed in the business context to the same extent as a full time employee of the organisation they are researching within would be. Thus the construction of social reality and questioning organisational values and norms, so essential to any action research approach, I imagine will not be so difficult for me. For although I expect to be conducting research with others I will not be a true insider-action-researcher. Having said that, the Club members are perhaps used to seeing my colleague IES researchers in a more 'professional expert' researcher mode of operating and therefore there is a possibility they may reject an action research approach. It may be therefore that I am underestimating the degree of personal risk.

The cyclical process of action research (Susman and Evered, 1978) is a model which appears to show action research as a process largely the same as with other

methods of enquiry. What makes action research different is the development of a client system infrastructure that is intended to lead to some kind of improvement or change. The IES Research Club provided the starting point for my client system infrastructure. I anticipate that there will be intended and unintended consequences. Further McNiff (1988) identifies that traditionally theory informs practice. In action research, practice and theory inform each other.

My research, therefore, does not start with a precise theoretical statement of general inference looking for particular instances. I feel such approaches would not be appropriate because the research area has not been systematically investigated before and the data previously gathered is very small. A pre-formulated hypothesis to prove or disprove similarly seems inappropriate where there is little research and no theory.

Reason (1993) outlines an epistemological framework for action research based on personal and communal self-reflection. Reflective practice involves challenging the subject matter and the way in which researchers conceptualise it. People and organisations have different constructs of reality. These constructs may be at odds, in which case researchers need to find a way of sharing their realities and try to create a new one. My intention is not to build a theory for its own sake, but in doing so I intend that it will be applied to practical problems faced by organisations in commissioning executive coaching. Of course I am concerned with improving our collective understanding of the world of executive coaching, as well as improving commissioning practice within it. In terms of reflective practice, this means that I need to give consideration to the practicalities of reflection, not just as a solitary process of reviewing events and actions from my own perspective but also in conjunction with my co-researcher commissioners so that we can together see how improvements might be made from their perspective as well.

Since my starting point was 'how can the commissioning of executive coaches be improved?' and 'how can I work with others to influence that change?' this implies some distance is required. My model of action research started from an interpretative model, rather than a critical theoretic or learning theory approach. From a methodological point of view, I acknowledged that I was operating in a context where very little is known about executive coaching so I anticipated wanting to generate some formal and informal understandings about how it works. Therefore my action research approach was informed by an interpretist rather than

a positivist view in Cycle 1. My initial emphasis was on discovery, clarification and explication rather than the testing and measurement of the positivist doctrine (Jones, 1998). But I remained open to drawing on either tradition to collect data in the future and I intended to be sensitive to the need to use the data I generated in such a way as to secure commitment and facilitate change in commissioning practice.

I remained conscious that key issues to consider from an academic standpoint would include the different styles adopted by myself as the researcher to effect change and also the way in which the executive coaching literature can inform achievement of desired change.

I am a former training and development practitioner and general manager who has previously worked in two large organisations. My prior development experiences include the provision of one-to-one support to individuals in career management and developmental contexts. It could be said in effect that I have operated in the past as a coach to healthcare professionals and managers whilst working in the National Health Service (NHS). This means I start from a position as a 'believer' in one-to-one type development interventions. It also means that I have the advantage of embarking upon this research with some understanding of the topic (from a coach rather than a commissioner standpoint) but I have the potential disadvantage of bringing with that understanding assumptions about the topic too. In addition I am aware that I work using models and frameworks somewhat intuitively. Models help me explain and make sense of what is happening in my consultancy work, but I am aware of the potential danger is that this can lead to a less-than-robust analysis of events as they unfold. I therefore need to remain conscious that I must not rush into assigning explanations for situations, I must ensure that explanation flows from the process of the research. In recognising this, I intend to acknowledge this with my co-researchers and IES colleagues to enlist their help in challenging my assumptions and data analysis at every stage.

I envisage that the IES Research Club will fulfil three distinct roles in this first cycle. Firstly, the Club as a whole is the client infrastructure, determining and shaping the agenda for the research at the outset and as it progresses. Secondly, some of the Club member organisations would act as participant contributors by enabling me access to interview appropriate personnel and provide access to documents and other data to enable actual commissioning practice to be explored. Finally some

Club members would be active participant co-researchers, attending a Forum to explore emerging learning, engaging in on-going dialogue and critical debate with me, challenging my analysis and reflecting on their own practice. This final role is central to my research process. Of the 26 member organisations, some were likely to be involved in all three ways, others in just one or two and some not at all.

According to Elden and Chisholm (1993), participation in the sense of co-researcher status is one of the main characteristics of action research and one of the clearest contrasts to the classical model of orthodox positivistic science. In recruiting co-researchers from within the IES Research Club I am suspending the traditional idea of a clear distinction between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity' (Reason, 1993) and the assumption that the roles of researcher and subject are mutually exclusive (Reason, 1994). I intend to conduct my research as far as possible with these traditionally mutually exclusive roles replaced by a relationship whereby Research club members and I work together as co-researchers, contributing to the thinking that goes into designing and managing the research project, and in controlling the interpretation and presentation of findings from the research project. I am conscious of being open to criticism for this position, but believe it important to collaborate with people who have specific experiences and perspectives on the issue so as to reach a position of understanding the nature of executive coaching and exploring its consequences for commissioners.

### **RECRUITING CO-RESEARCHERS**

My concern was with changing practice in organisations. I also had a commitment to making the results of each stage of the action research visible in order to facilitate and encourage improvements in practice. Through my actions representatives from member organisations came forward to become participant contributors and participant co-researchers. Amongst the actions I took in the first cycle were:

- The provision of a series of one to one and small group briefings at the IES Research Club conference on 14 March 1999.
- A written invitation in April 1999 to all 26 IES Research Club liaison contacts for their organisations to participate in the first or any subsequent stage of the research. This resulted in management development specialists from

three member organisations, with considerable experience of commissioning executive coaching, coming forward to offer to participate. These were the NHS Executive, an international distribution company and a telecoms company (although the telecom company later withdrew due to changes in personnel). I also sought out the participation of a small Civil Service Department, a client organisation of IES that I knew to be actively commissioning executive coaches.

- Production of an initial 26-page literature review in the form of an IES Employment Brief written by me, copies of which was circulated to all member liaison contacts in July 2000. Shortly after it was reproduced on the private members area of the IES website as an Adobe Acrobat (PDF) download for free distribution to a wider audience of all staff employed by member organisations. This was to extend access to the findings from the first cycle beyond my initial co-researchers. This resulted in the Head of Training and Development from J Sainsbury plc, who was just considering introducing executive coaching, asking for that organisation to participate in future research. In addition the Management Development Adviser for Legal and General expressed an interest in keeping in touch with the research and emerging outcomes.
- The organisation of a Forum entitled 'Executive Coaching' for IES member companies with the sole purpose of facilitating a debate on the issues arising from the first cycle of the research and decide the way forward in London on 14 September 2000. Although this event provided an opportunity for further data collection, it also allowed new participants to engage with the issues and reflect on their own practice to date. The extra member organisations to join in the research at this stage were Anglian Water plc, The Home Office, The Inland Revenue, and HM Customs and Excise. These organisations had a variety of previous experiences of using executive coaching.
- Two interviews for practitioner journals during August 2000, in order to reach a wider audience than those within IES Research Club member organisations. As a result two articles focussing on relevant issues were later published. The first article was published in Pay Magazine in December 2000 written by Larissa Tuohy and the second appeared in the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Sussex Branch newsletter in January

2001 with myself as the writer. As a result representatives of two other non-IES member organisations contacted me to express an interest in participating in future research. They were investment bank Schroeder Salomon Smith Barney and the HSBC Group.

## Method

I was conscious of the need for a high degree of method and orderliness in design and execution of the research, together with authentic descriptions and explanations of the data. Even though my starting point was practice, I was keen to take on board lessons from the literature as a secondary source of data to stimulate my theoretical sensitivity to the likely issues. Despite the limited literature in existence about the subject, nevertheless I was able to use what I found from this to produce a semi-structured interview guide, which I called a discussion guide. The discussion guide included a number of clarifying and exploratory questions.

At the outset the likely issues I took from the literature related to the matching of coaches to individual executives, the relationships between coaches and those coached, the cost of executive coaching provision and the sourcing and selection decisions regardless of whether coaches were internal or external. That this is a significantly under-explored area in the literature became evident as the research progressed. In addition I added two more issues to the discussion guide that had arisen as specific practical concerns of IES member organisations during the early discussions I undertook. These issues were the on-going quality assurance of the coaches and the evaluation of the impact of executive coaching usage.

Silverman (1993) has argued that social researchers should choose from the full range of research methods and not from either qualitative or quantitative approaches. Gill and Johnson (1991) also set out their support for what they call 'methodological pluralism'. However I am conscious that in my first cycle I cannot take the pluralistic approach as I believe that quantitative methods would be inappropriate.

I did consider a postal and/or internet survey. Despite the sampling and confidentiality issues such an approach would encounter, access to large numbers of employing organisations through IES, Industrial Society and other general

mailing lists and to coaches through the Internet was possible. However, I ruled this out also because of the relatively low level of knowledge about the subject that would make it difficult to generate relevant questions at this stage of the research. Even if I included free comment boxes as well as tick boxes I might elicit something about patterns of behaviour, but very little about motives. And since the second of the initial research questions posed by my co-researchers was all about the purpose, reasons and motive of commissioners, this reinforced the decision to rule out quantitative methods for my first cycle. As previously stated however, I intend to remain open to the idea of using such an approach at a later date. Following a literature review, the research method I chose to generate data about the practice of commissioning executive coaching in the first cycle was in-depth interviews, supplemented by document analysis.

The in-depth interviews were with two of the three groups – four commissioners within organisations and four executive coaches. I concluded that it might be helpful to turn my attention to the third group – the coached – during a later cycle once I had a clearer understanding of the likely issues. I ruled out the use of entirely structured interviews for the reasons I rejected postal surveys – I did not feel enough was known about the subject to enable me to capture data of a codifiable nature in order to explain the topic within pre-established categories. I was drawn to the use of unstructured interviews with open-ended questions, as it is considered (Silverman, 1993) an ideal method in attempting to understand complex topics without imposing any predetermined categorisation that may limit the field of inquiry. However I determined that semi-structured interviews would be the ideal method for my inquiries, given that my priority was understanding, but there were some areas I particularly wanted to ask questions about.

I was keen to draw on a life history approach within the interviews in order to understand the interviewees' experience of using executive coaching. This was deliberately starting off in an inductive manner searching for 'emic' perspective in seeking to find out and understand the meaning and perspective of insiders to the process of commissioning and undertaking executive coaching. This is a research strategy well within the interpretative research approach. It is also an approach appropriate for the area I was to investigate as the concept of executive coaching is not fully explored in the literature and there is no universal agreement on what is meant by the term. This calls for an epistemological position that is interpretative rather than normative, being concerned with elucidating meaning rather than with determining causality (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). From this interpretative

perspective, I am assuming that knowledge and understanding are context bound. As Jones states in Morgan (1983):

The life history methodology offers an interpretative framework through which the meaning of human experience is revealed in personal accounts, in a way that gives priority to individual explanations of actions rather than to methods that filter and sort responses into predetermined conceptual categories.

As Mussell (1994) observed having collected the data using a life histories approach, the researcher is left with two analytical problems. The first is what to do with the mass of data and the second involves the problems of surfacing taken-for-granted assumptions. Jones (1983) suggests that researchers can deal with these problems through a process of developing concepts which best fit the data by exposing themes, whilst preserving the internal logic of the material. Based on his ideas I approached the process of data analysis in two ways. Firstly, I acknowledged that there were some things I expected to find, since the supplementary and/or probing questions I had asked through my discussion guide were based on issues arising from the literature and issues identified by the initial client infrastructure meeting. Therefore my first step was an initial identification of all parts of the data following each interview that appeared to relate to any of these anticipated issues. I also recognised that the data was an important source of new information that I expected would emerge and that I would need to make sense of it and look for any patterns. My second step therefore was a thematic approach which involved categorising and analysing the data as I proceeded with further data collection, in effect seeing data collection and analysis as part of the developmental process. I developed a categorising framework after each interview that seemed to best make sense of and fit with the internal logic of that particular dataset and context. On completion of all the interviews I went back to the data and looked for themes and patterns to which the categorising frameworks logically attached. I also mapped out the apparent relationships between these themes.

Fontana and Frey (1998) identify two further concerns in the interpretation and writing up processes that are relevant to unstructured interviewing, whether or not they utilise a life history approach. Their first concern is the treatment of contradictory data in reporting, particularly mentioning what data was excluded and why. In writing up I have tried to present all contradictory data within the context of each issue that emerged. However, I found it more difficult to identify what data was excluded, other than to state in advance that in writing up this first cycle any

data which did not surface in the analysis as relating to either an anticipated issue or a subsequent theme or pattern was excluded by default. One of the potential advantages of having tape recorded the interviews is that I can return to the data if in subsequent cycles of my research I develop hypotheses and I remain open to this possibility. The second concern is with "the tremendous, if unspoken, influence of the researcher as an author" (Fontana and Frey, 1998). In interpreting and writing up this first cycle of the research I have attempted to use 'experience-near' concepts and meanings (Denzin, 1998) by which I mean the words and meanings actually used within the real life worlds of executive coaches and commissioners of executive coaching. According to Denzin (1998) this is a well used approach by interpreters seeking 'emic', or contextual, situated understandings.

## **INTERVIEWS**

As previously stated, interviews were the primary mode of data collection in the fieldwork during the first cycle. They were face-to-face and of a semi-structured nature. The arrangements for all interviews were confirmed by letter or email and were supplemented by a copy of a short Research Club proposal. In effect this proposal was a statement of the topic and initial research plans and also served as an outline of the kinds of issues to be explored with the interviewees. A copy of this proposal is attached as Appendix One. At the start of each interview the statement was repeated to set the scene and I sought agreement from each interviewee that this was an acceptable starting point. Following this agreement a general open-ended question asked individuals to tell me about when and how their understanding of executive coaching had developed and changed. The material elicited provided me as the researcher with pointers to intervene, asking progressively more focussed questions. In addition I used the discussion guide to introduce potential issues when these did not emerge from the interviewee. I continued to ask probing questions until I was satisfied that nothing new was being obtained. Since the topic is so under-explored I took the view that no material introduced by the interviewees during this first cycle was irrelevant.

It was my intention that all data would be attributed anonymously (unless agreed otherwise) and I would use a tape recorder for all interviews. To this end agreement was sought in all cases at the outset and was refused in only one case. This was due to concerns by the interviewee (the Head of Organisation Development at the telecoms company) as she was leaving and she was concerned that ultimately her organisation might not wish its approach to be attributed. This

interviewee was given a guarantee that the data from their interview would be used non-attributably in any publications. She was happy for her name to be listed as an interviewee but her views and organisation context would only be presented anonymously. In writing up the findings in this first cycle I have codified and assigned each interview a number (Coaches 1-4 and Commissioners 1-4) and will refer to them by their number. For the full coding structure, please see Appendix 2.

All eight interviews were taped. However in the event only six were transcribed due to the inability of the researcher to get a substitute tape recorder to work for two interviews (both with executive coaches) that were conducted on the same day. Each of the six interviews were fully transcribed by a secretary as a first draft within two calendar days. I then checked these first drafts by listening to the tapes and then checked the second transcripts against the amendments I had marked on the first draft transcripts. In the other two interviews, I made notes at the time of the interviews and supplemented these with notes made immediately after each interview. I typed up these notes within eight hours of the interviews. The six transcripts and two sets of interview notes were then forwarded to the interviewees. This served as a record for them but also as a means for inviting further comment. Only one interviewee – an executive coach – chose to comment.

I interviewed the commissioners from the three different IES Research Club organisations who had volunteered to participate plus I approached and then interviewed an IES client I knew to be actively commissioning executive coaches on behalf of her organisation. I aimed to understand and be sensitive to their different personal and organisational contexts. This was taking an ethnographic approach in the sense of assuming organisational culture may play an important part in the selection of executive coaching interventions over other possible managerial learning interventions. In so doing I tried to recognise my own role as an outsider to the process at that stage who was trying not to stereotype people and situations, but trying to immerse herself in their settings in order to better understand their perspective.

I approached and then interviewed four executive coaches. I obtained their names from a list of coaches used by and compiled by Research Club member organisations. My co-researchers were keen that I should approach coaches used by Club members to ensure that they were working in large employing

organisations. It was also felt necessary that the coaches approached were also not being used by the organisations whose commissioners I was also interviewing.

## **DOCUMENTS**

I also collected and studied documentary evidence. Generally this consisted of business and management development strategies or contract specifications referred to in the interviews by commissioners who then gave these documents to me after their interviews. These documents gave validity to their responses on 'why' their organisations commissioned executive coaching. In addition two of the coaches interviewed referred me to their marketing literature for more detailed explanations of what executive coaching meant to them. An exploration of this second source of data gave me an opportunity both for checking my interpretation of some of the data I obtained from the interviews and greater insight into the details of the executive coaching processes actually used.

## **Findings from the First Cycle**

An initial review of literature seemed a good place to start, since it provided the focus for initial discussions with my co-researchers, and helped to place this research in a context. As the various research cycles progressed I read more in parallel and so readers will find there are 'mini-reviews' of literature incorporated in each of the three chapters. This is but the first.

My co-researchers were keen that the initial literature review should not start too broadly by examining the vast literature of learning models. This was because their initial focus was narrowly defined as to those bodies of literature with direct relevance to the provision by employers of learning opportunities to senior managers and directors. This did not preclude widening the scope of the literature to be reviewed in later cycles. The literature and models that are referred to in this section include those of:

- Management development provision
- Organisation development context

- Changing nature of organisations
- Changing nature of managerial work
- Executive coaching definitions

This section does not include literature on workplace counselling. This is because at the outset counselling seemed to my co-researchers and myself a fundamentally different activity to coaching. Counselling usually comes into play reactively, whereas undertaking executive coaching is usually a pro-active choice by the individual executive or the organisation.

There seems to have been a phenomenal increase in the use of executive coaches in recent years, as outlined in this section. Judging from the literature that I will present, the reasons for the increase in demand may well include changes to the organisation context and changes to the nature of managerial work itself.

### **THE WIDER MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE**

An IDS review of management development (1989) pointed to many of the trends we still see today. There was a strong desire to tailor training and make it useful and this led to arguments for and against on-the-job training as opposed to off-the-job courses. Some companies felt they did this best through tailored in-house provision and others joined consortia. MBAs were supported by some companies, with others developing company or consortia MBAs. Secondment was on the agenda in the late 1980s, but mentoring and coaching were not mentioned in this review.

A study by Doyle (1995) of management development activity during change showed that efforts to shift to a more entrepreneurial perspective through formalised management training is often resisted due to the residual culture and style of the managers. He argued that there is a need to focus on the 'wider contextual influences' in designing programmes and that an understanding of the organisational dynamics that surround development can assist in deciding how and where to allocate resources, how to select and prioritise development activities and

even how to defend development from forces and influences which might otherwise undermine its effectiveness.

Thomson *et al.* (1997) carried out a large-scale survey of management development practice in the UK. Companies reported a move away from 'sheep-dip' training and also spread their training input across all levels of management. Although they wished to see management development as a longer-term activity, it was still tactical and short-term in implementation, largely focussed on current job requirements. However, over half the organisations supported managers taking further qualifications.

Woodall & Winstanley (1998) point out that the term management development covers a broad range of activities, but has traditionally emphasised off-the-job learning experiences. Indeed the Anderson study of senior executives (Marx and Demby, 1998) showed that standard development programmes still prevail in most companies, with managers rewarded to a certain extent by attendance at prestigious business schools. Kettley and Strebler (1997) in their study of the roles of senior managers note that:

Formal business education and training for senior managers is increasingly context specific, delivered in partnership with external experts and focussed on new business concepts and strategic learning. Many are experimenting with more individually focussed approaches to learning including coaching, counselling and personal feedback. (Kettley & Strebler, 1997)

There is much talk of tailoring management development by providing more support for learning on or very near the job. Following Woodall and Welchman's study (1998) on 'work-based' management development in 31 organisations, coaching and project work figure highly in the way we now talk about such 'work-based' development.

There has also been a rise in the interest in the use of 360-degree feedback, or personal feedback, to support the development of managers (Kettley, 1997). Tamkin and Barber (1998) explored the nature of managerial learning and found that managers are not often conscious learners and so need modes of learning which will cause them to become more aware of their learning. They conclude that personal feedback is helpful in learning about oneself, whereas study (for example

MBA) deal more with thinking styles and business strategy. They argue that the more internalised forms of learning, based on feedback and reflection, are especially important to managers.

Margerison (1990) argues that one way to encourage managers to manage change is through action learning. Action learning builds upon the experience and needs of the managers by helping them to learn from their actions. Kettley and Hirsh (2000) have explored the use of working in cross-functional teams as a developmental experience. Their survey of managers and professionals working in such teams found that they learned more about their own personal effectiveness and about organisational interdependencies than about other specialisms.

In seeing management development as part of a culture change, Holbeche (1999) discusses the problem of senior management training as appearing remedial. She argues that feedback can help managers to see the need for change, but their willingness may still be clacking. Linking training to a change initiative or to forums for fresh ideas can help overcome this negative ethos.

Buley (1996) advocates early preparation for senior roles in an exploration of management development specifically for top international jobs. Buley links the need for more imaginative management development with the notion of 'double-loop learning': a process in which the individual's learning challenges their assumptions as well as increasing their skills or knowledge. Such 'double-loop learning' is most likely to take place when individuals are put into new organisation settings – especially appropriate for 'next generation' senior management development.

Mentoring and coaching have received increased attention in the literature in recent years especially for the most senior managers at one extreme and new graduate joiners at the other. As far back as 1991, commentators such as Ford argued that executive coaching can transform performance by allowing by allowing executives to establish their own criteria for improvement. Clutterbuck and Megginson (1999) point to the unlearning which needs to take place for some senior executives to improve their interpersonal skills. Senior jobs are lonely and many concerns that need to be discussed are blocked by the unrealistic expectations that others project onto senior managers. They argue that mentors can help to expose some of these

deep-seated concerns, although external mentors may be required when the culture of the organisation needs to change.

Research into a range of management development programmes provided by organisations (Tamkin and Barber, 1998) concludes that learning programmes with an emphasis on feedback and learning support are best placed to create these reflective, empathetic managers. They go on to suggest this kind of learning is unlikely to take place outside a carefully and deliberately crafted learning event. And yet the Anderson study of senior executives (Marx and Demby, 1998) showed that standard development programmes still prevail in most companies, with managers rewarded to a certain extent by attendance at prestigious business schools. However, these authors also argue that more individually tailored development such as executive coaching is likely to be more effective.

Many companies have defined generic and/or senior management competencies, although they vary in the extent to which these really underpin management development. Holbeche (1998) identifies many companies using competency approaches, 360-degree feedback, personal development plans and assessment centres to help link their succession planning processes with corporate and management development strategies. Many companies have also determined a set of generic leadership competencies (e.g. BP, Texaco and SmithKline Beecham), but Holbeche warns against the limited shelf life of success profiles when business requirements change.

Alimo-Metcalf et al (2000) point to some of the same trends in leadership development: emphases on feedback (including 360-degree feedback), action learning, cross-functional teamwork and the involvement of senior people in delivering development themselves (e.g. as coaches or mentors). As she points out there are still few major companies with a well embedded approach to delivering leadership skills and many in-company programmes are short-lived.

Pemberton and Herriot (1995), in a study of the development of board members, argue that neither role descriptions nor lists of competencies adequately define the skill needs of board members. They found that boards did not adequately attend to their own induction and development needs. Internal appointments were likely to get less induction to their new role on the board than external appointments.

In many organisations, there may be a degree of reluctance to accept that managers at the top actually have developmental needs. Individuals who see themselves, and are seen by others, as 'having arrived' occupy the top two or three levels of management (Mumford, 1995). In addition, coaching peers and associates isn't usually on an executive's job description, despite the need for executives to take on the role of coach to their own teams (McDermott, 1996; Waldroop and Butler, 1996). There is an interesting paradox here in that senior managers may not see themselves as targets for development or as developers.

One of the strongest strands in current management development and learning literature is the emphasis on the individual as a self-managed, self-organised learner. Executive coaching seems to sit comfortably within this approach. Modern organisations are experiencing great change, there are rising demands for increasing flexibility, of increasing autonomy and responsibility, as organisations adopt the principles of total quality management, or deal with the aftermath of downsizing or delayering (Tamkin et al., 1995). Because of the nature of the work they do, managers in particular need to be able to self-develop (Burgoyne et al., 1980).

Burgoyne, Boydell and Pedlar (1980) argue that learning theories divide into two broad categories: those that view people as passive patients, i.e. what they do is the result of the combination of innate factors and what subsequently happens to them; and those that view people as self-actioning agents who originate action. Self-directed learning as a technique sits much more easily with the latter. If individual managers need to be more accomplished at self-directed learning, then ways in which this can be enhanced, and how learning opportunities can be maximised, is clearly of importance.

## **THE WIDER ORGANISATION DEVELOPMENT LITERATURE**

The literature on management development may help to explain some aspects of how individual managers learn and helped frame my research, but managers learn in an organisational context, and for their learning and development to impact on organisations their learning needs to be translated into an impact within this wider context. Hence I will turn in this section to some of the wider literature on organisational learning and organisational development.

Easterby-Smith (1997) argues that the creation of a comprehensive theory of organisational learning is an unrealistic aspiration because of the different disciplines that have a perspective on the subject. In addition to organisation development, these disciplines are psychology, management science, sociology and organisational theory, business strategy and cultural anthropology. Organisation learning has a vast literature, and each of the disciplines takes a slightly different perspective. This section focuses on a small amount of that literature which seems particularly relevant to understanding what is expected of senior executives.

In the 1980s much organisation development thinking was concerned with improving organisational performance through an integration of both organisation design and structure considerations, and also behavioural process issues and the way an organisation's members interacted with each other (Sashkin & Burke, 1994).

In the 1980's there was also a focus on organisational culture and how values affect critical organisational functions. Schein (1985) suggests that leaders can act to create cultures that integrate the two value perspectives of organisational bottom-line and quality of employees working life. This sort of executive leadership may be seen as what top level management has always been about (Mintzberg, 1973), but Schein (1985) puts the conscious navigation and attainment of planned changes in organisational culture firmly at the doorstep of organisations' leaders.

In the 1990's the concepts of the 'learning organisation' and, later, 'knowledge management' dominated much organisation development research. Fiol and Lyles (1985) conducted an early review of the literature on organisational learning and suggested some areas of consensus – the organisation must align to the environment to remain competitive and innovative, and the presence of four key contextual factors: culture; strategy; structure and environment. Many authors stress the alignment of cognitive elements (Hedberg 1981, Kuhn 1961, Argyris and Schon 1978).

According to Jones and Hendry (1994), the term 'learning organisation' was first coined by Pedlar *et al.* in 1988 in the UK, and by Hayes *et al.* in 1998 in the US. Pedlar's definition centred on organisational transformation through the learning of an organisation's members, but there have been numerous and varied definitions. For example, Senge (1990) defines a learning organisation as:

Where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (Senge, 1990).

Garvin (1993) offers a different definition:

A learning organisation is an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights. (Garvin, 1993).

Garvin argues that this must lead to change in the way work is done. Learning organisations bring about this change because they are skilled in five things: problem solving; experimenting with new approaches; learning from their own experience; learning from the experience of others; and transferring knowledge through the organisation.

The organisation is continuously influenced by its environment and vice versa and therefore its future is determined by how effectively it responds to change (Emery 1969, in West 1994). Learning organisations and organisational learning are not just about learning then, central to them is also the concept of change. The process consultation approach associated with Edgar Schein (1997) and the intervention theory and method associated with Chris Argyris (1973) are still used today by organisation development practitioners attempting to bring about change in organisations.

Pearn *et al.* (1995) identifies the extent to which the environment supports and sustains learning as a critical dimension of a learning organisation, as is the extent to which the workforce is confident, motivated and competent to learn. One necessary feature that needs to be in place to achieve this is 'inspired leaders'.

### **GROWING POPULARITY OF EXECUTIVE COACHING**

The number of individual coaches currently active in the US varies according to each author and the date of writing; the most recent estimates put the number in the 1,500+ region. There are no numbers available for the UK. Nearly all sources including from HRD practitioner associations such as IPD and AMED agree, however, that the number is rising quickly. Cost estimates also vary between

sources, but few authors expect coaching to be a cheap affair. Most in the US expect the basic cost to be in excess of \$400 per month per executive (or more, depending upon the time spent with the coach). In the UK, interviews with the small number of commissioners in IES Research Club member organisations identified that figures up to 15 per cent of the executive's annual salary have been quoted to organisations, although £2,000 per day (equivalent to four two-hour sessions) is not uncommon. This can be compared to the average (mean) daily fee rate of £975 per day among management consultants across the UK (MCIS, 1999).

Given that there are no widely recognised professional bodies or accreditation standards for coaches in the UK, anyone can set up in business as an executive coach. This is a matter of concern to almost everyone talking or writing about the subject.

### **LITERATURE ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF ORGANISATIONS**

One explanation for the rise of executive coaching is that lack of time and more frequent job changes leave fewer senior executives able to fill the role of a mentor figure in many organisations (Lutz, 1995). In addition since the widespread de-layering of management hierarchies in the 1990s (Kettley, 1995), spans of command are much wider. This leaves top managers managing more people than they can realistically 'coach' themselves.

The growth of executive coaching is also attributed to a change to a more entrepreneurial economy. There has been a dramatic increase in the number of people working alone at home without an organisational support system (Caudron, 1996). In this situation coaches can provide the kind of feedback and motivation once provided by bosses and co-workers. Caudron also points out that downsizing has eliminated many of the executives who used to be available as mentor figures in the past.

Other writers also pick up on the trend of 'flatter' organisations that provide fewer opportunities for traditional mentoring relationships to develop and also result in the existence of more isolated managers (McCafferty, 1996 and Herriot et al., 1998). Flatter hierarchies also make the jump from one level of management to another more difficult. In particular, the transition between general manager and director, and between director and chief executive both involve radical changes in

the way an individual makes judgements and manages his or her own team (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 1999).

The shift towards a more explicit transactional relationship between employers and their employees or mutual 'psychological contract' has been pursued by many organisations as a replacement for job security since the recessionary early 1990s (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995 and Watkins & Drury, 1994). Called 'new deals' by Herriot and Pemberton (1995), this shift involves employees being offered development opportunities to allow them to maximise their chances of getting another job if their current job becomes redundant *ie* enhanced employability. In exchange employers expect high levels of commitment and performance in the short term.

The interest in employability from a public policy perspective has grown during the late 1990's (Tamkin and Hillage, 1999) and with it has followed questions about where the responsibility for development should lie. A recent definition from the literature is 'Employability is the capacity of getting and keeping satisfactory work' (Hillage and Pollard, 1998). This definition implies employability is about an individual's self-sufficiency within the labour market.

A knock-on effect of these new deals and the emphasis on employees taking control of employability may be that as a society we are starting to rely less on the 'work organisation' to develop us and are starting to both take responsibility for our personal development and also to see it more as an individual matter. Since executive coaching is an individually centred approach to development, it may be that its increased popularity among senior managers can also be explained in the context of this wider growing emphasis on the individual rather than the organisation.

### **LITERATURE ON THE CHANGING NATURE OF MANAGERIAL WORK**

A review of the literature on senior management roles plus case studies in 17 major UK employing organisations concluded that the nature of modern organisations demand senior managers that are flexible, able to adapt to change, and who possess certain soft skills (Kettley and Strebler, 1997). These new challenges place heavy emphasis on some of the personal aspects of management as well as the ability to work with high volumes of information. These key soft skills are identified

as the skills of gaining trust, of developing people, of encouraging and empowering others, of nurturing effective relationships, of communicating and influencing, of working with new information, concepts and strategies, of managing themselves effectively, of seeking and using feedback and of tenacity and integrity (Kettley and Strebler, 1997).

Kets de Vries (1996) has a useful model of two rather different roles required of leaders. The charismatic role is about envisioning, empowering and energising. The architectural role is as a designer of appropriate structures and systems. In his view creativity and innovation demand less command and control and more self-managed teams. Organisations need more small autonomous units but linked by information and common values. They also need a learning culture, to be adaptive to change and one that values good corporate citizenship behaviour.

Perhaps the latest fashion is to see management as requiring 'emotional intelligence' defined by Goleman (1996) as self-awareness, handling ones own feelings, motivating oneself, recognising emotions in others and handling relationships. In an unpublished extensive review of the leadership literature commissioned by The Post Office, Hirsh (2000) argues that emotional intelligence may be just a repackaging of messages which have been around for a long time about managing yourself and your relationships with others. Nevertheless the concept does seem to have captured a current concern with the more personal aspects of managerial work.

Personal skills also emerged as crucial in a study of what makes for successful leadership in business alliances (Garrow et al., 2000). An open style of leadership and the capacity to build personal relationships form the critical basis for dealing with the strategic partner when it comes to the more transactional aspects of alliances: communication, negotiation and operational effectiveness.

How are managers to acquire these personal and soft skills that are demanded by organisations of their senior managers these days?

Despite the evidence from the literature about what kind of development is most appropriate to support senior managers in successfully fulfilling organisations' changing expectations of what is required in these roles, it seems in practice that

these opportunities may have been in short supply. Perhaps the past lack of the most appropriate kinds of consciously constructed learning programmes which Tamkin and Barber (1998) described, on behalf of groups of middle managers in many organisations, can also in part explain the growth in the commissioning of executive coaches for today's senior managers.

### **WHAT IS EXECUTIVE COACHING?**

The first question posed by the Research Club members during the diagnostic discussions during the winter of 1999 was 'what is executive coaching?' I looked initially to the literature in order to come up with a definition and this section outlines what I discovered.

Executive coaching, unlike mentoring, almost inevitably seems to include a financial aspect: the coach is being paid specifically for his or her coaching services. One source goes so far as to describe coaches as a 'hired friend' as well as a business mentor and consultant (McCafferty, 1996).

Executive coaching is a practical exercise: a goal-oriented form of personally tailored learning for a busy executive. To some, the purposes of coaching can be many: to improve performance or executive behaviour, to enhance a career or prevent derailment, or work through organisational issues or change issues (Hall, et al., 1999).

Coaching is an interactive process that is designed to help individuals to develop more rapidly and produce more satisfying results. Coaches work with clients in all areas, including business, career, finances, health and relationships. As a result of coaching, clients should be able to set better goals, take more action, make better decisions, and more fully use their natural strengths.

Executive coaches are usually trained to listen and observe, to customise their approach to individual client needs, and to elicit solutions and strategies from that client. One underpinning philosophy described by a coach interviewed is that the client is naturally creative and resourceful and that the coach's job is to provide support to enhance the client's existing skills, resources and creativity. While the

coach provides feedback and an objective perspective, the client is held responsible for taking the steps to produce the results he or she desires.

A recent definition of executive coaching is:

Helping professional people to reflect upon their work in a frank and rigorous way and to establish new patterns of behaviour as a consequence. (Sanger, et al., 2000)

This is interesting because it implies that the role of the coach is to help raise the consciousness of an individual in order for them to see and work effectively with the culture, people and practices around them. Sanger's work is also novel in the literature, in that he is reported as insisting analysis of changes required should be based upon evidence collected by the coach, not relying on the knowledge and feedback of others inside the organisation (Pawsey, 2000).

Executive coaching is usually a fairly short-term activity, intended to improve managerial performance, but competencies or behaviours underlying that performance can be identified through the coaching process and not necessarily in advance. Ford (1991) argues that executive coaching can transform performance by allowing executives to establish their own criteria for improvement. This is very important, as it seems to be moving development away from a culture of 'passports' such as professional qualifications and specialist or generic competencies towards a focus on individual aspects of development. Alternatively it may be that individuals still need to acquire these 'passports' in order to reach managerial positions but once there the process needs to change to one of rectification of skills and knowledge (Kirwin-Taylor, 2000). Executive coaching's goal-specific approach means that it is time limited, unlike mentoring which can be an open-ended commitment by both mentor and protégé.

Coaching is a performance and action oriented process, while mentoring as previously described is more of a role-model relationship. Coaching helps people learn how to do things more effectively, while mentoring gets at the intangibles (Hadden 1997). 'Intangibles' in this context refers to preparing for future changes and promotion. These intangibles may lead on to the attainment of tangibles, such as salary increases (Roche 1979).

Coaching doesn't have to be limited to the just the target executive; some coaches will work with everybody in the team (Masciarelli, 1999).

My interviews with commissioners and executive coaches elicited some similar perceptions and definitions of executive coaching with those of the literature. A personal development and learning theme was apparent throughout. The coaches described it as follows:

it involves changing personal behaviour by involving managers in owning their own issues and actions. The process used enables the deepening of learning for individuals about their issues. (Coach 1)

it's a process.....external, committed, independent, objective, respectful, nudging around the task, whatever the tasks. (Coach 3)

it is an action-orientated individual development intervention which enables individuals to be pushed in forwarding issues of importance to them. (Coach 2)

The commissioners I interviewed described it as follows:

It is an opportunity for a chief executive or a senior manager to reflect on their practice, to have a place where they can go to test out ideas, be challenged and be supported (but not uncritically). (Commissioner 1)

It is a way for people to evaluate themselves and help them make important decisions. This is in terms of their managerial life – how they lead and how they manage- but also how they make best use of their own abilities, so there's a personal element to it as well. (Commissioner 4)

It's a training and development intervention that can be targeted to more senior individuals. (Commissioner 3)

One coach I interviewed however had a slightly different view and described it thus:

I think its called executive coaching because it's posher and you can get more money for it. I also coach unemployed people. So an executive has a wider remit, has to be more strategic, has to be clear about the effect of their decision making and has responsibility for the people they are

making decisions about, but it's still just coaching as far as I'm concerned. (Coach 4)

This raises the question of whether this a supply-side issue: an industry created and marketed extremely effectively by willing suppliers? Or is the growth in the number of people offering executive coaching services rather a demand side issue, with increased supply an attempt to fulfil the growing demand for them?

### **INITIAL THINKING ABOUT DEFINING EXECUTIVE COACHING**

The main features that seem to define executive coaching are that it is a short term, paid-for, goal-specific and action orientated process designed to support senior managers in producing results more quickly and of a higher quality than they may otherwise have been able to do.

Practitioners (commissioners) of executive coaching present at the IES Forum in September 2000 valued most those definitions of executive coaching which differentiated it from more long-term mentoring, role-modelling relationships. This was because mentoring is a process with which they are already familiar. There was no one definition which was considered simple and understandable enough for them to adopt wholesale to use in their discussions with managers back in their own organisations. Having considered all definitions presented, what they considered to be useable and encapsulating the essence of executive coaching was the following:

It is a form of tailored work-related development that spans business, functional and personal skills.

The literature review highlighted the growth in the popularity and use of executive coaches and this was reflected in the perceptions of the project's practitioner co-researchers. The review of the literature also offered practitioners some reasons underlying this increase in popularity which they could relate to. These reasons include the knock-on effects of the downsizing and de-layering of the 1990s and the demand for senior managers with key 'soft skills'.

It became clear in the interviews with executive coaches that senior managers and other individuals can and do find then privately finance executive coaches to help them. However, the first cycle of the research project remains unconcerned with

that model of commissioning. Rather, the focus is on those circumstances in which organisations decide to find and finance one or more executive coaches to assist their managers. The reason for this specific focus is that it reflects the interests and needs of my co-researchers who are individuals within organisations who are currently, or may shortly be, responsible for commissioning internal or external providers of executive coaching to assist their managers.

### **WHY DO EMPLOYERS INTRODUCE EXECUTIVE COACHING?**

The second pair of questions posed by the Research Club member discussions in 1999 was 'why do we, as organisations, commission executive coaching? And what is that we hope to gain?' The following sections outline the answers I found to these questions.

There is little research I could learn from in the literature evidence on what motivates most employers to introduce executive coaching. However, I believe I have identified five main reasons. I have arrived at these reasons through my examination of the management development literature and also from current practice as identified through my interviews with the small number of IES Research club organisations. I am not suggesting that these five reasons constitute an exhaustive list, rather I offer them as a starting position. In doing so I believe I am establishing a baseline from which knowledge in this area can develop.

The main motives I have identified are:

- Supporting the induction of a senior manager into a more senior or different role. This model does not necessarily assume there are specific skills or competencies required for these new roles. Rather the aim here is to ease the transition period enabling the individual to be 'up and running' in their new post as quickly as possible.
- Acting as a mentor for a senior manager, in circumstances where it is not practical or desirable to identify an internal or external mentor. Typically, the aim is to assist individuals with often large, complex remits to focus on getting the results they need. Large organisations have a tendency to be rigidly hierarchical; although this doesn't stop mentoring relationships from

forming, it can be a disincentive for them to do so. Formal mentoring programmes, in which individuals unknown to each other are assigned to be a mentor or a protégé, do not necessarily produce beneficial results (Schor, 1997). At the very highest levels of an organisation there may simply be no one 'further up the tree' to act as the mentor figure.

- Supporting one or more individuals identified either as 'high potential' for senior management positions on the organisation's succession plan or as targets for extra support to increase the proportion of those from minority groups likely to reach senior management positions as part of an affirmative action plan.
- Supporting the personal effectiveness of individuals as part of a wider development programmes or processes, such as a 360-degree feedback programmes or development centres. Typically, the aim here is to support individuals in accepting the feedback, and challenge them in planning on-going development and actioning other changes and improvements.
- Supporting a number of individuals or teams through the introduction and/or implementation phases of major structural or cultural change. The precise aim here can vary, but typically will enable an acceleration of the time taken to achieve 'buy-in' and effective implementation of the desired change. Some people would consider this to be more properly termed organisational development or process consultancy rather than executive coaching. However, because these interventions are termed executive coaching by the players concerned and in recent literature, they have been included here.

When I presented these various reasons for employing organisations introducing executive coaching to the IES Forum of members in September 2000, the participants (my co-researchers) expressed the clear view that their understanding would be significantly enhanced by some specific examples of why other organisations had selected the approach and what they had hoped to gain from doing so. I then presented to them the concrete examples I had come across in the form of the 'vignettes', three of which I had published in my IES Employment Brief two months previously (Carter, 2000), and an animated discussion ensued. The presentation of real-life practical examples of executive coaching, set within the context of the purposes that I had previously extracted from those and other

examples, seemed to heighten their understanding of their own context. The different purposes I had listed and categorised proved inclusive and robust enough to cope with their own purposes which they were then easily able to articulate using my simple categories described above.

Four of these 'vignettes' are reproduced here, since they proved so helpful in aiding the understanding of others at the Forum.

The first category I identified of reasons why employers introduce executive coaching was to support the induction of senior managers into a more senior or different role. An example would be the NHS Executive scheme, as outlined below. I produced this example following the taped interview undertaken by me with the Assistant Director of the NHS Leadership Programme in May 2000 with reference also to the documentation supplied by her following the interview (Commissioner 1). With her consent it was not anonymised and was published in my Employment Brief, distributed to all IES Research club members in June 2000.

The NHS Executive has been using external executive coaches for over eight years for a variety of purposes. Since 1998 one use has been as an element of a individualised leadership development programme offered to all newly appointed Chief Executives of NHS organisations.

Called Personal Development Advisers, the purpose of commissioning these external coaches is to help individuals manage the transition from a Director's post into a Chief Executive's post in the same or a different organisation. The intention is to offer support in a holistic way, covering relationship and personal matters as well as operational issues. It is expected sessions will allow individuals the time and space to plan how to: leave their previous post; build new teams; form a productive relationship with one's new Chair; identify a personal development plan; and do the new job well without getting burnt out. The individuals themselves however determine what issues they choose to focus on. Eight hours of executive coaching per Chief executive is funded. Some 26 new appointees accessed an executive coach through the programme in 1999.

Other aspects of the overall programme which individuals can select from include networking events so they can get to know their peers, a local mentor such as a

more experienced Chief executive who already knows the ropes, and development activities or courses specific to an individual's needs. The programme is underpinned by an extensive induction pack. Participation in the programme is voluntary. However the ability of individuals to select which approach best suits their individual needs, circumstances and preferred learning style, is a key feature in achieving high levels of participation.

Source: Extracted from interview transcript with Commissioner 1, 2000

As previously outlined, the second reason I identified for introducing an executive coach into an organisation is to support the introduction of major structural or cultural change. The interview I conducted in April 2000 with the Head of Training and Development at an international distribution company (Commissioner 2) indicated that their reasons for introducing an executive coaching approach fitted into this category. This was also the reason indicated by the Head of Organisational Development for the telecoms company (Commissioner 4) in her interview. Coaches are seen as useful when someone is needed to challenge long established modes of working and behaving by individuals as part of the preparation for change; in effect, to 'speak the unspeakable' (Hall et al., 1999). They are also seen as useful in accelerating the effective implementation of change by supporting the leaders of the new teams and structures created by the change. An example of the former would be the financial services company M&G, as outlined in the literature by Pawsey, 2000.

