Enhancing Executive Leadership Coaching Using Virtual Environments

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Executive Coaching can be effectively enhanced through the use of technology and virtual environments. Further exploration of the benefits of coaching in virtual reality as well as the challenges and requirements of coaching in that environment can produce new methods by which coaching can be done. This new experiential realm could provide clients the experience of leading organizations or groups, experimenting with new roles or ways of being, and producing tangible results in virtual environments that is similar to the real world without some of the consequences that reality imposes on the mindset of the client.

Keywords: Virtual Reality Coaching, Virtual Leadership

Introduction

Highly effective executive coaching requires the co-creation of a relationship between the client, coach and usually a sponsor. This relationship together with a coaching process is focused on developing the client's potential for maximum development. Many opportunities have been ushered in by the age of modern technology and only some of them have been applied in the field of coaching. Technology has come a long way and it holds little resemblance to computers of decades ago (Glazer 2004). In order to provide an environment of ongoing learning, today's coaches can look into what the world of technology has to offer, in particular computers, the internet, and virtual environments. From primitive tutorial tools for individual inquiries, technology has transformed these machines into immersive three-dimensional (3D) computed-aided virtual environments (Glazer 2004). Systems are now available for individuals to readily construct knowledge and interaction. An important issue concerning virtual environments is its design that allows multi-users to build interrelationships with each other (Bullinger & Ziegler 1999). The virtual environment can also function to provide a transient medium by which people can chat, talk, interact graphically, engage in business activities, exchange currency, and potentially create and sustain virtual team or virtual community.

The benefit of using 3D virtual environment technology or virtual reality is also seen to gain recognition when it comes to teaching and coaching from researchers (Chen et al. 2004). Virtual reality (VR) is predicted to be the most significant technological transformation in interactive media. It is seen to allow learners to visualize the representation of the world, the abstract concepts, the understanding of different problems and the development of the virtual environments

as well as articulate their understanding of this environment (Chen et al. 2004). Users of VR also obtain dynamic relationships with an infinite number of people who visit and interact with the events that may not be available for them in real life.

This paper will analyze the importance of virtual environments in the field of executive coaching. Virtual Reality (VR) may provide many opportunities for learning and this paper will display the different opportunities that VR avenues like Second Life® offer in promoting the leadership skills and overall development of individuals. It will present a review of literature that connects coaching with technology and how these two concepts work together. It will also discuss the requirements for the coach to effectively coach a client with in a virtual environment as part of a blended coaching solution. It will present the different implications and applications that are discussed in the literature review by assessing the potential role of VR in executive coaching.

Review of Selected Literature

<u>Definitions</u>

<u>Virtual Reality.</u> Is described as a cutting-edge technology that allows users to step into a world through the computer screen into a 3D interactive environment (Chen et al. 2004). It is recognized as an effective learning tool and can now be accessed through affordable personal computers. Human interaction can occur within generated virtual worlds through the usage of conventional input devices like the mouse, keypad or joysticks. It is observed to be relatively low cost to have access to desktop virtual reality. This makes this technology feasible to be obtained and widely used. There are emerging electronic technologies that have applications in a wide range of fields (McLellan 2004). These fields include education, training, athletics, industrial design, architecture, entertainment and other fields of science. VR can also

be defined as a "class of computer-controlled multi sensory communication technologies that allow more intuitive interactions with data and involve human senses in new ways" (McLellan 2004, p. 461).

This technology was design to enable people to deal with information and interaction in a whole new and convenient level. The VR experience is dynamic and immediate. It has been used as a tool for model building as well as problem solving. It is seen as an effective way to undergo experiential learning as the VR world is interactive and responds to the users' actions. Jaron Lanier coined the term Virtual Reality (McLellan 2004). He was one of the developers of the first immersive interface devices. It was used to denote a computer-generated counterpart of a physical object like a "virtual room" as well as "virtual environments."

Coaching. Coaching is the act of developing partnerships with clients in a thoughtful, analytical and creative process that encourages them to achieve their best possible personal and professional self (ICF 2008).

Coaches undergo training that equip them to relate to other people. Part of coach training involves developing the ability to listen, observe, as well as to create innovative approaches according to the client's needs. When working with the client, a coach should be able to elicit solutions and strategies from the clients that will ultimately benefit the clients. Coaches need to recognize that their clients are innately creative and resourceful individuals.