Based in M&G's Headquarters in Chelmsford, the IT department has to cater for all the company's new financial products. As e-commerce grows, the company will have to replace its technology. Since the new systems will require less maintenance, some people will have to transfer to different departments, while others will stay on to be retrained. The organisation was concerned that the culture in the department was too rigid to withstand such changes. In particular managers needed to be able to encourage more teamwork and flexibility among their staff.

Executive coaching that focuses on individual performance is being integrated with a traditional human resource development consultancy approach to deliver a training programme for all members of the company's IT department. The idea was to combine the understanding of the organisation's culture that can be achieved by the objective research of an outside consultant whilst at the same time embracing a

concern for individuality by using executive coaching techniques operating at the interface between the personal and the professional.

The programme involves individuals carrying out self-assessments and being observed as well as being asked awkward questions that forced them to address problems they may have ignored. The coaching has been delivered first to senior managers, team leaders and technical specialists. The idea is to extend it to all 200 staff in the department. It is hoped one knock on effect will be that it leaves people better equipped to face the future, whether they stay or leave.

Source: Pawsey, 2000

A third motivation for deciding to introduce an executive coach may be as alternative to identifying an internal or external mentor for an individual senior manager. My interview with the Head of Training and Development of a small UK Civil Service Department (Commissioner 3) provided an example of an approach which I would place in this category.

Employing some 500 people, this Civil Service department has a hierarchical organisational structure. Back in 1998 it could have been described as 'old-fashioned' in its management practices with expert professional knowledge prized much more highly than management skills. It has used executive coaching in a number of contexts since then. One use has been to introduce the concept of management training and encourage the ongoing personal development of six Senior Civil Servants at Director level. This was necessary because of the significant management challenges arising from the 'Modernising Government' White Paper agenda.

The culture within the organisation was one where once you become a senior civil servant you had 'made it' and therefore did not require any more development. Undergoing training was somehow admitting that you had a weakness. Rising through the ranks within that culture meant it was threatening for Directors to undertake development or training courses within the public gaze. The size of the organisation and the seniority of the Directors meant there were not enough internal mentors, plus the individuals had inhibitions about working with anyone internal.

Each of the Directors targeted were found a different external executive coach and entirely confidential personalised objectives set between the coaches and coached. Coaching sessions were fitted around other meetings and commitments. A very careful matching process, the briefing of coaches and getting individuals to buy into the concept have been critical to achieving full voluntary participation.

Source: Extracted from interview transcript with Commissioner 3, 2000

Another reason I identified for establishing a coaching resource I categorised as to assist individuals to take action upon the self-insight they have gained upon receipt of personal feedback as part of a development centre, 360-degree feedback or other development programme. The idea of using coaches is both to support participants in accepting the feedback and also to challenge them in planning and actioning appropriate personal development plans or other changes. In this circumstance coaching is seen as an alternative to the provision of a self-managed workbook, encouraging participants to create informal networks or facilitated learning sets (Kettley, 1997). Coaches in this situation may be external or an in-house HR expert. There are numerous examples of this approach and indeed it is this category of employer motivation for introducing executive coaching that was most familiar to my co-researchers. One example I would place in this category was British Telecommunications plc, as outlined in the literature about personal feedback (Kettley, 1997).

In the mid 1990s BT used a 360-degree feedback instrument as an important input into ongoing performance management and development. All managers in BT were encouraged – and the top 150 required – to initiate the process and obtain up to date personal feedback.

The feedback report was structured specifically to help familiarise managers with the required competency profiles. The relevance of the competency framework for senior managers, on which the feedback framework was based, was validated.

A prime concern throughout was ensuring individuals had sufficient support to interpret the feedback they received. A network of coaches was developed to assist individuals in the interpretation of feedback, the creation of development actions,

etc. and a written guide to working with feedback was also produced for all managers.

Source: Kettleby, 1997

## **IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

The third question posed by my co-researchers was 'what are the issues for implementing executive coaching that we as commissioners need to be aware of?' The data from my interviews proved critical to being able to begin answering this question, although the literature also identified some of them. The following sections present my findings.

### **Background of Coaches**

Opinion is divided in terms of the literature over whether industry or field-specific experience is a given for a good coach. Some sources argue that a 'post-heroic' coach who has already proved himself and expert in the relevant field is the only kind to have credibility in the eyes of the tutored executives. Others (Caudron 1996 etc.) argue that it is not as important for a coach to know the details of a particular field as it is for the coach to understand how business (in the broadest sense) works, and have the ability to sensitively coach the executive towards his or her goals.

There is no uncertainty or divided opinion, however, on the need for trust between the coach and the coached executive. The executive needs to be certain that his weaknesses and concerns are not going to be broadcast to his peers or the organisation in general. External coaches, with no 'axe to grind' in the internal politics of an organisation are seen as particularly valuable for this very reason.

It's easy to use a coach as a safe place to discuss issues when there are so few people one can trust at the executive level in the workplace. (Hall et al., 1999)

An outsider, however, may not have an intimate knowledge of an organisation, its culture, history, politics and current situation, and they can be perceived to be expensive where the coaching of many managers is involved. Three of the four executive coaches I interviewed first came to coaching through undertaking the role

as internal coaches within major employing organisations. They all expressed the view that coaching can be effectively carried out perfectly well by an insider, especially within large organisations. One of the coaches outlined her view thus:

There is no reason why an internal training and development specialist couldn't take on the role if they have the right skills. There are three tests the company would need to be satisfied about: whether the prospective coaches are perceived by the individual managers as having the independence and respect for confidentiality about the issues arising; whether from a resourcing point of view the skills to do it already exist or the company can afford to develop, acquire or maintain them; and whether the coaches might share the same assumptions and 'blind spots' about the organisation. (Coach 3)

According to the literature, coaches are occasionally perceived as having an agenda that diminishes their effectiveness. A coach's desire to sell a particular conceptual model or other products as a way of managing may not necessarily match the organisation's or executive's goals (Hall et al., 1999). Understanding the conceptual model or framework of coaching each executive coach uses is therefore a consideration for organisations when commissioning coaches. There is no research evidence I was able to identify on the professional backgrounds or affiliations of executive coaches. The prior work experience and professional training of the executive coaches I interviewed varied and I found this appeared significant in terms of appreciating the underpinning coaching framework and philosophy within which they operated and therefore the very different experience of coaching those they coached were likely to encounter.

Coach 1 was from a trained counselling background and was a long serving member of the British Association of Counselling (BAC). This necessitates operating within the ethical code of that association, which includes an emphasis on respecting the confidentiality of the client's (or coached individual's) issues and progress. Membership also requires professional supervision arrangements to be in place to support the coach.

Coaches 3 and 4 that I interviewed were former trainers or management development or organisation development specialists within employing organisations. These coaches belonged to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) or the Association of Management Education and Development (AMED) that require or encourage Continuing Professional Development, but do not explicitly require ongoing supervision. The actual training of these former training

and development specialists varied from The Tavistock Institute's 'Role Consultation' approach through to a Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) approach. Neither of these approaches insist on formal supervision arrangements or adherence to an ethical or professional code of practice relevant to inter-personal development contexts.

Coach 2 was a former senior manager and management consultant. She was operating as an executive coach employed by a company specialising in the provision of executive coaching which used its own framework and approach to coaching based on 'life balance' principles. She belonged to the British Institute of Management and the International Coaching Federation (ICF), based in the US. ICF members do have to adhere to a code of ethics in their business dealings and coaching relationships. The ICF is interesting as it is attempting to develop an accreditation scheme for its members. However this is extremely expensive for coaches to participate in, due to administration and monitoring costs, and its reach in the UK is at present very limited.

### **Selection of Coaches**

There are two aspects to selecting executive coaches that seem to require attention. The first is the practical aspects of identifying a coach or pool of coaches suitable for the organisations' purposes. The second is the process of then 'matching' *ie* making sure that a specific executive and specific coach are paired well in terms of needs and the ability of a particular coach to provide what the executive needs. All writers on the subject of coaching agree that the 'fit' between the personalities of a coached executive and the coach is a basic 'given' in any coaching situation. The two of them need to at least get on most of the time.

In terms of identifying, recruiting and selecting coaches, I encountered one basic approach in use by all the organisations I spoke to in my interviews with commissioners. This was not very different from the approach widely used by organisations in commissioning other kinds of consultants that I am aware of from my own experience.

My interview with the Head of Management Development and Personnel Strategy at the large distribution company (Commissioner 2) provides an example. The process and emphasis on identifying potential coaches is particularly extensive in this example as potential executive coaches were unfamiliar to the commissioner.

In 1999 a large distribution company wished to identify and contract some executive coaches to work with one or more of the 15 newly appointed Managing Directors (MDs) of its business units. In particular coaches were needed to offer support the MDs and their new teams to deliver some challenging performance goals within a short timescale. These new performance goals were crucial to ensuring the achievement of the organisations overall 'Business balanced scorecard'.

First a detailed tender document or 'specification' was produced which outlined in broad terms what the coaches would be required to deliver, the context within which they would be expected to deliver and the success criteria against which the results of their work would be evaluated. This was to form the basis of a formal invitation to tender process.

Having no existing contacts it needed to identify potential providers of executive coaching. An advertisement was placed in People Management magazine, a literature search of companies/individuals mentioned in published articles was undertaken and names were sought from a leading development consultant. After initial basic enquiries for appropriateness, this initial 'long list' was reduced to 12 organisations that were then sent the specification and invited to submit proposals or 'bids'.

The resulting proposals were very detailed. It was important that exactly which coaches would be working on the contract was clearly identified. A 'shortlist' of companies was invited to present their proposals and clarify issues in the form of a commissioning interview panel. Following references from previous commissioners and executives coached, four organisations, representing ten coaches were selected.

Source: Extracted from interview transcript with Commissioner 2, 2000

In terms of matching specific coaches to specific executives, the approach used in practice varied. What determined the approach appeared to depend on the degree to which either the executive coaches or the target executives were already known to the commissioner or scheme organiser. Which of the parties was already known provided the starting point for a matching process that primarily involved making

judgements about the other party in a search for likely 'fit'. Where neither party was known, a process of getting to know both potential parties was recommended. Handling the issue of matching well was identified as important by all the commissioners interviewed. Sometimes matching was the responsibility of the commissioner, whereas other approaches gave the responsibility for final selection to the executives themselves. Three of the commissioners interviewed described the approaches they adopted thus:

A certain amount of the science of matching is pretty much like an Indian matchmaker. I had to rely on my own intuition about who would work well with whom. Knowing enough already about the person and what I wanted the coaching to do enabled me to talk to a potential coach and make an initial judgement about whether they might work well with that person. Arranging an initial meeting with no obligation to continue (by either party) is essential. (Commissioner 3)

We have a core group of 10 coaches that we work with. Some of these I know quite well. I know what their style is, what techniques they are likely to use and what level of challenge they will offer. When somebody needs a coach, we would offer the names and profiles of say 3 or 4 of these coaches, together with feedback on what previous people have said about what working with that coach was like. Determining these is basic. I ask about any gender preferences and how they want to work and what they want to achieve... I don't always get it right...if the chemistry doesn't work the individual can pull out after the first session and we find them someone else. (Commissioner 1)

Each [individual] was allocated a coach as soon as possible. On reflection we probably should have spent more time making sure that the match was appropriate and facilitating introductions. We left the decision on how the coaches were used, and exactly for what, to them [the individuals]. There was progressive take-up. Some have chosen not to use it all and we have not put pressure on them. It was a facility made available if they chose to use it. We did say to the [individuals] and the coaches that if a problem emerged we would deal with it – such as a personality problem – so everyone knew that they had the flexibility to change if they needed to. (Commissioner 2)

### **Managing Demand**

Once executive coaching has been introduced into an organisation for one person, it can rapidly spread through the upper echelons of management (Dutton, 1997). In the literature, coaching was generally seen as a very satisfactory experience for those executives who participate. The coaching process was seen to add value to the executive, as they acquired new skills, abilities and perspectives that allowed them to accomplish things after coaching that they could not do before (Hall et al., 1999). 'Coaching envy' is one term used for the process, where coaching is seen as

such a positive activity that everyone wants to get involved with a programme (Hall et al., 1999). A drawback for an organisation therefore is in creating and then having to satisfy a demand for the 'special attention' that positive (as opposed to remedial) executive coaching can create among staff.

Executives like the confidentiality and personal attention; they also like what coaching does for their careers. (Hall et al., 1999)

My co-researcher participants at the Forum for IES Research Club members in September 2000 had encountered the reality of this concept we called 'coaching envy' and agreed it was becoming an increasing problem. None had yet attempted to proactively manage it, beyond at an individual level persuading the individuals that other methods of development might be more appropriate for their particular needs. It could be however that organisations can establish clear guidelines for the use of executive coaches so that access or approval becomes a more explicit part of development process selection.

My co-researchers doubted the wisdom or practicality of extending a model, particularly an externally provided model, of executive coaching. Their reasons are two-fold. There is the issue of cost as provision is expensive. In addition the success of executive coaching is critically dependent on the quality of the coach and my co-researchers do not believe there is a large enough supply of really good coaches to meet a major increase in demand.

The way in which executive coaching is introduced into the organisation can require careful handling. Bringing in a coach may be perceived as a statement of (in)competence by a manager who may wonder why an executive who is up to the job need a coach in the first place (Masciarelli, 1999). In organisations where there is a perception that executive coaching is for the incompetent, it may be that managing demand will not be a problem.

If the demand in the wider business community continues to grow for having an executive coach, 'personal trainer' coach or 'life coach' (Edmunds, 2000), managing demand may become a more pressing issue. According to the business and trade management press (Edmunds, 2000 and Lyons, 2000) many managers are initiating their own ongoing and expensive relationships with external coaches to help them re-evaluate their lives or a response to dealing with stress at work.

Organisations may not even be aware where these relationships exist. Organisational awareness may not matter if these arrangements are privately funded or on a small scale.

There is a question organisations may wish to ask themselves: is coaching being used by executives without reference to their organisations in order to remedy their self-perceived weaknesses or as an investment to improve their personal value and remuneration? If so, does this matter? The interest of central HR functions may be raised if these coaching arrangements are found to be linked to issues such as stress at work, unmet development needs common across the board and if they are being funded on a widespread basis from local departmental or line managers' discretionary budgets.

### **Determining How Much to Pay**

Where executive coaching is widely used, the cost can become an issue. But how much should an organisation expect to pay for an executive coach? In an earlier section a figure of £2,000 per day (equivalent to four two-hour sessions for one individual) was presented as a not uncommon fee to be quoted by a potential coach to the commissioners we interviewed. Behind this figure lies an array of prices quoted and numerous models or 'packages' of delivery.

Some of the experiences and perceptions about quoted and actual costs of the commissioners interviewed are outlined below:

Some organisations we have used insist that you buy a years worth for each individual, although if you push them they will agree to six months initially. (Commissioner 1)

One package we bought includes telephone support, email support and other kinds of support as well as face-to-face sessions. It cost us about £1,800 a month for the most expensive one we used for one individual. It lasted nine months in the end,, but I have to say that in the initial stages I believe there were weekly meetings, pretty constant contact and I know the outcomes were particularly successful. (Commissioner 3)

Some organisations asked for 10% or 15% of the (executives) salary. (Commissioner 1)

We have different arrangements for different coaches. We have some good ones at a very reasonable price about £800 per day, and also some good ones who charge us £2,500 a day. You have to be careful though because you sometimes assume you are buying 2 hours of coaching, but can be charged a full half day for that. (Commissioner 4)

Some coaches ask to have an initial meeting with the manager before quoting. They then feel in a better position to identify with the individual what needs to be done and how many sessions might be needed. (Commissioner 4)

Very occasionally we organise a series of one-off sessions for a particular purpose. These sessions can work out as little as £200 per person for a few hours. What we would tend to do in these circumstances is buy a day of the coach's time, bring them in here and trundle the individuals through. (Commissioner 3)

We negotiate wherever possible. For example there are some coaches we use who work for a company where their individual rate is expensive. But because we use a number of their coaches they give us a special rate. Although the coaching takes place over a period it could be viewed as working out around the £1,800 per day mark (if you assume eight hours of coaching per day for the coach). (Commissioner 2)

The interviews with the executive coaches elicited an interesting approach to pricing. The two who agreed to answer this enquiry are quoted below:

My fees vary from £0 for voluntary work I decide to do to £2,000 a day for companies I believe can afford it. Typically I charge £400 per each two hour session. (Coach 1)

I don't really have a set price. It varies depending on who approaches me and what they need from between nothing for unemployed people to £1,500 per month for a fixed period for an employed senior manager in a finance or other successful private sector company. The regularity of meetings and other support varies but it seems to average out at about one session per person every three weeks. (Coach 4)

Clearly, extensive use of coaches could result in a considerable cost to the organisation. Consideration of measures to reduce these costs that IES has encountered include the negotiation of special rates with one or more preferred suppliers and substituting cheaper alternatives such as self-help workbooks for some individuals.

## **Trust and 'Control'**

Two of the strongest themes to emerge from the interviews was that of trust and control and these seemed to be strongly linked with each other.

There is more than one significant relationship to consider i.e. coach and executive, coach and commissioner and commissioner and executive. Issues of control emerged in seeking to understand the interplay between these various relationships. This first cycle of the research did not include direct contact with executives (the coached) themselves. However, the interviews and literature enables some insight to be offered into these relationships.

## **Executive and Coach Relationships**

The concept of trust between an individual and their executive coach was regarded by all interviewees as being critical to the success of coaching as a personal development intervention. The coaches I interviewed identified building trust as the single most important consideration for a productive and successful coaching relationship. They identified achieving rapport and respecting the confidentiality of the individuals' issues and progress as central. In that sense, using executive coaching can be viewed as no different to using action learning sets or mentoring. Information derived from the process (by the coach in this context) is regarded as confidential and will not be communicated to anyone else. Any sharing of information gained, without the explicit agreement of the individual would be considered a breach of that trust, which would undermine the value of embarking on the process in the first place. The commissioners acknowledged the importance of respecting the convention that the individuals should 'own' this data. Indeed they recognised that trust for a coach partly comes from their role as an outsider to the immediate work environment. These views are supported by advice in the practitioner literature.

The individual must feel free to speak without fear of being judged or of the conversation being repeated to others... Once that trust has been lost or compromised... then the coaching relationship is doomed. (Bolt, 2000)

Given the private and confidential nature of coach-coached relationships and the agreement that individuals need to 'own' their data, who then owns or 'controls' the process? The coach or the executive? The coaches interviewed were all clear that the executives should be in control of the whole process as they need to set the

agenda both in terms of content (objectives and issues to work on) and also in terms of process (nature, frequency and length of contact), although they as the coach would expect to challenge and negotiate these with the individual executives.

### **Commissioner and Coach Relationships**

But how does this all square with the expectations of organisations where they have commissioned coaches for a specific purpose and within a particular contractual framework that they will need to monitor and evaluate? This question was central to the concerns of participants at the IES Forum.

The issue of control between commissioner and coach comes to the fore when the relationship is put under pressure, for instance where the commissioner believes no change in behaviour is occurring. One commissioner described her frustration thus:

My briefings are all verbal and extensive. You have to give the coach the right set of tools to work with or the coach is going to take a heck of a lot longer to get there themselves. It's a waste of money if they don't listen and we've got an organisational issue. We are the client in the sense of hiring the coach. So it isn't the person who's the client. At the end of the day that's the thing that probably needs to be made clear to the coach is that I am the client. (Commissioner 3)

One of the coaches described here feelings about commissioners in a way that seems to encapsulate what all the coaches reported:

It doesn't matter to me who is paying... It's very tempting to bring up 'isn't he doing well?' but I would not expect to go back to the senior manager and do that. The work is completely our private business. But I'll argue that with the person whose paying before I take the contract. (Coach 4)

A commissioner's trust in the coach seems to be at the heart of a commissioner's degree of comfort in passing management of the process to the coach after the coach has been selected and contracted, knowing that the coach in turn will pass control of the process to the executive. One commissioner said:

I think if someone has got real difficulties in some way, a coach might well be expected to encourage (the executive) to talk to us... they will help them manage it and we might or might not be part of that picture. But we are not trying to say that we want things shared. We don't

expect to see the personal development plan, but we ask that it be shared with us in part where that helps us identify anything we need to be doing. (Commissioner 1)

The commissioners were clear that in most circumstances they would not be directly involved in the arrangements or mechanics of making the coaching happen. Meetings or other contact were the responsibility of the other two parties. Sometimes this took the form of commissioners effectively delegating the money or time already 'bought' to the executive and empowering them to draw upon these entirely as and when they saw fit up to a maximum agreed budget. The essential role of the commissioner in these circumstances can be said to be sourcing the right coach and securing 'buy in' from the individual at the outset. Both need to be undertaken effectively since the individual may otherwise choose to do nothing with the opportunity.

On other occasions this took the form of relying on the coach to take the initiative, on the commissioner's behalf, in making things happen and re-contracting with the commissioner after predetermined periods of time. In these circumstances securing 'buy-in' is a shared responsibility between coach and commissioner, although again an individual has the right to choose not to respond to the opportunity.

## **Evaluation**

Despite the lack of evidence to date, the overwhelming feeling that comes over from the literature is that executive coaching is a worthwhile investment of time and money for those organisations that have used it. Their executives benefit and, since the performance of executives is critical to the success of the business, the organisation in turn benefits too. There is an assumed, if untested, link to impact on the bottom line or service development. There is no evidence base for this feeling, other than some published anecdotal accounts of benefits to individual executives (Brotherton 1998, Chambliss 1999 and Masciarelli 1999).

All the commissioners I interviewed confirmed that they were similarly positive in their belief of organisational benefit having been achieved. But to date all were lacking in data or evidence to support their feelings and would welcome assistance in this area. The first cycle findings showed that evaluation was the single most widespread source of concern to commissioners of executive coaching. All four had struggled with setting formal evaluation criteria for their coaching interventions, although they all had written objectives of a broader nature.

Although this cycle did not attempt to investigate the perspective of those coached, all of the organisations we interviewed had sought and monitored feedback from the individuals concerned, either through written questions or formal discussions. Some of this feedback included the identification of actions taken as a consequence of the coaching they had received. One commissioner said:

It's easy to evaluate from the individual's perspective and easy from the coaches' point of view, but the corporate perspective is really difficult.  
(Commissioner 4)

The issues which arose from the steps they had taken to date included the sources of information they approached and the methods they employed to elicit relevant information from those sources.

### **Data Sources for Evaluation – Who to Ask?**

There was disagreement amongst those interviewed about the best source of information about progress and outcomes.

One of the coaches interviewed suggested that progress should be monitored by the commissioner with reference to the executive and others within the organisation, and not the coach. For instance, if the main purpose of the coaching was a matter of public knowledge and involved issues such as working on presentation skills, image management, confidence or interventions in meetings, then these are visible benchmarks. The executive will have a perspective in terms of how they feel about progress, but colleagues or others they work with will have a legitimate perspective on any change they have observed as well. The advice from this source was clear — for evaluation at the level of individual executives, ask those in a position to observe.

Commissioners 2 and 3 suggested that asking the individual to assess or measure the success of their coaching was not always the best approach. One commissioner said:

Some of the best interventions just aren't measurable by the person themselves, and that's why they need the coaching in the first place.  
(Commissioner 3)

## **Methods Used In Practice For Evaluation Purposes**

### **Reference Forms**

Commissioner 1 described how in her organisation all individuals who have received executive coaching are asked to complete a reference form. The form includes seeking a description of the way the coach worked with them as well as enquiring into the degree of success of the process from the individuals point of view. This form effectively doubles as a general satisfaction form to support evaluation of what has gone before and an internal reference to support future 'matching' decisions. The HR function refers to it in determining whether to hire that particular coach again. In theory coaches could be crossed off the organisation's books if the reference was bad, although in practice this had not actually happened. The organisation had found its second use much more helpful, whereby prospective individuals needing coaching can refer to part of it to determine whether that particular coach might have an approach they feel would also suit them.

### **Development Interviews With Those Coached**

The two organisations represented by commissioners 2 and 3 regularly held interview discussions with those who had completed their executive coaching sessions. These discussions covered a range of issues including eliciting feedback on their coach, as well as identifying what they had achieved and what else they might still need in terms of support for their personal development

### **Bringing Together the Pool of Coaches Used**

Commissioners 1 and 2 had adopted the practice of occasional meetings, whereby all the coaches used were required (as part of their original contract terms) to meet and share in general terms what had been working, not working well and what the organisational issues might be. No personal information on the executives is shared. Rather the focus is on what the key themes have been coming up with the people they have been working with and whether there are any corporate lessons than can be learned.

This approach was thought by these commissioning organisations to be appropriate where you have centrally initiated coaching activity and where you have small cohort or pool of coaches working with more than about six people each or where they have all been hired to support a particular organisational change or wider development programme. The advantages claimed for this approach was that it enabled the organisation to monitor progress in terms of the change or programme,

as well as identify barriers or blockages outside the control of the executives which the organisation needed to ensure was addressed through other interventions. In addition it gave the organisation the opportunity to identify where coaches were not taking 'a corporate line' on issues and suggest that they gave a bit more emphasis to that. The disadvantage cited was the cost; external coaches have to be paid for attendance.

### **Linking Into Existing Individual Performance Measures**

Commissioner 2's organisation had clear criteria for the personal behaviours, business competences and capabilities it believed would lead to improving business performance and these applied to all its senior managers. Incoming executive coaches are all briefed on their role in supporting these. The senior managers are all regularly assessed by the organisation against these criteria in addition to a self-assessment by the individuals as part of the regular performance management process. Since the executive coaching, in part, was introduced to assist individuals in meeting these criteria, it was considered crucial that any differences in the level of achievement be monitored to feed in to an overall evaluation exercise.

### **Monitoring Existing Organisation Performance Measures**

Rather than attempt to evaluate the success of executive coaching only at the individual executive level or at the executive coaching investment level, commissioners 2, 3 and 4 reported concentrating on indicators of the quality of management in general. These included monitoring staff perceptions about the approach and behaviour of managers through the indicators embedded in annual Staff Attitude Surveys. Certainly this is an approach that has also been used to judge the success of some 360-degree programmes. According to Kettley (1997) year-on-year improvements have been used as part of evaluating effective leadership in the Post Office for some years.

## **INTEGRATION WITH EXISTING DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES**

The fourth and final question to be answered posed by my co-researchers back in the winter of 1999 was 'where does executive coaching fit in terms of the management learning theory?' The following sections outline my attempt to answer this important question. I started with reference to the literature review.

I found that the relationship between, and integration of, executive coaching and other development processes (such as personal development plans, career counselling and appraisal) has received very little attention in the literature. It may be that senior executives don't participate in all these activities and that coaching acts as an alternative elite process in some cases. More likely perhaps is that organisations may be unsure how to tie everything up into a coherent whole. The next two sections explore where executive coaching might sit within the plethora of other development processes. In doing this I believe I am building on and extending the theory.

### **A Management Development Intervention?**

In the initial literature review undertaken I previously identified self-managed learning as a strong theme. As self-managed learning places the responsibility for learning on the individual, it appears to offer an attractive approach to HR departments in organisations to delivering personal and career development needs in leaner times and in devolved structures (Tamkin et al., 1995). It is possible then that executive coaching can be seen as a process that enhances senior managers in self-directed learning.

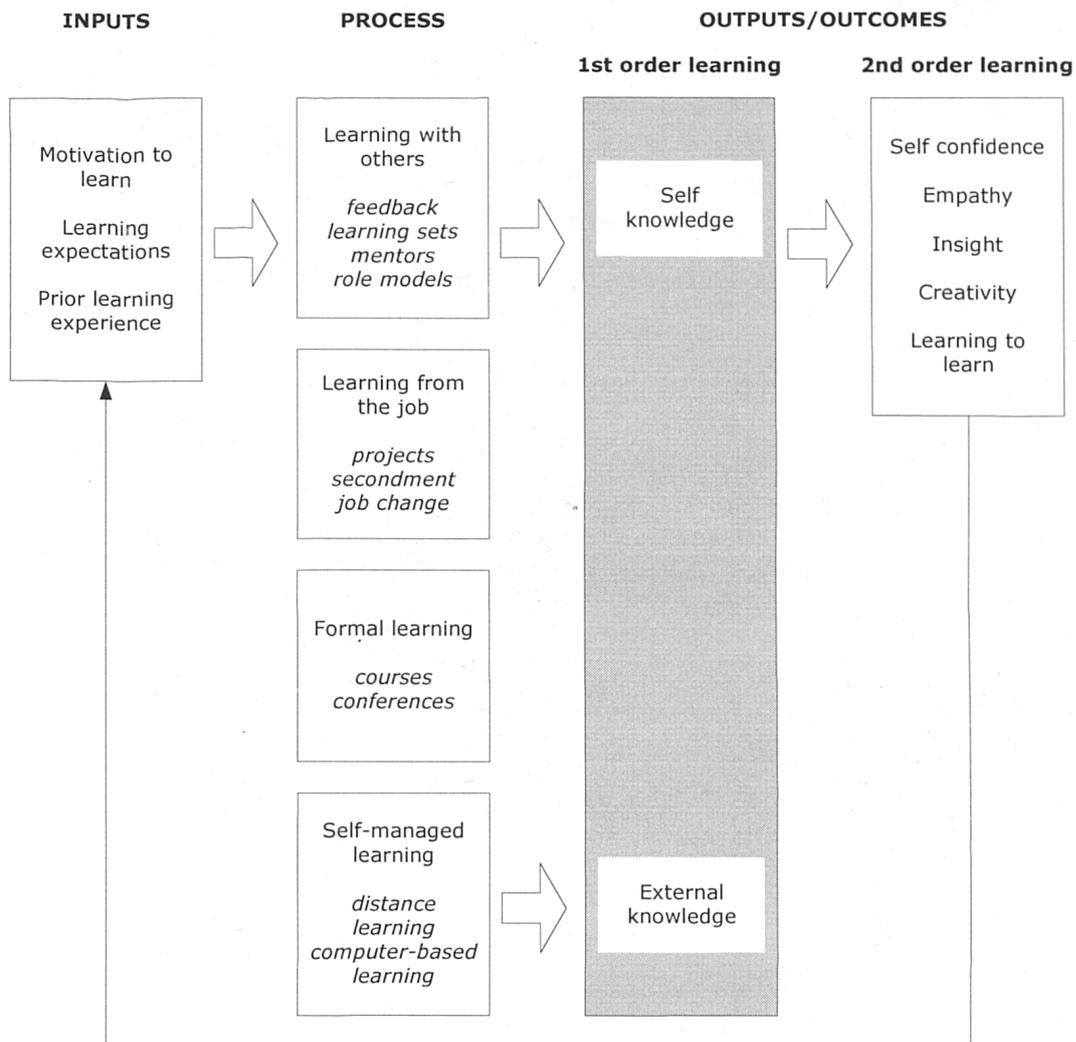
Tamkin and Barber (1998) have represented the complex phenomenon of management learning as a process model (see Figure 1 below) whereby entry into learning and the progression throughout are dependent on certain factors.

In order to make sense of executive coaching, it is useful to speculate about where executive coaching might sit within such a model. At first glance, the answer seems simple – surely as a process of learning with others, in this context the 'other' being a coach. This is true at the level of knowledge and skill acquisition. However, the executive coaching context of work based development means it is a process ideally suited to initiating and maximising learning from the job. In the previous section, I identified one of the most common uses by organisations of executive coaching as that of underpinning wider personal effectiveness programmes, which utilise feedback to increase the self-knowledge of individuals.

It may be argued that the benefit of an executive coaching approach is that it can be expected to be used as a 'meta-process' underpinning all other processes. Hence any, or all of the other processes of 'learning with others', 'from the job', through 'formal' and 'self-managed' learning are all sub-processes from which executive

coaching extracts and maximises the achievement of both first and second order learning. A big claim indeed, but nonetheless one that may possibly make sense of the very wide and variable motives and approaches of organisations commissioning executive coaching.

**Figure 1: The Learning Process**



Source: Tamkin and Barber, 1999

**A Career Management Intervention?**

The small number of executive coaches interviewed in early 2000 were all clear that executive coaching is an individual intervention which enables individuals to be pushed in forwarding issues of importance to those individuals. They described an action-orientated individual, not an organisation development intervention, the content of which is likely to include work-life balance and career issues. All of them also used a range of personality type indicators or self-assessment tools, such as MBTI and FIRO-B to help individuals understand themselves better. Because

executive coaching helps people to develop quite particular skills and strategies for coping and performing better in their existing environments, coaches point out that it can be good for retention. Nevertheless, one coach clarified in my interview with her:

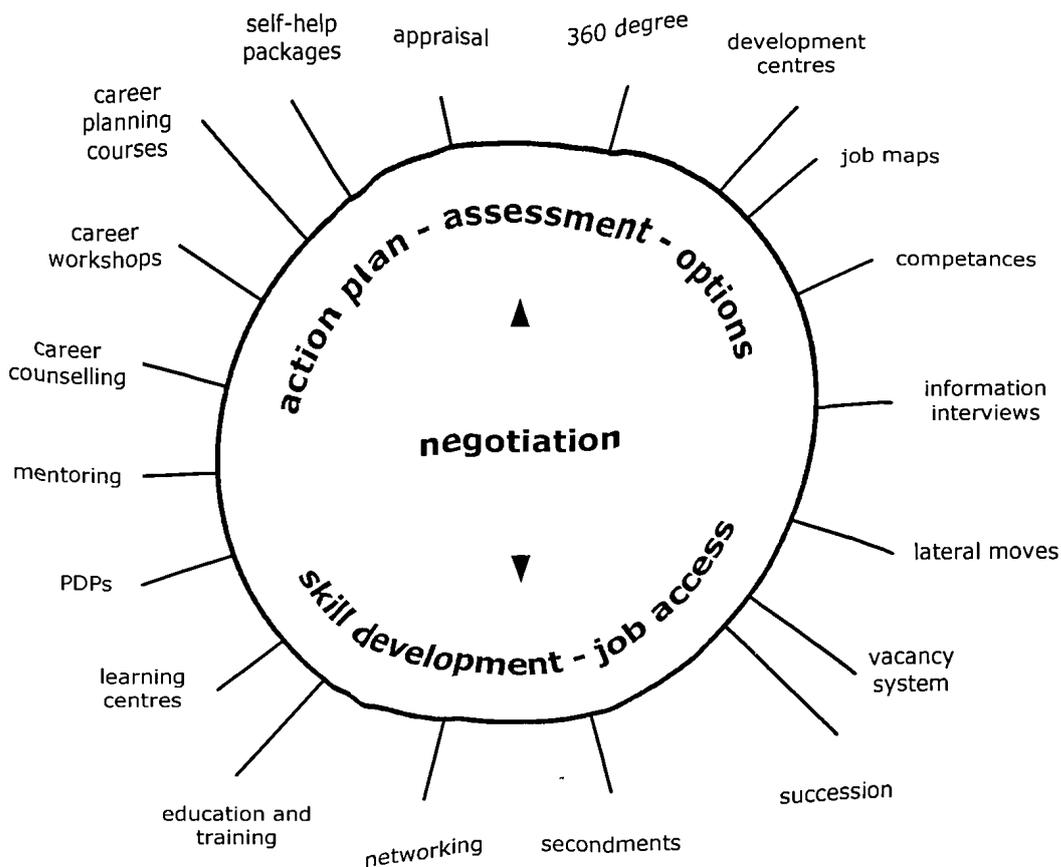
Whatever the organisation's purpose in hiring an executive coach, they have to accept that people who are being coached can move on from the organisation and often do. (Coach 2)

Hirsh and Jackson (1996) developed a now well-known model of a minimum set of functions designed to assist organisations in developing a coherent set of career development processes. The model is reproduced here as Figure 2.

As the Hirsh and Jackson model below shows, there are many processes that can be used (shown around the outside of the diagram), but they may all be performing relatively few central functions in terms of enabling both organisationally managed and employee managed career development (in the inside of the diagram). As Hirsh and Jackson explain, the functions in the upper part of the diagram (assessment of skill, knowledge, attitudes etc., supply of information on job options; and career and development action plans) can be seen as being concerned with thinking about career development. Those functions around the lower half (access to skill development and jobs) are concerned with action. If an individual needs the support of others in achieving action, then some kind of negotiation process is required which mediates between the 'thinking processes' and the 'action processes'. The model also makes clear the need to have both 'thinking' and 'action' processes, as well as mechanisms for linking these different types of process together.

In order to make sense of executive coaching, it is useful to speculate once again about where it would sit within such a model. On one level, it is possible to position it around the outside of the diagram alongside career counselling or mentoring, i.e. as just one of many development processes than can be used. However, because of its focus on harnessing feedback and its goal-orientation, it is also entirely reasonable to position executive coaching right in the middle, i.e. as a negotiator and mediator between 'thinking' and 'action' processes.

**Figure 2: The core functions of career development**



Source: Hirsh and Jackson, 1996

**Initial thinking about where executive coaching sits within managerial learning**

This write up of the first cycle has begun to explore and conceptualise a number of ways of thinking about where executive coaching might seem to best sit within the whole portfolio of management development and has focussed this thinking to the specific contexts of self-directed learning and career development approaches. Practitioners (commissioners) of executive coaching present at the Forum in September 2000 found this focus a helpful frame around which to think about why they commission it and what they hope to gain. The group reflected that one of the reasons it is philosophically so attractive to commissioners may be because it is so in tune with the self-managed learning ethos that many of their HR functions are now advocating. This includes a continued emphasis on 'learning to learn', active self-managed learning and the desire to use forms of management development which are tailored to individual needs and are close to the job in hand.

It could be argued that the specific context and culture of the organisation may be a key determining factor in whether or not executive coaching is used in addition to, or instead of, other processes to support the development and learning of senior managers.

One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from the first cycle of the research is that executive coaching is a very under-explored area, especially in terms of research evidence about what works and why it does so. Practice is having to go on without people fully understanding that practice and what it could realistically be expected to achieve. A lot of money is being spent on the basis of faith in a positive outcome, not measurable results. More research would be needed into executive coaching models and evidence from case studies in order for commissioners to be offered greater insight into best practice for organisations implementing such an approach.

## **Reflections On The First Cycle**

I built two types of reflection into the first cycle. The first is a deliberate and personal planned reflection time continuously throughout the cycle, during which I have stepped back from the research project and been thinking about what I have been doing and the competing views of executive coaching definitions and practice in different context. I have incorporated many of these reflections into what I have already written in this chapter.

The second type of reflection has involved reflection as a reconstructing experience mediated through colleagues on an opportunistic basis for the purpose of trying to transform this heightened self- awareness and seeking to develop a new definition of executive coaching. There are three different groups of people with whom I have undertaken this type of reflection. Typically I have used my interim writings as a trigger for these discussions. I have approached three of my colleagues at IES during key stages of the cycle. I have also had detailed discussions with my DBA supervisors. All of these discussions have been written up in note format immediately following each discussion. In addition I have reflected with representatives of IES Research Club members by post, email and through meetings and the one day IES forum event. These have been recorded by a mixture of written correspondence, flipcharts written during meetings and notes recorded by myself immediately following each meeting.

These reflections have enabled me to develop my thinking and consider what I need to adapt in terms of the direction of the research and the acquisition of new knowledge and building on/ changing my approach to method for further cycles. Particularly significant reflections are reported below:

### **ABOUT THE COACHES**

To my surprise all those I approached were pleased to participate as interviewees in the research. It is always interesting to see how much people like to be asked about what they do! In addition, I came to realise just how much of a vested interest executive coaches have in 'enlightening' or 'educating' commissioners (or potential commissioners) to just what it is that they do and how organisations can make better use of the skills they offer.

However, whilst I feel I now have a good appreciation of executive coaching issues from a commissioners perspective, I do not yet feel I have fully understood the issues from a coaches perspective or that of the coached.

### **ABOUT A CONTINUED GROWTH IN POPULARITY**

Executive coaching is clearly a hot topic. But I find myself wondering whether it can or should ever be used to address the needs of the whole management population in organisations. Executive coaching and other forms of individualised management development provision seem to have been used mainly on senior populations or other selected small groups such as graduate trainees, high potential personnel or for affirmative action. I know from the literature that some of these other approaches, such as 360-degree feedback have been extended to much larger groups, although often with reduced attention to feedback. I also know that mentoring or coaching schemes and action learning sets require considerable support from HR specialists unless individuals can be helped to establish such supportive approaches for themselves. So is there a natural limit to the capacity of organisations to use executive coaching beyond a subset of senior management populations experiencing context or role changes?

My co-researcher participants doubt the wisdom or practicality of extending an external model of executive coaching to the wider management population. Their reasons are two-fold. There is the issue of cost as external provision is expensive.

In addition the success of executive coaching is critically dependent on the quality of the coach and my co-researchers do not believe there is a large enough supply of really good coaches to meet a major increase in demand. It seems their belief is that externally provided executive coaching will remain of great interest for a while longer and will then find its place as meeting the specific needs of fairly small populations within senior management ranks. If this proves to be the case, for the bulk of managers an internal model of providing executive coaching seems a more realistic prospect.

### **ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEES**

All the commissioners I spoke to and quite a few of the executive coaches had definite but very different ideas and definitions of what executive coaching is. Through my discussions, particularly with my supervisors in June 2000, I came to wonder if this was because their ideas were all rooted in their own practical experience. 'Executive coaching' was whatever their experience of it had been and these experiences were markedly different either because of content, context or individual style. Some made reference to other 'models' of usage or delivery but had other 'label's for those – organisation development, process consultancy, counselling or mentoring – and had clear boundaries for defining the difference which were unique from the other interviewees. I came to wonder if this was unsurprising given the lack of a widely known or understood definition in practitioner circles. A simple table which compares and contrasts the key features of these various 'models' or 'labels' may be helpful to practitioners in deciding which type of intervention might best be commissioned to achieve what aims and in what circumstances.

### **ABOUT MY OWN POSITION**

The IES Research Club organisations involved are a mixture of public and private sector ones, although all are large employers. I am dealing with organisations that have many different systems and multiple values sets that are different from my own, and indeed probably from the executives who work for them. Dealing with a variety of 'stakeholders' is proving quite a challenge.

Any researcher being paid to undertake their research may be under pressure to deliver particular conclusions. I have not found any such pressure to date from members. Perhaps this is because the funding is collective and funnelled through a

third party (the Club). It seems that this is helping to create a distance since the members' representatives I am dealing are typically Training and Development specialists, rather than their IES HR liaison contact colleagues who collectively agreed the funding. In fact my sources of pressure come from within IES. They are not manifested in the form of particular conclusions expected, but rather focus on the timing of production of findings or initial conclusions. My original proposal to the Club stated I would publish an initial literature review in May 2000 and the performance management system, operated by my boss, expected that to happen. So did the publications schedule, operated by the Marketing manager. Not enough of my co-researchers were available to meet in early summer, so our forum had to be re-arranged for September, and my commitment to an publish the literature review in the form of an IES Employment Brief would be delayed. This forum was not just a dissemination activity it was critical to my research design, both for further data collection but also raising my confidence that the results of my studies to date had some external validation. I therefore had to handle the perception of 'failure to deliver on time'.

I have a dual role in the Club, both as a researcher for this one project, but also as the co-ordinator of all research activities. If other researchers experience delays that I consider legitimate for quality assurance reasons, I would normally negotiate extensions with the various parties on the researchers behalf. I do not have the same help for myself and I am conscious that I do not want to be thought to be setting others a bad example in terms of delivery to time. The external Club context within which I am undertaking the research therefore has its internal difficulties for me back in my own work setting. In the event I suggested a compromise by publishing an initial Literature Review in July 2000 called an Employment brief and committed to publishing a much fuller research report than had ever been promised sometime later in 2001. This allowed IES to be seen to fulfil its obligations to the Club founders within the organisations, whilst also allowing me to continue working with my co-researchers within those same organisations until September 2000. It also provides me with a substantial dissemination route utilising the full support of the IES publications machinery.

### **CARRYING OUT COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY AND ACTION RESEARCH**

When embarking on my research I was keen to work with Research Club members (commissioners) as co-researchers influencing the development of the project and contributing insights rather than seeing them just as a passive client infrastructure.

I feel that the reality of actually doing this has worked very well up to a point. Certainly we worked together to design the research, in determining who should be interviewed and, through the September 2000 Forum, to make sense of the findings. Although we did not have frequent meetings as is common with many such collaborate research projects (Reason, 1994) I found that by virtue of already being members of the same Club, there was a high degree of mutual interest and respect between the co-researchers which made telephone and email contact satisfactory. Some of the commissioners were also interviewed.

I realise that I had a very different relationship with the executive coaches interviewed. Although I tried to approach and interview them in a way which respected them as individuals and their experience, essentially they were treated in the same way as orthodox research treats its informants or research subjects. I gathered data from them and, although I checked with them the accuracy of the transcript of their interview, the sense-making process was undertaken elsewhere, initially by myself and then with the commissioners. I do not feel that this invalidates my first attempt at a collaborative form of inquiry, but it has made me reflect that there was an inequality in these particular relationships.

In terms of rigour in method, it is my feeling that this has worked well during the first cycle. It was helpful to have undertaken interviews with more than one stakeholder group, which did uncover more differences in perception than if I had considered the transcripts of just coaches or just commissioners. It was also helpful to have used the forum of commissioners to review my initial thinking, since this allowed the findings to be viewed clearly through the lens of the commissioners. In practice I believe this resulted not just in greater reliability of interpretation and sense making, but it also ensured any interpretations were closely linked to what they meant for commissioners' practices. My only concern was that I could imagine that, in other contexts with other co-researchers less open to gaining new insight, findings that challenged the norms or beliefs of one stakeholder group could easily be rejected without determination on my part.

There is however one problem with what I have written to date. This emerged when I presented my thinking to colleagues at IES. Because so far I have focussed on improving the practice of commissioners of executive coaching in organisations, I have assumed some distance from myself was necessary. Hence my model of action research started from an interpretist model rather than a critical theoretic or

learning theory approach. I myself am not a commissioner, so am I limiting my own opportunities to improve my own practice by the approach I have taken?

As a researcher/consultant at IES I am a provider of services not a commissioner. As well as operating as a problem analyser through research assignments at IES, I also take on consultancy assignments with elements of problem solving and development provision. Sometimes this role involves what I can now define as executive coaching - I used to describe it as a 'critical friend' mode of consultancy. A question in my mind, as yet unresolved, therefore is whether by focussing on the commissioners rather than the coaches am I deliberately distancing myself too far from the research? Am I actually playing the external observer role rather than the insider investigating and exploring issues of my own practice? By responding to the research in a more personal way, and being prepared to learn from it more directly, would I have been living the research rather than simply writing about it? Should I consider using a different model of action research for future cycles?

#### **ABOUT WHO IS COMMISSIONING EXECUTIVE COACHING AND WHY**

Throughout the first cycle I have been gradually forming the view that there may be a sixth reason why those in employing organisations facilitate the commissioning of executive coaching – that of seeking to reward and retain senior managers. Although I did not encounter it in the literature in relation to executive coaching specifically I am aware from a review of the employability literature of a counter-intuitive strategy termed 'keeping with kindness' by Tamkin and Hillage (1999). This is when employers seek to maximise in the short or medium term employee retention among notably already employable work groups by providing excellent development opportunities that further enhance the employability of those individuals. The idea underpinning this approach to achieving competitive strategy is to give employees what they value so that they do not seek it elsewhere.

I have not encountered this idea of reward and retention through my contact with executive coaching commissioning practice either. However I am aware from personal contact with those evaluating in the late 1990s the NHS Management Education Bursary Scheme and the British Airways in-house MBA programme that those two employers 'pulled the plug' on the widespread provision of support for professional and senior staff to study for MBAs. I remembered that both evaluation studies found, among many other things, that there were high levels of turnover among those completing these MBAs and that line managers were nominating for

central financial sponsorship and/or funding attendance from within their own departmental budgets individuals regarded as totally inappropriate. One explanation proposed to me at the time by the evaluators was that line managers were desperate to keep hold of their high performers for as long as possible. The implicit deal could be described as 'We can't offer you a promotion but stay here and work for us for another x years and you will leave with an MBA'.

Given that having an executive coach is proving so popular with senior managers I have been wondering if their provision might sometimes be a reward or retention strategy by line managers too? I put this question to my co-researchers at the IES Forum for commissioners in September 2000. None could confirm this to be the case and most were sceptical about the likelihood. Neither could any confirm whether line managers were supporting the private commissioning of coaches. But would they necessarily know what line managers were doing?

All I do know, from my interview with one of the executive coaches, is that the bill can be paid by the individual themselves or local departmental budgets as well as by central HR or corporate functions. How could I discover if paying for an executive coach was a retention strategy? I also know from my interview with another executive coach that she believes executive coaching is good for the retention of managers. Talking to line managers might be difficult for access reasons. Or would those coached be able to shed light on this if I ever got to enquire of them how they came to have a coach? The idea intrigues me. I recognise I am not a detached analyst in this research, I have an interest in this question and have acknowledged this to my co-researchers.

## **What Next?**

During the course of this first cycle, more IES Research Club members have expressed interest in the project and have taken up the offer of participating in forum meetings and the pool of interest in emerging findings is also growing. The written briefings produced during the first cycle seem to have allowed members to better articulate their needs about what will help them all improve their practice and they became increasingly keen to see the research extended in particular directions. I am greatly encouraged by this.

The part of my research officially supported by the IES Research Club finished in September 2000 and its member organisations expect that the research work has finished, although not the dissemination. Beyond a presentation of my findings at the annual Research Club conference in March 2001 and a full Research Report to be published in the summer of 2001, Club members have no further expectations of me, beyond the offering of advice to any members on the subject in the future as and when I may be approached. This client infrastructure has therefore come to an end. Some of my participant co-researchers have offered to be involved informally during future research and others have expressed interest in being informed of the outcomes of any future research, but none expect more meetings or dedicated forum activity. This continuing interest is also encouraging to me in that it suggests they have found participation useful and worthwhile. Although their exact areas of interest vary, two common interests stand out:

- To identify what executive coaches actually do. What are the processes they go through?
- To develop further the understanding of commissioners so that they can use their judgement about how good executive coaching is in fact and in what circumstances they might best use it.

I have immersed myself in meeting the needs of a client infrastructure that has now gone. For the first time I have experienced working within an action research paradigm that involves using co-researchers as collaborators in the research process and these collaborators have now also effectively gone. Whilst I am excited at the progress we have made, I also experience a tinge of regret at the end of this cycle of the research. I believe there is still much to be understood about executive coaching and am committed to using a collaborative approach to inquiry to pursue this knowledge.

**CHAPTER TWO: EVOLVING MY  
UNDERSTANDING THROUGH MY  
PRACTICE AS AN EXECUTIVE COACH  
(OCT 2000 – APR 2001)**

# The Aim of the Research and the Organisation Context

My original starting point for this DBA thesis was a concern about the practice in organisations of commissioning suppliers of executive coaching. At the beginning of my DBA I was aware of the need for research because information and advice on commissioning and implementing executive coaching was not readily available, nor was the subject at all well understood by potential commissioners in organisations. During the first cycle I worked collaboratively with a group of organisations in undertaking an initial exploration of the topic. The first cycle made progress in identifying what executive coaching is about. By publicising the outcomes of this initial research cycle through events and publications (Carter 2000 and Carter 2001a). I believe I have contributed something to enabling commissioners to identify what outcomes it is expected organisations may gain by using executive coaching. I also believe I have enabled reflections on existing practice in my co-researcher's organisations and other IES Research Club member organisations. I expect that I will continue to learn more about what executive coaching is about during the remainder of my research for the DBA thesis and readers will find this the major recurring theme. However, at the beginning of the second cycle I shifted my enquiries towards researching how the executive coaching process is conducted.

My specific starting point for the second cycle was a desire to explore the executive coaching process itself. This was based on the premise that in order for potential commissioners to know what they may be getting, they need to know what it is that executive coaches will actually be doing for them and how they do it. It was my belief that researching what the executive coaching process actually looks like when viewed by executive coaches was likely to yield additional insights from the initial exploration of the first cycle. In addition if it was possible to make these insights widely available to all actual or potential commissioners, I believed this might encourage further improvements in practice, in particular by enabling organisations to better understand the perspective of the coaches they will be (or are) dealing with.

The civil service organisation which will form the organisational context for the second cycle of my research is a non-ministerial government department headed by a Director-General (CEO equivalent). For reasons which I will explain later in this chapter the identity of the organisation has been anonymised. Since the aim of the

organisation is unique, this means I am unable to provide some contextual details including its purpose and mission. There are approximately 500 staff in total, many of them with specialist professional qualifications. Like many other Civil Service Departments the office is hierarchical. At the time of the research, there were three Directors who report to the Director-General and 14 Directors at the next level down. These 17 individuals formed the Senior Civil Service (SCS) staff within this organisation. Throughout the write-up of this second cycle I will refer to them by assigned numerical code, i.e. Directors 1 – 17. Similarly I will refer to my two co-researcher executive coaches as Coaches B and C. The full coding structure is explained in Appendix 2.

Early in 2000 the civil service organisation developed a Training and Development Strategy for its SCS staff which included plans to conduct 360-degree appraisal with follow up using executive coaches. The organisation for which I work, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) submitted a bid, through a competitive tendering process, to conduct this 360-degree and executive coaching exercise. I led the IES bid. In October 2000 IES was awarded this consultancy contract with myself named as both the overall project manager and one of the three executive coaches.

This consultancy assignment provided me with an excellent opportunity to research issues relating to implementing an executive coaching approach and also in being an executive coach. The period of the assignment proved to be the second cycle of my research.

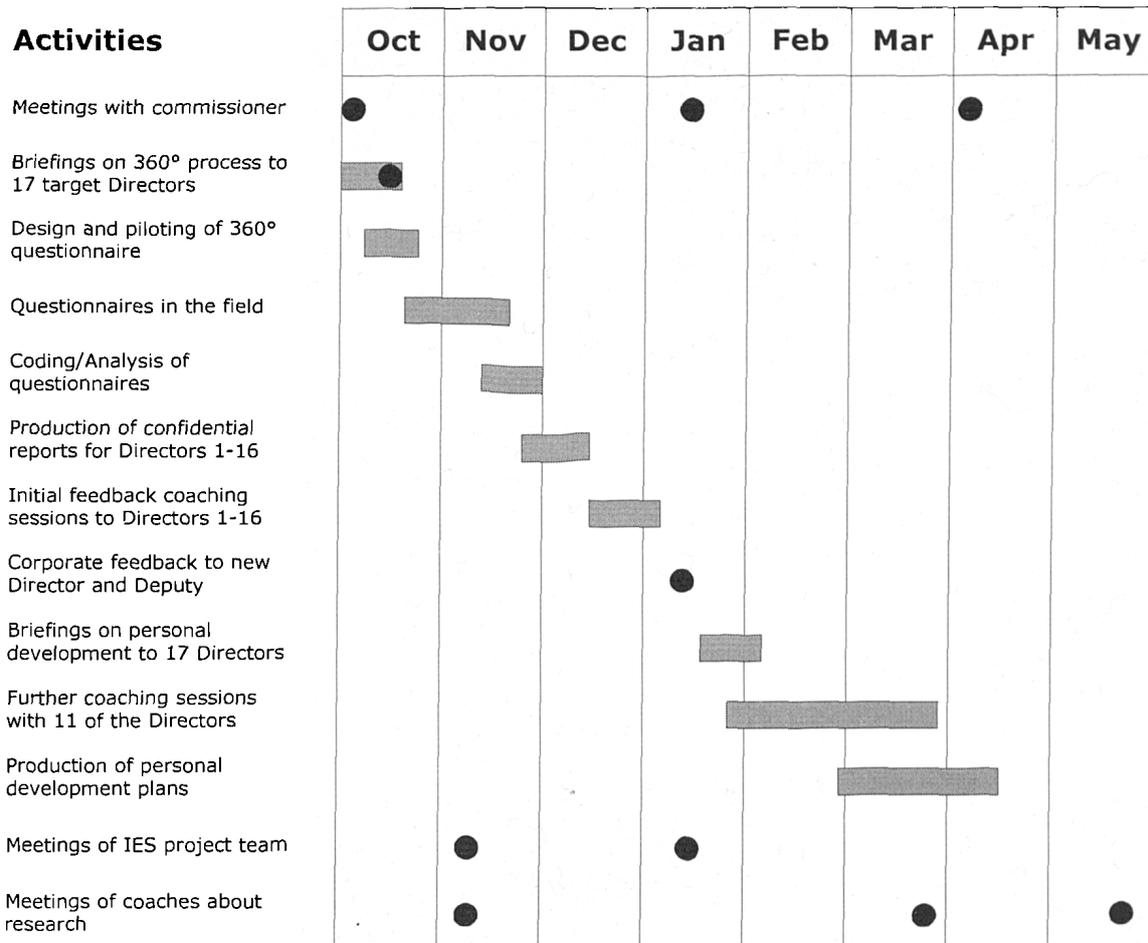
In my role at IES I generate and deliver a range of research and consultancy assignments. Since the publication of my initial literature review on executive coaching to IES Club members in summer 2000, I have sought out and have been approached by a number of clients wanting assistance with a variety of aspects of development for their most senior managers. By October 2000 four of my commissioned assignments included some aspect of executive coaching. This created potential research opportunities for accessing executive coaching in real time.

Having sought the advice of my supervisors I selected this assignment as providing by far the best 'fit' in terms of progressing the research. It is important for readers to note that that this assignment was broader than just executive coaching. Two factors, essential criteria from my perspective, were also present, making this

assignment a good choice. Firstly the commissioner at the organisation was aware of my research, had been involved as a participant interviewee in the first cycle and was supportive of the idea in principle. Secondly, by being able to base my research on a funded assignment, a significant proportion of the time I would need to spend would be funded and this I felt would be benefit my employer. Throughout my first cycle IES had been very supportive of my research, indeed I was offered one weeks study leave to assist me in writing up the first cycle. I had no reason to believe their commitment to my research would not continue. However IES was extremely busy with full order books. Whilst I might be able to bear personally any financial cost of reducing my workload, IES was unlikely to be able to spare me at the time. By aligning my research to an already committed 'real' assignment this would minimise the need for time away from my fee-earning activities during the period of my 2nd cycle.

An overview or timetable of the key activities undertaken as part of the overall assignment is presented below as Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Timetable of Key Activities for 360-Degree Feedback Assignment**



Source: compiled from IES project records, 2001

The process of diagnosing the needs of the organisation had already been completed by the Commissioner and to some extent therefore the organisational agenda was fixed. The decision to introduce 360-degree appraisal and executive coaching for the senior civil servants had been made. The contracted assignment was to deliver it in the collaborative manner proposed by IES in our bid. The summary of our proposed approach, the first two pages of the actual tender bid, is included as Appendix Two. An explicit rationale for executive coaching was not given. However an implicit definition was offered for the assignment through IES' description of the purpose of the executive coaching element, which was to:

- Support the 17 individuals in making sense of the feedback generated by the 360-degree process, and support them in interpreting it in context.

- Ensure the 360-degree process and the feedback are accepted and not rejected.
- Challenge the individuals to extract the maximum learning from the process.
- Assist the individuals in progressing into an action planning mode so that personal development plans can be drawn up.

The purpose of using executive coaching in this the organisation context can be seen as fitting squarely within the category of 'supporting the personal effectiveness of individuals as part of a wider development programme or process'. This category was identified in the first cycle of my research and the example or 'vignette' provided was from British Telecommunications plc.

The initial scope of the executive coaching in this organisation context from IES' perspective was to provide one initial two hour session with all 17 of the senior civil servants taking part in the 360-degree process. Later the scope was extended to follow this up with a further 11 of these individuals by providing three further two hour sessions to support the production of personal development plans for those individuals. Since six of the 17 participants in the exercise already had executive coaches for other reasons, it was assumed these six may prefer to use their existing coaches to support them. In addition the organisation was keen to give the other 11 participants the choice of working with a different coach if, after the initial session, they felt for any reason their allocated IES coach was not 'right' for them. I fully supported this approach, since the 'match' of coach and coached was identified as such an important implementation issue during the first cycle of my research.

Following an initial telephone call from me, informal telephone discussions with the two other executive coaches on the assignment resulted in an agreement that the assignment should be used to progress the research by seeking to answer the following three questions:

- Can we develop a model of the executive coaching process that reflects how we as coaches go about doing what we do in this one specific organisation and development context?

- What does executive coaching achieve or not achieve when used within that context?
- What are the issues that we as coaches need to be aware of for working effectively as a coach within that context?

## **Developing the Action Research Approach**

My interest in the practice of organisations' commissioning suppliers has been increased by my initial exploration of executive coaching in the first cycle of my research. I remained keen to develop further the understanding of these commissioners about the executive coaching process and how they might best utilise it.

I sought to get behind events as they were actually unfolding and reflect upon actions as they were happening. In this way I intended that these reflections, and the increased understanding it brought me, would enable me to make changes to my own practice in the future. By recording these actions and reflections I hoped also to contribute to the professional practice of others. This led me to consider my own practice as an executive coach in adopting a more subtle approach to action research than in the first cycle. I acknowledge that this more subtle approach means that I will be putting myself and my own concrete experience into the text I am writing up. In the first cycle my standpoint was of an external researcher working in collaboration with a group of organisational commissioners as participant co-researchers, within a client infrastructure and with executive coaches and organisational commissioners as participant contributors. In the second cycle my standpoint will be that of a practitioner researcher working in collaboration with other practising executive coaches as participant co-researchers. There is no client infrastructure for the research, although there is what I would describe as a 'host' organisation. I will actually have experienced what I will be describing in seeking to understand and represent how executive coaching is actually conducted in the one particular context.

Authors have noted that action researchers participate with practitioners to organise a collaborative process of enquiry (Whyte 1991, Reason 1994, Heron 1996). This type of approach means that an action researcher should not take

control of the design of the research but should organise the research together with participants. It also means that all should decide together how to consider and interpret the data and action implications. I was comfortable with this approach and intended to work with my co-researcher participants (executive coaches) in defining the issue to be addressed, deciding together what data to collect and how to interpret it.

However many authors also note that some form of action should also take place as part of the research (Lewin 1946, Gill and Johnson 1991, Whyte et al 1991, Reason 1994, Argyris and Schon 1996). The idea is that people can learn about the effects of their actions in the course of the research and this helps them to act more effectively in the future. Lewin (1946) in particular emphasises the practical relevance of action research to help people evaluate their actions. My own approach however did not aim to set up cycles of action and reflection in the sense of experimenting with forms of action and evaluating their consequences with participants. Rather my approach was to set up opportunities for myself and my co-researcher participants to reflect following our actions. I did not envisage that my research would become a tool for what Gill and Johnson call the creation of 'joint action plans' (1991). Rather, I envisaged it as a tool for creating relevant credible interpretations of data which has taken its cues from a specific local context. My approach allowed for the drawing out of theoretical significance after, as well as during, the research so that it can be shared with others at a later date and not as part of the second cycle of my research itself. My way of doing the research does not imply that I feel other researchers should operate as I did. I believe my approach matched the local context.

As I have explained above, I hoped to build up experienced based knowledge (Whyte, 1991). 'Making' knowledge, as Morgan (1983) described it, needs to appreciate the nature of research as a distinctly human process. My preferred stance is from the perspective of a self-reflective coach (or practitioner) researcher working together with other self-reflective practitioner researchers. I made this choice because I believe that I will be able to give a truer representation of what actually happens by observing and questioning it through my own eyes and describing how I see it as one of the parties involved in this human process of executive coaching. I do not expect to reveal or discover knowledge through a neutral, objective or external observer stance during the second cycle of research.

Lewin (1946) describes action research as different from other types of research whose aim is to derive knowledge without considering the value of knowledge in helping people to solve problems. Gill and Johnson (1991) agree with Lewin that laboratory experiments can be too artificial and reduce the complexity of effects of action to the point that it can become meaningless. Argyris and Schon (1996) also note that laboratory experiments are not suited to action research because the aim is not to try and develop knowledge of covering laws but to develop a way of helping people act in their everyday situations. Laboratory experiments are 'context independent', action research operates in a definite context (Argyris and Schon, 1996).

It was my clear intention to develop a 'model' of executive coaching. My purpose was both to make a contribution to the body of academic knowledge and to provide commissioners of executive coaching with increased understanding to help them better commission such coaches. I acknowledged that to achieve both was likely to be difficult. It was my hope that some kind of visual conceptual model might help bridge the gap between theory and practice. My use of the term 'model' is therefore broad. I mean to infer an externalised mental map in a diagrammatic form. This is in the tradition of Kurt Lewin who Argyris (1989) identifies as one of the first social scientists to note that diagrams (and metaphors) could be used to link the generalised theories of researchers with the practitioner's need for situational knowledge.

Worren et al (2000) identify that academic knowledge is used differently by researchers and practitioners. For researchers, knowledge is an end in itself and the central objective of their profession (Pendleton, 1995). Academic knowledge requires a high degree of 'scientific' validity, often judged according to rigour and empirical testing (Bacharach, 1989). For managers and practitioners knowledge is a means to an end and they use it to guide their decision making and action taking. However according to Schon (1983) and Hoshmand & Polkinghorne (1992), the formal body of knowledge in professional fields does not often align with the particular situations or unique cases encountered by practitioners.

Practitioners judge knowledge according to its practical usefulness and relevance. This is especially important in helping them to interpret new situations and design their actions more skilfully and thereby achieve individual and systemic change (Argyris et al., 1985).

My aim was to find an well defined epistemology that I could follow as a researcher to illuminate the relationships between conceptual understanding, academic knowledge and professional expertise in producing a 'user-friendly model'. I hoped this would allow any academic knowledge I obtained to be both a faithful description of the reality of the executive coaching process in one context whilst at the same time be capable of being transformed into a tool that could be applied by practitioners.

I did have some reservations about my aim of producing a user-friendly model. My greatest fear is that any 'model' I come up with may be misinterpreted by other practitioners or aspiring executive coaches as a structure or checklist of 'how to do' executive coaching. This is not my intention at all. My phenomenological perspective is one of a practitioner-researcher who is reflective. I will not be seeking to deduce that there is some right answer about how to do executive coaching. I am also reluctant to imply that there is some structure to executive coaching, as it may be that I am unable to explain it by way of a reasoned process. What I am seeking is a way of explaining to potential commissioners what it is that I and my colleagues actually do as executive coaches and how we do it. I will need to be clear as to my intentions in the way I present any findings. My final reservation is that I may end up with a model that appears to be coach-led when my philosophical approach to my practice as an executive coach leads me to believe coaching works best when it is driven by the person being coached. I will need to make it clear that how I operate as a coach is at the interactive level and determined by a complex series of events.

## **Method**

My choice of method was determined by the confidential nature of executive coaching and the preferences and geographical dispersal of the three coaches.

The confidential nature of the executive coaching being undertaken in this assignment context meant that it would not be possible to collect or use data (in)directly derived from the coaching sessions themselves. The agreement with the assignment client (host for this second cycle of the research) also meant it would not be possible to involve the assignment participant managers in other data collection activities. Indeed her instruction to me was that they should remain unaware of the research. Whilst these constraints would arguably have some effect

on the evaluation of internal validity, as well as raising some ethical issues for me about the rights of third parties, these constraints were not problematic in method selection.

Reflective method(s) seemed the most appropriate in order to identify and understand executive coaching practice. The primary focus I was seeking was reflection about action already taken rather than reflecting before acting to determine that action. I also expected that this reflection would have some impact on my future practice (actions). The answers to two questions led to method determination – whose reflections? and how to generate their reflections?

One option was to reflect solely on my own practice as an executive coach in this context. Certainly I felt that this could be a valid and reliable option. However since there were three coaches working on the assignment (research context), I felt all three of us reflecting would increase the insights we were likely to unearth. I did not feel the need for corroboration of my observations and reflections, but I did feel that all three of us reflecting would add to the trustworthiness of the data. When both of the other coaches expressed a strong interest in being co-researchers, I chose the option of all three of us reflecting on our practice in this one organisational context.

I did try to get the three of us together to gain a shared understanding of the way forward by testing out possible ideas and linking these into methodological debates. However, it was not possible to arrange a meeting within the necessary timescale, so I made some suggestions and consulted the others remotely. I considered a number of data generation methods, which would allow a collaborative format for enquiry between the three of us as participant co-researchers.

My initial preference was writing our own journals (as suggested by McNiff, 1988) because I felt this would have enabled us to collect data about what we were doing and why, as well as increasing our individual understanding of our own perceptions. Critical conversations or other letter writing research techniques or methods would have enabled us as coaches to share our reflections on our practice on an ongoing basis and would have been methods suitable for my particular reflective practitioner action research approach to studying the topic. I felt a combination of individual journal accounts and critical letter-based conversations would have provided both written sources of data about our actual practice as well as a format for capturing

our subsequent insights and understandings about that practice. Plummer and Edwards (1993) observe, in their conversational introduction to their book on critical conversations, that this method is especially useable by practitioners: 'Most of us feel we can, at a pinch, write a letter' (Plummer and Edwards, 1993).

According to Edwards and Plummer the method allows practitioners to explore the relationship between their personal and professional 'self' through anecdotes, story and narrative in order to make sense of situations. However both writing a journal and engaging in critical conversations or other exchanges in writing were rejected as one of the other coaches felt the method would be unsustainable for him. His e-mail response to the suggestion was:

Writing is not my preference nor my forte. I may or may not come to feel inferior but I know myself well enough to assert now that I will definitely get bored. I am at my most thoughtful talking to and with others.

As someone who has been a manager and professional developer of others for some years, I have come to believe that it is more empowering for individuals to take part in an activity that they do well. I was also keen for the three of us to be equals in this part of the action research process, with out which I did not feel we could be true co-researchers in the way outlined by Reason (1994). A series of telephone discussions ensued and we discovered that all three felt comfortable with a face-to-face method and the more dynamic, collaborative and challenging it could be the better. We therefore jointly selected a series of face-to-face discussions as our preferred method.

### **DISCUSSION MEETINGS WITH CO-RESEARCHER EXECUTIVE COACHES**

Three meetings of the executive coaches were scheduled during the second cycle. The notes of these three meetings proved to be the primary source of data for the cycle. The data was analysed during the meetings and initial interpretations were also developed during those same meetings. The purpose of the meetings was to work collaboratively in discussing and reflecting upon all three of the research questions associated with the project assignment.

The structure or 'agenda' for each meeting was the same. We worked sequentially through the following questions:

- What has happened (or will happen)?
- What do we think it means?
- What do we think it tells us about what we are doing?
- How does it relate to the research questions?
- How can we best explain it to others?

There was no leader or 'chairman' for these discussion meetings. The only activities undertaken by me were to organise the dates/venues for the meetings and to take notes. The structure allowed all three of us to participate equally and very quickly the other two coaches made the inquiry their own and it felt to me that I was not different by virtue of being the initiating researcher, I felt like just one of three practitioners in an egalitarian relationship. Heron and Reason (2001) refer to this as the co-operative group skill of 'authentic collaboration' which they consider one of the inquiry skills and validity procedures needed to lift the inquiry from uncritical subjectivity. The method allowed us the possibility as participants of a route into self-generated reflective discussions, which at times were very animated. The discussion on each question was started by whomever felt they had something to offer. The others would then offer new comments, challenge or build upon previous points raised by others. We frequently made use of flipcharts in making sense of each others points and the flipchart pens would exchange hands often as we sought to amend each others writings or drawings and so add to the sense-making process. This iterative process of individually adding new points and supporting and challenging each one in turn was undertaken for each question until none of us had anything more to add. At this point we moved onto the next question. The sequence of the questions proved even more helpful than I initially expected because in practice it allowed a clear separation between the primarily data collection activities necessary to answer the first question and the primarily sense-making activities necessary to answer the other four questions.

In practice discussion of the first question frequently arose from comments or stories highlighting what we as coaches perceived as critical incidents. Discussion of

the third question sometimes involved reference to documents produced as part of the assignment.

At the outset we agreed that we should take turns (one meeting each) in formally adopting an additional role of devil's advocate, as later recommended by Heron and Reason (2001) as a simple procedure for 'challenging consensus collusion'. The intention was to promote rigour in our inquiry method. In practice however each meeting was marked by regular, almost continuous, constructive challenges emanating from all three of us, so much so that I never felt any of us needed official authorisation to question each other. Perhaps this was only possible because we had worked together before. In addition it may be that questioning skills are so core to an executive coach's make-up that we were not likely to be lacking in this particular aspect of working together!

The research process involved us in articulating and sharing the values and beliefs underpinning how we each conducted executive coaching in general as well as then challenging and supporting each other in attempting to come to a collective agreement about how we implemented executive coaching in practice in this one organisational context. Our desire to generate a model as an output from our collective reflection helped us focus on making sense of what we were doing and how we were working. Without that focus I believe our sessions may have lasted much longer. The developing model also became a way of subsequently describing it to others, which was a bonus.

The first meeting of the co-researcher coaches was on 13 November 2000 at IES offices in Brighton, the second on 21 March 2001 near the organisation offices in London and the third on 29 May 2001 at the office of one of the other coaches. Each lasted between three and four hours. These meetings were deliberately arranged to coincide with other arrangements to minimise additional travelling time and expense for the other two coaches.

The first date was arranged on the same day as two meetings related to delivering the project assignment - an IES project review and planning team meeting and a coaches meeting to design and plan the coaching framework for the assignment. The second date was when all three coaches arranged to be at the organisation head offices on the same day undertaking some one to one coaching sessions. A third date was originally planned and scheduled for the after the end of the

assignment. However since one of the coaches, who I shall refer to throughout as Coach C, decided to retire and embark on a lengthy around-the-world tour, attendance by all three did not prove possible. The third meeting was held at the office of the remaining coach. Notes were taken during all three meetings. I typed them up within eight hours of each meeting. These notes were subsequently circulated and agreed as correct by all present to promote data trustworthiness and face validity.

Additional data was generated through the occasional email exchanges between ourselves as coaches and notes taken following telephone discussions. Although perhaps seen as just an add-on or for administrative purposes only at the beginning, these exchanges proved critical in the run up to the third discussion meeting. This is because Coach C was able to submit some thoughts through these mechanisms even though he was not able to attend the meeting.

The data generated at these discussion meetings was used as the sole source for answering the first research question and the production of a model of the executive coaching process. It was also used in conjunction with other sources to answer the remaining two questions of what was achieved and the implementation issues arising.

In writing up this second cycle of the research, particularly where it relates to the development of a model, I have attempted to present the text in a manner which identifies our emergent designs and emergent understandings about the executive coaching process. Denzin (1998) might identify this as a text attached to a interpretative perspective more in tune with a constructivist paradigm than a grounded theory perspective within a post-positivist paradigm. I do not see it this way. Rather I have tried to describe the findings by reliving through my writing what I experienced in order to allow the reader to follow the interwoven data collection, sense making and interpretation experiences comprising the overall research process. My intention in this reflexive account is partly to achieve construct validity. This approach will, I hope, also help illuminate and clarify for the reader what we as co-researchers believe we have been able to reveal through undertaking the research, and what I have subsequently interpreted and understood myself in representing that research. This is important given that I am both a participant in the research as well as the interpreter and author.

## **DOCUMENTS PRODUCED AS PART OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

All documents used by and produced by IES or the client organisation in arranging the assignment and produced for and with individuals during the course of the assignment were available for scrutiny as part of the research. In summary, these documents comprised:

- Notes of the two project review and planning meetings of the IES project team generated by IES
- Original specification, tender and contract documentation supplied by the client organisation
- 16 confidential 360-degree feedback reports produced by IES
- A list of 21 items of achievement by the individuals arising from the one to one coaching sessions, compiled by the three coaches

These documents were used at two different times. Firstly, some documents were used during the research process itself as an input to collecting other data. In particular some were used during the discussion meetings to help our reflections about what we were doing. Documents used in this way were analysed during the meetings and not independently of the meetings. In addition some documents were used to assist the development of a semi-structured interview guide for the commissioner review meetings. Secondly, other documents were used after the data collection had finished to assist me in reflecting upon the research findings. These were analysed in a variety of different ways and this process of analysis is described in subsequent sections.

Two project review and planning meetings were held with the IES office-based team (i.e. excluding the two coaches) during the second cycle. These took place on 13 November 2000 and 16 January 2001. Both were held at the IES offices in Brighton. Standard IES project management practice (IES, 1999) requires all assignment project meeting notes be written up, circulated, agreed as correct by all present and shared with other IES colleagues via the IES intranet. These requirements were followed for both meetings. This practice also contributes to IES

quality assurance and organisational learning. The purpose of both meetings was to review and progress the project assignment and did not specifically address the research questions. However the notes from both meetings proved helpful to me in identifying and better understanding a number of issues relevant to implementing executive coaching arising from a 360-degree feedback context. They were helpful because they supplemented the otherwise entirely coach-centric interpretations of the coaching process arising from the discussion meetings of the coaches. I was the only common participant in both sets of meetings. My IES colleagues perceived the coaching process in this context from the perspective of suppliers of information used by both the coaches and the executives being coached. As coaches our perspective was as designers and users of the information.

Before the assignment began, the organisation had supplied an extensive specification of the services it wished to commission and what it hoped would be achieved through those services. This document included clear expectations of what the individual executives should achieve through the coaching process and what the organisation should achieve as a knock-on consequence. This data was used to inform reflections by the coaches on achievements by each individual and the organisation. The statements of expectation was also used as a prompt during the discussion meeting with the Commissioner towards the end of the project about her perceptions of what had or had not been achieved at the organisational level.

The confidential reports produced in November 2000 for the 16 senior civil servants who completed this part of the process highlighted potential areas of development need. They were used to stimulate reflection with my two co-researchers regarding what the executive coaching had achieved at the individual level in the context of what had been identified by the respondents to the 360-degree questionnaire as needing to be achieved.

At the start of the assignment and research, it was agreed with the commissioner that the research would not involve directly seeking any views from any of the executives participating in the 360-degree exercise and coaching. Each of the coaches was in the habit of taking occasional notes at the end of each one-to-one session. These notes are ordinarily used prior to subsequent sessions to help the coach's preparation. These notes are regarded as confidential since they refer to private discussions about individuals, and we each felt to share them (even with each other) would be a breach of trust with that individual. The notes were

therefore not available to the research project. However at the outset of the research, each of us agreed to make a separate note on a yellow 'post-it note' at the same time as making our session notes. These post-it notes outlined any comments or observations the individuals had made about what (if anything) they felt they had achieved as a result of the coaching. At our final meeting we placed these post-it notes (in no particular order) onto a flipchart as a list. Out of 38 sessions undertaken in total, 21 items had been noted. This list was used to help us identify what had been achieved by the individuals.

Additional data was generated through email exchanges and notes of telephone conversations between the organisation commissioner and myself.

### **REVIEW MEETINGS WITH THE ORGANISATION CLIENT**

It had been my intention that, at the end of the assignment, I would conduct taped interviews with both the commissioner of the assignment (Training and Development Manager) and the Director General. This had been agreed with the two individuals before the research began. I expected that the transcripts would provide useful data about the organisation's view of what the executive coaching might achieve within that context. As Argyris and Schon (1996) point out it is important to take into account whether all relevant observers see matters in the same way as the action researcher(s) do. By interviewing the main client organisation players, I intended to ensure that any claim of casual linkages between the executive coaching process or the overall 360-degree assignment which I might put forward would have been based on a higher standard of rigour than if they were based on the perspectives of myself and the other two coaches alone.

In the event it did not prove possible to collect this data in full, nor in the manner I had hoped as both individuals left the organisation during the eight-month period of the research.

The commissioner found a new job in February 2001. She agreed to a discussion and review meeting with me during her last week in April 2001. I developed a semi-structured interview framework for the meeting. During the meeting we did cover her perceptions of what had been achieved or not achieved so far, and this provided useful data from a non-coach perspective. She declined for the meeting to

be taped on the grounds that the assignment was not yet finished and she no longer felt it was appropriate for her to formally represent the organisation. I took notes of the meeting, which I typed up within four hours of the meeting. I forwarded a copy of the notes for her agreement as a check to promote data trustworthiness and face validity.

The Director General left the organisation rather sooner, shortly after the research began. His replacement arrived in December 2000 and he indicated his approval and support for the 360-degree feedback exercise. Indeed, he subsequently asked IES to return during the period May-July 2001 so that he and his new deputy could undertake the exercise for themselves. Although I did meet him and his (even newer) deputy on 9 January 2001 for what had been the scheduled interview with his predecessor, clearly they were both too new in post for an interview to be appropriate. Therefore I did not use the semi-structured interview framework for the meeting. Our meeting took the form of a briefing from me about the project and my perceptions of the corporate issues arising for the organisation. I did take notes of the meeting and type them up within eight hours of the meeting. These notes were helpful in clarifying my own thinking about what had been achieved by that stage in the research but I did not use them as data from the organisation perspective.

The data collected from the written records of the coaches' meetings was analysed in those meetings by the three coaches. As outlined earlier, the meetings of the executive coaches were both a process of data collection about what had happened and a vehicle for analysing and interpreting what we were talking about, what we thought of it and how our thinking was being influenced by it. The conclusions presented in this thesis however, and how I made sense of it, are my own following my additional reflections on those interpretations we jointly made during those meetings.

## **Findings from the Second Cycle**

The use of 360-degree feedback is becoming increasingly common in organisations for the management of individual performance (Mabey, 2001 and Chivers & Darling, 1999). It is based on the premise that in flatter organisations with looser hierarchies, a superior may not have all the information they need to identify development needs or appraise their staff and that the people best suited to judge

the performance of individuals are those who work most closely with them (Peiperl, 2001). 360-degree feedback has been described as:

The systematic collection and feedback of performance data on an individual or group derived from a number of stakeholders on their performance. (Ward, 1997)

At the organisation in question the purpose of the 360-degree feedback was specifically to assist its most senior staff in identifying their development needs and therefore it was determined from the outset that the data generated would be confidential to the individual. It was not intended to feed the results into an appraisal or other performance management system nor was it intended to influence reward. Neither the individual's manager nor the HR department would have access to the results.

360-degree feedback solicits views about the performance and/or behaviour of an individual from the full circle of relevant viewpoints: subordinates, peers, superiors, customers and suppliers (Tornow, 1993, London & Smithers, 1995).

Subordinate feedback is considered particularly appropriate in providing information on whether managers are behaving in accordance with organisational values on managing people, such as empowerment (Gratton & Pearson, 1995). There is some doubt however about the effectiveness of peer feedback (Berr et al, 2000). Multiple studies have shown that the subordinates' observations of the individuals' behaviours have the highest correspondence of all viewpoints with performance (Bass 1990, Shore et al. 1992). One of the key elements of 360-degree feedback then is that it may provide an individual with a more accurate assessment of themselves than would be available to them from their manager or themselves alone.

Self assessment as well as ratings by others on common elements of performance and/or behaviour is also sometimes included in 360-degree feedback programmes. It has been suggested that including self assessment improves commitment and buy-in to self-development on these elements (Meyer, 1991). Self assessment also provides a useful tool for focussing the attention of individuals on discrepancies between their own views and those of others. However Furnham (1994) found that more successful managers (as measured by their superiors) displayed lower

discrepancies between their own and their subordinates ratings. The same has also been found for women (London et al, 1991).

As Peiperl (2001) identifies, not all jobs are the same. The target population for the 360-degree feedback was all the 'senior civil servants' (SCS) at the organisation. But 'SCS' has in recent years come to signify a range of paygrades more than a job role. All of the 17 senior civil servants employed by the organisation had at least some managerial responsibilities for people and budgets, but most were also practising professionals (lawyers and economists). The circle of relevant viewpoints therefore varied, although for all these managers it was possible to identify direct reports (subordinates). For the majority of the managers, it was also possible to identify the other viewpoints of indirect reports (subordinates' direct reports), peers (others at the same grade of the SCS at the organisation), a reporting officer (superior/line manager), a countersigning officer (superior's line manager), internal organisation customers of their services and recipients of their services external to the organisation (external customers).

According to Zemke and Zemke (1995) adults undertake learning experiences when they see a need for new or different skills or knowledge. Thus the use of a 360-degree instrument provides a method which organisations hope will lead to their employees seeing the skills or behaviours they need to improve and that through supportive feedback this realisation will then act as a catalyst to them undertaking appropriate learning activities. For this hope to be realised, however, individuals have to accept the accuracy of the feedback arising from the 360-degree process (Kettley, 1997).

What makes the process a development one, rather than a purely assessment one, can be seen as the way that this feedback is explained and used. Self development can be seen as the progressively enhanced ability of an individual to move to more inclusive perspectives of the self and the world via reflective discourse (Mezirow, 1991 and Harri-Augstein et al, 1992). This often requires the support of others (through their ratings) who can help the individual make explicit the ways in which they see the world and a feedback giver who can help them make sense of this in a non-judgemental environment. This is where an executive coach (among other options) can be used to help support an individual develop through a dialogue with them about another reality (based on the other raters views) that is different to the individual's own reality.

## **DEVELOPING A MODEL OF THE COACHING PROCESS**

The first question we posed ourselves as coaches during our initial meeting was 'Can we develop a model of the executive coaching process that reflects what we as coaches actually do in this one specific organisation and development context?' In writing up the following sections I am drawing exclusively on the data collected from the three meetings of the coaches held during the period of the project assignment in order to show the emergence of the model over time, and the extent to which our understanding of the coaching process we were using developed. The model is therefore borne out of reflecting on action and practice. In writing up the findings, however, I am conscious of searching for theoretical links.

### **November 2000**

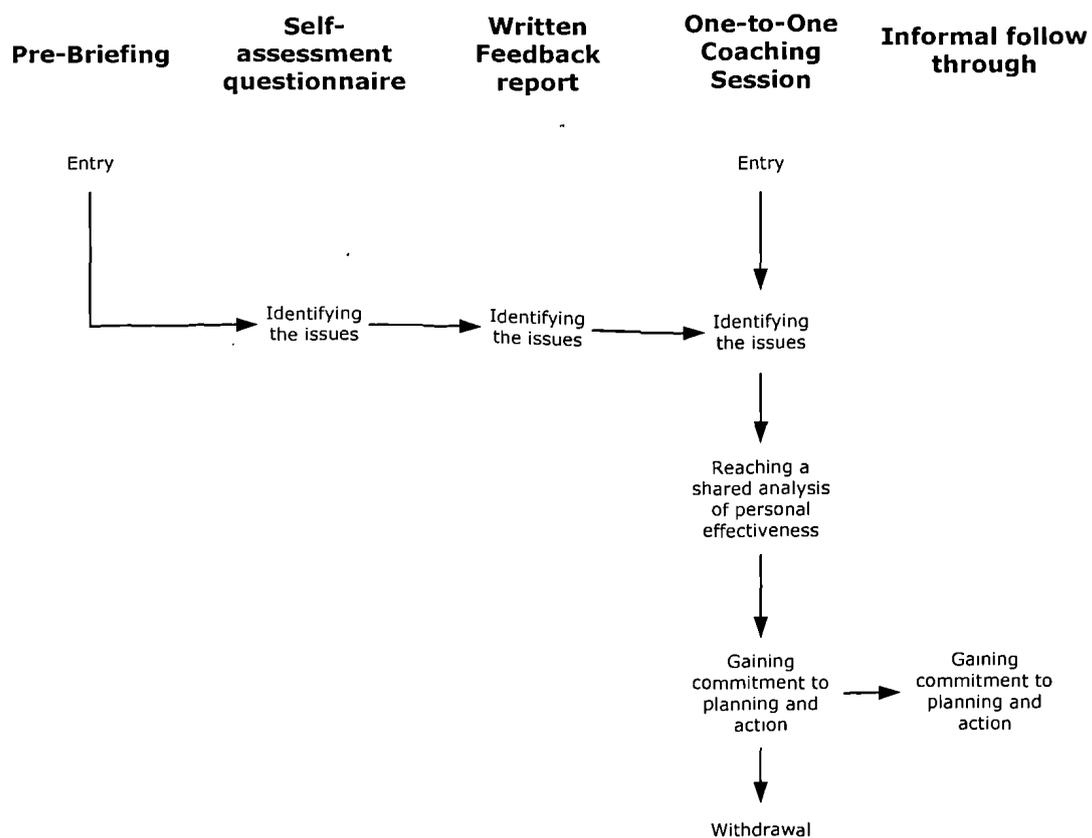
Our first attempt at identifying and describing the key phases we expected was based on the executive coaching framework we had developed and agreed for the initial one-to-one coaching sessions. That framework is attached as Appendix Three. The first version of the key phases in the process is shown in Figure 4 below.

Given that we were contracted initially to meet each of the organisation Directors only once, we felt any descriptions needed to acknowledge this fact. In effect our model at the first meeting was our 'expectation of the process' and this process consisted of one session only. We produced an initial linear representation of the key phases we expect to take place. It was not our expectation that any final model we developed would actually be linear. As we recorded at the time in our written meeting notes, coaching is not as simple as that, rather our aim at the November 2000 meeting was to identify the different key phases we anticipated needing to address and, ideally, how we anticipated these different phases will relate to the overall project assignment activities.