Professional coaching entails a professional partnership that is composed of a qualified coach and a team or an individual that share a common goal of achieving extra-ordinary results (ICF 2008). The individual or the team who are the clients of the coach opt to choose the focus of the conversation wherein the coach listens and contributes observations and questions that generate actions towards the client's

goals. Coaches also focus and stay aware of different opportunities for effective growth. Coaching also means that the overall results are a function of the clients' intentions, choices, actions that are supported by the coach's efforts. (ICF 2008).

Executive Coaching. According to Stopper (2005), Executive coaching is the "direct support for senior leadership in improving their individual effectiveness and the effectiveness of the organizations with which they work" (p. 7). It emerged in the late 1980s building on organization development, management consulting and psychology (Sherman 2007). It was intended to provide development for high-potential executives and managers as well as to rescue the careers of managers or executives that were stalling due to perform specific performance problems. The popularity of professional coaching has also turned managers into in-house coaches (Kaiger 2002). Consultants in different fields have also started to call themselves coaches. It is a powerful tool for management development. Mentoring was mistakenly seen to be a part of a good coach's strategy. What it refers to is a chemistry that the coach had with his client and something that could not be forced (Kaiger 2002). Coaches need special skills and charisma for in order to be effective in building such relationships.

Virtual Teams. More and more individuals have found themselves leading teams of people from literally all over the globe (Buono & Kerber 2004). Most of the time, budgets will not allow such teams to meet on a regular basis, if they ever get to meet in person at all. Leading a virtual team and coaching a virtual team is relatively new. People who find themselves in these positions ask themselves questions about their virtual roles as well as what strategies they can use in order to build quality relationships with people they seldom see in person (Buono & Kerber 2004).

They also question what they need to do to enhance performance as well as how they can utilize technology to make this happen.

There are some challenges that executives face when leading virtual teams. While like all teams, virtual teams works on interdependent tasks that were guided by a common purpose, they were different because they worked with each other across time, space and organizational and geographic boundaries (Buono & Kerber 2004). While advanced communication technologies enable them to "work together apart" ,there were still questions as to the effectiveness of such teams in achieving their goals.

Advantages of virtual teams eliminate the problem of time, travel and cost restrictions (Buono & Kerber 2004). This enables people to extend their pool of available resources by including people from other places as well as external consultants. This also enables organizations to extend their clientele reach. Virtual interactions rely heavily on communication skills and information technologies in order to create an atmosphere of connectedness. Going across time and space barriers is bound to create a mix of difficulties and opportunities for users of technology.

Second Life. Second Life is a 3-D world that was created by its "residents" (Linden Research, Inc. 2008). It was released in the public in 2003 and experienced explosive growth with millions of Residents inhabiting it from all over the globe. Entering this World, the users discover a digital continent that includes people, entertainment, experiences and opportunities (Linden Research, Inc. 2008). The user can also find a parcel of land wherein users/Residents can build businesses or houses. The whole World is able to reflect on the "creations" of the Residents. They also retain intellectual property to their digital creations and can sell and buy or trade with other Residents. The "marketplace" actually supports millions of US dollars in

monthly transactions. Commerce is handled in the in the world's unit of trade, the Linden™ dollar, which can be converted to US dollars through online Linden dollar exchanges (Linden Research, Inc. 2008).

Remote Leadership. This is leadership that is done from a distance (Harvard Business Review 2008).

Coaching Process

The coaching process usually starts off with a personal interview designed to assess the set of opportunities, challenges, and priorities and desired outcomes that will come out of the partnership (ICF 2008). Scheduling, scope of relationships, checklists and models may be provided during this time. According to the Columbia Coaching Certification Program manual for coaching, there must be an emphasis on the contextual awareness phase because this is where the client's agenda will be clarified and clearly laid out. The second phase would includes the coaching components wherein activities like feedback, exploring and planning will be worked on. Action strategies occur in the third phase which is concerned with conduct. Action strategies are laid out, growth and renewal occurs and execution takes place.

Assessments. Assessments can be given according to the different needs and circumstances of the individual client (ICF 2008). They provide objective information regarding the enhancement of the individual's self-awareness and of others opinions. Assessments can provide a benchmark for creating goals and actionable strategies.

Concepts, models and principles. These resources are usually drawn from different subjects such behavioral sciences, management literature as well as

traditions of spirituality, arts and humanities (ICF 2008). These provide the clients with a perspective, a framework and fresh insights into the challenges and opportunities they face.