Our model starts with our first contact with those to be coached. This is because we decided our model of the coaching process most concerns the coach-executive relationship and the activities and sub-processes supporting this relationship. Looking back now, I realise another option would have been for us to start our first attempt at a model with the meeting of our client, and we could have explored the relationship the commissioner wanted with us as coaches. Certainly the findings from the first cycle highlight the importance of trust and control issues in the coach-commissioner relationship. Some of the project management and consultancy activities and processes associated with undertaking this assignment

certainly were very interesting from my perspective as project manager in this one context. However my experience of project management models, such as PRINCE, is that they have already been explored and that they are focussed on procedures as a means to enable the achievement of an end result. My interest in this context is on means and process, not on ends and procedures. The focus of this second cycle is on the much less explored and less well understood executive coaching process, so I feel our starting point was the most appropriate. I acknowledge, however, that in this context any model of the coaching process between coach-executive forms sits within and is affected by the broader context of other processes and other relationships.

**Figure 4: An Expectation of the Executive Coaching Process at the Organisation Presented in Relation to Project Activities**



Source: discussion meeting of co-researchers, 2000

*Entry*

We considered that the first two steps in our framework are both essentially about entry into a relationship and 'contracting' with the individual. What lies behind this

first phase was the desire to establish rapport with the individual early on in order that they feel comfortable working with us and will trust us. Rapport is a difficult social interaction to explain. Our plan was to start the session by asking them about their job history and any other development or self-development to date is an attempt to get them talking about themselves so that dialogue is established. We did not want to end up doing all the talking. For some individuals talking about the results of the 360-degree feedback may be difficult, so we wanted to start with something less potentially threatening. Also, it may elicit information which allows us to place this 360-degree exercise within their own development context and clarify their expectations of the session and the exercise as a whole, i.e. identify a rationale as to why it is in their interests to be involved. We expected that the compulsory nature of this exercise might have resulted in heightened personal anxiety and/or hostility to the process. We wanted to agree with each individual some confidentiality ground rules and reassure them of our commitment to them.

So how do I know when I have got rapport? What is it I am looking for? And how do I go about getting it? I feel I can only reflect on this by presenting an example of what I observed and called 'rapport' when quickly achieved with one individual.

Director 16 was a white, male, 52-year old, career civil servant.

As soon as he entered the room I welcomed him with a smile and gave him the choice of where to sit. I commented on the dreadful weather (it had just started to snow) and he asked for an option to finish early if the snow became worse as he had a long journey home. I sought to be reassuring by leaving the option open as his choice. While he was settling into his chair and arranging the papers he had brought with him, I enquired as to his journey destination. We discovered something we had in common, both being users of Thameslink train services. We spent a few minutes exchanging personal stories of the recent disruption of these services, caused by a landslide in Sussex a few weeks before. I then moved on to outlining the purpose of the session and asked if this matched his expectations and needs. He confirmed this was the case and I then asked him to tell me about his current job and something about his career to date. As soon as he started talking I was confident that we had achieved a sustainable rapport.

The signs of rapport I observed in this case were a combination of different behaviours that he was displaying, together with some indications of the nature of

the interaction between us. His body language quickly became relaxed. We were both sitting leaning slightly forward towards each other and I would say there was some mirroring of our body language. He smiled, nodded frequently and made positive gestures which I took to mean acknowledgement and affirmation of what was being said. There was also some matching of pace and tone of speaking and energy levels. His language included comments such as 'that's a good idea and can we also...' I would describe our discussions thereafter as having an upbeat rhythm as if we were 'singing'. This resulted in a cascade of ideas throughout the session.

However, whilst this session might be the first phase of a process involving the one-to-one coaching relationship, it would have been preceded by the initial group briefing meeting where the Directors have been introduced to IES and the 360-degree appraisal process (of which the coaching session is just one part). Since we will all have been perceived as part of IES and the 360-degree process, we recognise that the coaching process starts in advance of the actual session. I was at the briefing in my role as overall project manager, but the other two coaches were not. The individuals did not at that stage know which feedback coach they were to get.

### *Identifying the Issues*

We considered that the third step in our framework in process terms was essentially an attempt to identify, clarify and agree the issues. The second phase we therefore termed 'Identifying the issues'. By planning to ask the Directors for their initial reactions to their feedback report we expected that this would help us identify what is important to the individual and why. Having already seen the report in our preparation we would know where there were gaps in their perception of their performance or behaviour compared to how others see them, but what we would need was a sense of whether this really tallies with their own awareness once they had up to a week to think about what the exercise has produced. What we perceived as big issues were not necessarily important; it is what the individual saw as the big issues we wanted to identify. They had time to think about the issues, our role here was to challenge them not to reject a potential issue without having thought it through, and to make connections between bits of the data where this helped them understand what the report may have been telling them. In one sense, our challenge can be considered a concern with closing any gaps in the individual's perception compared to the perceptions of their raters. In some situations we

imagined the report would not be the main focus of the session, but it was the main focus of this phase.

We debated whether this was, in fact, the first phase, given all the efforts we had made in presenting the report and making it available in advance of the session, or whether this comes second in a linear (chronological) based representation if you consider entry to have already been undertaken.

### *Reaching a Shared Analysis of Personal Effectiveness*

The fourth step for the initial session of identifying priority development needs we considered to be in process terms essentially about reaching a shared diagnosis or analysis of their personal effectiveness. The exercise will provide them with some benchmark of where they are now in terms of their personal effectiveness against a competence framework that is behaviourally based and should allow them to check or raise their self-awareness.

We were not sure whether diagnosis or analysis was the better term. 'Diagnosis' sounded too much like we were indicating that a problem-solving philosophy underpinned our model. Intellectually we did not like that implication. One of our shared values was that our approach should be an individual-centred one, not a problem-centred one. 'Analysis' sounded as though there might be no outcome.

Since our meeting the terms assessment, evaluation or measurement have also been suggested by others. None of these terms feels quite right either.

Conceptually there are important distinctions between these various terms. The meeting notes show we decided to stick with 'analysis' in the interim, since it implies the evolution of understanding about what the data generated means, but we hoped to find a better term.

We felt the need to acknowledge that the 360-degree exercise was what we had been hired to support and essentially this exercise was about personal effectiveness. The constraints of one session meant we did not expect much time to bring in other considerations, as we would normally do in other coaching contexts. The real key aspect, however, was the notion of a 'shared' understanding of what it

all meant, what to take forward, and what to leave behind. We expected that it would be about broadening the context out from the exercise in order to then reduce the data and focus on just the information that was both important and manageable for that individual.

### *Gaining Commitment to Planning and Action*

The fifth and final step in our framework was encouraging individuals to share some of their learning and areas for action with others. In process terms we believed this was really about gaining commitment to planning and action, so this was the term we used for the fourth phase of the process. We expected that there would be severe limitations in an approach that only involves just one session as we would not be able to ascertain whether any actions agreed were actually taken, or whether any performance improvements and behavioural changes identified as necessary through the 360-degree exercise were actually attempted. Our role therefore needed to include securing commitment to achieve action. We anticipated supplementing this by encouraging individuals to seek the support of others to help them embed their intentions in the workplace environment. By encouraging the sharing of action intentions or some key insights from the process with existing coaches/mentors, line managers or staff (where appropriate) we felt could help to connect the process with an ongoing source of encouragement or support.

### *Withdrawal*

Although not on our agreed coaching framework for our one-to-one session with individuals, we realised there is a final phase in the coaching process in this 360-degree context at the organisation and that is closure or withdrawal from our relationship with the individual. We aimed to clarify any expectations or ground rules about any continuing contact on an informal basis, although from our perspective we would only offer this in circumstances where we feel the individual was clearly in need of further support to accept or make sense of the data, or where they were clearly in distress or we anticipated difficulty in them moving forward. Our aim was to get individuals to a stage where they had decided the areas where they could move forward and have a commitment to move forward. Quite a task in two hours, we felt! From the findings in the first cycle, it seemed likely that this a typical scenario faced by coaches in situations where they are operating as part of wider development programmes, and their primary contact

with individuals is the one-off provision of feedback, such as in development centres and 360-degree programmes. Hall et al. (1999) refer to this as 'one-shot coaching'.

### **March 2001**

So did our expectations of the coaching process stand up to what actually happened? The notes of our second meeting as coaches, held some four months later in March 2001, records that we agreed that the phases we identified had accurately reflected our expectation as to what the coaching phases were in undertaking the initial coaching feedback session with the individuals. That is not to say that our coaching framework actually applied in all individual circumstances, although it did for the vast majority. We saw 16 individuals rather than the 17 we had expected. Twelve of the individuals we saw as planned. We did not see Director 17 at all as he negotiated an exemption to undertaking the 360-degree exercise as he had recently completed a similar exercise as part of his MBA programme. He would, however, rejoin the process later in order to produce a personal development plan (PDP).

In the light of our experience of the initial coaching feedback sessions, some interesting issues emerged and these are discussed in the reflections section later in this chapter. We concluded that it did accurately describe the distinctive initial phases, but what it did not do was accurately reflect the iterative nature of the overall process. In particular it did not indicate the reality of movement back and forth between the phases of 'identifying the issues' and 'reaching a shared understanding'.

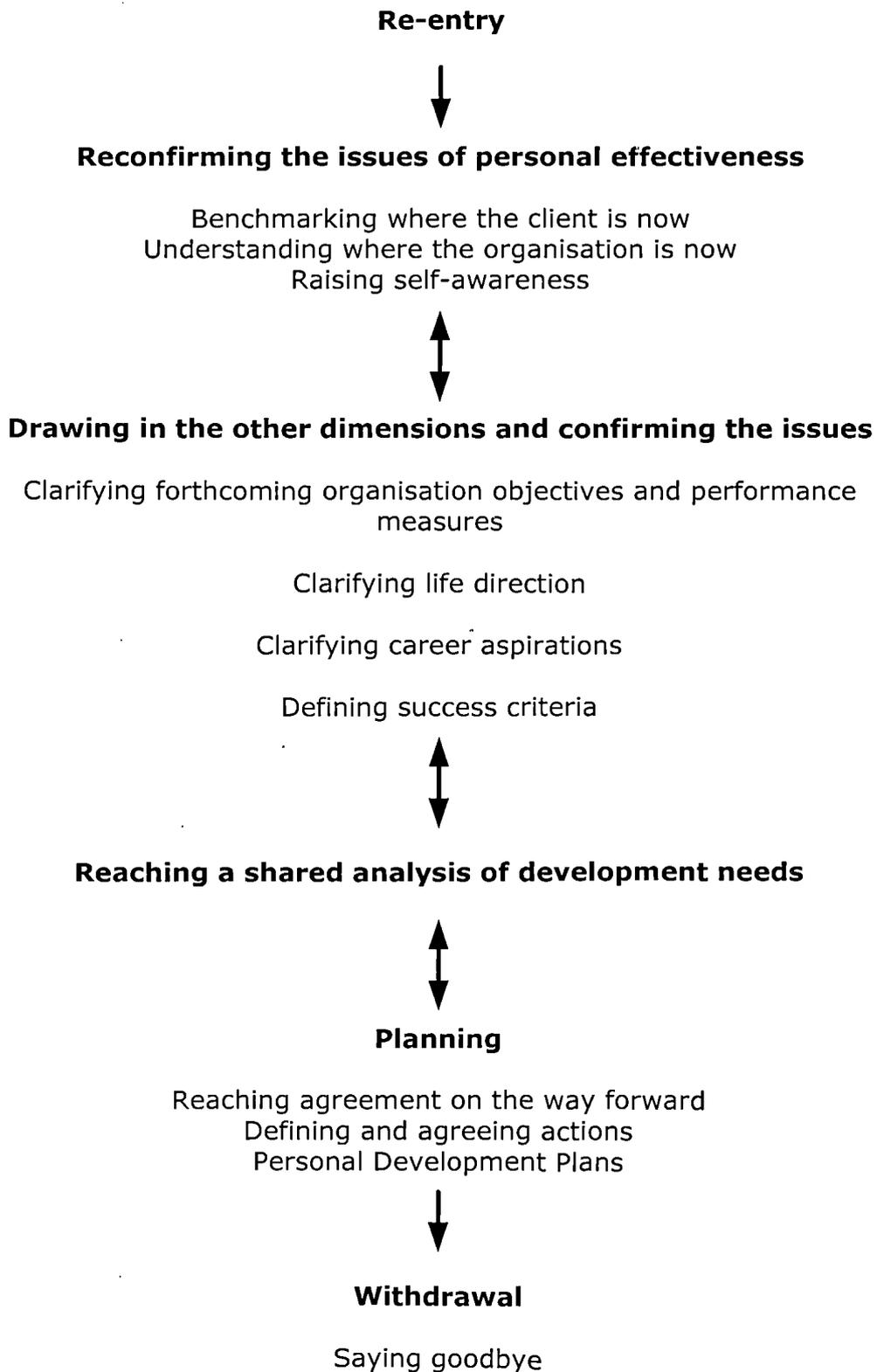
The next issue for us (as coaches) in March 2001 was to identify and describe the additional phases, based on the reality of our experiences since the previous meeting. By March 2001 we had undertaken one or two additional sessions with 11 of the individuals since a new stage of the assignment had commenced in January 2001. The aim of these sessions was to work with individuals in helping them draw up a personal development plan. Rather than adapt our original descriptions of the initial stages we decided to produce a new description of the phases in delivering this additional objective. This was in part because the original model reflected the entire process with those six individuals we only saw once (and would not see again) to support the feedback because they are progressing their PDPs with their existing executive coaches who are not part of our research.

We decided the new description would need to reflect where we had been with the 11 individuals in terms of the coaching process but while acknowledging that this description started where the previous one ended, it would not replace it.

In order to save on costs, I suggested that the client organisation commissioner contract with each of us individually for this next stage, rather than through IES. The other two executive coaches were commissioned direct by the organisation as independent/freelance coaches and I was commissioned as a coach through IES. In practice we continued to work closely together to co-ordinate our activities and continued to view this stage as just an extension of the existing assignment.

I had been commissioned separately in January 2001 to produce a document for all the 17 individuals outlining the purpose of a personal development plan (PDP), and a suggested/model PDP which was the end product for this extension to the work. The notes of our second meeting as co-researcher coaches records that we felt that the descriptions of the phases needed to reflect what we were actually doing supporting the 11 individuals in drawing up their plans. At the time of this second meeting only one individual had already produced their plan in written form, the remainder were in progress, so we acknowledged that we would need to revisit the model when we had finished the additional work. Our second description is shown as Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5: Work In Progress on the Executive Coaching Phases at the Organisation (I)**



*Source: discussion meeting of co-researchers, 2001*

## *Re-entry*

We consider that the first phase in this process is re-entry or re-contracting with the individuals. This was necessary because we had previously said goodbye to the individuals, but the purpose is the same as outlined previously under 'entry' in the previous model.

## *Re-confirming the Issues of Personal Effectiveness*

Our purpose in reconfirming the issues is the same as previously discussed under 'identifying the issues' in the previous model, although we were now able to add more description to what actually happened during this phase. Since we had already identified issues arising from the 360-degree exercise in our initial meeting, the subsequent meetings were used to reconfirm these and to check the extent to which the individual saw them as relevant. In some sessions it became apparent that life had moved on since the initial sessions. For instance, a re-organisation had been announced by the new Director General, and for one of the individuals this meant a significant change in role. For others it meant that Directorate objectives had been articulated in a different way. We also noted that many individuals had shared the issues previously identified in the initial one-to-one sessions with colleagues, their manager, or loved ones. They had received further feedback through doing this, that in many cases further raised the individual's self-awareness and also their acceptance of those issues.

## *Drawing in Other Dimensions and Confirming the Issues*

Having additional meetings enabled us as coaches to place the issues identified within a broader frame by considering with the individual other dimensions of their work and careers. We therefore added an additional phase that wasn't in our previous model. We asked about organisation objectives, specific individual performance measures and other organisation related plans. This was done with a view to clarifying with the individual any anticipated changes in their work context from which the need for additional development might also be anticipated. We also asked about their personal life plans e.g. expectations of early retirement or desire to change working hours or location. A third area of enquiry was any career aspirations e.g. promotional aspirations, change of role or organisation.

Answering these questions requires the individual to place an enormous amount of trust in one of us as their coach. This retrospectively reinforces the need for trust and empathy to have been established earlier during the 'entry' phase.

The purpose of these questions was twofold. Firstly, to place the issue in a wider context to ascertain the relative importance of the issues of personal effectiveness already identified. Secondly, we were seeking a more holistic person-centred approach by identifying additional data relevant to identifying development needs beyond those of personal effectiveness. This was so that subsequent development plans would be fully inclusive of that individual's unique context, and hence ensure the development plan created would have a greater chance of being implemented because it would reflect the development needs of the individual as a person and not just as a manager.

Our notes show that in practice we believed that when we had clarified some of these contextual matters this challenged the relevance or relative importance of some of the issues previously identified and it became necessary to revisit the previous discussion. Consequently, we added a two way arrow between this phase and the previous one.

#### *Reaching a Shared Analysis of Development Needs*

Again, this phase was the same as previously discussed in 'reaching a shared analysis of personal effectiveness' in the previous model, with the exception that we identified in placing it as part of a linear progressive model was potentially misleading. This was because the process of discussing development needs challenged whether the issues were the 'right ones', the relative importance of issues and sometimes led to these being modified before development needs could once again be discussed. We recognised that in any final model the subprocesses ought to be linked in such a way as to indicate a flow in both directions between these two phases, and so we added a two way arrow.

## *Planning*

This was an entirely new phase. Our actions involved taking the shared analysis reached during the previous phase, together with ideas about what would constitute a successful outcome in terms of the changes to be made (i.e. the success criteria), then using these to consider and identify solutions or actions to achieve the desired change.

The list of development needs and actions for addressing or solving these changes needed was recorded by means of a Personal Development Plan in this particular context. This was thanks to the brief from the organisational commissioner. This brief to produce a Personal Development Plan was directed to the executives and it was their responsibility to produce their plans. Our brief as coaches was to assist the individuals to review the options and help them identify the actions that would help them reach their development goals. In practice this assistance included ensuring the option appraisal process gave due regard to factors such as the work-life context within which the executive was operating. It included giving regard to the opportunities available to the individual, as well as weighing these up against the preferences of the individual and his or her attitude towards risk taking. We noted that occasionally it also involved the individual in practising new behaviours, or new ways of doing things, through role-playing possible future scenarios when they would have (or create) the opportunity to use these new behaviours.

Once again we decided to add a two way arrow between this phase and the previous one. This is because when faced with practical actions, some individuals want to reflect on the development needs previously agreed and/or the relative importance they had assigned to these needs.

As coaches we noted that different individuals took different lengths of time to reach this phase. In some cases the need to produce a written personal development plan seemed a strong pull and they were keen to get to this phase as soon as possible. In these circumstances our challenge to them was to hold back until the rigour of 'thinking through' enough issues had been undertaken. For others, their enjoyment or struggle to identify as many issues as possible, resulted in us feeling the challenge of nudging them on towards focusing on a few and considering options for action.

## *Withdrawal*

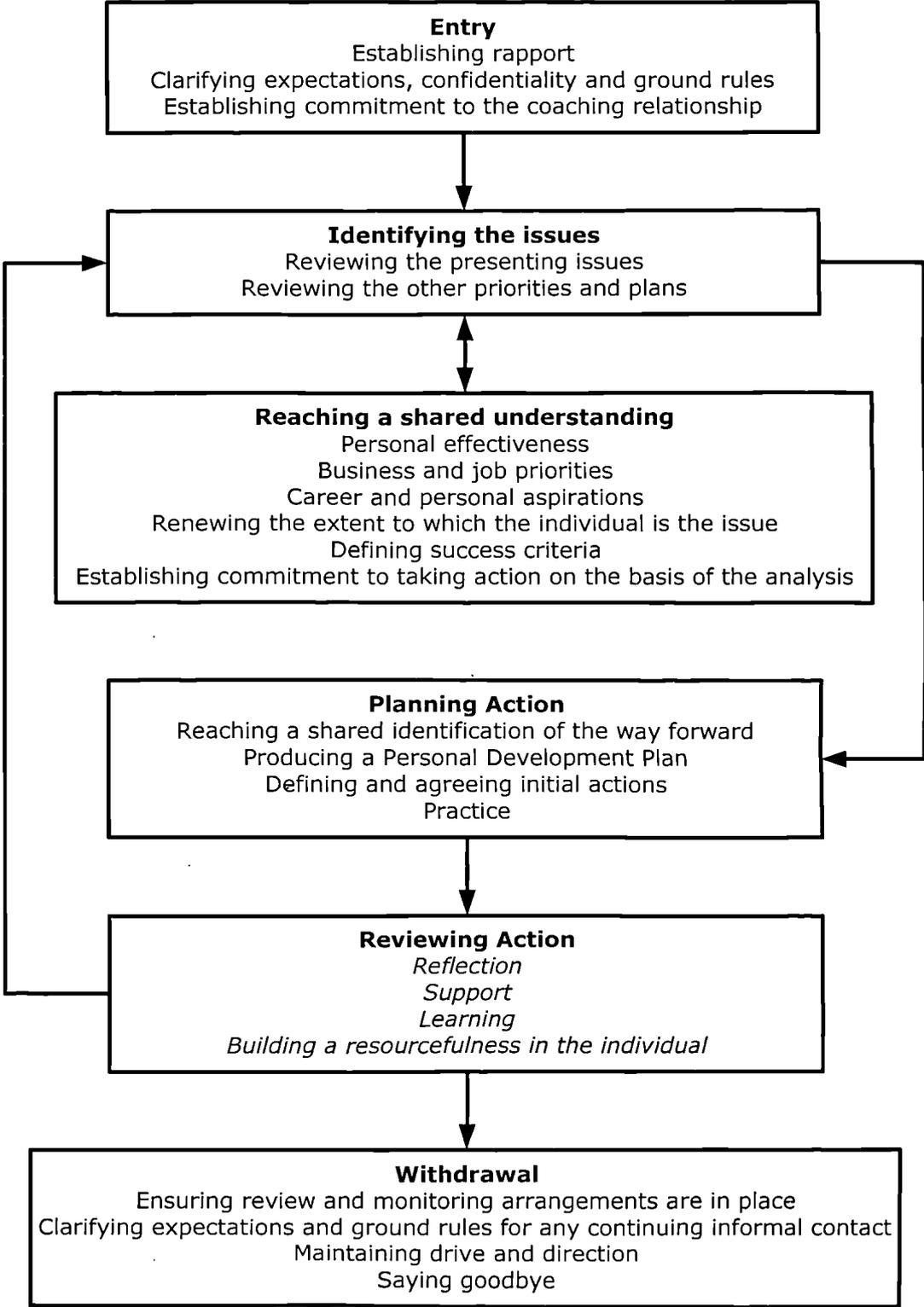
This phase was similar to that already described earlier in our previous model. We also defined withdrawal as being about saying goodbye and clarifying any arrangements for informal contact beyond the agreed session. My co-researcher Coach C refers to this as his 'conscience call' whereby he always offers individuals the option to contact him again if they encounter difficulties.

### **May 2001**

The notes of our third meeting as coaches on 29 May 2001 record that we undertook two further activities relevant to producing an overall model of the executive coaching process. Firstly, we identified and described one additional phase and added some additional description to the other phases which we had identified since our previous two meetings. We then added this to our two previous models, consolidating and refining the phases and descriptions previously identified, and reordering where necessary to produce our final version of the key phases. Our end product is shown in Figure 6 below.

Between our second meeting in March 2001 and our third meeting in May 2001 there had been a significant amount of activity between the coaches and the executives. We had undertaken an additional coaching sessions with the 11 individual executives, 15 sessions in total. By the date of our meeting all the individuals had completed a personal development plan. Five of these 11 individuals had gone beyond planning their actions into undertaking some of them and so it was possible for us to identify an additional phase in the overall coach-coached relationship, that of 'reviewing action'.

**Figure 6: Work in Progress on the Executive Coaching Phases (II)**



Source: discussion meeting of co-researchers, 2001

### *Reviewing action*

This is a distinct additional phase. The purpose of this phase is to help the individual review the action or implementation of the items on their personal development plan. The notes of our discussion meeting show we describe this phase as involving an iterative or circular process. It starts with the executives reporting back to us on actions they have attempted or new behaviours they have been practising. We then encourage them to reflect on their degree of success, where necessary challenging them to articulate the possible reasons for their apparent success or failure. What we are trying to do is to make the learning resulting from their experience conscious rather than unconscious. We then support the executive in modifying their plans on the basis of their learning to date. In some cases this involves them practising or role-playing with us as coaches the behaviours they plan to re-attempt. In three cases we feel we have also been helping motivate the individual to sustain their efforts. We have also been helping them celebrate any success they achieved.

We reflected that it had taken until the fifth out of six phases until we have used the word 'learning'. This feels wrong when we as coaches believe what we are undertaking as coaching is primarily a learning process. Upon further individual reflection since our meeting it occurs to me that this is a very significant comment for two reasons.

Firstly, in other coaching contexts where the executive coach is only employed to help with the more diagnostic second and third phases only, their interventions surely constitute the giving, and making sense of, feedback only and it may not be right to define it as 'coaching' people. What makes what we do real coaching (and a real learning experience for those individuals) is what we do in the phases of planning and reviewing the actions of the individuals. In other contexts it may be that the more diagnostic phases contribute to a wider learning experience, supported by others rather than the feedback-giver 'coach'.

Secondly, it also struck me when writing up this thesis that the cyclical process in this phase of encouraging learning by helping the executives reflect on their experience of implementing actions, draw conclusions from those experiences and plan their next actions, is very familiar. This is not just because it is what I am supporting as an executive coach every time I practice as a coach. It is familiar

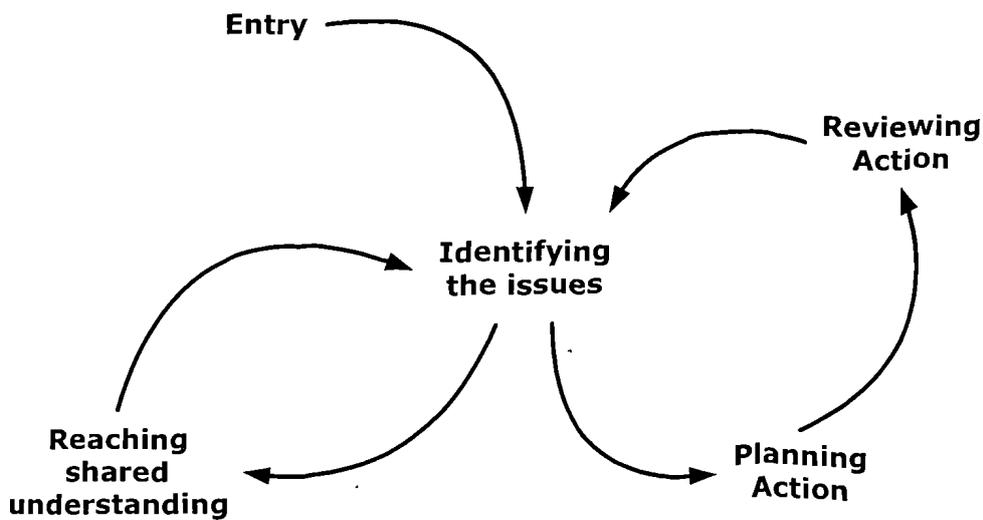
because it so closely resembles the learning process itself, as described by Kolb (1984) in his seminal work on 'the learning cycle' and Revans (1982) in his descriptions of action learning. This is not surprising, since by coaching I am supporting the individuals in their learning experience. Perhaps being coached can be equated with being a member of an action learning set in the sense that the activity itself over time also has the potential to build a desire or resourcefulness in the individual to see their future challenges as opportunities for learning and gives him or her a template for understanding how to approach this learning for himself after the coaching relationship or action learning sets have finished.

In our meeting of coaches in May 2001, we also looked at the relationship between the different phases. We redrew the various arrows and feedback loops. We considered that identifying the 'right issues' was central to the overall process. Reaching a shared understanding of the agenda to be pursued can involve revisiting the issues several times. As previously described, frequently this involved adding, subtracting or reframing some of the issues. We concluded that reaching a shared understanding was therefore a sub-phase of identifying the issues, and therefore decided to present it as unconnected with the other phases (see Figure 6). We considered that, in our experience with coaching executives at the client organisation, the remainder of the phases are significantly different with the focus being on enhancing the executive's learning. As previously described, planning and rehearsing new ways of behaving or working is followed by a structured review with the individual about the outcome(s) and this can again lead to subtracting, adding or reframing the issues to be addressed. Reframed issues lead to adjustments in action needed. The arrows we redrew reflect these movements between phases. We agreed that our final diagram (Figure 6) accurately and faithfully reflected the reality of the executive coaching process from our perspective as coaches in this one organisational context.

Since then I have reflected alone about whether Figure 6 lives up to the definition of the kind of 'model' which I had hoped for when I embarked upon this second cycle of my research. I wanted to contribute to theory and I also wanted to produce a 'user-friendly model' that was simple enough to make sense to a non-expert professional and be capable of being transformed into a tool that could be applied by other practitioners, as well as a faithful representation of the overall process. My starting point had been to generate knowledge about the executive coaching process so that commissioners of executive coaches could better understand the process, and use this knowledge to specify what their own expectations are in their

own unique development context. I concluded a simpler visual representation would be more helpful: one which emphasised the iterative nature of aspects of the process. In particular, I felt that within the process my co-researcher coaches and I had produced, the phase of 'withdrawal' was not helpfully presented. After a number of attempts, the simpler version I came up with is shown as Figure 7 below.

**Figure 7: The Executive Coaching Process**



*Source: developed from analysis of notes of meetings, 2001*

The titles of the phases identified with my co-researchers remain the same and so do all the connections between the phases, with the exception of those relating to 'withdrawal'. 'Identifying the issues', which we had agreed was central to the process, is positioned just as we had described it in our third discussion meeting – in the centre. The two parts of the overall process, so different in nature, are positioned separately: the diagnostic part to the left and the learning support part to the right. Presenting the learning support aspect as circular is an attempt to resonate with the circular learning process the individuals being coached are going through. I hope that separating these two aspects in this way should enable commissioners to describe more accurately their priorities. In some other development contexts issues may have already been identified, perhaps through corporate development centres with feedback resourced internally. In such a case

their focus may be on identifying a smaller number of individuals who would benefit from coaching with the priority being on learning support.

Withdrawal is presented as a dotted line coming from a number of different points to reflect that, in practice, a coach can withdraw at different points – just as we did in the client organisation context. Ideally, in many other contexts a coach would hope to withdraw when this is mutually agreeable with the individual, following the building up of a resourcefulness in the executive to carry on improving their performance without the coach, i.e. when the individual has also learnt about managing their own learning. In practice coaches may only be commissioned as feedback givers to identify the issues based on a shared understanding (as we were at the organisation with six of the executives). Commissioners may also require the development of a personal development plan (as we were with 11 of the organisation executives) and so withdrawal can also be after that phase. Alternatively, coaches may be hired or be able to complete the learning support cycle once or several times and withdraw after the actions attempted have been reviewed (as we had time to do with five of our final 11 executives at the organisation). I feel representing withdrawal in this way should better enable potential commissioners to understand what they are commissioning (and indeed be more understanding of what they are choosing to miss out).

## **WHAT EXECUTIVE COACHING ACHIEVES**

The second research question posed was what does executive coaching achieve or not achieve when used within this one specific organisation and development context?

The sources of data were fourfold. The first source was documentary, the original specification and contract documentation from the organisation which highlighted the organisation's expectation of what it wanted the coaching to achieve. The second source was the notes of the discussion meetings of the coaches. Thirdly, the quotes from participants on the 'post-it' notes generated by the coaches immediately following coaching sessions were used. I have included many of these in quotation marks throughout this section in order to help illustrate points. The final source was the notes of my discussions with the outgoing commissioner about her perception of what the assignment was achieving.

In total we have been involved in 36 one-to-one coaching sessions. This includes 16 initial feedback coaching sessions with 16 Directors, plus 20 further sessions with 11 individuals who we were tasked with helping produce PDPs. So what was achieved with the individuals? Given that the coaching covered the top 17 managers in this one organisation, what was achieved for the organisation? I will outline the findings firstly with regard to individuals and then later with regard to the organisation.

### **Interpreting Feedback in Context**

One of the purposes of the executive coaching element in the assignment was to support the individual participants in making sense of the feedback generated by the 360-degree process, and support them interpreting it in context. This was clear from the organisation tender documentation and subsequent contract. In our third coaches discussion meeting we reflected on who was doing the interpreting and what 'in context' actually meant in practice.

Ward (1997) asserts that the coach (he uses the word facilitator) is not in the position of interpreter. Our approach supported this assertion, as we saw our role being to assist each individual in their sense making (interpretation) process. As Ward argues

Graphs, numbers and text can have a deceptively precise and scientific aura... the feedback sometimes asks more questions than it answers, and requires really hard work on the part of both participant and facilitator fully to understand the real meaning and implications. (Ward, 1997)

The notes of the third discussion meeting reveal our belief in one clear achievement: all the participants had a raised awareness of what style of management the organisation expected of its managers in the future. This is because we were able to point to the elements in the competency framework underpinning the 360-degree exercise as the organisation's articulation of what it expected. Although most participants had seen the new competency framework, it was not until the one-to-one feedback sessions that most appreciated its significance for them as individuals. This proved of particular significance in five cases where development plans were explicitly related to these 'new' competency areas. In three cases we feel it came home to the individuals that they were part of a corporate management team and not just the most senior technical specialist in

the organisation. This meant being required to act as a leader and manager, not just a technical advisor. 'In context', therefore, can mean a recognition that management in the client organisation is different from what may have been assumed (and previously implemented). In some cases this subsequently led to the desire to change to ensure the required mode of management was adopted. One individual said:

If this exercise reflects the direction of travel for this organisation, I can see not just me but all my colleagues need to become a lot better at collaborative working. (Director 6)

Whereas for another individual a greater understanding of what the organisation expected leads to reassurance: 'It's quite reassuring to know I am on the right lines.'

In other cases, this realisation of what the organisation requires could lead to a reappraisal of whether the role was one individuals wish to take on. 'In context', therefore, can also mean a recognition of an individuals own career preferences. Two individuals described their recognition differently:

It's been useful in making me think about the implications of my having moved into a management role and I'm no longer sure it's the right way for me to go. I was much happier before I had to manage other people. (Director 11)

My feedback was very positive, so I had thought this session would be pretty pointless. But when I was talking to you I suddenly realised why I have become so frustrated in my job. I realise I thrive on creating something new. When I started here it was to create a new department. Now that's up and running I probably need to move onto a new challenge. (Director 13)

The notes of our third discussion meeting also revealed that in six cases we believe individuals had significantly enhanced self insight on issues that others could see but they couldn't. The trigger for this insight was the difference in self rating compared to the ratings of others on a number of competency areas. What the coaching gave them, that the 360-degree report alone did not, was an opportunity to explore why this might be so. This additional exploration had enabled a case for change to be recognised. 'In context', therefore, can also be linked to personal effectiveness. One individual said:

I do feel I have a clearer idea now of how others see my style of managing and what it is I am doing that makes them see things in that way. (Director 8)

There is a danger with 360-degree exercises that individuals can get hung up on their own (mean) numerical scores, and on how these compare to the average scores of the group as a whole. In our coaches' discussion meeting we believe that we were successful in having shifted the focus away from the numerical scores and into a mindset that focuses on the development potential of interpreting what the message behind the scores might mean. This meant enabling individuals to view the scores as an assessment that was just a necessary stepping stone to development and not as the output. This may not have been achieved without the coaching element.

In writing up this thesis I have reflected further on the achievement we, as coaches, are claiming for enabling all the individuals to make sense of their feedback and interpret it in context. There is perhaps a further question to be explored: how did coaching achieve this?

In the previous section I outlined one aspect of the executive coaching process we adopted, and termed it 'reaching a shared understanding'. Amongst other things, this phase involved initiating discussions through questioning of each individual around the three aspects of benchmarking, where the individual was in terms of personal effectiveness, clarifying business and job requirements and clarifying career/personal aspirations. Interpreting feedback was therefore supporting an individual's interpretation of their 360-degree exercise in these three distinct contexts. These discussions led to other issues, not directly addressed by the exercise itself, being added into the picture. It seemed reasonable to conclude that the process of questioning around these three context areas may be what helps lead to a wider degree of interpretation and sense making of the feedback generated by the 360-degree process than the report alone may have done. I acknowledge, however, that it is difficult and somewhat artificial to try to separate the total experience of the participants into the two parts of the 360-degree exercise and the coaching.

### **Acceptance of 360-degree Process and Feedback**

The tender documentation and contract agreed with the client organisation also made clear the commissioner's expectation that the coaching would ensure that the

360-degree process and the feedback were accepted and not rejected. The organisation had never before commissioned or undertaken such an exercise, although some participants had experienced similar exercises in their previous organisations. The commissioner expected that there would be resistance to this kind of exercise given the generally low level of development activity among the target group, and the lack of any culture of giving and receiving feedback within the organisation.

The notes of our third discussion meeting show that in four cases we perceived that we have clearly given a greater sense of validity to this kind of self-development process and have therefore achieved an acceptance of the 360-degree process with at least those individuals. As three of the individuals put it:

My previous experiences of these kinds of assessment was negative and as you know I did not want to do it this time. But I have seen some value in this one because it wasn't just a set of numbers. I would do it again. (Director 1)

I can see how useful these kinds of things can be and I'll be more inclined to subject myself to them in future. It gets straight to the heart of the matter – not like the last Civil Service Management College course I went on of which 90 per cent was a complete waste of time. (Director 3)

Much to my surprise I have found talking to you really useful. Some tough messages in there but it was time well spent. Thank you. (Director 5)

As coaches we perceived that it was much harder to assess the extent of our achievement in claiming we had ensured that the feedback arising from the process was accepted and not rejected. The notes of our third meeting indicate mixed success. In most cases the feedback was accepted. Our hesitation is with knowing to what extent it would have been accepted anyway without the coaching, and therefore we are reluctant to claim the coaching led to the acceptance. In four cases the exercise seemed to reinforce what the individuals already knew, but we felt that the one-to-one coaching clearly enabled them to move on from accepting the problems identified into identifying practical suggestions to address them. This is what we wish to claim for our coaching in this context. As one individual put it:

I think I already knew this about myself but seeing it in black and white and talking through with you what I can do has been useful. Without this impetus I'm not sure I would have had the drive on my own to do anything about it. (Director 13)

In addition in the six cases where we passed the individual on to their existing coaches to take forward the feedback identified, we were similarly convinced that they accepted the need for action because of the feedback they had received. Although we do not know whether action was subsequently taken in those cases, we feel that they had the drive to progress the issues in question which they might not have otherwise had. As one individual put it:

This feedback confirms discussions I have been having with my own coach. Now I am going to have to do something about it! (Director 2)

As coaches we found it rather easier to identify the two cases where we had not achieved acceptance. In one case (Director 10) we were not certain that an issue of behaviour was fully acknowledged (a style perceived as aggressive by others) despite the strength of the feedback from the 360-degree exercise itself, and the individual's self report during the coaching of similar feedback arising from his appraisals. Although the individual did agree to actions that might result in a change in his behaviour pattern towards others, it may be that he agreed to this despite the feedback and not because of it. Rejection of the feedback did not in itself lead to no commitment to change behaviour, and without the coaching the coach involved believes this commitment to behaviour modification would not have been achieved. In the other case, Director 16 was due to leave the organisation on a two year secondment to another Civil Service Department and appeared to reject that the feedback might be transferable into a new context. This is despite the fact that the Senior Civil Service competence framework applied throughout the Civil Service. He stuck to the view that it was his raters who were mistaken.

In the interview I undertook with the commissioner before she left, she indicated her perception from informal conversations she had had with participants that, in general terms, we had achieved a far higher degree of acceptance of some challenging feedback than she had expected. She partly attributed this to our high credibility with the target audience, partly the result of being part of a not for profit research-based Institute. As subject experts themselves in the public sector (mostly experts in economics or the law), the target audience had a higher regard for experts in other fields (in our case human resource management) than they might

have done for consultants from a commercial company. But this is more about who we worked for than what we did!

However, the commissioner also raised a concern about what she considered to be 'missing' feedback. Putting aside the issue of whether or not an individual would choose to tell her the full extent of their feedback, this still raises a number of interesting issues. In writing up this thesis I have attempted to reflect further on 'missing feedback' and whether there was anything in particular about what we as executive coaches did or did not do that seemed to lead to generating feedback and then achieving or not achieving acceptance of the 360-degree feedback.

Because of the approach we took as coaches in this context we could only deal with feedback raised from two sources: the 360-degree exercise and what we were subsequently able to extract from the individual themselves. We could not achieve acceptance of feedback that was not raised. It may be that in the phase of 'identifying the issues', other coaches would have taken a different approach, perhaps by asking the individual for permission for the coach to seek feedback from other people, or perhaps by the coach observing the individual at work. Certainly in other organisational and development contexts these are actions I might have suggested undertaking myself. On the other hand, it may be that it was appropriate for us to have limited the 'identification of the issues' to the two sources we did, but that our skills in questioning and probing during this phase were insufficient to lead to an uncovering of the issues from the individuals.

Alternatively, perhaps commissioners may expect too much from a 360-degree exercise and, where there are clear issues of under-performance, it may be that the organisation's own performance management systems should be dealing with these, rather than hoping a 360-degree exercise will uncover them and then deal with them.

It is my belief that the careful thought we gave to the design of the assignment was certainly helpful in increasing the acceptance of the resultant feedback in some cases. At the very least it did nothing to undermine acceptance in most cases. The design included letting individuals decide for themselves, albeit within suggested guidelines, from whom to seek feedback. It may be that this led to a trade off between increasing acceptance from the majority, but allowed the minority to

manipulate the exercise by only selecting feedback sources who were like-minded or those they perceived as unlikely to raise uncomfortable or challenging issues.

### **Maximising Learning**

A third expectation of the coaching element which we as coaches signed up to trying to achieve was that the executive coaching would challenge the individuals to extract the most from participating in the 360-degree process. Implicit in this is that we should seek to maximise the opportunity for learning to take place, and that more learning took place than may reasonably have been expected from a 360-degree exercise alone.

It is not possible for us in our particular research context to 'prove' that any learning has taken place at all, or to define precisely what that learning was. What we can do is articulate our perceptions about the results from learning we have observed for ourselves, or that the participants have told us about.

Tamkin and Barber (1998), in their study of management development programmes, found that individuals who had undergone a learning experience that involved personal feedback were much more likely to have learned something about themselves and their impact on others as opposed to acquiring technical knowledge and skills or knowledge about their organisations processes or culture. This is in line with our observations of the results of what our participants had learned.

In our third discussion meeting we noted examples where participants had decided to make use of learning to implement a change in their behaviour or the way they did things especially in order to deal better with other individuals. We noted only those instances where, in our opinion, the individuals had not decided quickly on these courses of action, i.e. where we could reasonably claim that it was our challenge as coaches during sessions that prompted the eventual decision or intent. Examples of this include showing a more caring side of themselves that they had previously thought they should not reveal, backing up strategic proposals to Board colleagues with success criteria and performance measures, being more proactive in outlining the implications of strategic direction for team members and resisting the inclination to attribute blame.

The list of 'post-it' notes includes some further examples:

It's made me realise my development is important and I need to make more time for myself and what I need. (Director 6)

For years I have assumed that everybody is motivated by the successful conclusion of a case and the sense of achievement that brings – because that's what motivates me. I now realise that other things are important to other people too and by being a bit more considerate of this I am reaping extra dividends. (Director 10)

I've woken up to taking my own development more seriously instead of just my staff's development. (Director 11)

### **Drawing Up Personal Development Plans**

The final agreement for the coaching highlighted in the tender documentation and contract was that we should seek to make sure individuals moved into an action planning mode, so that personal development plans could be drawn up.

One indicator of achievement could be viewed as the number of personal development plans (PDPs) that were drawn up. Documentary evidence arising from the assignment shows that ten of the eleven participants we saw for more than the initial feedback-giving session did draw up a PDP in 'official' organisation format. The eleventh participant was not expected to complete a PDP since, shortly before the commissioner's deadline for completion, the individual had announced her intention to leave the organisation.

But does completion of a PDP alone denote achievement of this objective? Surely the quality, relevance and appropriateness of the content is important? In my review meeting with the commissioner one of the discussion areas I questioned her about was her perception of these matters. Although participants were under no compulsion to share their PDPs with anyone else, custom and practice with other less senior groups of staff was that a copy of each PDP was sent to the HR/Training department. At the time of my review meeting with the commissioner she said that seven of the participants had submitted a copy that she had seen. Her perception was that they exceeded her expectations and were 'very good'. When I asked about the criteria she has used in coming to this conclusion, she cited the variety of job related approaches to development methods rather than just courses. In addition,

she highlighted her own observations of the actions already taken by some individuals in line with the stated intentions in their PDPs. This implies that action taken was more important than action being planned.

So, if these were the aspects hoped for by the organisation in commissioning the executive coaching, did we as coaches believe we achieved anything else? We reflected upon this in our third discussion meeting. The tender documentation and contract outlined only expectations with regard to the individual participants. We felt there were additional achievements that could be identified and they all related to the organisation as a whole.

### **Time for Reflection**

Chivers and Darling (1999) conducted a multi-case study based exploration of the link between an organisation's culture and the responsiveness of its people to feedback within the 360-degree feedback process. They found that the facilitation of feedback by internal staff can be time consuming. This creates conflict between the pressure to deliver short term business results and the clear need to create the 'mental space' for effective discussions about development to make the process worthwhile. Resourcing facilitation of feedback externally alleviates some of the conflict at an organisational level – at least for those who would otherwise be facilitating the feedback.

My experience in the second cycle indicates that time for reflection is important for individuals, particularly when they are developing an action plan or PDP. This is supported by the findings of Chivers and Darling (1999):

Reflection is also important on a personal level. Action plans based on too many areas for development put individuals under time and achievement pressure, and can be de-motivating. Action plans should be realistic and doable. The individual needs to be encouraged to find the time to assimilate what needs to be done, implement it, and review the results. (Chivers and Darling, 1999)

Time to see a coach, a coaching 'session', was protected in an individual's diary at the organisation. Once arranged, only a very small number of sessions were cancelled or rearranged by the individuals. This time was used for the kind of reflection, assimilation and review that Chivers and Darling referred to. Not everyone will have the same experience or level of reflective abilities, so for many

individuals these sessions also allow them to improve their skills and techniques in this area. This is time an individual may not otherwise spend on these issues, so at a basic level the coaching achieved time for reflection about development. As long as the organisational culture is supportive of these coaching sessions being legitimate time in an otherwise busy diary (which it was at the organisation) then having a coach may be de facto equivalent to making time for reflection.

Table 1 below gives an estimate of the time for reflection on personal development given to the organisation Directors through the executive coaching sessions undertaken. My estimate of total time spent on reflection is 35.33 hours, or 4.71 working days. Even if they had had 'good intentions', it may be that the individuals would not have found this amount of time in their diaries for structured thinking about their own performance and development unless it had been part of a wider exercise supported by the organisation.

**Table 1: Time for Reflection in the Host Organisation**

Initial Sessions	16 individuals x 1 session x 2 hours* = 32 hours Time for reflection: $32 \times \frac{1}{6}\text{§} = 5 \text{ hours } 20 \text{ minutes}$
Second Sessions	11 individuals x 1 session x 2 hours* = 22 hours Time for reflection: $22 \times \frac{3}{4}\text{¶} = 16\frac{1}{2} \text{ hours}$
Third Sessions	6 individuals x 1 session x 2 hours* = 12 hours Time for reflection: $12 \times \frac{3}{4} = 9 \text{ hours}$
Fourth Sessions	3 individuals x 1 session x 2 hours* = 6 hours Time for reflection: $6 \times \frac{3}{4}\text{¶} = 4\frac{1}{2} \text{ hours}$
Totals	Total time spent in coaching sessions: $32 + 22 + 12 + 6 = 72 \text{ hours}$ Total hours for reflection: $5\text{h}20\text{m} + 16\frac{1}{2} + 9 + 4\frac{1}{2} = 35 \text{ hours } 20 \text{ mins}$ (equivalent to 4.71 Civil Service working days)
Assumptions	
* Assumption 1: All sessions last, on average, 2 hours.	
§ Assumption 2: Time spent directly on reflection about personal development is, on average, 20 minutes in an initial session.	
¶ Assumption 3: Time spent directly on reflection about personal development is, on average, 1½ hours in subsequent sessions.	

Source: calculated from IES project records, 2001

The question then becomes how much time does an individual need, and over what time period? As coaches for the organisation executives, our meeting notes indicate that this may be best judged on an individual basis. If the coaching is the bridge between the 360-degree exercise and the creation and implementation of a PDP, a bridge which maximises the impact of both, then the time needed depends on the length of the bridge i.e. the distance each individual needs to travel and how quickly they see the bridge and accept the need to cross it. With eleven individuals two sessions were enough. For three individuals four sessions over two months was necessary for both the coach and the individual to feel happy that their action plan was sufficiently challenging to enable development and not too onerous in terms of time commitment. From this, it could be inferred that commissioners should not think in terms of a standard number of sessions when budgeting for coaching provision. Planning for an average and allowing for variances from this average may be more effective in terms of the quality of outcomes and in obtaining value for money invested.

### **The Role of Senior Managers**

I believe that one of the implications of the 360-degree feedback exercise and executive coaching was that it opened up a debate about the role of senior managers in the client organisation. In our second coaches' discussion meeting we remarked that a number of participants had challenged aspects of the competency framework underpinning the 360-degree exercise, and this has been discussed previously. In our third discussion meeting we noted that some participants had linked this to questioning not only their own individual roles within the organisation, but also the current culture within the organisation. Clearly the organisation is a Civil Service department, but it is self-contained, has no Minister and has a specific statutory role. This may have led people to operate in an insular manner.

We believe we have got individuals to be explicit about what was previously implicit, and articulate this to each other and to third parties. One example of this was confirmed by the commissioner who said that the need for the organisation to encourage collaborative working at all levels with other agencies had been raised at one of their corporate management meetings and an action plan to encourage this was being developed. Improving individual performance in collaborative working with other senior managers had been a frequently discussed topic in our confidential one to one coaching sessions.

## **Contributing to Cultural Change**

The organisational context was one of cultural change. In parallel with the 360-degree feedback exercise and the executive coaching, the organisation had also embarked upon its first ever staff attitude survey, and expressed its intention to work towards achieving Investors in People (IiP) status and conducted an initial internal assessment of its state of readiness for IiP. Both these other two exercises involved diagnosing the state of health of the organisation. The results of these two exercises were published in January 2001, and indicated a degree of dissatisfaction with the organisation in general and with communications and senior management in particular.

It is my belief that part of cultural change is expressing unease with the current set-up. It was not part of our brief in the coaching to connect with these other initiatives. However since they affected the participants (as the most senior managers) during the timescale of the additional coaching sessions, many individuals mentioned these results as part of the context within they were expected to operate. We helped create a momentum for encouraging and supporting the senior managers to have a stake in their own development as part of the cultural change. Feedback from the commissioner in our review meeting with her was that she had observed an increased readiness amongst the corporate management team, compared to before the coaching process, to get involved with championing the development of others. Clearly, this was likely to be essential in the organisation's move towards being eventually deemed worthy of an IiP Employer status.

## **IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES**

The third question we posed ourselves during our initial discussions at the outset of the assignment was 'what are the issues that we as coaches need to be aware of for working effectively as coaches within this context?' The data from our first and second formal discussion meetings proved key in identifying the issues presented, although other data from the IES project team meetings in the second cycle, and interviews with other coaches in the first cycle, also provided the initial basis for insights for some of the findings presented in the following sections.

Two main issues arose from the first meeting with my co-researcher coaches. Firstly, there was a cluster of dilemmas we faced regarding how to design the assignment and, in particular, these related to getting the balance right between

what could be achieved through the feedback report of the 360-degree exercise and what was achievable through the one-to-one coaching sessions. Secondly, we reflected on a practical problem relating to the issue of matching specific coaches to individual executives.

### **Assignment Design: the Role of Coaching 'Sessions'**

Throughout the interviews I undertook with the four executive coaches during the first cycle it became clear that it would be a mistake to think of the coaching sessions themselves as being the only place where the coaching happens. As one of the coaches said:

The coaching can be a process which begins before the first session even takes place, when executives are asked to consider their situation and start to identify their issues. (Coach 1)

I encountered practice whereby individuals are aided in this by coaches through the provision of pre-session 'work'. This took the form of a structured work-book in one case, or a straightforward set of questions in an introductory letter in the other cases. Both approaches were designed to raise the individuals self awareness prior to their first formal session.

Between sessions further diagnostic tools might be used by the individuals or the action agreed might be implemented or practised. Some coaches referred to this affectionately as 'homework'. The sessions themselves are used for a variety of activities, including the giving of candid feedback and role-playing or rehearsals for the action identified.

In the specific organisational context of the first cycle of my research however, the role of the sessions was more narrowly defined. Since the contracted assignment allowed for only one session initially, as coaches we had to assume this might prove to be the one and only session with the individuals. We therefore viewed this session as just a part of a wider coaching process. It is difficult to judge how the individuals viewed the session without asking them. I would speculate that they would view their coaching as being synonymous with the sessions.

### **Assignment Design: the Feedback Reports**

The relationship between the role of the 360-degree feedback report and the role of the first coaching session was crucial to maximising the overall experience and benefit to the individual participants in this context. Some of the objectives for using executive coaching outlined previously had to be achieved through the overall process rather than in the one session. In particular the feedback report needed to be designed and used in such a way as to prepare the ground so that valuable time in the session was not 'wasted' reading the report or clarifying its presentation. I considered from the outset that the written report would form part of the coaching process. During the design phase of the assignment the IES-based project team and the executive coaches took a number of decisions about necessary actions needed before the coaching sessions.

Firstly, we took the view that the written feedback reports should be highly personalised and should highlight what we considered to be the most helpful findings for each individual from our analysis. There is some evidence that highly structured feedback instruments are not felt to be as useful as more qualitative opportunities for feedback (Kettley, 1997) and advice offered by Peiperl (2001) highlights that numerical ratings by themselves are not enough. It is qualitative comments and insights offered which can help an individual improve performance.

Our decision was that a feedback commentary would be written to highlight behaviours that are important to other people's jobs, but are not experienced and vice versa. That is, what are the things that individuals do which they should consider continuing to do, improve doing or preferably stop doing. Areas where individuals rated themselves higher or lower than other respondents would also need to be examined particularly during the analysis stage. The commentary included highlighting aspects of the feedback where individuals might have liked to discuss with their coach the reasons which lay behind the results.

In practice, the more personalised a feedback report becomes, the more time-consuming it is to prepare from the providers/coaches' point of view. However, since the cost of report production (even for personalised reports) is cheaper than the cost of executive coaching sessions (when you take into account the opportunity cost of the executive's time as well as the coaches fees) the commissioner later reflected that the extra cost of personalised reports was definitely worth it.

During discussion with my supervisors in June 2001 I realised the significance of coaching skills having been applied during the report writing process. It was especially relevant in a situation in which individuals would receive their report in advance of meeting their coach. In the client organisation context the reports were written by IES colleagues who were not coaches, but they were all passed to me for final checking and amendment before distribution. I removed some comments and edited others, with a view to ensuring nothing written would be likely to elicit too negative a response in the reader, since a coach would not be present to help put the comments in a wider perspective, or help the individual deal with immediate emotional reaction. The comments removed were instead put into a briefing pack for the relevant coach, who was asked to feed the excised comments into their session.

Secondly, we viewed the presentation of feedback results in the report as vital to how effectively they would be internalised and actioned by the recipient. Based on the findings and recommendations of Kettley's study on personal feedback (1997), report design decisions IES took in collaboration with the client, included: reducing a threatening appearance by limiting the reproduction of detailed numerical scores; highlighting the variance between an individual's self rating and that of others; offering an overview of feedback ratings for each of the core competency headings, together with a more detailed analysis of the individual behaviours which made up that competence; where anonymity assurances to respondents allowed, narrative comments were recorded word for word to ensure none of the meaning was lost; varied the visual presentation of feedback data; and choosing not to include an average or normative score for the participating management population in the report itself.

### **Assignment Design: Pre-Session Briefing**

We gave thought to pre-session briefing of participants about what to expect and how to make the most of the overall process. An initial briefing was organised by the commissioner and was scheduled for 9 October. It was attended by myself as overall IES project manager and my IES colleague, Marie, who was leading the first major element of the project by designing and piloting the questionnaire. She was later to oversee the questionnaire analysis and report production elements. As originally conceived, this briefing session was an important vehicle for explaining the purpose and mechanics of the overall 360-degree appraisal programme. We also used it to act as a precursor to setting the eventual feedback in context. Fourteen of the 17 individuals were present.

The group was sufficiently small that individual concerns could be addressed and questions answered and there were many questions. Marie and I later reflected that concerns were probably inevitable with the introduction of any compulsory multi-source feedback programme, even one which the organisation states is purely for personal development purposes. Our opportunity to lessen personal anxiety through re-assurance about the organisational purpose, clarity about the design process and what to expect in terms of outcomes, was probably critical to the degree of acceptance of the feedback we did achieve. At this briefing and also in our subsequent correspondence with individuals we consistently advised individuals not to act on the contents of their feedback report prior to their one-to-one session.

### **Assignment Design: Timing**

We considered when to release the feedback reports and how to encourage queries about the data to be dealt with before the session itself. The team of three coaches decided that IES should aim to send the reports out to individuals one week before their scheduled feedback coaching sessions. This was in order to give the individuals time to read and assimilate the data to make sure the one to one coaching sessions were not used solely for reading. The covering letter invited the executives to contact Marie prior to their session with any queries or issues of data clarity or presentation.

In the event this decision, taken at the design stage, but after the project timetable for this element had been drawn up and did not include this extra week, added complexity to the already tight schedule for administration of the process. One-to-one coaching sessions had been arranged with all participants for the period 4 – 15 December. By the original closing date for receipt of the questionnaire responses of 13 November 2000, only 87% of expected responses had been received, and we only had all the expected responses for six of the participants. These were not the first six executives we were scheduled to see. Additional telephone and email reminders had to be undertaken as the analysis and report production schedule was being revised. Queries from executives who had already received their reports had to be answered at the same time as analysis and report production for other executives was being done.

In the end two sessions were rearranged for January 2001 as we had too few responses to enable analysis and report production in time for a one week gap with the original session dates. Whilst advance sight of the reports and the fielding of

superficial queries in advance of the coaching sessions proved important for the success of the overall process, clearly it would have been helpful to take this into account at the original project planning stage. The following two comments, extracted from the notes of the IES in-house project review meeting on 16 January 2001, highlight the feeling of those individuals at IES producing the reports:

The original estimate did not allow enough days for data analysis, nor enough elapsed time for comfortable production and checking of the reports. This problem though was significantly exacerbated by the mid-stream decision to change the template for the written report which also meant significant additional actual time taken in report writing and production. (Note of project review meeting, 2001)

The boundaries between what we hoped to achieve through the written reports and what through the coaching sessions was not transparent to the entire team. The more individualised the report template became, the more time consuming their production and the less interpretation the coaches needed to do in their session preparation. We didn't get the balance quite right. (Note of project review meeting, 2001)

### **Matching Specific Executives to Specific Coaches**

The selection of coaches was identified as a critical issue during the first cycle of the research, so I was keen to take note of what insights had already been gained. In particular the 'matching' of specific coaches to specific executives was found to require attention. In a context where initially only one session was planned it may have been that this matching was less crucial as a longer relationship was not necessarily envisaged. However since eleven of the 17 chose to continue with their IES coach for a further three sessions, in order to complete their PDPs, with the benefit of hindsight any time and attention spent on matching was likely to be effort well spent.

The commissioner had definite ideas about how she wanted the matching process conducted. Essentially her desired approach was based on the assumption that she knew all of the executives well and that I knew the coaches. Together she and I could just sit down and through a process of sharing information make the necessary pairings. Whilst this sounds straightforward enough, the process proved an uncomfortable one for me. It also made me reflect on what an organisation actually expects when it hires a coach, and whether the reasons espoused are the actual ones. The vignette below outlines the difficulty that arose for me at the start of the matching process.

The commissioner emailed me a 'pen-portrait' of each of the executives that included some factual and biographical data about their gender, age, length of tenure in their role and in the organisation, professional background and the remit of their current job role, along with any line management relationship involving other participating executives. I felt this was helpful. However, she also included an assessment of their managerial style, weaknesses and 'tips' on what problems she wanted the coaches to make sure were addressed. I felt uneasy, and I enquired about the source of these assessments. It transpired these were based on no formal assessment process, but on her personal opinion. I became anxious and I presented a counter proposal. I offered to develop some pen-portraits of the three coaches, and the executives could be asked to select the one they felt would be most appropriate for them. Given that the whole process was compulsory, I felt this would be a good way of *building in some sense of personal choice into the overall* process, albeit limited. If the individuals provided unhappy with all three coaches for any reason, IES could supply alternative choices.

I was unable to persuade her that this was a more desirable approach. As far as I could ascertain her objections were threefold. Firstly, consulting the individuals was likely to prove time-consuming, and with diaries filled up weeks in advance, it was necessary to move forward quickly. Secondly, it gave any potentially reluctant participants an opportunity to stall the process by rejecting the coaches presented to them in the hope that they may eventually be able to get out of completing the exercise altogether. Finally, her view was that the civil service culture meant allocation would be perceived as normal practice and self-selection was therefore unnecessary.

Why was I so concerned about these pen-portraits? The 360-degree process itself was designed to diagnose personal strengths and weaknesses, and to highlight any gaps in perception about these between the individuals and others. So any assessment about weaknesses or problem areas I felt ideally should be derived from this process. The 360-degree is based on people's perceptions and arguably therefore not on 'hard' evidence. Nevertheless, 360-degree appraisal utilises feedback from those who actually work with the individual, and hence are in a good position to have actually observed the performance and behaviours concerned. At the time I believed that the commissioner was not in such a good position with many of the executives to observe them for herself. Clearly she did not agree.

The alternative approach I had suggested was in tune with the practice of the NHS Leadership programme (outlined in the first cycle of my research), which the NHS commissioner believed worked relatively well over the previous three years.

This 'critical incident' raises an interesting issue for myself as a coach – to what extent should I be influenced by the preconceptions of the commissioner about any individual I am about to coach? And should I forward these preconceptions to the other coaches and, in doing so, face them with the same dilemma? The presenting 'problem', as identified by the commissioner may have borne no relation to other evidence or the perception of the person to be coached. To what extent can I be uninfluenced by these perceptions once they have been outlined to me, even though I did not seek them? Recalling the 'relationship triangle' I drew in the first cycle, I felt as though this is an example of a commissioner exerting control in a manner that I felt compelled to resist. In this context I am able to be true to my own belief in the process and work with the individuals using the results of the 360-degree feedback when they materialise and put aside the commissioner's comments. In other contexts, I would wish to reach a joint diagnosis with the executive about areas to work on the basis of other evidence generated specifically in the coaching context.

Following discussion with the other two coaches in our November 2000 meeting, they shared my concern but it seems they had already encountered such a situation in the past. We agreed that I would forward them the factual and biographical element of the pen-portraits for those executives they were to coach, but edit out the second element of the commissioner's personal comments, so that there was no risk they would be influenced by them.

I never deliberately consulted these personal comments again, but I noticed that a number of the commissioner's perceptions of one individual (Director 10) were also shared by two of the executives. The Director described as 'a bully' by the commissioner was similarly described by two of the individuals I was coaching, in the context of their own difficulties in the competency area of influencing others. I had no reason to believe that any of the Directors being coached were aware of the briefing I had received from the commissioner.

During our second meeting as co-researcher coaches, we identified and reflected upon three different issues which had arisen since our previous meeting. These

relate to the selection of coaches, how trust between coach and commissioner can be affected by a problem between a coach and executive and the background and skills that coaches need.

### **Coach Selection: Internal vs. External**

The findings from the first cycle identified the background of coaches as an important issue for organisational commissioners to be aware of with executive coaching. One aspect of this issue was the sourcing of coaches internally or externally. In commissioning IES to deliver its 360-degree appraisal process and executive coaching, the commissioner made the decision to use executive coaches external to the organisation. Notes from the IES project review meeting on 13 November 2000 suggest that external coaches should seek to identify the rationale behind a decision to source executive coaches externally. This is important to the relationship between coach and commissioner. In this context the small size of the client organisation and the absence of people with the necessary skills may have necessitated this regardless of other reasons. However, on reflection we concluded that we should have made enquiries to check the rationale. The IES project team involved in supporting the administration of the questionnaires 'in the field' was forming a view about why it was a sound decision in this case, as the following extract from the meeting notes outlined:

We have received an unexpectedly large number of queries from respondents about the process. Most are pleased to accept our verbal reassurances about the confidentiality of the process overall and their individual responses in particular as IES undertakes to ensure no comments are attributable. These reassurances were in the covering letter and briefing/guidance also. Our role as 'neutral administrators' of the process is clearly crucial – we can see why this exercise could not have been resourced internally. There is low trust. (Notes of project review meeting, 2001)

Coaches able to identify early that the 360-degree process for self-development is being undertaken in a hostile environment are able to prepare for this, and acknowledge it as a key environmental context. In comparison to similar assignments I have undertaken in other organisations before and since, I would say the client organisation context was more hostile. In other organisational contexts (particularly in the private sector) I have found concepts such as the 'learning organisation' and 'seeking out feedback' are more commonly known and accepted by managers. The confidentiality issue, highlighted in the questionnaire distribution and completion phase, raised a bigger question for us about the degree of

suspicion, mistrust and concern that 'my boss might want to pay me back if I am honest' attitude present in the organisation. An extract from the same meeting says:

Perhaps next time we should suggest/undertake a more collaborative process with the client to diagnose the 'state of readiness' of the organisation for 360-degree feedback. We relied almost entirely on the client's diagnosis which either underestimated the likely resistance or, if it did identify this, it was not shared with us. (Note of project review meeting, 2001)

### **Trust: the Coach-Commissioner Relationship**

Another issue we discussed in our second discussion meeting was identified following our reflection on a critical incident. This arose after the first sessions when 15 of the 16 initial sessions went well and as coaches, our perception was that rapport was achieved and progress made. In this sense the matching process worked well. The following vignette describes my experience of what happened in the remaining case.

My co-researcher Coach B was initially matched with Director 5, a white female in her forties who worked in the private sector until she joined the organisation some two years earlier.

The executive reported to the commissioner that she was unhappy with her coach. Prior to my hearing this from the commissioner, Coach B had also reported to me that it was not a wholly satisfactory meeting. They just did not hit it off, and he had been unable to establish any rapport with her. This was a potentially tricky situation, as the individual was one of the few Directors the commissioner had expected to be generally supportive of the process as a whole. It was unfortunate that there was a mistake with the presentation of her written report – the only such mistake to be identified. The IES project team checking the reports should have spotted the mistake and corrected it, but had not, nor had Coach B. The Director had. She perceived that Coach B was slow to grasp the significance of the mistake when she pointed it out to him. As she later explained to me in a telephone discussion:

Because of this I lost faith in him. We also have different styles - his pace was slower than mine - which made it hard for me to relax.  
(Director 5)

Following a series of telephone calls between myself (as overall project manager) with Coach B, the organisation client and the Director concerned, it was agreed by all that the best way forward was for the report to be amended, and another session to be arranged with the Director with me assigned as her feedback coach. There would be no cost to the organisation for the original session. Coach B and I were happy with the outcome as we share the belief that no 'matching process' is perfect, and that the relationship between the coach and coached is based on empathy, rapport and 'chemistry' as well as on skills. The Director ultimately reported her replacement session was helpful and choose to work with me as her coach to assist her in producing her PDP.

It was the concern and reaction of the organisation client in the vignette described above which caused us as coaches pause for thought. Her emails and telephone calls to me during the period indicate a high degree of anxiety and potentially a loss of faith in all the reports, IES itself as a provider and certainly doubt about Coach B's skills in particular. It may be that as providers we could do more to warn clients in advance that 'matching' is not a perfect process and offer that, if necessary, an alternative coach can be provided. It was also interesting that the client insisted it that was me that did the additional session, rather than our third Coach C. This seemed to be based on a belief that, as the overall project manager, I was surely the 'best' coach? Coaches B and C and I all knew that they both had more years experience than I as executive coaches. However, the Civil Service is noted for its cultural regard for hierarchy and status, so perhaps their preference for the 'boss' merely reflects the values which underpin that organisational culture. Some months later it appeared that the client's faith in Coach B's ability had recovered somewhat; she reported to me that she had received informal feedback from two other individuals he had coached indicating they thought extremely highly of him.

### **Coach Selection: Background and Skills of Coaches**

Another issue identified during the first cycle was that commissioners should pay attention to the professional training and background of the executive coaches, or otherwise ensure they are able to define and understand the underpinning conceptual framework or model of coaching being applied. This was in order to anticipate the very different experience of coaching those they coached were likely to encounter.

In our second discussion meeting in March 2001 we shared our perceptions about our backgrounds. We concluded that it was our skills and styles that were significant, and not just our backgrounds. This leads to wider questions- of relevance to potential coaches and commissioners alike – of how people come to be coaches, what is it that denotes the 'good' practitioner coach from the bad and can someone be trained to be a good coach? These are important questions in the absence of any widely available certification or quality kitemarks for coaches that might otherwise have provided commissioners with a proxy for inferring a level of training, competence to practice and quality assurance of service. We attempted to unpack our experience with a view to uncovering some of the issues which may be of relevance to these questions, by reflecting on ourselves as practising coaches. In doing so we do not put ourselves up to be examples of good or competent coaches as we have no criteria or benchmark for doing so. Rather we sought to understand what it is about us that enables us to feel confident in our practice.

One of my co-researcher executive coaches, Coach C, had a career background which began in the Civil Service in the 1960s. He then moved into a range of personnel management positions within Unilever and the NHS, culminating with the role as Director of Personnel and Training at an NHS Trust. We felt that the relevance of his background to coaching was primarily that he understands, broadly speaking, the way in which large organisations work and the different ways things get done. Coach C has been self-employed since 1989, carrying out human resource development projects for a wide range of public and private bodies, both independently and as an associate of larger consultancies. The majority of Coach C's freelance work involves giving feedback to individuals, and then assisting them in using this information constructively. We reflected that these were his two core skills relevant to his executive coaching practice. His specific professional training for executive coaching came from the sphere of career counselling and much of his early practice was helping groups and individuals with career changes initiated by redundancy. His age (he was 60 in 2000), and his personal experience as a Director, meant that his background also gave him personal credibility in fulfilling the role defined as a 'post-heroic' coach (Cauldron, 1996) who had proved himself as a peer in a role equivalent to those he was coaching. It may be that this was important to some executives who might have felt more comfortable working with a coach who had 'been there done that'. When undertaking executive mentoring, his empathetic style and listening skills could position him in an 'elder statesperson' or counsellor mode of operating (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 1999).

My other co-researcher executive coach, Coach B, had a different background, skill set and style. Coach B began his career as an insurance underwriter back in the 1970s, before moving into personnel management and then organisation development. He had worked in a number of roles in Local Government and the NHS. We reflected that this may be partly where he got his understanding of how things get done in large and medium-sized organisations, particularly in the public sector. He had been a freelance executive coach since 1994, and was also a consultant in organisational learning to an NHS Trust and a Visiting Lecturer on the MBA programme at a university business school. Coach B specialised in the development of individuals and teams, and had a wealth of experience of giving one-to-one feedback to individuals in a variety of different contexts, including outdoor teambuilding exercises. His specific professional training for executive coaching, together with his professional code of conduct, came from an organisational development and process consultancy context. His early work included advising Chief Executives and other Directors in approaches to change management. His general appreciation of how organisations operate and how things get done, as well as his ability to sensitively coach an individual towards their goals, made him what Cauldron (1996) would consider the ideal executive coach. When operating as an executive mentor, his thoughtful and 'academic' style meant he could be classified as a 'reflective mentor' (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 1999).

I am the youngest of the three coaches, being 37 at the time of the assignment. I started my working life as a graduate management trainee in IBM (UK) Ltd in the mid 1980s. During a twelve year period I undertook a range of general management, project management and specialist training and development roles within a number of NHS organisations before moving into HR consultancy. The relevance of my background to coaching was we felt primarily the broad understanding this gave me of the organisational context within which executives at different levels have to work, and the pressures and dilemmas they can face. Having been employed by, and promoted within, eight different organisations and having more recently consulted widely in over 40 different public and private sector organisations since joining IES, we reflected that I am also alert to the 'clues' of organisation culture as well as the dynamics around power, politics and accountability. We concluded that my credibility in this organisational context of highly qualified professional and intellectual participants came partly from my connection with IES, supplemented by my MBA and CIPD qualifications. Certainly, I found my knowledge base around business processes, results, concepts and models very helpful in this context to help introduce greater rigour into participants'

thinking. My communication skills, ability to provide challenge to an executive's assumptions, and probe beneath the surface of issues to test the logic of decisions would position me as a 'critical friend' style of 'reflective mentor' (Clutterbuck and Megginson, 1999).

Our search to understand what it was about our make-up that enabled us to feel confidence in our practice as coaches led to one of the most animated of all our meetings. The cynic in me wondered at the time if it was just that we enjoyed talking about ourselves! However, it doesn't explain the number of additions and crossings out we made on our flipchart list, and our constant challenges about whether items were either necessary or shared by us all. In process terms it was in this area of our reflections that we had most disagreement. It reminded me of the disagreements among the coaches I interviewed in the first cycle of my research over the definition of coaching. These are clearly the two fiercely contested aspects of executive coaching. We finally came to an agreement on the make-up that we perceived best described what we brought to our practice as coaches to this one context. The list we agreed upon is reproduced here as Table 2.

**Table 2: The Make-up of a Good Coach**

- Personal credibility
  
- Ability to give feedback to individuals and assist them in using this feedback constructively
  
- Core skills in observation, active listening, probing questioning, summarising and explaining
  
- A trained user of a range of diagnostic tools
  
- Understanding of training needs analysis at the individual level
  
- Knowledge of training delivery methods, particularly those that integrate

learning and day-to-day work

- Detachment from the immediate work environment
- Respect for confidentiality of an individual's data, process and opinions
- Broad understanding of the way in which organisations work and the different ways in practice that things get done
- Broad understanding of the context, management pressures, and dilemmas that executives at different levels have to face
- Alertness to the 'clues' of organisation culture, and the dynamics around power, politics and accountability
- Chemistry or 'fit' with the particular executive being coached

*Source: meeting of co-researchers, 2001*

In writing up this thesis I have reflected further about what makes a good coach and what organisations can look for in coaches. It seems to me that personal credibility cannot be emphasised too highly. Credibility can be, by its very nature, a perishable commodity, hard to gain and easily lost. Certainly Coach B's experience with one executive at the organisation (described above) emphasised how quickly credibility can be lost with an individual.

I am unsure that credibility comes from a coach's background, although clearly the necessary core skill set does. For some, executive coaches with credibility do need to have proved themselves as experts in something, as in our research context. But could this expertise have been in law, economics or finance? On the basis of my experiences in other contexts, it seems clear to me that credibility can also come through personal success and even recommendation as a coach. Certainly most of my executive coaching relationships come through personal recommendation. Commentators like Cauldron (1996) argue, as I do, that it is not as important for a

coach to know the particular field as it is for the coach to understand how business (in the broadest sense) works, and have the ability to coach the executive towards his or her goals. However what made us credible in this one organisational context might not suit another context, where we may have been perceived as too 'academic'. This implies that commissioners need to understand what credibility might look like to their executives. Asking the executives or letting them choose from a shortlist may be the only ways to know in a larger organisation.

Detachment from the immediate work environment was also important in our research context. I feel this distance was more help to the organisation managers than if we have worked in the organisation itself, or have come from the same legal or economics professions as those we are coaching. This is because our very distance from the specifics allowed us to 'see the wood for the trees' and to demonstrate empathy with individuals. This probably assisted us in the entry phase of the executive coaching process.

I find myself speculating whether having a broad understanding of management work in organisations (however obtained) also allowed us to help individuals developing and planning action to generate and select options which are practical (not just theoretically possible) to their context. Would I feel qualified to coach entrepreneurs, parents or others of whose context I may have no understanding? Despite my belief in having some generic coaching skills, I do not feel qualified to coach people in such different contexts where the relationship power and politics are presumably very different. Those without direct experience working in organisations would need to obtain some knowledge and understanding of this context through their training in order to operate effectively.

I have also been speculating about how an executive coach-in-training obtains the necessary skills. The list my co-researchers and I came up with (see Table 2 above) contains some skills but are not significantly different to those required in the training of many groups. The skills of observation, active listening, probing questioning, summarising, explaining and demonstrating a commitment to an individual are those you find in the literature on what makes an effective mentor (Clutterbuck, 1998), the key skills of the manager as a coach (Bolt 2000, Parsloe and Wray 2000) and in the basic training of occupational psychologists, counsellors or therapists (Williams & Irving, 2001).

I wondered to what extent the list we came up with in Table 2 was similar to the existing literature on what makes a good coach. I hoped this would help me reflect on whether I was a good coach. Hall, Otazo and Hollenbeck (1999) conducted interviews with over 75 executives and 15 coaches in the US. They found that for executives the competence of coaches was generally a given. Executives perceived that the two primary factors in 'good' coaching are honest, reliable feedback and good action ideas. Only the first of these appears in our list, although the second is perhaps implicit. Whilst most of the coaches in the US study agreed with the executives on good listening and action recommendations, the coaches were more likely to stress the importance of connecting personally and of making a good match or fit between coach and client. This is certainly something which appears on our list too.

Clients also find that trying out the coach's suggestions and then reporting back was a successful learning tool. While results matter to coaches, the process for getting to those results is just as important. (Hall et al, 1999)

## Reflections on the Second Cycle

### **ABOUT THE ETHICS AND IMPLICATIONS OF MY RESEARCH APPROACH**

I am increasingly concerned that to date my research has given no 'voice' to those who have been coached, although I feel able to justify their exclusion in this research context. Access to the executives in the client organisation is not possible as it would compromise the explicit agreement I made about the research at the outset with the commissioner. I would regard this as unethical, even though she has now left the organisation. Talking to other executives I (or my co-researchers) have coached in other contexts would not be helpful either in furthering an understanding of the coaching process in the organisation context.

Of greater concern to me, however, is to what extent I have undertaken this second cycle of my research with due regard to the rights of third parties, in particular the organisation's Directors who do not even know about the research. In other words, has my research been completely ethical? The assignment commissioner was fully supportive from the outset about the organisation being a 'host organisation' for the research, although a clear condition from her perspective was that none of the participants should be informed. A second condition was that

none of the individuals should be identifiable in any publication arising from the research. I wonder whether in my enthusiasm for gaining this access I may have compromised my intuitive preference for informing the 17 individuals and seeking their consent. It may be that this consent was unnecessary. The organisation was not acting as a client infrastructure for this cycle of the research, it was acting as a 'host' or context to the research. None of the people being coached were research participants, the executive coaches were, and the coaches were fully involved in all decisions regarding the research. In that sense the assignment commissioner was a third party herself and, could legitimately be said to have been representing the organisation in deciding whether it was likely to have any adverse consequences for the organisation or any of the people who worked within it.

I can only speculate on why the commissioner introduced what I now consider to be the 'secrecy' and 'anonymity' conditions. Did she not want them to know because she thought they might object? If this was the case, would I have continued anyway? In this, I am not sure. Was it because she thought it might complicate the explaining and 'marketing' of the 360-degree exercise? Or did she genuinely believe it was unnecessary as she was acting as a legitimate representative on behalf of the organisation. In future I would wish to probe an organisational representative on the rationale for not making the research more widely known, as I will never know what the commissioner's rationale, and that bothers me.

The lack of awareness in the organisation about the research also led to a practical problem when the assignment commissioner left in early April 2001. Before she left I agreed with her that I would inform the newly appointed Director General about the research and ask him to be my organisational contact. I felt that I needed a contact so that I could ensure that any use of examples or vignettes I subsequently wished to publish from the research did not allow individuals to be identified (as per the 'anonymity' condition). The practical problem was that he sought to extend the anonymity to include the identity of the organisation and not just the individuals within it. He has a PhD himself and I found him to be supportive of the research and extremely supportive of the 360-degree exercise, the executive coaching that had been commissioned, and the informal feedback he had received from some of the Directors about the IES executive coaches' performance. However, he felt that in such a small organisation, it would be impossible for the identity of those being coached to be kept truly anonymous. In addition he felt the profile of the organisation might be weakened by information about the management capability of the organisation getting into the public domain.

Initially I felt devastated by his position. Could I have prevented this by taking a different approach at the outset, perhaps through a written agreement with the commissioner about my intention to publish my findings? I felt that presenting the findings in a named organisational context would help lend them credence by enabling them to be seen as grounded in reality. Or was this just one of the problems that all research conducted in organisational contexts can suffer, since the personalities and politics in organisations can change, even in a relatively short space of time? On the advice of my supervisors I was keen to persuade him to compromise, as the worst position from my perspective was to find myself unable to present my thesis or any other publications arising from it without him feeling he was entitled to see it and wield editorial control over every paragraph. I found him helpful but determined, and after some discussion we agreed that I could present all my research unseen by him on the basis that my thesis and all other publications should refer to the work as 'in IES' consultancy experience' or 'in a small Civil Service Department'.

### **ABOUT DEFINING EXECUTIVE COACHING**

During the course of my second cycle I have reflected further about the nature of executive coaching. More has been published by practitioners on the coaching of executives (Goldsmith et al., 2000, Cacas, 2001 and Lyons, 2001) as well as by academics on wider management development issues. I am forming the view that executive coaching is just one part of a growing sector in coaching, mentoring and other one-to-one collaborative support processes: a slice of a growing cake.

A recent survey of UK management development in 500 organisations by the Institute of Management and the Open University (Mabey & Thomson, 2000) provides some specific data on management development practice within organisations. The most common informal method for companies with more than 100 staff was planned on-the-job development (84 per cent), followed by coaching (80 per cent) and then mentoring (65 per cent). The survey is run infrequently making trend data problematic. Nevertheless, Mabey and Thomson identified coaching and mentoring as showing a considerable increase compared with their 1996 survey data (12 per cent and 8 per cent increase respectively). The Training and Development Survey 2001 (CIPD, 2001) is a smaller scale survey that has been running for three years but because of changes in questions and data reporting, trend data over the period is also problematic. Nevertheless, the 2001

survey identifies over 80% of UK companies utilising mentoring and/or coaching methods to develop their people.

That there can be a difference of opinion about the nature of executive coaching, and how it relates to mentoring and other support processes, is becoming even more apparent. I wonder if this is partly just a question of labels and semantics. The boundaries between what a coach, a mentor, counsellor or organisation development consultant 'do' can be hard to see. Given that the skill sets of each are similar as well further confuses the picture. As one of my co-researcher coaches put it 'there are as many differences as there are academics and practitioners'.

Although I learnt a lot about definitions of executive coaching from the literature during the first cycle and have since contributed something towards developing a clearer definition that should help potential commissioners understand what they may be commissioning (Carter, 2000, Carter 2001a), I wonder if understanding how it has been applied may be more helpful than a definition alone. With definitions, everyone seems to be fighting for their particular label to 'own' the same piece of turf. With applications in practice, the link between practice and the literature may be more meaningful to potential commissioners.

Reflecting on the literature I have read during the period of my second cycle, and reflecting back again at the discussions at the IES Forum for Research Club members in September 2000, I am considering some simpler distinctions. Broadly speaking in a business context, a mentor prepares individuals to perform better in the future and grooms them for higher and greater things such as career advancement (Allen et al., 1999). It's almost an extension of the old concept of apprentice-journeyman-master, and the relationship can last over many years. (Sangster, 2000). In the past mentors have largely been volunteers, drawn from within the organisation's own management ranks (Gibbons, 2000) or more senior members of an individual's specialism/professional association. More recently, external paid-for mentors have been used, especially for individuals already at a more senior level (Clutterbuck & Megginson, 1999).

A counsellor helps an individual come to terms with an event of some kind and prevents negative influences from the past getting in the way of future behaviour. Coaches without training in psychotherapy or counselling should not be intervening in an individual's deep personality issues or offering therapy (Downey, 1999,

Williams & Irving 2001). They should limit the coaching objectives to workplace support that addresses personal development (Pinchot & Pinchot, 2000). In practice, however, I wonder how easy coaches would find it to draw clear cut boundaries and on what basis can a coach recognise an issue is beyond his or her skill?

The role of organisation development consultant has developed from the change management movement and from Edgar Schein's approach to 'process consulting' (Schein, 1997). It is the consultant's responsibility to identify, accelerate and ease the process of organisational change for individuals and teams.

Coaching comes into this picture to rapidly improve behaviours and performance 'now', not at some future career point. A coach's goals are therefore immediate. Coaches are usually trained to listen and observe, to customise their approach to individual needs, and to elicit sustainable solutions and strategies from individuals. A structured and purposeful dialogue is at the heart of coaching (Lyons, 2000). While the coach uses feedback and brings an objective perspective, the individual is held accountable for taking the steps to produce the results he or she desires. In the past coaches have tended to be hired from outside the organisation, although more recently the creation of internal cadres of coaches is on the increase.

The term 'executive' coaching ought to be straightforward. Surely it just means applying coaching techniques to executives i.e. senior managers and directors? I am starting to believe that it is just as simple as that. But with so much mystique surrounding the concept, we can all be forgiven for wondering whether there is actually more to it than that in terms of a definition.

### **ABOUT WHETHER EXECUTIVE COACHING SHOULD BE A VOLUNTARY OR COMPULSORY PROCESS**

One issue arising for me was that with two individuals (Directors 2 and 10) in the client organisation I felt that there was an objection and hostility to the whole process. One example will serve to illustrate the point:

Director 10 exhibited a number of behaviours which, when taken together, led me to conclude hostility to the process. Each behaviour taken separately however

would not necessarily have pointed to the same conclusion. He was a white male 56-year old career civil servant.

Before our first feedback coaching session, he rang to say he was not prepared to meet in the room which had been allocated for the purpose; he wished the session to be in his office. From the beginning of the session, he seemed careful to be 'in control' by steering me to a particular chair thereby ensuring there was a table between us. He lent back in his chair and crossed his arms. Because of the layout of his office, leaning back meant he was positioning himself as far away from me as possible and in crossing his arms he created what felt to me like an additional physical barrier between us. He avoided eye contact with me for the majority of the time but, when he did look at me, he stared hard. His facial expressions appeared to me to be aggressive rather than thoughtful or distracted.

He asked a battery of questions about the purpose of the organisation in commissioning the exercise, and the validity (or not) to his job of the underpinning competency framework developed by the Cabinet Office on behalf of the whole Civil Service. In short he challenged every conceivable aspect of the exercise, without seeming to be interested in a response to those questions.

Although the content of his remarks and questions was entirely reasonable, his language included referring to me as 'a girl' and his manner and tone was generally one I would describe as laughing at me (not with me). Clearly I had not achieved a rapport with him. But I felt this was much more than a lack of rapport. It did occur to me that his hostility may have been towards me rather than the process. At one point he stated that he had only gone along with completing the form and being seen to meet me so that he would not be singled out for a 'ticking off' for not playing ball, but he had no intention of doing anything further.

Towards the end of the initial session I declined to continue on the grounds that he was not a voluntary participant, and I had no desire to work with someone who was unwilling. Looking back, this proved to be a turning point in my coaching relationship with him. After some discussion he asked me to continue, the atmosphere became more cordial and he agreed to address his concerns about the organisation to his colleagues whilst taking the opportunity to work with me on some related issues. He subsequently asked the commissioner for me to be

allocated to provide him with additional sessions. I would describe my subsequent sessions with him as productive.

Hostility to the compulsory nature of the process meant that the majority of time in the initial sessions with these two individuals was spent on entry and contracting with the individual, as per the vignette provided in the box above. This served as a reminder that that coaching is not an intervention with a straight jacket timetable. It is also a reminder that provision of coaching to some individuals is an example of power and politics exerted within organisations when they seek to control or channel the behaviour of their staff. In my experience, voluntary choice is rarely fully present for an employee or paid manager. At the client organisation participation was compulsory. However, as coaches we can only move to where the individual is willing to go. An individual can be seen to turn up to coaching sessions, but coaches cannot help them change or learn unless they are willing to actively engage in the process.

### **WHEN THE 360 DOES NOT REVEAL ANY DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

With two individuals the 360-degree report itself did not reveal any significant gaps in perception between the individuals and others, nor did it indicate any real weaknesses in performance or personal effectiveness. It is possible to speculate on the possible reasons for such an occurrence.

It may be that some individuals do not have any development needs, at least in the sense of having no performance gaps against an organisational competency framework. The Directors coached at the client organisation included all the Senior Civil Servants and provision was not targeted at those perceived as likely to have development needs. If this was the case, in this context it could be argued that the commissioner wasted money by commissioning coaching provision on behalf of these two individuals (if they were already fully competent and fully exhibiting the required behaviours).

Alternatively, it could be that the two individuals and the 360-degree raters they selected were unwilling or unable to comment adversely on the performance of these two. Interestingly, the personal development plans subsequently produced by the two, showed that development needs were identified and agreed. From this, other commissioners can be aware that they should not rely exclusively on a 360-

degree exercise to identify development needs. In the client organisation context, the coaching process came into its own, because as coaches we were able to use our questioning skills to uncover possible development needs that may otherwise have been missed.