Appreciative Approach. Effective coaching is seen to incorporate appreciation in the process of interacting with the client (ICF 2008). This also incorporated discovery-based inquiry that was proactive in the ways it managed personal opportunities and challenges including a positive future focused approach.

Success of Coaching

There are different indicators of performance . The ideal scenario includes a reflection of both external and internal metrics incorporated.

The achievement of goals is considered to be external measures of success. Positive feedback, promotion, and measurable performance improvement are considered to demonstrate this factor because results of these would be seen from the output as well as the feedback of the other people in the client's network of interaction. Internal measures of success included self-scoring or self-validating assessments that could be administered through initial and regular intervals during the coaching process (ICF 2008). Shifts in thinking that would result in areas such as increased confidence reflect internal indicators of success (ICF 2008).

Distinctions of Coaching

Coaching is considered as distinct from other helping professions because of how it focuses mainly on the future results the client wants to achieve. It is considered to be different from therapy because it is individual-initiated and it was about forward moving and future focused results. Unlike therapy, it does not focus on healing pain, dysfunction and conflict within an individual. It is also different from consulting

because consultants are accountable for solving the problem while coaching entails that the people being coached will generate solutions for themselves as a result of self-discovery. While some coaches may be mentors, coaching is distinct from mentoring because the goal in coaching is not to share knowledge, experience and solutions with the client based on past experience. (ICF 2008). Coaching is also distinct from athletic development and training. Coaching is less linear and does not have a set curriculum plan. It is also not focused on behaviors that are poorly executed as in athletic development.

History

The origin of virtual reality is difficult to trace. Like a river, VR was produced by an accumulated flow from many streams of ideas and was fed by different springs of inspiration (McLellan 2004). Technology that led up to VR went through computer graphics simulation; human-computer interfaces and developed over three decades. It was in the 1960s that Ivan Sutherland created the pioneer system for virtual reality that incorporated a headmounted display nicknamed "The Sword of Damocles" due to its strange appearance (McLellan 2004). His work did not continue because of the primitive computer graphics presented during that time.

Sutherland may have stopped but his work provided the foundations for VR as he inspired Frederick P. Brooks, Jr. who began experimenting with different ways to accurately simulate and display molecule structures (McLellan 2004). His work was developed in major VR research initiatives at the University of North Carolina.

In 1961, filmmaker Morton Heilig patented Sensorama. This was a mechanical VR devise that included 3D full color film with sounds, smells, and the feeling of motion with the sensation of film in the viewer's face (McLellan 2004). In the 1970s there were researchers that developed spatial data management using

videodisc technology that resulted in the Aspen Movie Map that recreated a part of Aspen Colorado. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, VR became popular but it was later forgotten due to limited technology and attention was then transferred to the emergence of the World Wide Web (McLellan 2004). In the 1990s, a paradigm shift occurred with projective displays, as viewers were able to keep viewers in their natural environment.

Soon there were different types of virtual reality that emerged. Four major types of VR were identified: (1) immersive, (2) desktop VR, (3) projection VR and (4) simulation VR (McLellan 2004). For the purpose of focus, this discussion will be limited to desktop VR wherein the user sees the 3D world through the window of the computer screen.

This emphasis provides users with a first-person experience wherein they can participate in the comfort of their own home or preferred space with a personal computers.

Summary of Major Findings

<u>Virtual Reality, Environments and Relationships.</u>

Technology has enabled people to build virtual environments wherein individuals who do not necessarily meet face to face on a regular basis can actually work together and build a group, a community or relationships through this setting (Fairholm 1998). While this is now possible in platforms such as Second Life, the link to coaching needs to be established by describing the way in which individuals , groups and teams can be coached in this environment.

In such a setting, there is a question as to the effectiveness of the VR environment for coaching. Does the role of the leaders change when it comes to virtual realities? Since virtual reality exists in an abstract place, where does leadership take place? The purposes of the virtual groups and the behavior of the leader is said to determine the achievement of the objectives even in a virtual environment (Fairholm 1998).

<u>Good Coaching</u>

Possessing the competencies that an effective coach must have is another important feature when it comes to examining the enhancement of leadership and coaching in virtual environments. It is important that in whatever setting, partnerships need to be forged. Building on the trust and understanding of the people in this environment is an important task (Kraiger 2002). This task seems to grow larger when the people do not see each other on a regular basis to establish trust. However, the coach must gain this trust in the face of these challenges. Virtual groups are sustained because of a commitment that exists amongst its members (Kraiger 2002). Since the people do not meet often, the question of effectiveness is also a key concern. In this case insights can be provided to the clients during the coaching process.