### **WHEN THE FEEDBACK IS UNSURPRISING TO THE EXECUTIVE**

We found that many of the individuals at the organisation had a clear view of the issues prior to their session. It is interesting to note that this is in line with the findings of Mabey (2001) in his field study of participants in a 360-degree programme for managers at a UK university, who found that the content of the feedback was unsurprising for the majority of those managers. Although Mabey does not offer any explanation for this particular finding, he does identify that, despite unsurprising content, the process of participating had the effect of catalysing more focussed self-development activities. In our organisation context, the degree of self-awareness may have been greater than the commissioner expected, in which case it begs the question of why the individuals had not done something about their issues previously! As coaches, we challenged them about this where we could. Possibly, the process of filling in the 360-degree questionnaire (self-assessment) and/or reading the feedback report and noting the gaps in perception may have enabled them to identify relevant issues in advance of a session with one of us. In terms of developing a model, this confirms our original view that the model of the process should include pre-session activities.

### **ABOUT SAYING GOODBYE**

Withdrawing from the relationship after the first session was perceived as a bit 'odd' from the individual's point of view when we later came back to continue working with them. Perhaps in other contexts, whatever the contractual arrangements with the organisation, it might be better to assume we would be continuing with them all when we were developing our coaching framework. We could have made sure the withdrawal phase involved some element of re-contracting (i.e. giving them the explicit ability to opt out of the relationship at that stage).

### **ABOUT CARRYING OUT COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY ACTION RESEARCH**

One of my concerns after the first cycle was that the coaches had been treated more as research 'subjects' than as participants or collaborators in the research

process. I feel this position has now been rectified. However, the commissioner (Training and Development Manager), who had been involved as a key participant co-researcher in the first cycle, was less active in this second cycle. This may be because she was leaving the organisation or that her prime consideration was in seeing a successful conclusion to the 360-degree initiative, and that took priority over our prior relationship as co-researchers. Alternatively, it may be that she or I (or both of us) found it difficult wearing simultaneously the multiple 'hats' of co-researcher, assignment buyer and supplier. The power dynamics inherent in a buyer-supplier relationship did not sit comfortably for her, I suspect, or indeed on one occasion with me.

In terms of rigour in method I have found the second cycle leaves me less confident than after the first. This is partly because, in practice, I was not able to gather data from all the stakeholder groups I would have liked, nor in the manner I would have liked. I knew from the outset that direct access to the executives' perspective would not be possible. The 'post-it' notes technique turned out to be a poor substitute for direct input by the executives, since we as coaches were the sole 'gatekeeper' and interpreter of what was relevant and what was captured. I am confident, however, in reflecting that capturing the perspective of all three coaches within the coach stakeholder group worked well and that, as in the first cycle, giving my co-researchers the opportunity to review meeting notes and draft write-ups adds to the trustworthiness of the data.

In practice, I did find that it was important to sustain my own independent critical reflection during the second cycle of research, and especially during the write-up stage. Using a method of group discussion meetings with the other two coaches I am certain did lead to greater reliability of the data and greater insights than I would have identified if reflecting alone. However, it was important that I could step back from this immersion as an 'insider'-action-researcher to allow my own reflections and further interpretations of the group meetings. The help of my group of three IES colleagues who had assisted me in the first cycle proved very useful once again. Through using them as a sounding board I was able to disentangle both the group perspective from my personal perspective and also to separate my contributions as one data collector from that of a sense maker, interpreter and report writer. These colleagues in no way brought their own interpretations. Rather, through asking me simple questions about what I thought of x, y and z, they helped me to articulate my own assumptions about how coaching ought to be undertaken and helped me to clarify my own thinking.

## **ABOUT MY OWN PRACTICE AS A COACH**

The research in this second cycle has given me the impetus to reflect on my own practice as a coach as well as on the practice of Coaches B and C. I wonder whether other coaches would have done things differently? Would they have developed a different model of the executive coaching process? Would their different practice have affected what was achieved? And would they have fashioned different meanings and interpretations out of the experience? I do not know the answer to the last of these questions. But what I do know is that I can check the extent to which other executive coaches feel their own practice in other contexts resonates with the model we have developed.

The discussions with Coaches B and C have also made me realise that my coaching style reflects my beliefs about organisation development. Essentially my style is characterised by 'drawing out' issues from individuals and then helping them articulate their desired destinations and routes of travel to solutions. I imagine that other coaches (like the former rugby player Will Carling) may take an approach more akin to 'driving them forward' in a particular direction.

While talking to the other two coaches about our collective achievement in helping individuals interpret their 360-degree feedback in context, I was interested to note that Coach C appeared to have spent more time during his sessions on clarifying career and personal aspirations than Coach B or I had done. When questioned about this he pointed out that two of his six participants were within two years of normal retirement age, and another had just returned from a period of long-term sickness. Coach C said he therefore believed that focussing more on this aspect was important in reaching an understanding of the issues to address. He did concede his firm belief that that this was the most important context or 'domain' in which to operate generally, and in his experience frequently assisted individuals in diagnosing what could lie behind their issues.

While I agree it is an important part of understanding an individual's context, and with some individuals I have coached perhaps more so than others, I realised in this assignment I have tended to give, on average, more time to the other two aspects of context – personal effectiveness and clarifying business and job priorities. I think the reason I did this may be because I believe the types of issues identified in a work based assignment most often lend themselves to further exploration through these two routes. I was left thinking there may be more to this

divergence in our practice than the particular participants we were matched with in this one assignment. Different philosophical beliefs about coaching seem to be important.

In career management programmes, through which I have coached many mid-career managers and professionals in the NHS, I think I have spent a far higher percentage of time on the career and personal aspirations route. Perhaps in that context I felt I had explicit authorisation from the commissioner to do so. Certainly some consideration was given to this aspect in all my organisation coaching relationships, but was part of the reason I spent more time considering other aspects because I felt that I did not have explicit commissioner approval to move away from the other two aspects?

When questioned Coach B reflected that during the assignment he had probably spent the most time supporting and challenging in the context of personal effectiveness and giving equal, but less, time to the other two contexts. He attributed it to the coaching following the use of 360-degree feedback tool based on an in-house competency framework. He did not present this as a planned tactic on his part. Rather, he felt it was probably the result of an intuitive feeling that this context area would be a good route to getting behind the issues to increase an individual's understanding.

Looking back at the transcripts of the interviews I undertook with executive coaches during the first cycle of my research, I can now identify differences in how each of them operated, the importance they attached to different aspects, and how this linked to the techniques they employed. I can also easily relate what each described as giving at least some consideration to each of the three main aspects I have now identified, and that no entirely new aspect emerged from that defined or categorised through the second cycle of my research.

It seems to me there are two issues here, both of which are relevant to my own practice as a coach. Firstly, if there are indeed three primary paths a coach can take to reaching a shared understanding with the person they are coaching, on what basis have I been, and should I be, attributing the relative importance of each aspect in deciding which path to follow with any one person in any one coaching context? Is it that I feel more comfortable pursuing one path than another? I don't think so. Or is it that I am somehow being influenced by my own assumptions

about what I have been commissioned to do? I hope this is not so, as I believe it is the person who is being coached whose needs should come first. Certainly it would be easy to discuss with a potential commissioner my intention to explore all three aspects.

Secondly, in other coaching contexts which do not follow on from a particular feedback technique prescribed by an organisation, on what basis have I been, and should I be, selecting the diagnostic techniques I employ? Is it just that I select the techniques I am trained to use? Clearly I would not select one I was not trained in. Or am I basing this decision on the nature of the initial issues identified and referring individuals on where necessary? I believe this should be the most important factor.

#### **ABOUT WHAT ELSE COMMISSIONERS MIGHT LIKE TO KNOW**

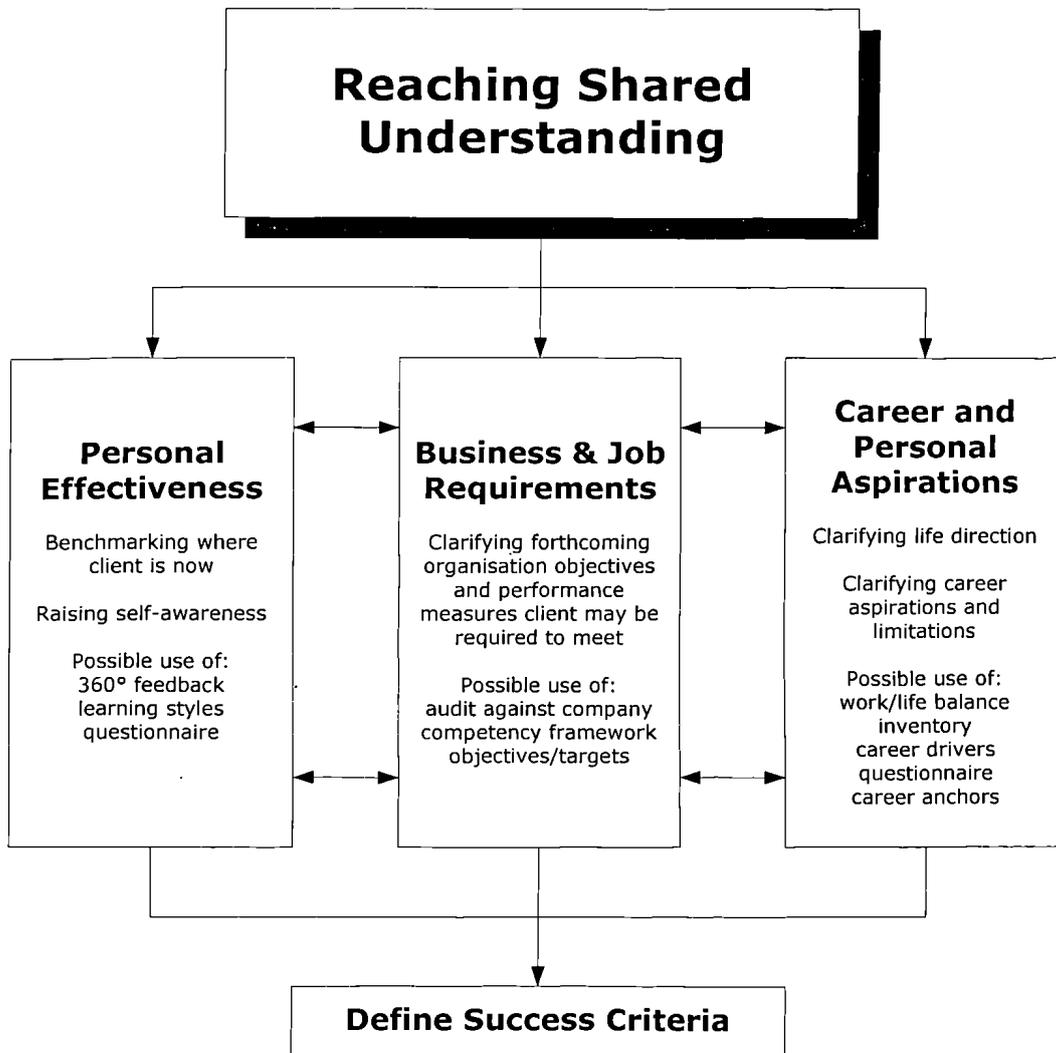
In addition to a model of the executive coaching process, I feel it might assist me in talking to potential commissioners to be able to represent visually the context(s) in which I might employ the techniques I am trained to use. In this way, I hope to assist in clarifying my own practice, but I also hope that it will assist commissioners by making the link between the list of techniques mentioned in my CV and what goes on behind closed doors during the executive coaching process. Other coaches might find it useful to do something similar, although their list of techniques may differ from mine. I would, however, expect the context in which they might employ them would be the same.

It occurs to me that in order for this link to be most effective, it is probably helpful for this visual representation to be an extension of the model of the executive coaching process previously developed. Two specific factors arising from my reflections on the second cycle findings have guided my representation.

The first factor is that it is predominantly during the phase of reaching a shared understanding of the issues that I employ the techniques. This led me to use the same language as the headings as I had used in the original model to ensure it could be presented alongside that phase. The second factor is my emerging belief that there are three distinct, but linked, paths that a coach might follow in order to help an individual better understand their issues and their success criteria for each. This led me to indicate the directions of possible travel, or routes, by using one way

directional arrows vertically, and link these routes to indicate movement back and forth between all three by using two way arrows. The diagram I came up with is shown in Figure 8 below.

**Figure 8: Paths to Reaching a Shared Understanding**



*Source: personal reflection on meeting with co-researchers, 2001*

## What Next?

During the course of my second cycle I feel I developed a greater understanding about the executive coaching process in one organisational context, and about my own practice as a coach. The part of my research based on the contracted assignment finished in May 2001. The client organisation had no more expectations in terms of their 'hosting' research into the executive coaching process, and my co-

researchers also expect that our research work has finished. They do not expect any more meetings.

Coach B has told me that he very much valued our meetings and came to see them as an important part of his own continuing professional development. The opportunity to reflect on his own practice with peers was something he has not had for some years. He felt it had challenged many of his assumptions about what he does and why he does it. Both of my co-researcher coaches have expressed an interest in being informed of any dissemination activity or the outcomes of any future research. Coach C's continuing interest has encouraged me in that it suggests he also has found the collaboration a worthwhile experience.

At the end of my first cycle I said 'goodbye' to the members of the IES Research Club in the sense of the club as a client infrastructure for research, although I did promise to publish my findings from the first cycle. What I have not yet done is widely share what I have learnt with actual or potential commissioners in Club member organisations and indeed in other non-member organisations.

I am interested in the difference between raising knowledge and awareness in others as a means of indirectly influencing practice compared to achieving improvements in practice more directly. I plan to publish the findings from my first and second cycles and pause before undertaking further research. Even though what I publish will be 'work in progress' I feel it is essential to share the knowledge I have developed up to this point. It will serve as a means of raising awareness of some of the issues more widely than my initial IES Employment Brief (which was exclusively for IES Research Club members) and, I hope, will therefore indirectly influence the practice of commissioners.

At the end of my first cycle the Research Club members, as commissioners of executive coaches, were interested in an identification of what executive coaches actually do, and in further developing their understanding about executive coaching so that they could use their judgement about the circumstances in which they might best use it. It seems to me that in this second cycle I have developed some knowledge about this subject that may be helpful to them. I have been operating as an insider, investigating and exploring these issues of relevance to commissioners (and other coaches). Once I have published my findings to date I feel it will be time to go back to a research position with a little more distance from

my own practice as a coach, so that I can focus on directly improving the practice of commissioners in organisations. I do not yet have a concrete idea of how to achieve this, and it may depend on the response to what I publish. I feel I need to pause and consider the question – how can what I have learnt so far help commissioners?

**CHAPTER THREE: IMPROVING  
COMMISSIONING PRACTICE  
(AUGUST – OCT 2001)**

## The Aim and the Research Context

The IES Research Club fulfilled the role of the client infrastructure in the first cycle of my research during the period September 1999 – September 2000. I would have liked the opportunity to re-engage directly with the Research Club to close the loop on my action research by sharing what I have found and learnt and then by checking out with the members (in a qualitative sense) their needs in shaping the direction of the research. However, the IES Research Club was technically disbanded in March 2001. IES had replaced it with an upgraded and more extensive corporate membership format which targeted directly experienced specialist practitioners within leading edge employing organisations focussed around four specialist topic areas. This new format comprised four 'Research Networks' and developed further the Research Club concept of direct partnership between experienced practitioners and expert researchers. The basic idea was that, in addition to sponsoring new research, each network would benefit from a range of activities and forms of interaction to stimulate debate with the aim of improving evidence-based practice. It was expected that over time each network would develop and operate differently to reflect the needs of its own members. One of the four specialist areas was Employee and Management Development and I had been appointed as one of two co-Directors of this Research Network in March 2001.

In practice, the majority of the former IES Research Club member organisations chose to join all of the new networks, although some of the 'faces' or individual named contacts for network members were new to IES. Other organisations not previously in the Research Club are also joining, often to only one network. I saw the Employee and Management Development Research Network as the natural sponsor for continuation of the executive coaching research, assuming its members were willing. A consultation exercise was conducted in April 2001 with individual members of the new Employee and Management Development Research Network which clarified their research needs and funding priorities for the coming year (programme content). This exercise identified three broad thematic areas comprising ten specific issues. One of these issues was executive coaching. They were still interested, so I was back in business!

I arranged a series of meetings and telephone calls with the 13 interested network members during May and June 2001 to determine the nature of their interest in pursuing research into executive coaching. The seven members who had previously

been involved as participant co-researchers in the first cycle comprised representatives from the Cabinet Office, Marks and Spencer, the Scottish Office, Consignia, J Sainsbury, Legal and General and HM Customs and Excise. These members were already familiar with the action research approach adopted in the first cycle as a vehicle for eventually affecting desired practice improvements. They were also familiar with the process of collaborative inquiry, and were instrumental in suggesting to the new members that collectively we all continued with this epistemological position. The six interested members who had not previously been involved included representatives from HSBC, Royal Bank of Scotland, DTLR, Scottish and Newcastle, DTI and Abbey National.

The discussions with, and between, the Research Network members resulted in an agreement that the ultimate issue remained broadly similar to that previously identified by the original Research Club members in the Winter of 1999. The issue was to help them improve practice in commissioning and managing executive coaching interventions in their organisations. They did not perceive that significant new empirical research about executive coaching was needed at this time. Rather, the principal emphasis they sought was the opportunity to explore and expand their own thinking and understanding of the research I had already undertaken, with a view to identifying how they could further use and apply it in their own organisations. The research questions agreed therefore included using the topic of executive coaching to determine a *modus operandi* for this new research network in terms of developing its own preferred way in applying this and other research. The agreed research questions were:

- Does the emerging model of the executive coaching process reflect what any other coaches do in any other contexts?
- How can we as organisations use knowledge about executive coaching, and what coaches actually do in their practice, to improve our practice in commissioning and managing it?

# Building on the Action Research Approach

The need for research was that organisations do not feel that the academic knowledge base being generated has yet been made sufficiently available to them, nor has advice about how they might apply it to their own unique contexts.

## EARLY ACTIONS

Early actions I undertook to disseminate the knowledge and understandings I had gained about executive coaching so far during my research to a wide audience of practitioner-commissioners included:

- Publication in June 2001 of a 62-page research report entitled Executive Coaching: Inspiring Performance at Work. Complementary copies were sent to all research participants and sponsors from my first and second cycles, as well as to all members of the Research Network. The report was originally intended to cover all the findings from just the first cycle of my research. However, due to a slippage in its publication 'slot' in the IES timetable, I found myself able to add an extra chapter which included, in a limited manner, the still evolving model being generated following the second cycle of my research.
- Production of a 4- page report summary which supported a direct mailing to everyone on the IES database who was listed as interested in information about management development issues: i.e. potential commissioners of executive coaches. The summary was also placed on the IES website so that the key messages it contained were freely available to a wider audience.
- Undertook interviews with two journalists. As a result three articles were later published that focussed extensively on related matters. The first article (Carrington, 2001a) was published in the Daily Mail on 6 September 2001 and focussed on what an executive can expect from an executive coach and how to select one. The second article (Carrington, 2001b) was published in the September 2001 edition of the practitioner journal 'Training magazine', and focussed on how major organisations are putting coaching into practice. The remaining article (Druce, 2001) was published in the Southern Daily

Echo on 28 August and included warnings about the unregulated nature of the executive coaching industry.

- Records and extracts from the International Press-Cuttings Bureau indicate that there were a further 29 citations for the report in the press during the period June-July 2001. They included citations in The Daily Telegraph on 14 June, the Sunday Telegraph on 17 June, Financial Times on 21 June and The Guardian on 23 June. These citations and accompanying commentary appeared largely to have been based on two minor items on IES press release had listed about the report findings: the cost of executive coaching and the 'loneliness' of senior managers

## **IMPROVING PRACTICE**

My starting point for this DBA thesis was a concern about organisations' practice in commissioning executive coaching. As Gill and Johnson (1997) observe:

Action research then, is clearly an important approach to research in business and management, particularly given its declared aim of serving both the practical concerns of managers and simultaneously generalising and adding to theory. (Gill and Johnson, 1997)

So did any of this written material and publicity described in the previous section relating to both the research report and the messages it contained meet the practical concerns of commissioners in organisations in improve their commissioning practice? This question is central to my aim of improving the professional practice of those commissioning executive coaching in organisation. It also rests at the heart of a DBA thesis which seeks to add to the body of academic knowledge and lead to improvements in practice.

At the most basic level, I am pleased with the interest in my research, as it seems reasonable to think that I cannot improve practice if those engaging in that practice are not aware of the knowledge gained, which may help them. My early approaches to disseminating knowledge may have accessed a numerically wide audience but left me dissatisfied about my initial attempts to influence practice. This is because while I can control the information contained in the report and report summary and I can influence the content of the press release distributed, I cannot control what

journalists say about the findings. Nor do I have any way of ensuring that the messages I intended to send are those actually received by the readers.

I received phone calls from individuals following publication of the early newspaper articles, although not from organisational commissioners. Some of these phone calls caused me concern. For instance, some readers were people who identified themselves as what I would term 'aspiring coaches'. Most of these were ringing for my advice on the kind of training they needed to become coaches and/or seeking tips on marketing themselves. Two particular calls have stuck in my mind. The first was from someone whose interest was based on her feeling that she was a good shoulder to cry on for all her friends. The second was from a former marketing executive who felt it would be an easy way to make money - did I have any ideas about what he should say to give the superficial illusion that he was 'qualified' to be a coach? Frankly, both calls horrified me. This left me reflecting that I am not a value-free external researcher. I am also a coach myself and one who is increasingly concerned about the lack of quality kitemarks for buyers and the low barriers to entry in the marketplace for prospective providers of executive coaching.

If I have succeeded in stimulating a further increase in the pool of unqualified, and therefore potentially naïve and unsafe, practitioners as executive coaches, whose interests have I served? Certainly not the commissioners of executive coaches who will have even more potential coaches to select from, some of whom I might consider unsafe, and certainly not qualified and experienced executive coaches who may face an increased lack of respect from potential commissioners if they then encounter 'nightmare' experiences of unsafe practitioners. Perhaps I have been naïve in assuming that it was possible to influence how my research findings might be interpreted by others or what other people might chose to do with those interpretations. A more experienced researcher may have been less naïve.

On a more positive note I also received 13 calls from people who identified themselves as executive coaches. Many of these contacts reported having encountered the report summary on the IES website through an internet search using the words 'executive coaching'. Some coaches told me that they like to keep up to date on the evidence base relevant to their work and regularly use internet search engines to identify potential research - and are usually frustrated that they find so little!. The coaches who called me did so to offer their comments and

reactions to the report or summary. Some also asked if I would be willing to notify them of any future published research on the topic.

Both the report and the summary made clear that it was aimed at readers who were HR professionals and management development specialists: actual and potential commissioners of executive coaching and not practising coaches. Despite this, the majority of comments from the practising coaches were supportive of the research and the findings presented. Three callers said it had really helped them understand the perspective of organisational commissioners. Two other callers said it had given them a new 'language' for talking to commissioners and scheme organisers which they expected would limit problems they had previously encountered in the area I would term the commissioner-coach relationship. It was interesting to hear from practitioner coaches who were concerned about their own practice, dismayed by reports of unsafe practice they had encountered for their clients, and keen to see a greater degree of professionalism in coaching.

As I previously stated, my intended target audience had not been other coaches. But if through changes in their practice of managing the commissioner-coach relationship, the outcomes in the implementation of executive coaching commissioned by organisations could indeed be improved, then I was pleased that the research and my 'work in progress' dissemination had contributed in some small way. It also led me to realise that I have contributed to improving practice by getting executive coaching professionals to ask themselves questions about what they are doing.

What surprised me most was that I received no additional contacts from organisational commissioners, other than research network members to whom I had already spoken. It is not possible to conclude from this that others have not read the research, or that reading it has not given them an impetus to reflect on their commissioning practice and/or influenced that practice. All I can infer is that I need a more direct way of communicating with this target audience, a mechanism that also promotes feedback. Other action researchers who are internal consultants may not encounter this problem. They may be in a position to observe for themselves the actions that are taken during or after each stage of their research. As an action researcher who has so far acted as an external researcher in participation with multiple organisational representatives in my first research cycle and as a self-reflective practitioner in participation with other practitioners in the

second research cycle, I have had limited opportunities to observe the implications of my research for others beyond these co-researchers. I reflected that the one-off forum event I ran in September 2000 for IES members was the sole exception to this. At that event I was able to influence and observe participants engaging with the issues arising from the first cycle of my research and reflect upon their practice. I determined to adapt my research approach for the third cycle to ensure face-to-face contact with commissioners, even if that inevitably meant this will involve dealing with and attempting to improve the practice of much fewer numbers of individuals than written dissemination traditionally allows. As I reported in my write-up of the first cycle earlier, the four examples of real-life practical examples of the uses of executive coaching (or vignettes) I presented at that forum had seemed particularly important triggers to heighten their understanding of their own context.

Reflecting further on the September 2000 forum event also gave me an idea for pursuing the second research question of the third cycle. I wondered if we might aim to test out a forum-style approach as a vehicle for enabling the research network members to engage more directly with knowledge and improve their practice. In this context 'their practice' means commissioning and managing executive coaching.

Once I had reflected on my early actions in disseminating my 'work in progress' research findings, I felt it was time to consider with my co-researcher commissioners inside the Research Network organisations how we might go about exploring the research questions and get our inquiry to move in a specific direction. Following a series of email exchanges in late July 2001, it was agreed with the interested Research Network members that a forum event for commissioners was a good approach. In addition three individuals were identified to work with me as co-researchers in addressing both research questions. All three were Research Network members and volunteers. Further email and telephone discussions with these individuals resulted in a broad agreement about what information I should gather and how. The research that followed effectively became the third cycle of my research.

The third cycle aims to make available any findings about how organisations can use knowledge to improve their practice to all the members of the Employee and Management Development Research Network. These are the primary target

audience. In addition, it was agreed with my co-researchers that any further information or findings relating to executive coaching, and what coaches actually do in their practice, should also be made freely and widely available to other commissioner-practitioners and coach-practitioners as well as the Research Network members.

## Method

I organised two events, one with organisational commissioners held on 10 October 2001 and the other for executive coaches held on 15 October 2001. These were the primary method of data collection in the fieldwork during the third cycle of my research. Both events consisted of two sessions designed to pursue the research. These sessions drew on a number of research methods, in particular non-directive or unstructured focus group interviews and semi-structured focus group interviews. The design of the event for organisational commissioners was also informed by the growing literature on communities of practice.

Focus group research involves organised discussion with a selected group of people to gain information about their opinions, experiences and reactions relating to a topic (Kitzinger, 1994). The insight and data is produced by the interaction between participants based on topics that are supplied by the researcher (Morgan, 1997) and not on questions and responses between the researcher and the participants. This interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences (Gibbs, 1997). This kind of group interview has the advantage of being stimulating to respondents, data rich and cumulative, over and above any individual responses.

According to Gibbs (1997), focus group interviewing is particularly suited to gaining several perspectives about the same topic. It is also thought to be suitable when one wants to produce qualitative data for academic analysis which furthers understanding of a group perspective (Fontana and Frey, 1998), and to explore the degree of consensus on a given topic (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993). One of the limitations of focus group interviewing is that it usually cannot be relied upon for generalising findings to a whole population, mainly because the participants are usually not a representative sample of that population. Certainly my event attendees were not representative samples of the two populations in the research – executive coaches and organisational commissioners of executive coaching.

However, Fontana et al.(1998) cite Blumer (1967) as arguing that if the group is selected sufficiently carefully as "acute observers and who are well informed" about the topic, then a discussion group approach "is more valuable many times over than any representative sample".

Morgan (1988) suggests that participants need to feel comfortable with each other, and advises an invitation will be more appealing if people think they are likely to be meeting with others they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a topic. Based on this advice, I suggested to my co-researchers that we organise separate events for executive coaches and commissioners and they readily agreed. Indeed one reported her fear that a joint event might have resulted in too tempting a sales 'pitch' opportunity for the coaches to resist. While not believing that eventuality was a likely one, she nevertheless felt that some of her peers (other commissioners) may have stayed away from a joint event. Her concern would seem to re-inforce the wisdom of Morgan's advice.

Krueger (1993) identifies analysis as often the single biggest problem in focus group interviews because it is time consuming, unstructured and complex. There is a danger that some researchers will see (selectively) only those comments that confirm a particular point of view. I was very worried about this, given that I was testing a model I had been so instrumental in developing. Despite my very good intentions, could I be trusted to be objective enough and not to give greater weight to feedback supporting my own experience as a coach? One systematic procedure he recommends is to seek verification from the participants. I made the notes from all four sessions available for inspection and comment by the appropriate attendees from the two events. In order to ensure the analysis is verifiable Krueger also suggests 'collegial feedback' on focus group procedures and results. In August 2001 I enlisted the support of three IES colleagues as a means of ensuring quality in my plans for the events in October. In December 2001 I enlisted the help of the same colleagues to challenge me on my initial thinking about the findings, and to determine if they were borne out by the raw data in the transcript and notes.

I did consider using other methods, particularly one-to-one interviews with the executive coaches, since the attitudes of this target group were independent of their normal organisational or work setting. I could, perhaps, have sent details of my findings from the second cycle in advance of the interviews and used the

interview to test the attitudes, feelings and language used through probing individual responses to the findings. It would have been possible for me to have organised interviews, and they would have been easier for me to control than a focus group interview where the participants take the initiative. However, I was keen to understand their opinions, to elicit a multiplicity of views and to create an environment in which ideas could be generated. I took the view that the potential for collecting data about ideas, and then exploring these ideas through the analysis, was more important in terms of meeting the research objectives than the language any one individual might use. An interactive method seemed to offer the best fit.

## **DISCUSSION GROUP**

I had two objectives for the discussion group with executive coaches. Firstly, I wanted to collect data about their views on whether the findings from the second cycle resonated with their own experiences as practitioner coaches, whether the interpretation and presentation of the findings made sense to them, and whether or not anything had been missed. I held up the model in order to test its applicability to the experiences of this particular group: My intention was to use this data to further develop the model of the executive coaching process. I did not expect to be able to generalise from this to the practice of the whole population of executive coaches. Rather, I expected to test its applicability in a wider context than the practice of three coaches in the one organisational context of the second cycle. Secondly, I was keen to supplement the data generated through my initial exploratory interviews with four executive coaches during the first cycle. My objective was to identify any new information which may further my understanding about executive coaching practice. To make sure that my search for any new information was not constrained by the model, I determined that the ordering of the two different discussions was important. I should firstly seek to understand the issues for their practice and secondly test the model.

The discussion group was an invitation-only event. I identified 16 people whom I believed to be self-employed practising coaches of executives. Of these I had never met 13, but they comprised the executive coaches who had initiated contact with me following publicity accompanying publication of my research report three months earlier. The remaining three invitations were issued to three of the four executive coaches I had interviewed in the first cycle, who had expressed an interest in any further research I undertook. I acknowledge that the identification and selection of the group was not ideal and owed much to contact detail

availability rather than any positivistic sampling strategy. However, I believed these individuals, as practising coaches who had taken the trouble to contact me, were likely to be as well informed as any other coaches. Access is a significant constraint when researching a group of unknown size and location and without any known associations between each other.

Invitations were sent by post eight weeks before the event date. No financial incentive or travelling expenses were offered. Eight coaches accepted the invitation, although a further five indicated they would have attended but already had other commitments. Two apologies were received shortly before the event date. The discussion group therefore comprised six executive coaches (three men and three women) plus myself and an IES Research Officer. One of the coaches present had been interviewed in the first cycle.

The arrangements for the half-day discussion group were confirmed by letter and included details of my purpose in organising the event, suggested a two-part process for the group discussion, and identified the names of attendees. The location was a comfortable meeting room at the IES in Brighton, which was booked for the day. Attendees were offered the option to stay on after lunch if they wished to pursue informal networking with each other. The chairs were initially arranged in a loose circle so that each attendee could see all the others.

At the start of the event, I repeated my suggested two-part process to set the scene and sought agreement from each attendee that this was acceptable. I then introduced myself and asked the attendees to introduce themselves to each other. The first part of the discussion group was run along the lines of a non-directive or unstructured focus group interview. By non-directive I mean that my prime concern was with the group members' perceptions of what was important within the context of executive coaching and I did not seek to control the process. I only asked one question and invited the group members to identify and debate what they thought were the important issues were for their practice as executive coaches. My only other interventions were designed to maintain a balance of participation within the group by encouraging quieter attendees and diplomatically restraining the two most dominant ones. The ensuing discussion lasted one hour and ten minutes and finished when it became clear that no new material was being obtained. Since this particular aspect of the topic is still under explored I took the view, as I had in the interviews I undertook in the first cycle, that no material introduced by the group

members was irrelevant. A 15-minute break followed. Written notes were taken by an IES Research officer.

The second part of the discussion group for executive coaches was structured in the form of a workshop. I invited participants to retake their seats and started by seeking agreement to use a tape recorder, which was given. I then left my chair and gave a 20 minute presentation that outlined the research to date and introduced the findings and model from the second cycle. This presentation used the figures and tables from Chapter Two of this thesis to illustrate the points I was making. I then invited comments and reflections firstly on the whole and later on each phase in the executive coaching process model using a semi-structured set of questions (which I again called a discussion guide).

I continued to invite their comments through asking questions and listening to both the replies and exchanges of dialogue between attendees generated by these replies. I tried not to 'defend' my ideas and model, or offer my own opinions. During this period I was standing, whilst the attendees gradually re-positioned themselves and their chairs in a close semi circle facing me. We were interrupted by the arrival of lunch one hour 45 minutes later and at this point I asked a final question designed to determine if anyone thought we had missed anything. Following a few more comments, the formal discussion group proceedings finished and the tape recorder was switched off. An IES Research Officer took written notes. The attendees continued chatting informally over lunch before individually departing but these informal discussions were not recorded. I had produced a small pack of materials and articles relevant to executive coaching for each attendee to take away if they so wished. These were distributed at the end.

Immediately after the event the IES Research Officer typed up her notes. I forwarded a copy to all attendees several days later along with a letter of thanks for their participation. I also invited comments on the notes.

The transcript of the second part of the discussion was fully transcribed by a secretary as a first draft nine days later. I checked this first draft by listening to the tape and making amendments on the draft. I then repeated this checking process with her second draft to produce a final version. The sound quality was generally good, although on three occasions multiple voices made accurate transcribing

problematic. It was not possible to identify all the speakers on these occasions, although I was identifiable at all times among the speakers.

I assigned each coach attending with a number (Coach 4 – 9) in order to report their views anonymously. The coding structure can be found in Appendix 2. Coach 4 was the individual who had been interviewed in the first cycle and previously allocated that number.

## **FORUM SESSIONS**

The two purposes of my sessions at the forum for commissioners in organisations was, firstly, to feed back my findings from the second cycle about what it is that executive coaches actually do. Secondly, in my second session at the end of the day, I sought to collect data about ideas and concepts on applying these findings to their practice that came forward from commissioners as a result of what knowledge they had gained during the forum.

Invitations to the one day forum on executive coaching were issued to all 42 organisations who were members of the Employee and Management Development Research Network some 12 weeks before the scheduled date. The forum as a whole was billed as an event in the calendar for members of the network. Ten individuals booked a place. In order to cover venue and catering costs, a small attendance fee was charged. I also enlisted a commitment to attend from two of the former IES Research Club member organisations who had been also been involved as participant contributors and co-researchers in the first cycle. One of these was also a member of the new Employee and Management Development Research Network and a co-researcher in this third cycle. I invited them to ensure that there would be a mix of experienced commissioners of executive coaching, as well as those who could be embarking upon commissioning for the first time. Their inclusion was also designed to establish a clear connection with both the original Research Club and new Research Network client infrastructures.

Arrangements for the forum event were confirmed by post. The forum was held in a hired well equipped meeting room at the Commonwealth Club in London.

Comfortable chairs were arranged in boardroom style around a table. There were nine network member attendees present, plus myself and an IES Research Officer. I acted as host and facilitator for the whole day. In designing the overall

programme I decided that the first and last sessions would be devoted to the research. This was made clear in the event confirmation details. Other sessions included two case example presentations from the organisations I had invited. The first focussed on Commissioning and Quality Assurance of Executive Coaches and was presented by a commissioner from the NHS. The second focussed on Identifying and Measuring the Organisational Outcomes from Executive Coaching and was presented by a commissioner from Consignia. These sessions were designed to further extend the 'vignette' approach taken at my forum with commissioners back in September 2000.

Following introductions, I outlined the proposed programme for the day and sought agreement from the attendees that this was acceptable. My first session took the form of a workshop or semi-structured focus group. I presented my findings from the second cycle, and introduced the model of the executive coaching process using the same materials I used with the executive coaches. I then invited their comments and reflections using a semi-structured set of questions (a discussion guide). I continued to invite their comments through asking questions and listening to the replies and exchanges between attendees generated by these replies. The discussion lasted 45 minutes. I did not ask for the session to be tape recorded, as this would have run contrary to the informal 'Charterhouse' rules of these Research Network events. However written notes of this session (and all sessions during the day) were taken by an IES Research Officer.

My second session was billed as the final discussion session for the day and took the form of a non-directive focus group discussion. My prime concern was with the group members' perceptions of what was important within the context of executive coaching, and how their perceptions may have changed during the course of the whole day. I did not seek to control the process but I asked two questions. My first question invited group members to identify what they now thought the important issues were for their practice in commissioning executive coaches, and what they thought they had learnt. The ensuing discussion lasted 50 minutes. My other question asked if attendees to describe if they intended to do anything differently as a result of their participation in the forum.

The Research Officer typed up the notes from the whole day within two days of the forum. I forwarded a copy to all attendees along with copies of material requested by the attendees and provided by the two case example presenters. I produced a

five page summary of the event which was placed on the private area of the Research Network website so that it could be downloaded by members who had not been able to attend.

The main difficulty which arose from the method was the timing of the two separate events for coaches and commissioners. At the outset I perceived that these were non-sequential data gathering activities. Although they were held in early in October 2001, the forum for commissioners preceded the discussion group for executive coaches by four days. While reflecting on the two events, I concluded that seeing the coaches first would have been better. It would have enabled me to revise the model in the light of their opinions before presenting the final version to the commissioners. This may have enhanced the knowledge acquisition and dissemination aspects of the experience for the commissioners. I do not feel that the primary data gathering aspect of the forum event was adversely affected but, on the advice of my supervisors, I determined to analyse the data from the discussion group before that from the forum.

## **Findings from the Third Cycle**

### **ETHICS AND THE NEED FOR A PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATION**

One new issue emerged from the initial session with executive coaches: ethics in executive coaching. This was born out of a discussion as to whether or not counselling qualifications and supervision were necessary for coaches. On one hand, the issues and dynamics were thought to be different to a therapy environment, and that coaching should be regulated in a different way through professional coaching qualifications and codes of ethics rather than supervision. The International Coaching Federation code was thought to be bland and an irrelevance in the UK context. Three of the group volunteered the information that they produced their own code of ethics and included it in their publicity material. On the other hand, supervision was thought to be a form of good practice to enable a coach to be challenged in their practice, to enable them to see patterns and gain insight. Specific comments from members of the group included:

You need to know what your limitations are as a coach. There's a lot of hungry freelancers out there, and there's a danger that people won't say 'No, I'm not good at that, let me refer you on to someone else'. (Coach 5)

The coaching spectrum has the potential for getting into deep counselling, tinkering with people's head, so there's a sensitivity around it that you don't get with other consultancy. (Coach 9)

I wonder if people could pay to get the problem diagnosed through a broker and then it would be refereed out. Maybe there's something around this for coaching – someone who didn't supply coaching, but refereed to a selection of people or consultants who could help. In the same way that it happens in psychotherapy assessments. (Coach 4)

We need a code of ethics, common to all coaches. It's worrying for the buyer, there is confusion as they don't understand the area so they rely on referrals. Companies really need qualifications and referrals and a code of ethics. (Coach 6)

It occurs to me that that the literature has tended to advocate matching the coach and coached (Hall et al., 1999, Garman et al., 2000) but it remains unclear on what basis potential clients should make their choices about an appropriate coach. What should they look for? Of what should they be wary? How is the prospective client to determine who can best help them? How can they identify a coach with 'ethics'? The commissioners of coaching I interviewed in the first cycle similarly identified 'matching' as important, but I am conscious of not having identified robust, 'matching' methods. This seems an area worthy of future research.

One suggestion made by Richards (2001) is a detailed and systematically organised Coach Directory. Her idea is to have a directory produced by a professional coach association, that coaches would wish to join because it would confirm their reputability. Currently the Coaching and Mentoring Network offers the chance for coaches to describe their services to potential clients although many do not need to do so because they already have plenty of work. Such a directory would certainly make it easier for clients to compare prospective coaches and select someone suited to their requirements. And a UK based professional association would have the additional advantage of being able to formulate a code of ethics and disciplinary procedures that clients could rely on as a national standard.

Parsloe (2001) agrees with Richards that some form of association is probably inevitable as well as necessary, although he sees executive coaching as just one part of a wider maturing market and profession in coaching and mentoring. His notion of a profession, however, is more broadly based on specifications of

knowledge requirements, occupational standards and evidence criteria as well as codes of ethical conduct. He describes his thinking thus:

Out of this cauldron of excited, enthusiastic and largely well-intentioned activity, a profession is emerging as people increasingly ask 'Who is to judge the quality of the coaching and mentoring provided, and the value of the time and money spent?' The search for agreement on this type of quality standard is now a priority for the infant profession. (Parsloe, 2001).

In the same article Parsloe discounts the idea that an association should be created under the auspices of a professional body like the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) as he feels coaching and mentoring are likely to "disappear into the black hole of the multi-faceted bureaucracy of the pensions, remuneration and legal interests of the HR Industry". He also rejects following the example of workplace counsellors who formed a separate association as a division of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). He does so on the grounds that aligning too closely to the counselling profession runs the risk of "adopting much of the baggage of the medical and academic concerns that are important for dealing with traumatised or dysfunctional individuals who tend to be the main focus for workplace counsellors."

### **WHO WANTS TO BE CALLED AN 'EXECUTIVE COACH'?**

During the first cycle, it became apparent that the coaches and commissioners I interviewed had different perceptions and definitions of 'executive coaching'. Definitions in the academic literature also differed. A variation in perspective about this issue arose during the discussion group of executive coaches, who chose to discuss what constitutes an 'executive coach'.

At the start of the discussion group the participants introduced themselves to each other in turn. Even at this early stage, while each clearly identified themselves as an 'executive coach', four out of the six expressed a preference for using slightly different labels. These alternatives were 'performance coach', 'OD consultant and coach', 'business performance coach', and 'business coach'. During the initial discussion session one of the coaches declared her reason for attendance to be an interest in comparative practice and a desire to explore whether what she does is at all different to what the others do. This led to an exchange of information and

opinions, summarised below, about approaches and whether the term 'executive coach' was a helpful label.

That there were significant differences in approach quickly became clear. Indeed, one speaker after another addressed the preceding speaker using introductory statements such as "My agenda and work is different to yours", "Actually that's not my way of working" and "It's interesting that we're all at different places on this. What I do is..." The nature of these differences included location (on-site versus off-site), method of contact (face-to-face versus telephone), primary focus (corporate agenda versus personal life agenda), underpinning framework and model (organisational change versus leadership versus part-therapeutic) and mode of contracting (direct with individuals versus tendering via organisational commissioners). The sectors in which they worked also varied, with two working in large companies across sectors, two with client organisations predominantly in the finance sector, one operating in the health and voluntary sectors and the final coach working mostly with small-to-medium sized companies (SMEs).

However, the difference which seemed to be regarded as the most significant by the participants themselves was the extent to which they tended to work in contexts presenting client needs as discrete, easily identifiable issues rather than contexts presenting the client as having a high degree of uncertainty about the need for coaching and the nature of that need. I would describe this as a spectrum from demonstrative and practical orientation at one end to conceptual orientation at the other.

Despite the differences the participants identified in what they actually did and how they did it, there seemed to be a high degree of comfort with the proposition that it was still appropriate and helpful for them all to be regarded as 'executive coaches'. So why did some prefer alternative labels to describe their work? I would love to have asked them this question. However, I had committed to a non-directive focus group method and so felt obliged to resist my desire to ask. I later consoled myself with the belief that the issue may not have surfaced at all if I had selected a more directive approach with me as a facilitator asking the questions rather than giving the participants the freedom to select their own questions and debates.

I am left in the position of speculating on possible reasons. I wonder if part of the answer may lie in the freelance or independent practitioner status of five of the six

coaches. The remaining coach had recently moved to a large specialist executive coaching branch within a major consultancy firm. As one of the freelance coaches explained to the others:

There are big consultancy models being perpetuated in some organisations and I find this worrying, especially in terms of diversity. Small consultancies haven't got the wherewithal to compete head-on as one big supplier who can do all the coaching of executives needed in one company. Much of my work comes through associate relationships but otherwise I need to differentiate what I do. It's easier to define the uses of what I can offer rather than what it is. It helps in marketing for me to talk about different types of coaches. (Coach 9)

Reflecting further when writing up the first cycle I noted how helpful organisational commissioners of executive coaches (at the IES Forum) found it to differentiate executive coaching from other one-to-one personal support relationships. This was particularly so when it came to distinguishing executive coaching from mentoring. The coaches I interviewed at that time had also reported frequent confusion in the minds of others about the nature of executive coaching. It was felt that the picture was further confused because some providers were using the executive coaching label for other one-to-one activities (such as counselling) because it was a current buzzword that helped market these other approaches for higher fees. Looking back now while writing up this third cycle, I would say that the overall impression I formed eighteen months ago was a desire, from the coaches I interviewed, to rally towards a unifying executive coach label (and to defend it from those undertaking other one-to-one support activities). It may be that the marketplace has changed in those intervening eighteen months and that there is now no need to promote the label 'executive coaching' because it has a much higher degree of recognition among purchasers. Alternatively, on the basis of the discussion among the executive coaches in this third cycle, it seems to me as if these coaches may be deliberately seeking to distance themselves from the 'executive coach' label to further segment an already complex and differentiated market in order to compete for available work.

There seems to have been a change from the coaches eighteen months ago keen to be called an 'executive coach' to coaches now keen to be called some other kind of coach for executives. It may be that individual preferences and the very small numbers of coaches involved on each occasion are the most relevant factors. I decided to go back to examine the interview transcript of the one coach who I interviewed before and was also a member (Coach 4) of the later discussion group.

I then compared her contributions identified in both transcripts. This one coach had also changed her position. She introduced herself in her 2000 interview as a 'freelance executive coach'. In the group she introduced herself as 'an OD consultant and coach'.

The literature surrounding language and the projection of group identity may well be useful to reflect upon. However, think about myself as a coach and my own motivations, I feel it would be very useful to be able to draw on much wider data about the state of executive coaching as an industry. After a period of phenomenal growth has the demand for coaching services peaked or possibly declined? Or are the number of suppliers increased at a greater rate than a growth in demand, implying we are seeing a change in supplier behaviour as the market gets more competitive? Or are we just seeing the effects of a previously embryonic industry maturing (as suggested in the practitioner literature by Parsloe, 2001) and, in so doing, fragmenting?

That the demand for externally sourced executive coaching may be declining seems unlikely on the basis of the summary findings of a forthcoming study on how organisations source their training and development activity (Aston et al., 2002). In this UK study FTSE 250 companies and large public sector organisations were surveyed. Aston et al. found that overall 63 per cent of organisations reported that they currently commission at least some external executive coaches and within 3-5 years 85 per cent expect to be doing so. These findings would seem to indicate that demand can be expected to continue growing for some years yet.

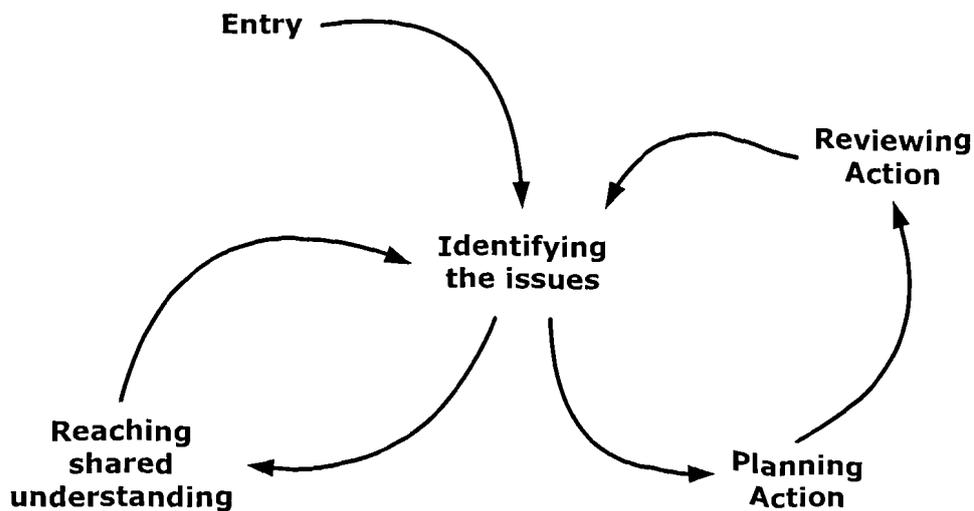
My research was not designed as a longitudinal study, nor a quantitative study about executive coaching at a macro-economic or industry level so I am unable to answer these additional questions that I am now posing. However, I do feel that the availability of more research data of this nature would be a most helpful resource through which to view the qualitative data I have generated.

### **REFINING THE MODEL OF THE EXECUTIVE COACHING PROCESS**

The first research question posed by my co-researcher commissioners related to the model of the executive coaching process that I developed during the second cycle in one organisational context. The diagram of this model is reproduced below as Figure 9. The research question was whether this emerging model reflected what

some other coaches do in some other contexts. The data drawn up in answering this question was drawn exclusively from the second discussion group session of executive coaches.

**Figure 9: The Executive Coaching Process**



*Source: developed from analysis of meeting notes with co-researchers in 2nd cycle, 2001*

After presenting the model, I asked the coaches to what extent the model as a whole related (or not) to what they did in their practice. The feedback from them was very positive. Initial comments from individuals included:

There's no sense of time here, no sense of how many times you need to go round each of the loops, and that fits for me because its different for every person I coach. Some people would take two weeks to go there, others 12 months, it depends on the content. I tend to think in terms of content, like this person is crap at time management, they need to get sorted out. But this makes me think about process not content and for the process it really fits. (Coach 6)

It does relate. Absolutely. Without doubt. But I hadn't realised it before. I mean I guess it was in my head as a whole. I hadn't ever thought of it being bundled up into two separate things. But what you've done is actually quite right and seeing it like that well I've found it helpful. (Coach 5)

There was some discussion about whether the two distinct loops in the model were always present. There was a clear consensus among the group that the right hand loop – that of learning support – was always present and always overt. But a question was posed by Coach 7 about whether the same could be said for the diagnostic part represented by the left hand loop. There seemed to be a concern that in some coaching contexts the diagnosis may already have been done by someone else in the organisation before the coach was hired, and that in those situations the organisation would not expect the coach to be “going over old ground”. The conclusion reached was that, even in those circumstances, they as coaches did still view this as an integral part of the process they went through in practice. Three of the coaches expressed their reasoning thus:

The level of content needs to be explored with individuals. OK, I might be referred to someone whose organisation has already identified them as needing two particular competencies but I still have to spend time reaching a shared understanding of what it actually means to the individual. The organisation might be clear I need to sort out strategic influencing say, but there is no real understanding in the individuals mind about what it means, so I still find myself going through that identifying the issues and reaching a shared understanding bit before we can sensibly progress. (Coach 6)

Yes, I agree the level of content needs to be exposed. But I still need to spend time understanding what that concept, for example time management, means to that individual. (Coach 9)

Behaviour changing has to be voluntary, so you need to look at personal agendas and values and what they mean for the client. So yes the personal level affects this. So what you called the diagnostic [loop] is definitely always there. But perhaps it should be smaller than the learning support [loop] to reflect its lesser comparative importance. (Coach 4)

Another question posed by one of the group participants was whether there might be an additional phase in some circumstances. As he explained:

I also do demonstration and ‘how to’ things. Otherwise it all becomes very facilitation based, like counselling. For example, I would sit in on someone chairing a meeting, sometimes they might ask me to chair it for them. The same might happen with giving presentations. (Coach 7)

A discussion ensued as to whether there might be an additional one or two phases in the right hand learning support loop in the process between planning action and

reviewing action. It was proposed by Coach 8 that these possible phases might be termed something like 'observing action' and/or 'demonstrating action'. Initially there was some considerable difference of opinion about this proposition. Coaches 4 and 6 did not routinely observe their clients in action and therefore felt that if the model was revised in this way it would no longer reflect the process they personally used. Coaches 5 and 9 who did tend to use observation felt that this part of their practice fitted squarely into the existing identifying the issues phase. This was because observation was in effect just one of the feedback generating tools they used in determining an individual's precise issues and needs.

Similarly, some of the coaches did not routinely demonstrate how a skill might be used by actually exhibiting it themselves in real time within an individual's workplace. However, all did use some method for demonstrating such skills in operation. Role-playing a scenario within the privacy of a coaching session was mentioned as an example. The participants therefore seemed to reach an agreement that any demonstration method was indeed an important part of the process but that it sat well within the existing phase of the model termed 'planning action'.

When I asked the executive coaches to discuss each of the six phases of the model in turn, it became apparent that all of the coaches present could easily relate the phases proposed to their own practice, and to the practices of each other. The first of these phases was that termed 'entry' and a short discussion about this elicited examples of how some of the different coaches went about building rapport and contracting with their individual clients. For example, Coach 8 was in the habit of undertaking a first-contact lengthy telephone discussion with each prospective client, with a view to both parties determining whether they wanted to work together and, if so, how they might work together and according to what ground rules. Coach 7 described how he usually sent an initial letter or email with some general information about what to expect from him as an executive coach, together with a self-assessment exercise designed to assess (and thereby raise) the individual's state of readiness for entering into such a relationship. He followed it up with a short telephone call. Both of these examples highlighted the need that I and my co-researcher coach-practitioner had also identified in the second cycle: to consider pre-session communication as part of the entry phase.

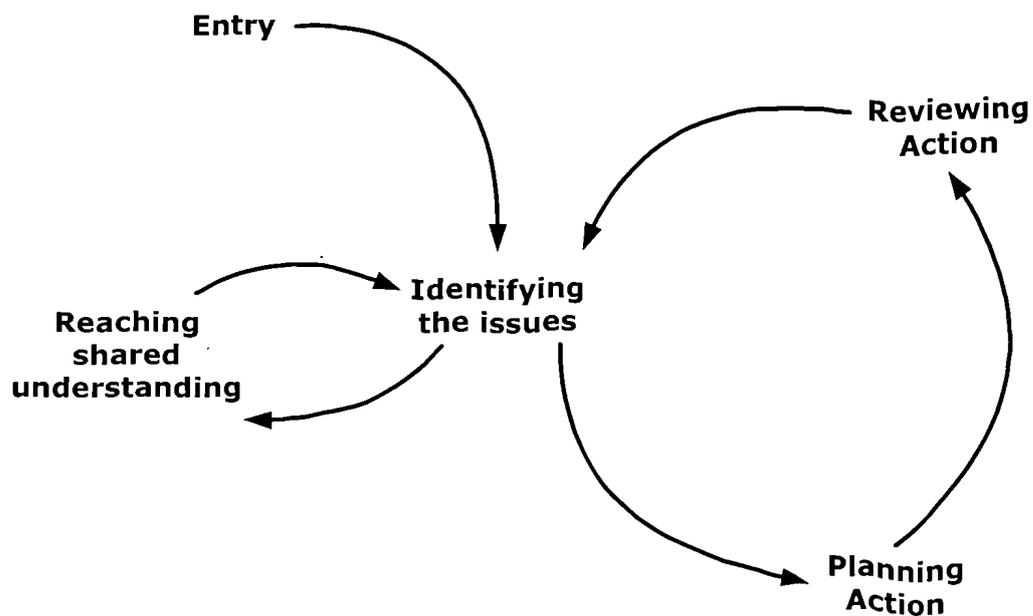
The second phase termed 'identifying the issues' was similarly discussed in terms of its relevance to their own practice. In addition, it was proposed by one participant that this was the single most important phase. There appeared to be agreement from other group members to this proposal. Comments supported the reasoning from my second cycle that this is a phase about challenging an individual client's assumptions and using feedback (however obtained) to stimulate identification and prioritising of coaching needs. None of the examples given were rooted in a coaching context involving explicit support of a 360-degree feedback exercises, and this was relevant to me as I was seeking to understand if the model proposed was relevant to different coaching contexts.

The final phase proposed in the model was termed 'withdrawal' and this was the third of the phases that the coaches in the discussion group quickly agreed related to their own practice. Examples of how they went about achieving this were also elicited. Coach 5 reported using a self-completion exercise for individual clients to assess their state of readiness to continue without the coach's support. Coach 8 reported agreeing 'contracting out' ground rules with his clients which including leaving 'the door open' for individuals to contact him again informally if they felt the need for an occasional and non-chargeable sounding board regarding their on-going progress. At what stage 'the meter would start running again' also formed part of his contracting out procedure. There was, however, some discussion among the group concerning whether the term 'withdrawal' was appropriate. It was suggested that it implied a psychoanalytical approach to executive coaching which was not followed by all the coaches present. The term 'saying goodbye' was suggested as a more inclusive and straightforward term. The nodding and other affirming gestures I observed indicated a significant degree of agreement to this suggestion.

I will pause at this point in writing up my findings to share my reflections following my analysis and findings arising from the discussion group. I have concluded that so far the model of the executive coaching process I proposed did seem to reflect (indeed closely reflect) what these other six executive coaches actually did in their practice. Since all described operating in a variety of different sectors and coaching contexts than the one in my second cycle I have concluded that so far the model also seems to reflect (and reflect closely) what actually happens in other organisational contexts.

My expectation at the beginning of the third cycle was that I should further develop the model of how the executive process is conducted on the basis of the feedback from these other executive coach-practitioners. My interpretation of the findings so far are that two changes to the model are desirable. Firstly, I determined to present the left hand diagnostic loop as a significantly smaller loop than the right hand learning support loop. This is to represent visually that the former part of the process is of a somewhat lesser scale in the context of the overall process than the latter part. Secondly, I determined to change the term by which the final phase is identified to that of 'saying goodbye'. These two changes are reflected in a revised model, presented below as Figure 10.

**Figure 10: The Executive Coaching Process (revised)**



*Source: adapted from figure 10, 2001*

### **THREE ASPECTS COACHES CONSIDER**

In a study into executive coaching undertaken by a student for an MSc in Occupational Psychology, and published in September 2001 (Richards, 2001), eight executive coaches were interviewed in eight different settings. The coaches were asked what percentage of their work fell into each of the three paths or categories I had suggested (Carter, 2001) of personal effectiveness, business or job

requirements, and career or personal aspirations. Richards found that seven of the coaches thought that they did all three. This would tend to support my personal experience in the second cycle where both I and my two co-researcher coaches also believed we did all three. Some of Richards' interviewee coaches also said that the three interacted with each other so much that it was hard to distinguish between them. One example she cited was a coach who said that someone might present with an organisation problem, but the solution was found through working on their career plan. Of the six interviewees who agreed to ascribe percentages in answer to this question, she reports

Four followed the pattern of career and personal aspirations accounting for just 20-25% of their work with the remainder divided, usually equally, between the two other categories; the other two placed more emphasis on career and personal aspirations (75% in one case and 40% in the other). (Richards, 2001)

So what did the executive coaches in my discussion group think of the three paths to reaching a shared understanding that I had suggested based on my experiences in the second cycle? All six agreed that they had pursued all three paths although it was suggested they related to them as three different 'aspects' or 'areas' rather than different 'paths'. Four thought they had pursued all three aspects with the same individual or 'client'. No-one was able to identify any other aspects that seemed to have been missed. Particular comments arising during the discussion included:

I think I always operate in all three areas with the same client, but there comes a point on the third one [career and personal aspirations] which can kibosh the rest if the person is really unhappy or aspiring to something which is nothing to do with that organisation. So I can take the personality stuff and look at the job objectives from the first two areas and look at them in the context of the individual in the third area and what it is that they don't want in that organisation. So the third area can skew it. If there is a synergy with the person in that organisation then I think I do use all three equally, but it's the third area can occasionally dominate. (Coach 5)

Quite a lot of companies I work for scope the work not involving the third [career and personal aspirations]. But I find it hard to separate them. So I may not have been commissioned, but in practice I definitely tread there as well as in the other two. (Coach 4)

I think I have operated in all three. But from a commercial point of view I would probably only want to admit to the first two [personal

effectiveness and organisation/job requirements] but from an ethical point of view probably the other one is the most important and I would say organisations are a bit short-sighted basically. (Coach 7)

So it seems there is support among coaches working in different coaching contexts that all of the three aspects I identified are indeed important. Commissioners should be aware that coaches can work on all three of these aspects, since they may believe they are only commissioning one or two. Commissioners, therefore, may like to clarify with the coaches they are hiring how comfortable they are with all the aspects being pursued.

### **DIFFERENT TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES**

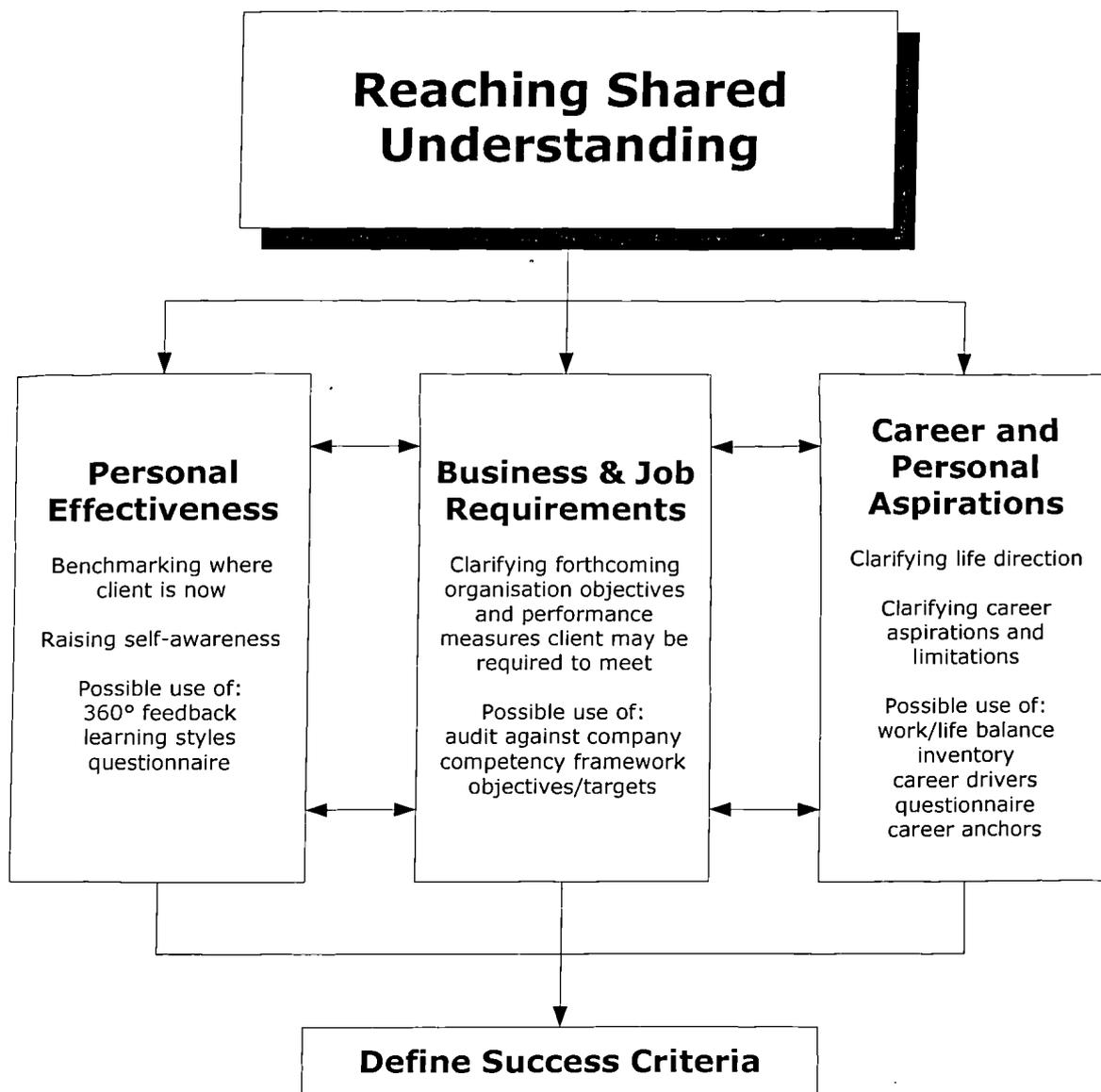
Discussion arising from consideration in detail of the phases in the model of the executive coaching process resulted in some lively and animated debates about what underpinned what the group members actually did as coaches. During these discussions the coaches also referred to the three different aspects coaches can choose to consider, and the various tools and techniques they as coaches chose to use when coaching executives.

One of the coaches (Coach 6) explained that she found the use of cognitive-behaviour diaries (a tool acquired through her counselling background) very useful in helping executives to surface their thoughts about how they were progressing with their attempts to change their behaviour. She explained how she saw this tool as linked to helping executives reflect when pursuing the aspect of personal effectiveness. Another, Coach 9, described the bespoke written exercises he had developed, and how they helped executives generate feedback for themselves about their personal work-life balance priorities. Others shared their habits of using a variety of other tools and techniques including psychometric tests, information sheets and (with an executive's permission) interviewing the executive's boss.

At the time of the discussion group I found myself feeling increasingly uneasy and somewhat muddled as to whether comments were central to understanding how the process is conducted. This unease about the tools and techniques used persisted despite a number of interventions by me. During these interventions I asked clarifying questions to the group members and attempted to summarise what I thought I was hearing. I was relieved there was a transcript to analyse later!

My confusion may have been exacerbated because, during the presentations I gave at the workshop sessions with both the coaches and the commissioners, I had also included a slide with a diagram I had developed during my personal reflections at the end of the second cycle. This diagram visually represented the techniques I used in my own practice during the phase termed 'reaching a shared understanding'. This diagram is reproduced here as Figure 11 below. The coaches made frequent reference to the terms I had used in this diagram, as well as the terms used for the phases in the model of the executive coaching process itself.

**Figure 11: Paths to Reaching a Shared Understanding**



*Source: personal reflection on meeting with co-researchers in 2nd cycle, 2001*

In making sense of the data arising from the written transcript of these discussions, I have concluded that these discussions did not imply any further amendments or changes were needed to the model of the executive coaching process. This is because I do not believe the discussions related to the process of executive coaching itself, and do not affect the identification of the phases of the process. I do not believe the discussions raised any challenge to the three aspects a coach can consider. On the other hand I do not believe they resulted in a long list of tools and techniques coaches use, although compiling such a list is one possible output. Rather, I believe the analysis of the discussions was important more because it revealed different methods of implementing executive coaching, and how different coaches make sense of what they are doing. My interpretation of the data and analysis has led me to conclude that the coaches were describing their practice in using tools in three fundamentally different ways. Firstly, some of the coaches seemed to be offering a rationale for why they used tools at all, while others seemed to be presenting a list of the tools they used and offering an indication of the basis upon which they used each tool in a given context. Thirdly others seemed to be describing the different times when they used their particular tools with the executives they were coaching. This has led me to conclude that among this group of coaches:

- tools and techniques are used in seeking to promote movement through a phase of the process *i.e. rationalising **why** tools are used*
- distinct and conscious choices are made about the tools and techniques coaches actually use *i.e. deciding **which** tools to use*
- tools and techniques are used to support two phases in the process, both to help reach a shared understanding with executives about the issues to work on, and also later to help executives review the degree of success they may have had with the actions they have attempted *i.e. determining **when** tools are used.*

At the time of writing up this third cycle I have reflected further about what these three conclusions mean in the context of my own practice as an executive coach. I find I can relate to these three ways of considering the tools I use. This includes being able to identify examples from my practice where I have used tools such as written exercises and articles to help individuals review the degree of success with actions they attempted. So why didn't I identify the third conclusion – that tools are

used to support two phases in the process – during my reflections following the second cycle?

I did not actually use any tools with the executives in my client organisation to help them review action. Why was this the case? I think it may be because of a combination of two factors. Firstly the small number of executives I personally coached through this phase at the second cycle client organisation may be relevant. I simply did not identify a need to use specific tools with those particular individuals to help them review the success of their actions – the use of questioning alone was sufficient in these particular cases, so there was no rationale for using tools. Secondly, the relatively short length of time the coaching relationships lasted in the assignment may also be relevant. The coaching contexts where I have used tools to assist in the phase of reviewing action, I have been commissioned to work with individuals over a longer period of time. This has meant the executives have had the time to attempt more actions and so together we have reviewed actions more often. In going around the learning support loop of the executive coaching process more often on a particular issue identified as needing action, the likelihood of my considering it desirable to use formal tools increase. This is because it is easier to identify an executive getting stuck on a particular issue and needing extra assistance the longer I am able to work with them. Reflecting on these two factors has made me realise that in my practice I routinely use tools to promote individuals' movement through the phase of 'reaching a shared understanding'. However, where I differ from some of the coaches in the discussion group, is that I only use tools to promote individuals' movement through the phase of 'reviewing action' by exception. It seems that I am more likely to view tools as useful for the diagnostic part of the executive coaching process, whereas others may see tools as important for the learning support part of the process as well.

Further, it seems reasonable for me to speculate that I am rather less dependent on the use of specific tools in my practice than some other coaches in the discussion group, although rather more dependent than one of the coaches in that group who did not use tools at all, but relied exclusively on her questioning and other generic coaching skills. There seems to be a spectrum relating to the style of executive coaches, from a high degree of dependence on tools at one end to a low dependence on tools at the other.

Commissioners should be aware that coaches use different tools. Commissioners might also like to enquire in general terms as to the evidence base underpinning some of these tools. Some of the bespoke exercises and self-completion 'tests' I briefly heard about in the discussion group may not be based on evidence at all. Other tools have been designed based on research evidence, validated as applied in practice and the results are available in published research. Research findings from the use of different combinations of tools in a coaching context are also now starting to be published. For example, initial indications in a US study are that the use of MBTI (a personality measurement tool) in combination with a multi-rater feedback exercise and then delivered in a confidential one-to-one executive coaching context (Beth *et al.*, 2000) may better equip coaches to identify and address the differential needs and values of their executive clients.

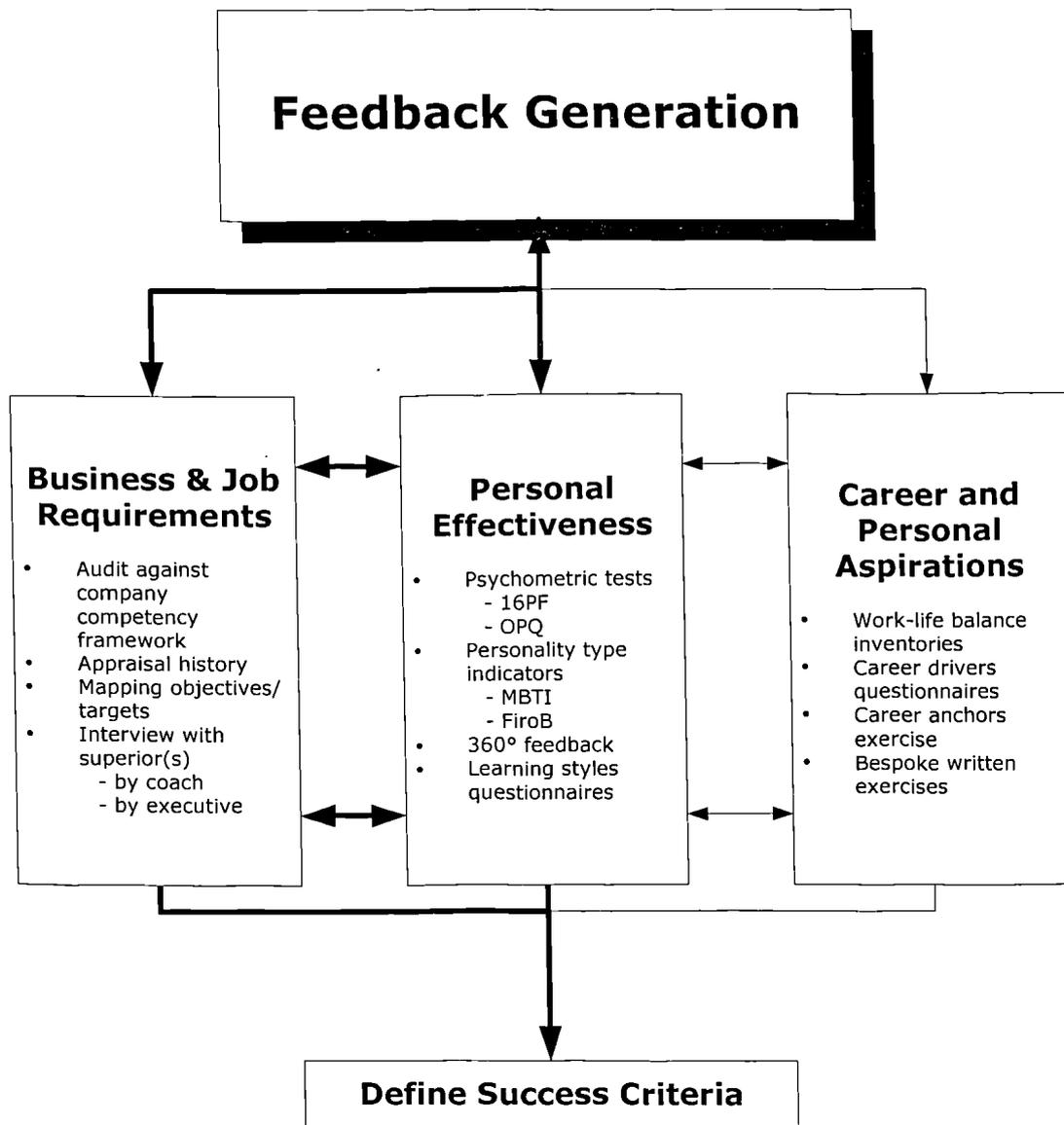
I do not mean to suggest that those coaches who cannot provide compelling details of the evidence base for their tools should not be hired. Instead I would suggest that commissioners might like to agree with coaches, in advance, those tools which they wish to form part of the potential 'tool-kit' from which the coaches select specific tools in coaching sessions with their company's executives. If commissioners are uneasy about any of the tools described, they may like to agree at the outset that these particular tools will not be used.

In discussion with my co-researchers in December 2001, they suggested that a visual representation or diagram of when tools are used, and some examples of the tools coaches might use, would be useful to potential commissioners of executive coaches. In developing this we considered that it might be helpful to adapt my previous diagram (Figure 11 above). My co-researchers felt that by assigning the tools used by the coaches I had encountered to the three aspects coaches consider, this would promote understanding of the context in which tools might be used among potential commissioners. This was considered important in helping commissioners identify those tools they might wish to make further enquiries about.

In discussion about how the diagram might be developed we considered two changes desirable. Firstly, we determined that two separate diagrams might be more helpful, since it would emphasise the clear distinction between when tools were used in the overall executive coaching process. One diagram should represent the feedback generation tools that might be used by coaches in seeking to reach a

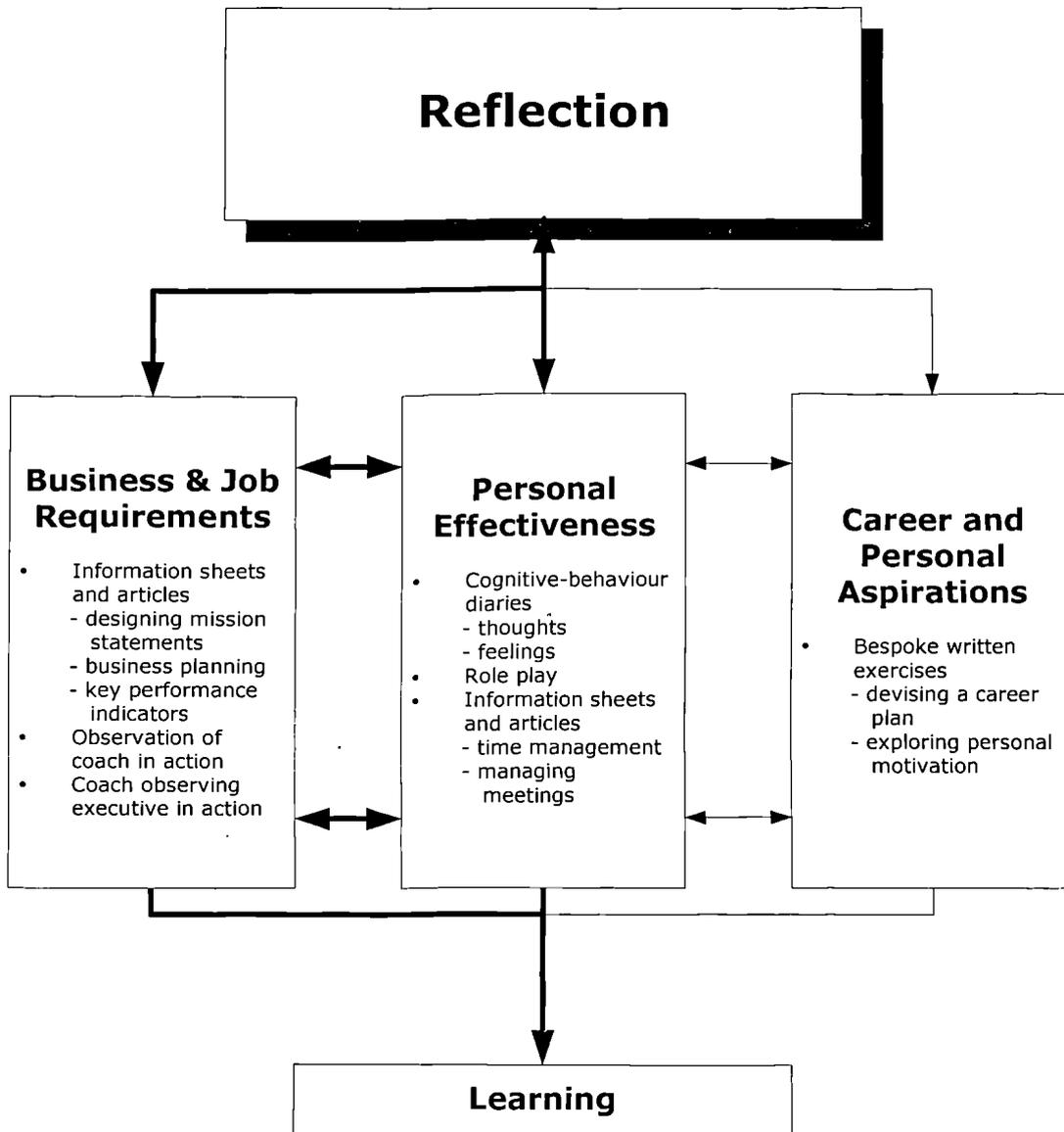
shared understanding of the issues to be addressed and enabling success criteria to be defined. A second diagram should represent the reflection tools that might be used by coaches in assisting executives to review action(s) attempted, and so enable learning to be articulated and conscious. Secondly, we determined that the arrows linking one of the aspects – career and personal aspirations – should be lighter than the arrows linking to the other two aspects. This is to represent visually that this aspect is not always commissioned. The two diagrams we developed are presented below as Figure 12 and Figure 13 respectively.

**Figure 12: Tools Coaches Might Use to Reach a Shared Understanding of The Issues to be Addressed**



Source: adapted from figure 12, 2001

**Figure 13: Tools coaches might use to review action**



*Source: adapted from figure 12, 2001*

### **WHAT MAKES A GOOD COACH?**

My presentation during the workshop sessions to both the executive coaches and the commissioners had included a slide with the list prepared during my second cycle. This related to those aspects that my co-researcher coaches and I believed might comprise the makeup of a good coach in that specific context. Three of the aspects included on that list triggered a lively discussion among the executive coaches. Two of the aspects they vehemently disagreed with as being relevant to

what makes a good coach in the different contexts they operated within. One other aspect – that of ‘personal credibility’ – they agreed was the single most important item. One coach expressed her view thus:

It sounds like the magical gravitas which I get asked to help people acquire! But I think if you’ve got personal credibility all the rest of them [items on the list] can go hang. (Coach 6)

The first aspect on the list that elicited some surprise and disagreement at its inclusion was ‘knowledge of training delivery methods’. Three of the six coaches felt that this sounded too much like an executive coach operating as a ‘one-to-one trainer’. During discussion there was recognition from the other three coaches that this aspect was necessary when they operated in a personal development context, such as following up development centres or when a personal development plan was one of the outputs a contract specified. However, in other contexts where the immediate aim could be described as performance improvement in a specific area, such as chairing meetings, did not necessitate a training methods knowledge base.

The coaches second objection was evident when they discussed the item called ‘trained user of diagnostic tools’. There seemed to be three different sorts of arguments regarding this item, two against its applicability to all coaching contexts and one in favour. The first was what I would describe as a coach-centred argument. As quickly became evident, not all the coaches used diagnostic tools, and therefore it was felt this item should not be a criteria. Comments included:

I’m a trained user of a range of diagnostic tools, but I do get a bit worried about this. I mean when I say diagnostic tools I think I mean all sorts of different ways to help reflecting and talking with people, but my guess is other people would guess its more about psychometrics and things like that, and I don’t think a good coach needs to be trained in formal use of psychometrics. I think there are other ways of achieving the same things. (Coach 6)

If the only tool you’ve got is a hammer, you treat everything like a nail. Most people can’t afford to be qualified in the full range of psychometric tests because each one is so expensive. (Coach 8)

I cannot do a psychometric test in a snowstorm. (*laughter in background*) I can’t do them and I think I’m a good coach. (Coach 4)

The second reason for objecting to the item was because it did not reflect the full variety of national and cultural contexts within which all the coaches worked. As one explained:

It might be fine in an Anglo-Saxon context. In continental Europe they can be much more sceptical about psychometric tests and other formal tools. because their environments are much less like that. You just don't do that, you do it through talking and relating. That's why people like Oxford Psychological Press have a lot of difficulty selling things in Europe than they do here. But its much easier in Scandinavia and you could use them there. (Coach 6)

The final argument pitched the item as more appropriate in some individual client-contexts, although once again the implication was that the use of diagnostic tools was not appropriate in all contexts. Comments from coaches included:

Yes I can relate to that. I've been involved in programmes where the formalised diagnostic stuff has been front ended and then the coaching comes out of it and I have found them really useful as a frame or framework to argue why they don't get on with their boss or why they want to leave that job in two years. (Coach 9)

So I can use tools and methodologies and all those kinds of things but I know [a colleague] can achieve the same thing using questioning. I'm trained in it. I would love people to come and say to me 'Ooh, let me have the latest thing you're qualified in' but it might not be appropriate to that person and anyway I wouldn't want people to think that it is an integral part of all my coaching. It's not. (Coach 6)

I had expected that the commissioners, or potential commissioners, of executive coaches might find it helpful to have a list of what makes a good coach. This is because I thought it might assist them by offering them some possible criteria against which to select between coaches. It was interesting that the commissioners in the initial forum workshop session also queried whether two of the items should be on the list. One of these was 'trained user of diagnostic tools'. Two different perspectives were offered in support of this belief. Firstly, some commissioners seemed to assume that anyone who was an executive coach was bound to have this training anyway. Being trained in some diagnostic tools was, in effect, a 'given', so it would not be helpful to try to differentiate between good and bad coaches on the basis of training to use particular tools. The second perspective offered by some other commissioners was that it should be left to each coach's own judgement to decide on a case-by-case basis whether to use these tools or not, since some

managers might not need or want them. Since they believed that some coaches could be effective in working with these individual managers without using formal tools, how could it be necessary for all 'good' coaches to possess them?

While the coaches had accepted the inclusion of 'detachment from the immediate work environment' as a valid item on the list, the commissioners disagreed. The main reason seemed to be that they thought one of the other items 'respects confidentiality' was important in every conceivable context. If a coach could be relied upon to respect confidentiality, then it wouldn't matter if they came from outside an individual's department or the organisation, as no conflict would ever arise.

I have reflected on this difference in perspective. It may be that it is linked to the internal vs external coach debate. On the one hand, it is in the coaches commercial interests to promote the notion of detachment, since hiring an external coach suits all the coaches at that discussion group and indeed myself and my co-researcher coaches in the second cycle who were also in effect coaches-for-hire! Or it may be that it suits commissioners to source at least some of their coaches internally, which means they might be more inclined to lessen the extent to which detachment is important.

### **USING KNOWLEDGE TO IMPROVE PRACTICE**

The second research question posed by my Research Network commissioners related to using the topic of executive coaching to determine a *modus operandi* for the new research network. The question was 'how can we as organisations use knowledge about executive coaching and what coaches actually do in their practice to improve our practice in commissioning executive coaches?'

Commissioners of external executive coaching suppliers are not alone in feeling they lack advice about how they might commission a specific development intervention for managers. The recent CEML enquiry into the use of UK business schools for management and leadership development found that employers did not feel they had enough information on the management training market to be really effective purchasers (CEML, 2002). Commissioners are not the only constituent group in organisations who lack advice about how they might apply specific development methods to their own unique context – the intended target audience

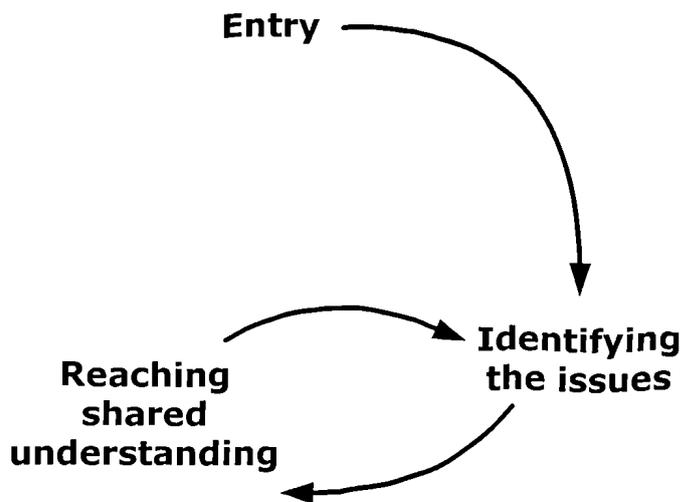
can lack advice too. Woodall's findings (1998) on 'work based management development' in 31 organisations included:

Coaching and, increasingly, special projects are the interventions most likely to be consciously promoted, but explicit guidance on using these interventions is rare. (Woodall, 1998)

During my first session at the commissioners' forum I presented my slides outlining the findings from the second cycle of my research and invited their comments and reflections on those findings. By introducing the emerging model of the executive coaching process (and other findings) my intention was to share what it is that some coaches do in their practice. So what was the reaction of the attendees?

The forum participants were very positive about the emerging model of the executive coaching process I presented. During discussion it came out that the main reason it was helpful to them is that the model allowed them to reflect upon what they had commissioned and, even more importantly, what by implication they had not commissioned. For instance, one participant from the finance sector explained her use of external executive coaches to support a management development programme. She highlighted the parts of the model that referred to what she had commissioned, and these are shown in Figure 14 below.

**Figure 14: The Feedback Giving Process**



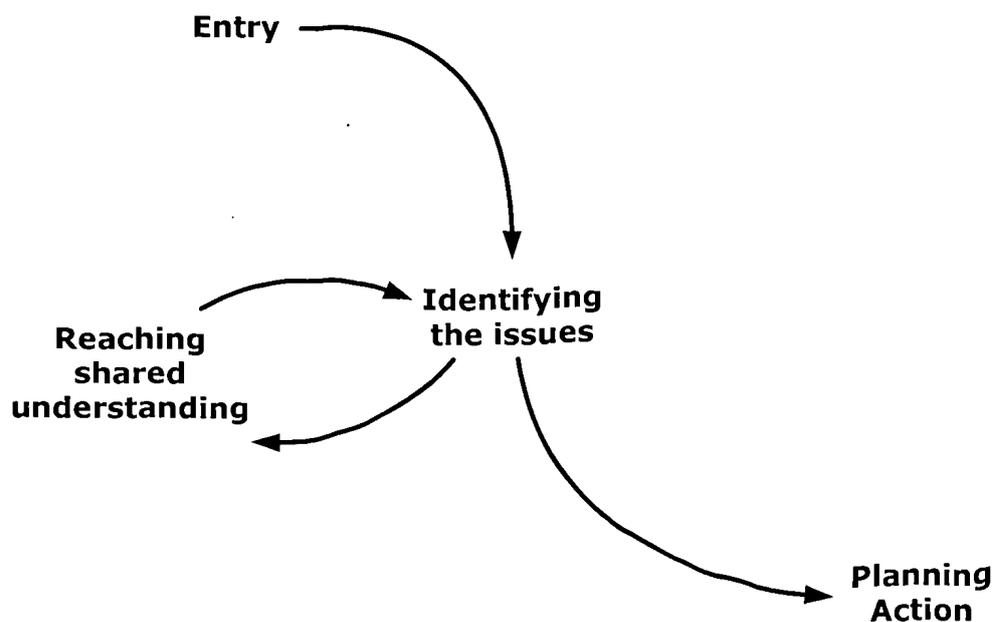
*Source: forum of commissioners, 2001*

A 360-degree feedback exercise had been commissioned from a local business school, and all the senior managers at head office had received a computer-generated report with their individual 'scores'. A cadre of local freelance executive coaches was hired to assist the senior managers in making sense of their reports and to identify the relevant issues for them. Some six months down the line, this commissioner had been frustrated that very little change in the behaviour of the senior managers had been noticed. In pointing to the model, she said she could articulate for the first time a possible reason for this shortcoming. She wondered if, by only hiring a coach to give the feedback, she had enabled the senior managers to be supported only in diagnosing their development needs. If she had extended the coaching to support the individuals in planning action and/or implementing and reviewing those actions, or put some alternative arrangements in place to support these phases, she may have had a more positive result. Her point was that she acknowledged something else needs to follow on from coaching as 'feedback-giving' to support the individuals in order for change to actually occur.

On a similar note, another forum participant from the finance sector explained the way she found the model useful in making sense of what she had commissioned.

This was part of a pilot management development programme for senior managers to support a move away from a command and control management culture. The phases in the model she felt she had commissioned are shown in Figure 15 below. She had commissioned a large consultancy firm to design a bespoke development centre to allow senior managers to be assessed against a new competency framework. Executive coaches from the same firm were then used to help the managers draw up personal development plans. Once again, this participant said the model had helped her realise that she had not put in place a process for supporting the senior managers in implementing their actions and learning from reflecting on their degree of success. She felt that by paying for a few more coaching sessions, she may have enabled the coaches to complete the whole executive coaching process and in doing so maximised the chances of the required changes in behaviour being adopted and embedded in the organisation.

**Figure 15: The PDP Producing Process**

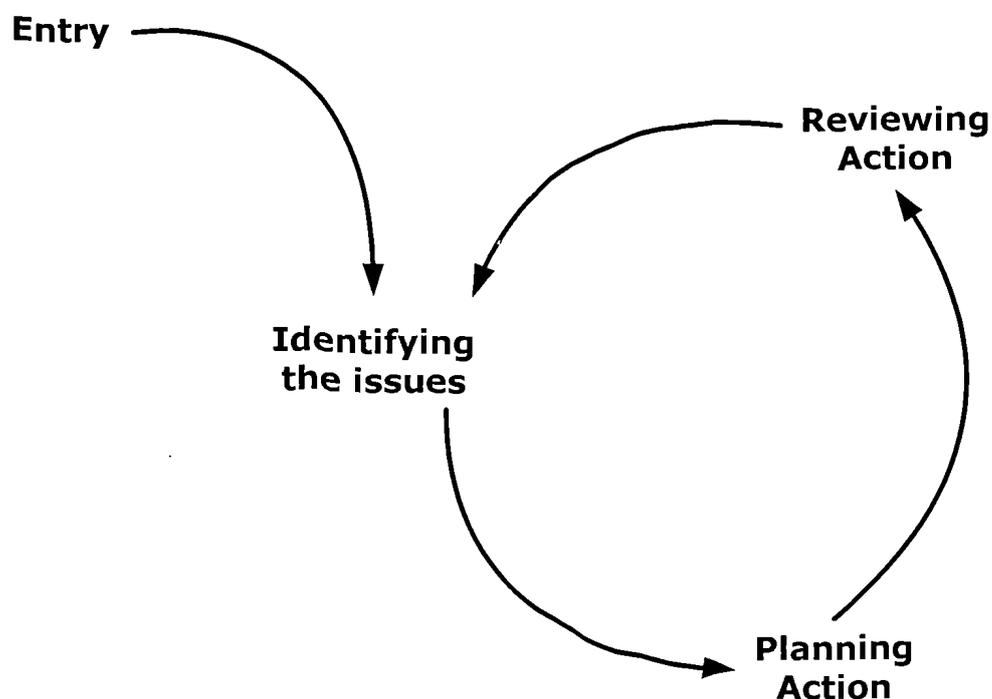


*Source: forum of commissioners, 2001*

A third forum participant shared her previous frustration with a number of the executive coaches she had commissioned to support Company Directors in improving specified performance areas. She had felt they were constantly trying to 'push up the price' by suggesting optional extras were necessary in individual

cases. These options included the use of Myers-Briggs Type Indicators and proprietary psychometric tests. She described what she thought she had commissioned by highlighting the phases in the model as shown in Figure 16 below. She shared her reflection that she had not appreciated how important it was for a coach to 'reach a shared understanding' of the issues to be addressed with an individual Director. Just because she (on behalf of the organisation) felt clear what the issues were, she now realised that this did not mean the Director was clear about 'why they might be going wrong'.

**Figure 16: The Learning Support Process**



*Source: forum of commissioners, 2001*

When reflecting upon the initial session I ran at the commissioners' forum, it seemed to me that the model of the executive coaching process was helpful to this group of commissioners in three ways. Firstly, the model increased the commissioners' understanding of what it is that executive coaches actually do with individuals. This was the driver for producing the model in the first place, so it was encouraging to me that the model did seem to be very helpful in this regard. Secondly, reflecting on what executive coaches do enabled the commissioners to

identify exactly what they were commissioning and the impact they could expect. In future, they would be better prepared to anticipate likely gaps in their commissioning and put in place alternative arrangements for ensuring these gaps were filled. Thus, improvements in commissioning practice can be expected. Thirdly, a greater understanding of how executive coaches work seems to have enhanced the status of coaches in the eyes of the commissioners, and led to an increase in the collective regard with which they are held.

It was also interesting that in the final session of the forum, the list I had presented of some aspects that might be important in the make-up of a good coach was cited by one commissioner as an example of how helpful the forum had been. This prospective commissioner declared that the discussion about the list had made her realise how varied views could be on this subject. She said she was now determined to consult the target group of senior managers in her organisation before she decided whether to select external coaches. If the company culture was thought open enough, she might rethink her initial assumption that she would have to go to an external source. So it seemed sight of the list had fulfilled two useful functions for her. Firstly, it had made her pause to reflect on and then identify what she now considered to be her own personal assumptions about what denoted a good coach. Secondly, it had provided her with an initial list that she intended to adapt as a basis for internal discussions with her manager target group to help identify their criteria. I took this to be an example of the dual purposes I had hoped to achieve through the forum – to enable learning of the participant commissioners and to influence what they might do as part of their future commissioning practice.

## **Reflections on the Third Cycle**

### **ABOUT THE MAKE-UP OF A GOOD COACH**

I remained curious about the difference of opinion between coaches and commissioners on the need for 'detachment from the immediate work environment' and I wonder if this is an important issue to test out with executives, as their perspective could be critical on this issue. One might imagine commissioners, being closer to their own company executives, might have a closer perception of what is important in a 'good coach' with regard to the need for detachment. However, as coaches actually develop very close relationships with those executives they coach, it may be that they have the more accurate notion of what these executives value.

When reflecting with my co-researcher commissioners in December 2001 about the differences in opinion on 'detachment', they suggested that I use a conference on 21 February 2001 as an opportunity to test out some of the items on the list on an audience of HR specialists. Thirty-two organisations were represented at the conference and, of these, 18 completed and returned a short exercise sheet that asked them to rank in order of importance the five items they would use to identify a good coach. They were then asked to rank these five items in order of importance with 1 being the most important and 5 the least important. I also left space for them to include other items in addition to the 12 suggested if they so wished. Finally, I asked them to share their rankings and discuss the reasons for any similarities or differences. The number of times each aspect was ranked within the delegates' top five aspects is shown in Table 3 below. The number of times each aspect was ranked as the first, second and third most important is shown in Table 4 below.

The results must be treated with caution. Although the audience comprised HR specialists, it cannot be assumed that they took the perspective of a potential commissioner. The exercise asked them to consider what they would look for if they were offered a coach for themselves. However, it may well be that the various other perspectives they already had may have influenced their responses. My request for a simple show of hands at the beginning revealed that some of the delegates were already operating as internal coaches within their organisations, others already had a coach of their own and a few were currently responsible for commissioning external suppliers of executive coaching.

**Table 3: Number of Times Each Aspect Ranked in HR Delegates' Top Five**

Has personal credibility	(15)
Gives good feedback	(14)
Personal 'chemistry'	(12)
Respects confidentiality	(12)
Skilled listener	(10)
Understands the way organisations work	(9)
Has good ideas about what to do	(6)
Understands the job	(6)
<i>Asks good questions</i>	(5)
Can identify training needs	(3)
From outside immediate work environment (i.e. from outside dept/org)	(2)
<i>Knows if and how to give advice</i>	(1)
Trained user of diagnostic tools	(0)
Note: items in italics were delegates' own aspects	

*Source: Performance Management Conference, 2002*

**Table 4: Number of Times Each Aspect Ranked as First, Second or Third Most Important**

<b>Number of times ranked in first place (i.e. the first most important aspect)</b>	<b>Number of times ranked in second place</b>	<b>Number of times ranked in third place</b>
Personal 'chemistry' (7)	Gives good feedback (4)	Gives good feedback (4)
Skilled listener (4)	Respects confidentiality (4)	Personal credibility (4)
Gives good feedback (2)	Personal credibility (4)	Skilled listener (3)
	Personal 'chemistry' (2)	Understands the job (2)
	Skilled listener (2)	Can identify training needs (2)
		Has good ideas about what to do (2)

Note: Table does not include aspects with one or less responses

Source: Performance Management Conference, 2002

Despite my reservations about treating the results from this simple exercise as part of my research, it was interesting that only one person ranked detachment from the immediate work environment as important enough to rate in their top five aspects. The results also supported what both the commissioners and coaches in my third cycle discussion group felt about the relative lack of importance in a coach being a trained user of diagnostic tools, since none of the conference respondents ranked this aspect in their top five aspects.

The real value of the exercise, however, was not in the actual results at all, but in the discussion that followed the exercise. The delegates appeared fascinated that there was such a degree of variation in what others in the room thought was important. A number of delegates said what a useful exercise it had been in making them realise that not everyone thought the same way as they did, and that it was an exercise they would 'borrow' to facilitate in-company discussions prior to identifying and matching coaches and those to be coached. Thus, improvements in commissioning practice can be expected. I determined to make the exercise available as a resource for Research Network members through the members' area of the IES website.

## **ABOUT EVALUATING COACHING PROVIDED TO EXECUTIVES**

A forthcoming report on some of the practical challenges of management development (Hirsh and Carter, 2002) was largely based on discussions with management development managers in twenty-nine large private and public sector organisations. The report highlights the increasing pressure on management development managers to show that money is well spent on the activities they organise. Evaluation was clearly a key issue, but also an area where it was felt practice was still relatively weak. A particular problem was perceived in the area of 'newer approaches to development', such as executive coaching, where provision was often very open-ended in its objectives. Difficulties in evaluation were perceived to be partly for reasons of confidentiality and the private nature of the process, and partly because its impact may be at a deeper personal level than others can see and over longer periods of time.

The commissioners of externally supplied executive coaching that I have been involved with throughout the first and third cycles have also been concerned about their lack of success in evaluating the coaching provided. I am left reflecting whether and why all personal one-to-one support approaches to senior manager development are difficult for commissioners to quality assure and evaluate. It may be that they are inherently uncontrollable and that organisations have to accept that they are to some extent taking a gamble by investing in them. Executive coaching may be slightly easier to evaluate when used for a specific purpose over a limited time frame, such as in the example provided by one of the case study organisations at the forum for Research Network members as previously described.

It seems to me that externally commissioned executive coaching provided for relatively small populations of senior managers and directors must surely benefit from low capital investment costs when compared to methods such as e-learning modules or establishing corporate universities or in-house management colleges. However executive coaching could be considered very expensive to maintain over long periods or when extended to large management populations.

## **ABOUT BUILDING INTERNAL COACHING CAPABILITY**

My research has concentrated on externally supplied coaching for executives, as this was the focus desired by the Research Club and Research Network members who comprised my client infrastructure. However, I am conscious that organisations have the option to supply this coaching internally. If demand for coaching continues

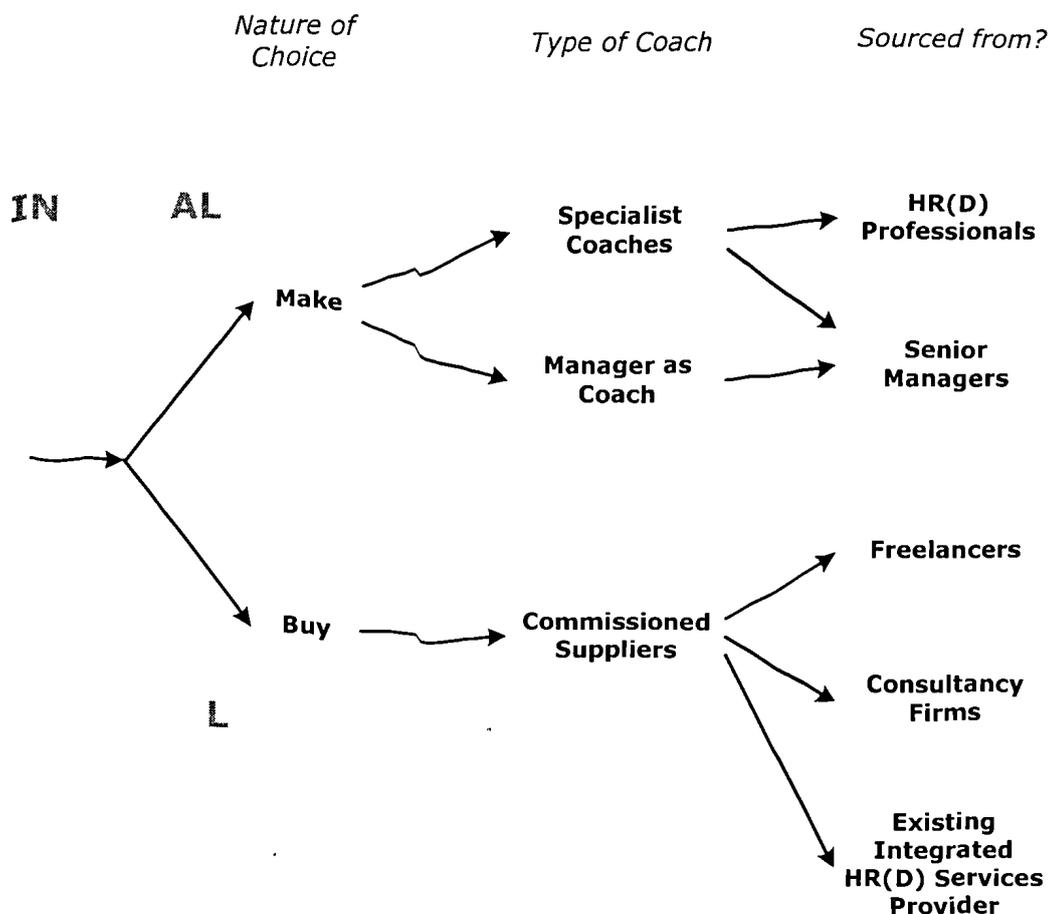
to grow and is sustained, more organisations may choose to consider building their own internal coaching capability.

It occurs to me that a simple decision-making model such as those used to support operational management decision making may be helpful to assist reflection about coaching provision before the decision to commission external suppliers is actually made. Drawing on the concepts of Moore and Thomas (1976) in using decision trees and the 'make or buy' choices in HRM devolvement and outsourcing suggested by Reilly (2000) I propose the following simple schematic, presented below as Figure 17, that addresses coaching for senior managers and directors.

There are several choices to be made in the way in which coaching for senior managers and directors can be introduced and delivered. The most crucial of these is whether to 'make or buy', i.e. whether to resource coaching internally or externally.

On the basis of my contact with organisational commissioners to date, it seems to me that some organisations believe that there are benefits to commissioning external suppliers. Notable reasons I have encountered include giving greater flexibility in meeting demand, keeping the cost as variable rather than fixed, improved quality of service from a specialist supplier, and freeing up managerial time to focus on core business issues. If this is the case there are still decisions to be made. If you have outsourced HRD activities to a single integrated service provider, will they have the credibility and capability to deliver coaching to your executives? Will you seek to maximise consistency and minimise contract management effort by going to a single consultancy firm? Or will you seek to save costs and maintain flexibility by hiring a cadre of freelance coaches?

**Figure 17: Issues to be considered in building coaching capability**



Source: adapted from Reilly, 2000

On the other hand, I have encountered organisations that believe, almost as a matter of principle, that better cost and/or service can be provided internally. These organisations have commissioned suppliers to date, either because of the limited requirement for coaching to date or as a temporary stop gap while they consider other options. The stated reasons for preferring in-house provision include lack of expertise in managing contractors, rising costs as more coaching is provided, and ensuring consistency in delivery. If this is the case, then decisions still need to be made: do you set up an internal cadre of specialist coaches? If so, will these form a separate profit centre chargeable to the business units they serve? Will they count as an additional cost centre as part of the corporate overheads? Will they be a temporary resource, perhaps to support a one-off upgrading or step-change improvement in management skills? Will they be a more permanent resource in seeking continuously and incrementally improve management performance? Or do you extend the role of line managers in operating as coaches for the individuals they manage?

In determining whether to create an internal cadre of specialist coaches or to develop the role of line managers as coaches, there will be further resourcing decisions. Where will these people come from, and how easy will it be to develop and sustain them as a coaching resource? Given that senior managers and directors are the target audience in question, both options imply the use of further senior management time. Specialist coaches could also come from within the ranks of HR and HRD professionals within the organisation.

### **ABOUT CARRYING OUT COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY ACTION RESEARCH**

The three cycles of research described in this thesis are my first experiences of participating in collaborative inquiry or any form of action research. When I first embarked on my DBA programme I was a senior manager and consultant in the NHS who would probably have described research simply as the production of knowledge about a given subject matter. Such was my enthusiasm for the programme that within a year I had moved to a very different employment context to become a consultant and researcher at IES. In parallel with the thesis research process I have been involved in other research projects for my employer, and these have employed quantitative and qualitative strategies. My familiarity and competence in leading these research projects has grown over the last four years. So what have I learned about conducting collaborative inquiry and action research and how has that differed from what I have been learning about other research strategies?

According to Reason (1994) to be considered collaborative, or co-operative, inquiry researchers must work with co-researchers, and establish collaborative dialogue in the conduct of the research. In this regard I can definitely identify a clear difference here from other research I have conducted. Looking back, however, I feel that the nature of involvement has varied between the cycles. In the second cycle I felt that there was full collaboration between my two executive coach co-researchers and myself. Using Heron's (1988) terms, the separation of roles quickly dissolved and all three of us devised, managed and drew conclusions from the research as well as undergoing the experiences and actions that were being researched.

The nature of involvement was markedly different in the first and third cycles, where I felt there was more of a close consultative relationship with my commissioner co-researchers during these periods, rather than full collaboration at every stage. This may be due to a combination of the methods employed – that I

alone was the data collector and the fact that I was not a commissioner myself. Perhaps an alternative approach would have been to work harder to empower this community of commissioners to construct and use their own knowledge for their benefit by supporting them in their own research process. Nevertheless, I do feel that ownership of the problems and the actions for changing commissioning behaviour did rest with my commissioner co-researchers, and that the knowledge produced is directly useful not only to my co-researchers but will also be useful to other commissioners as the results are disseminated more widely.

The question of who benefited from my research is of interest to me as it seems central to my understanding of collaborative inquiry as a means, in my research context, for aiding commissioners of executive coaching. If I have solely benefited then has my research journey been an individual one which has just 'used' groups along the way to support me in producing knowledge that may somehow increase my personal status or power in dealing with executive coaching assignments? Certainly I have benefited enormously in terms of my personal development, as I have sought to make clear throughout the writing of this thesis. But the feedback from the commissioners at the two Forums I ran during my first and third cycles respectively indicates that the research process had facilitated their personal and professional development as well. When I asked the October 2001 forum attendees to name their most significant learning, most enthusiastically pointed to the opportunity and experience gained from learning about each others' experiences of commissioning executive coaching. The heightened collective consciousness about what executive coaches do was also mentioned by most attendees. For some of my commissioner co-researchers, involvement in this research has inspired them to become more actively involved in the Employee and Management Development Research Network. This means that my employer and colleagues should also benefit.

The question of validity and the legitimacy of the knowledge that has been produced is also of interest to me. Compared to other research I have been involved in, this current collaborative inquiry research process has been very time consuming and at times I have struggled with data difficulties and in coming to terms with, and openly acknowledging, my own subjectivity on this particular subject matter. Because the research, especially in the second cycle, had involved me in examining my own experience and action, I have been overtly aware of the possibility of fooling myself about my experience. I have sought to ensure that I have structured the research and presentation of findings in a manner that allows

the analysis and interpretation activities to be transparent to the reader, as well as allowing for the meaning of my various co-researchers to be heard and represented. I have sought to establish the trust-worthiness of the data, and face validity through recycling interview, focus group and meeting transcripts and notes to all those present. I have also recycled emerging findings from each cycle through my co-researchers for the relevant cycles. I have also tried to operate within a conscious context of theory building, and reflection with others, in the analysis to achieve construct validity. In short, I have found it difficult not being a detached and objective researcher in the way *my other research activities require*.

Heron and Reason (2001) advocate the cultivation of 'critical subjectivity' whereby people are enabled to build on and develop their personal living knowledge to produce high quality and valid individual perspectives in collaboration with others who are doing the same. I have tried to embrace this concept of critical subjectivity and found the attempt demanding but truly liberating. It has also seemed at times a responsibility. This is because it has opened up the possibility among IES member organisations to action research as a valid means for pursuing research, something not previously acknowledged by many of my colleagues as 'real' research. To have been seen to have 'done it badly', or to have failed to engage the members as it did, might have been a career limiting move! Looking back I realise the potential for personal damage was greater than I ever realised when I enthusiastically took the first steps down an action research path.

### **ABOUT KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AND IES RESEARCH NETWORKS**

The special edition of the British Journal of Management published in December 2001 debates the nature of management research and 'Mode 2' knowledge production. The term 'Mode 2 knowledge' or 'M2K' was originally coined by Gibbons et al. (1994) and is concerned with knowledge as it works in practice in the context of application. In the special edition Starkey and Madan (2001) identify a need to increase the stakeholding of users in various aspects of the research and knowledge creation and dissemination process. They also recommend new forms of research partnership to address what they call 'the relevance gap'.

in reading Starkey and Madan and the extended peer commentaries and criticisms that followed in the special edition, I have reflected on what the debate means for me in the context of what I have been doing. I am struck by a clear resonance in two distinct ways: firstly, in respect of the way I have conducted my research

process, particularly in the first and third cycles using collaborative inquiry. Secondly, with regard to the context in which my research was conducted as part of the IES Research Network partnership of HR researchers and experienced HR practitioners.

Starkey and Madan (2001) propose that the users of research have to educate themselves about the potential benefits of close research relationships with academics. They argue that academics have historically been prime agents in the generation of knowledge through research and its dissemination through the publication of results and teaching. Further they argue that managers are not great readers of academic material, especially if they are not involved in an academic course of study, and that experienced managers are more interested in concepts and ideas that can help them make sense of, and deal with, the problems they face in their day-to-day work. This strikes a chord with what I have been seeking to do through the way I have undertaken this research with the explicit aim of helping commissioners of executive coaching to further their understanding of the issues of relevance to their practice, and to make sense of these issues in a way which enables them to improve their practice. So does this make me a practitioner-researcher producer of 'Mode 2 knowledge'? And am I therefore one of the new breed of researchers predicted as springing from a practitioner rather than academic background? Certainly, it could be argued that the research process of collaborative inquiry I adopted, with commissioners framing their needs from the research at the outset and being involved as co-researchers, appears at least superficially to be ideally suited for the production of this 'Mode 2 knowledge'.

The debate has made me reflect on the position of the IES Research Networks. As previously outlined in the first cycle, my employer is an independent, not-for-profit institution which undertakes research and consultancy into employment policy and HR practice. It is not an academic institution, nor a commercial consultancy firm. IES might sit somewhere between the two on a hypothetical knowledge production continuum. Through its Research Club, IES had a history of generating knowledge on HR issues, although it has disseminated this as a 'public good' through publications and conference presentations but never through teaching. Through the replacement Research Networks, IES offers HR managers the opportunity to actually be involved in generating knowledge about the HR issues they collectively choose and frame. My research on commissioning executive coaching is but one small example of the work of one of these networks. By drawing together researchers and practitioners to discuss emerging findings the networks also offer

them a combination of theory and practice. It could be said that the Employee and Management Development Research Network itself is all about generating and disseminating Mode 2 knowledge. It is a closed network in the sense that only members are involved in framing research and initially debating what the findings mean for members own practice. But the knowledge created is subsequently available to all organisations 'as a public good'. The competitive advantage to organisations joining as members is one of timing (they get the results first) but six months later the results are published for a wider audience.

I would like to be able to say that the IES Research Networks were established precisely with a view to filling this so called 'relevance gap', the existence of which is hotly debated by others including Grey (2001). But since I was heavily involved in conceiving and establishing these networks, I know that this is not the case. However, at the time of writing this third cycle, some nine months after the networks were launched, I can say with confidence that I have observed an increased interest and participation among members in research in general. I have also seen new members joining the networks.

Participation in this kind of network is offered by IES and other applied research institutions and management consultancy organisations. It seems to be encouraging members to enquire more deeply about how other research can help them develop an understanding of what does and does not seem to work, and why. Certainly, in putting together the second annual programme of research and events for the Employee and Management Development Research Network I find there is a demand to invite more and more academic researchers to join in discussions with members. It is my proposition therefore that these kind of networks or research partnerships may well lead to an increase in the status and regard among practitioners for the type of 'Mode 1' theoretical and discipline based knowledge which, argue Starkey and Madan (2001), is the product of universities. These networks may not prove a threat to universities, but rather may provide an additional bridge through which practitioners can be encouraged to value and engage more widely with academic researchers of all types.

### **ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE RESEARCH ON PRACTICE**

I believe the research outlined in this thesis has had a clear impact on the practice of four distinct stakeholder groups. Throughout the writing of my thesis I have highlighted where I believe my research has contributed to improvements in

practice. Practice improvements have been primarily in the area of commissioning executive coaching by some IES member organisations, and this was the aspect which I had intended to influence. In addition there have also been practice improvements by some coaches, including myself, affecting how executive coaching is provided, an aspect which I had not initially expected to influence. There has also been an unexpected impact on the work of my employing organisation, IES.

It is reasonable to infer that the research has had a considerable impact on the commissioning practice of those IES members who participated in the research and these commissioners are the first of the stakeholder groups I will mention. I base this claim on their own reported intentions to change their practice which have already been outlined in this thesis as part of the first and third cycles. Some of the many intentions mentioned by commissioners present at the two forum events held for IES members in September 2000 and October 2001 included:

- consulting targeted directors and managers before determining whether sourcing executive coaches from outside the organisation is the best delivery model
- better anticipation of gaps in commissioning specifications
- facilitation of discussions with targeted executives prior to matching coaches with executives.

Thus improvements in commissioning practice can be expected among this group of commissioners.

The second group to consider in terms of impact on practice is other coaches. As discussed at the beginning of Chapter 3, I received telephone calls from a number of practicing executive coaches after the publication of my research report in June 2001. Two of these callers told me that the report had provided them with a new 'language' for talking to commissioners and scheme organisers which they expected would improve communication in their relationships with commissioners. In addition the coaches who have been involved in the second and third cycles of my research have also indicated intended changes to their practice. For example, one of my co-

researchers in the second cycle identified the benefit of time for reflection with peers as part of his continuing professional development. He has joined a support and challenge group of executive coaches and become a more active participant in the networking events of the Association of Management Education and Development (AMED). Another example concerns two of the coaches who participated in my third cycle discussion group in October 2001 who were surprised by how very different what they do as coaches is from what some other coaches do. As a result I have been told by both that they have changed their marketing literature to make it easier for prospective purchasers to identify where the coaching style they offer sits along the coaching spectrum.

The third area of impact on practice I will outline is that of improvements to my own practice as an executive coach. I am now more articulate and confident about what I do, why I do it and what I won't do. The second cycle of my research, in particular, gave me the opportunity to reflect on my own practice as a coach. The comparison of aspects of my practice with that of my two co-researcher coaches enabled me to acquire a greater degree of self-awareness about my coaching style, my underpinning beliefs and values about organisation development and the way I tend to interact with commissioners. This increase in self-awareness, outlined more fully in my reflections section of the second cycle, provided me with the impetus to make a number of changes to my practice.

I have altered the brochure description of the coaching I offer which I provide to executives enquiring about executive coaching and I have added some detail about my style based on feedback from previous people I have coached. In addition to existing supervision arrangements, I have also introduced a formal peer review element into all IES coaching assignments, so that I and others can continue to reflect on our own practice, and assist each other to increase our self-insight and identify improvements in our practice.

I have become much more articulate and up-front with commissioners about the range of aspects that may be covered during the coaching sessions with their executives. I am also more at ease now in promoting my belief about the importance of freedom for a coach to manoeuvre in all these areas.

Perhaps the most important change in my practice however has arisen from my reflections about ethical issues affecting executive coaching. Three aspects of

concern about ethics have arisen for me during this research, and I now use these as three tests which inform my personal decisions about whether I should be involved in undertaking a proposed assignment. Firstly, whether the apparent organisational purpose is in line with my own values about ethical treatment of employees. Secondly, whether the coaching intervention itself can be underpinned by an appropriate and ethical model. Finally, whether the implementation of the coaching through my practice and the practice of the other coach(es) available is likely to be competent and helpful.

Another change in my practice is that I challenge commissioners and HR specialists on their proposed use of executive coaching where it appears to be about exerting control in forcing managers to conform to company-approved values and competencies. I believe that executive coaching can promote a more ethical treatment of employees by organisations where it is framed within a context in which it can also help individual managers to rebel or leave, where that is the desire of the executive.

During my research I have taken the approach of not commenting on the underpinning models and frameworks used by other coaches, as this was not of interest to my commissioner co-researchers. However, I do have a personal view about questionable evidence base and practice related to some of these models, such as NLP. This has prompted me to view myself not just as a coach, but also as a participant in the wider growing debate about professionalising the external provision of executive coaching services. At the heart of the debate is whether there should be ethical standards of 'best practice' to guide or regulate the process of coaching (Parsloe, 2001) or whether a better approach would be the development of ethics of care for each coach to situate each executive's need and circumstance *i.e.* by regulating the integrity and behaviour of the coaches. This debate will take some time to play out. In the meantime I am working with coaching colleagues at IES to develop a written code of conduct for our coaching work and this will provide an explicit ethical framework for my own practice.

The fourth area of impact on practice I will present is that of changes in service delivery at IES. At the operational level, my research has led to the improvements in providing coaching services that I have already outlined. These improvements have included the introduction of a formal peer review process and the development of a code of conduct for our coaching work. However, the impact on

my organisation has been greatest in terms of our relationship with the corporate members of Employee and Management Development Research network and our way of working in providing research services to the network members.

The collaborative enquiry mode of working adopted on my research project proved extremely popular with members and has raised expectations about the way future research should be conducted within the network. Although IES had a long track record of collaborating with corporate members through its former Research Club, the nature of that relationship encouraged members to be more passive in initiating and then receiving the findings of research undertaken on their behalf. The new way of working allows the network members to be much more active participants and encourages involvement in the entire research process. IES has benefited from this change in terms of strong levels of corporate member retention, despite the recent economic downturn which has hit the membership levels at other HR networks. This new way of working has led to all the IES researchers managing the Network's new research projects having to change the way they think about research design to maximise member involvement and feeding back progress and early insights to network members.

### **ABOUT CONTRIBUTING TO THEORY**

It occurs to me that perhaps I have not been so explicit in reflecting upon and highlighting what contribution I believe my research work has made to theory. I take this opportunity to identify the theoretical contributions as well to offer some reflections upon the methodological approach. I am not rooting my claim to originality in the invention of any new form of research, rather I believe I have made two original contributions to knowledge in the executive coaching field.

The aim of this thesis has been to advance the understanding of issues which affect commissioning executive coaching for directors and senior managers. This was necessary because the literature review demonstrated that there was a paucity of empirical work in the executive coaching field. This study commenced by exploring 'what' executive coaching is and it might have been expected that a definition of executive coaching would have been of vital importance. Indeed, much effort was exerted in this regard throughout the research, particularly during the early stages. Now that I have come to the end of the study, I seriously doubt whether such a definition is a useful contribution for the reasons I outlined during my reflections

following the second cycle. Descriptions of why and how executive coaching is used by commissioners may be more useful.

My first original contribution to theory is in categorising for the first time what organisations hope to gain by commissioning executive coaching on behalf of their directors and senior managers. This study has been interested in exploring 'why' executive coaching is commissioned, from the perspective of organisational commissioners, and a proportion of the first cycle was devoted to identifying and categorising the various reasons organisations chose to sponsor executive coaching. I do not claim to be offering an exhaustive set of the descriptive categories that all commissioners could be found to employ. Nevertheless, there is value in this kind of initial work. Its value lies in establishing a baseline from which further knowledge in the area can develop. There is a need to add to the available academic literature, so that researchers can seek to progress a whole range of debates about whether executive coaching works and, if it does, why and in what circumstances. Understanding what commissioners hope to gain forms one important part of the context from which future research on these further issues can spring.

The descriptive categories were developed through an examination of case studies in the literature and interviews with four commissioners. The inclusion of descriptions through 'vignettes' and direct quotations from interview transcripts were designed to allow the reader to judge the adequacy of the claims that I make for the data. I presented the findings to a group of commissioners at a forum for IES Research Club members. They confirmed the findings and related their various organisational reasons for commissioning executive coaching to the categories presented.

My second original contribution to theory is a model of the executive coaching process from the coach's perspective. This study developed an interest in exploring the 'how' of the work that executive coaches do, the process by which executive coaches conduct their activities so as to accomplish their commissions with directors and senior managers. That is what I have sought to describe and present in terms of the phasing and sequencing of the activities which make coaching happen. The model therefore contributes to an understanding of how executive coaches do their work.

The model of the executive coaching process was developed through situated research. Although based on practice in one specific organisational context, the derivation of theory comes about by virtue of the methods employed. The research has been informed by collaborative inquiry. The model was formulated in rigorous terms, which was possible because care was taken to ensure that the research in that one context remained at an appropriate conceptual level. A level of description in reporting the development of the model was a feature of the research account.

Since I am an executive coach, I am aware of a possible charge that the data could have been unconsciously 'fitted' by me as the researcher in order to meet my own expectations. Such a potential charge raises questions about the nature of research itself, since it is not sustainable in a philosophical sense to argue that any researcher's knowledge and expectation should be 'blanked' before undertaking research. What I have adopted is an epistemology which uses my real experience and is explicit about it to the reader. I have also incorporated my occasional confusions, and my personal reflections on these, within the body of this thesis. I did not generate the data about the executive coaching process or analyse that data alone during the second cycle; two other executive coaches were collaborators. In the third cycle I presented the findings to six other executive coaches who work in other organisational situations and they confirmed the findings and further enhanced the model.

### **ABOUT DRAWING MY RESEARCH TO AN END**

It seems to me that my research into commissioning executive coaching for senior managers and directors has come to an end. I have fulfilled the needs of my client infrastructure. The Research Network members are happy with the research I have undertaken for them and are ready to focus on other issues (such as supporting e-learners and the changing role of the in-house trainer). Other interested parties, such as my various co-researchers and my IES employers, have also indicated that I have met their needs and they also are ready for me to move on to a focus on other issues.

My degree of comfort with ending the research at this point does not mean that I believe that this is the end of any debate about the provision of executive coaching. Far from it! In my view there are number of debates that still need to be resolved and I have already touched on some of these in my reflections on the third cycle.

Rather, I see myself making a contribution to these debates about where executive coaches should go, but doing so by alternative means. For instance, in my view:

- There is a need for an association for executive coach practitioners in order to promote good practice and ethical standards. In February 2002 I joined a small group of interested parties seeking to gain support among executive coaching practitioners for the establishment of such an association in the UK. These parties include those with a commercial interest, such as David Clutterbuck, founder and Managing Director of the European Mentoring Conference and Clutterbuck Associates, Eric Parsloe, Director of the Oxford School of Coaching and Mentoring and Sir John Whitmore, co-founder of the Inner Game. The group also includes representatives from industry including Zulfi Hussain of BT plc, and from academia including Professor David Megginson of the University of Sheffield.
- It is desirable to make what I have learnt about commissioning executive coaching available to a wider audience of practising commissioners and coaches, beyond the Employee and Management Development Research Network. In December 2001 I wrote an article called 'The trainer as executive coach' which was published in Training Journal. In February 2002 I gave a presentation entitled 'The theory and process of executive coaching' to the HR professionals who are corporate members of Performance Management Forum (and a rival 'club' to the IES Research Networks!). I have also accepted invitations to speak at a number of other conferences to practitioner audiences later in 2002. In addition I have committed to writing and publishing a practical guide to commissioning executive coaches, also with practicing commissioners as the intended target audience.
- It is also important that I contribute to theory. I therefore intend to put my findings forward for scrutiny and debate among my student peers and a wider academic audience. I have been accepted to present papers at both the Executive Doctoral Colloquium at the Academy of Management Conference in August 2002 and at the Research Stream of the European Mentoring and Coaching Council Conference in October 2002. I have submitted papers to two other conferences to be held in 2002. In addition, I have committed to writing a paper for a refereed journal.

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# Appendix One: Proposal to IES Research Club

## Executive Coaching

15 April 1999 (Revised)

### Background

Executive coaching is becoming a 'hot topic' for meeting senior management development needs in many organisations. As originally conceived, executive coaching was seen as being remedial: a method of personalised, short-term, intensive training to address and cure management performance deficiencies. However a change in this perception has occurred and now executive coaching is just as likely to be seen as a force for positive change and a method of reinforcing and stimulating success in any organisation's high fliers. But what exactly is executive coaching?

### Issues to be addressed

The aim is for an initial exploratory study of the topic area to provide members with some insight into the issues behind the media hype.

Four IES Research club members already commissioning executive coaches have already expressed significant concerns about executive coaching matters. Discussions to date have highlighted a desire for this study to explore how organisations can be more effective in:

- Sourcing a pool of coaches whose quality in their interactions with managers can be counted on
- Improving the matching of executive coaches to individual directors and senior managers
- Identifying and managing factors which can improve the return on future executive coaching investments

- Understanding the links with other concerns such as recruitment and retention, organisational learning and knowledge management, and reward.

### **Research Methods**

It is proposed that the initial work will be primarily desk based, but may involve interviews and discussions with a small number of employing organisations, coaches and executives. A literature review will be conducted, together with an examination of available evidence as to the effectiveness of coaching for the most senior members of today's organisations. However it is proposed that the study be conducted collaboratively with Club members with a view to Club members shaping the precise focus of the research and becoming involved in the research study on an on-going basis. Members with an interest in the subject area are invited to contact the Project Manager with a view to discussing the nature of this collaboration in more detail. Members with experience of commissioning executive coaching are also invited to participate through interviews or discussions.

### **Outputs and benefits to Research Club members**

An initial literature review will be available exclusively for members in May 2000. A Forum to discuss the issues arising from the study will be held exclusively for members in June 2000. If the initial exploratory study is later extended, members may be able to access support or participate in further action research to address defined areas of concern.

**Budget allocated: £6,000**

**Contact: Alison Carter, Project Manager, Tel: 01273-686751, email: [alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk](mailto:alison.carter@employment-studies.co.uk)**

# Appendix Two: Coding Structure of Primary Sources

## CYCLE ONE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Code Reference	Job Title	Organisation	Interview Date
Commissioner 1	Assistant Director	NHS Executive	15 May 2000¶
Commissioner 2	Head of Training & Development	Distribution Co.	11 April 2000¶
Commissioner 3	Head of Training & Development	Government Dept.	14 June 2000¶
Commissioner 4	Head of Training & Development	Telecoms Co.	17 April 2000¶
Coach 1	Freelance Executive Coach		15 May 2000¶
Coach 2	Executive Coach		15 May 2000¶
Coach 3	Consultant and Coach		17 April 2000§
Coach 4 #	Freelance Executive Coach		18 May 2000§

¶ Interview location was interviewee's office premises.

§ Interviews took place at Charing Cross Hotel, London.

# Same individual as in Cycle Three focus group.

**CYCLE TWO: EXECUTIVES COACHED WITHIN HOST ORGANISATION**

<b>Reference Code Assigned to Executives</b>	<b>IES Coach Assigned Code</b>	<b>Attended October 2000 Briefing?</b>	<b>Number of Sessions with IES Coach</b>	<b>Number of 'Post-it' Notes generated</b>
Director 1	A	N	2	1
Director 2	B	Y	1	2
Director 3	B	Y	2	2
Director 4	B	Y	3	-
Director 5	A+B	Y	3	3
Director 6	C	Y	1	1
Director 7	A	Y	2	-
Director 8	B	Y	1	1
Director 9	C	Y	4	2
Director 10	B	Y	3	-
Director 11	C	N	4	3
Director 12	A	Y	1	-
Director 13	A	Y	2	4
Director 14	C	N	4	1
Director 15	C	Y	2	-
Director 16	B	N	1	1
Director 17	C	Y	-	-

**CYCLE THREE: DISCUSSION GROUP ATTENDEES**

<b>Code Reference Assigned</b>	<b>Job Title Preference</b>	<b>Main Type of Client Organisation</b>
Coach 4 #	OD Consultant and Coach	Health and Voluntary sectors
Coach 5	Freelance Executive Coach	SMEs
Coach 6	Executive Coach	Large Companies, cross-sectors
Coach 7	Business Coach	Finance sector
Coach 8	Performance Coach	Finance sector
Coach 9	Business Performance Coach	Cross-sectors including heavy industrial sector

# Same individual as in Cycle One interview.

# Appendix Three: Extract From IES Tender Bid for 360-Degree Feedback and Initial Feedback Contract

## Summary of IES Approach

5 August 2000

### Design of questionnaire

Our preferred method for design of the questionnaire instrument to collect feedback data is to:

- conduct a content analysis of existing documentation in order to devise a framework of leadership qualities, skills and behaviours
- review a small sample of current personal development plans where they exist for individuals within the target audience to ensure the feedback items adequately acknowledge current practice
- check the validity and user-friendliness of the questionnaire by asking a relevant sample of knowledgeable parties to review the items
- pilot the questionnaire with a small group from within the target audience
- review the questionnaire following the response of pilot participants and make necessary adjustments to maximise acceptability of the items and presentation.

There are some issues and design choices which will need to be made. Our preference would be to work collaboratively with the (*organisation name*) project manager and colleagues, who best understand the cultural context, during the design phase to determine jointly the most appropriate measure of frequency, performance or importance for us to use, the suitability of variable feedback items and the inclusion of free comment boxes.

### **Giving initial feedback**

Our preferred method for gaining commitment from the target audience and giving initial feedback is to:

- supply different written briefings to participants, raters and line managers
- facilitate upfront briefing session(s) for all 17 participants in the process
- send personalised written reports to individuals one week prior to a scheduled feedback coaching session
- include qualitative as well as quantitative data in the reports for individuals
- arrange one two-hour feedback coaching session with each individual, offering a choice of dates when coaches will be available on-site in London.

### **Follow up process**

IES is not bidding at this time to provide a follow up process with all 17 individuals, although our three feedback coaches are qualified to undertake that kind of work. It is our view that any follow up process would need to be individualised and voluntary. We are however conscious of the need for continuity of key messages and the extra support some individuals may need in preparing appropriate PDPs and then actioning them. Therefore we remain open to discussions regarding 'hand-over' meetings with existing executive coaches (where applicable and where individuals agree) or arranging series of additional one to one coaching sessions with specific individuals should the organisation and the individual agree that carrying on with the same coach would be helpful. Our standard daily rate would apply in these circumstances.

# Appendix Four: Executive Coaching Framework Developed for Initial Feedback Sessions

## Executive Coaching Framework: SCS in (*Organisation Name*)

13 November 2000

### **1. Job/Self-development activities to date**

Reflections on job history and any other development or self-development undertaken to date. Position this 360-degree exercise in their unique context.

### **2. Ground rules/ structure of the session**

Outline and agree some suggested ground rules for this one to one session, and agree a process for conducting it. These should presume and assume it is a one off session only.

### **3. Overall reactions to their 360-degree report**

What do they need to get off their chest? Do the findings tally with their own awareness? Where are the gaps in perception/ self-awareness about how others see them and perceive their strengths and weaknesses? Are there any 'big' issues?

### **4. Development priorities**

Ensure individuals identify the priority development needs they will pursue. Discuss in broad terms ideas and options for how they could be addressed.

### **5. Sharing with others**

Encourage individuals to think about who/why it might be useful to share some of their data with *e.g.* boss or HR to secure funding/support for meeting specific development needs, one or more of those who filled in questionnaires for them by way of thanks *etc.*