In the community provided by Second Life, people can be exposed to real life situations without some of the actual consequences that occur in real life when they make mistakes. In this environment new skills can be built. Coaches can directly or indirectly (guide) clients towards new skills that are drawn out through simulated opportunities for acquiring new knowledge (Kraiger 2002).

Since consequences are sometimes not similar to real life, mistakes can be addressed by persistence and maintaining discipline to break old habits and to

establish better ones (Kraiger 2002). A major benefit of virtual environments can be seen with the way it allows users to shape the environment at a different level. In virtual reality the coach can not only focus on the one-to-one nature of coaching , but also needs to consider the virtual environmental factors that will bring about effective learning (Kraiger 2002).

<u>Coaching and Stress</u>

Virtual environments include problems posed by barriers of time, distance and limited resources. Clients can be exposed to stress because of the reality of interactions

According to Passmore (2006), "Today it is becoming more common to hear people talk about being stressed as a result of increasing demands on their lives. The gradual loss of energy and tiredness reduces physical health and well-being, which in turn has a negative effect on our ability to be productive at work" (p. 170). Virtual reality has the possibility to simulate the work environment, cause stress, and provide windows of opportunity for coaching stress management issues.

Application and Implication for coaching practice

According to Scharmer (2007), "Conversations are the living embodiment of social fields, and they are important starting point for improving social interaction (p. 271). It was observed how conversations were performed in different patterns. Such patterns were seen as constant. The patterns that Scharmer (2007) had observed were downloading, debate, dialogue, and presencing.

They were different in terms of how conversations were formed. Downloading referred to how people spoke in terms of what they want to hear themselves; debate revealed how the speakers really thought; dialogue was about speaking from what was moving through or speaking as someone who was part of a whole (Scharmer

2007). Having progressive conversations was something that the group would want to achieve. Listening to a conversation wherein a shift in the pattern would be observed would recognize it. The shift occurs upon a maturation of a relationship. In a virtual environment the coach can recognize the conversation patterns of the clients and use those to gain insight and serve as entry points for coaching conversations.

In the first stages of getting to know a person, one would appear to be more polite compared to a time wherein they would get well acquainted as they talked more. As the pattern reflected deeper thought and opinion from different parties, it shows the relationship of the people conversing. This would be reflected in the table below.

In Second Life, it was easier to start with the understand the patterns by which people conversed. People would talk nice and be friendly as the relationship was just being established. This was acceptable since the coach could take this time to orient the people. Soon, as there would be more time to get to know each other, patterns would shift from one point to actually have collective creativity in the group or the partnership. Tasks and different virtual activities would bring out the pattern of conversation the coach's client had and develop their strengths from there. The clients of the coaches would also use the patterns of conversation by which they had experienced and were taught in how they would deal with their own teams. It would generate in them an awareness in how he would communicate with the people he was leading.

Table 1

Scharmer's (2007) Four fields of conversations

ENACTING EMERGING FUTURES			
Primacy of the Whole	**Presencing** *Generative Flow* *Collective Creativity* *Stillness and Grace* *Listening from the emerging Future* *Rule-generating*	**Dialogue** *Inquiry, reflection* *I can change my view* *Listening from within* *(Empathetic listening)* *Other= You* *Seeing oneself as part of the current whole*	**Primacy of the Parts**
	Downloading *Talking Nice* *Polite, Cautious* *Don't Speak your mind* *Listening=Projecting* *Rule-Conforming*	**Debate** *Talking tough; clash* *I am my point of view* *Listening from outside* *Other = counterpart* *Rule-confronting*	
REENACTING PATTERNS OF THE PAST			

It would be important for the coach to go through the process of shifting from one pattern and into the other to mark that there was progress between the coach and the individual or group being coached. According to Fernando Flores, former Chilean Minister of Finance, "Speech acts are powerful because most of the actions that people engage in -- in business, in marriage, in parenting -- are carried out through conversation" (Rubin 1999).

It is important for the coach to recognize the manner by which dialogue flows between partners or within the group. This is important because of the kind of conversations that the coach will need to have with the client if they wanted genuine development. Flores said, "Our best comes out when we have honest discussions. Our worst comes out when we behave like robots or professionals" (Rubin 1999, p. 3). Coaching entails co-creating a relationship with the client that enables them to initiate honest discussion; this is made possible if there is trust in place and if a pattern of conversation is established. There needed to be some tough love if the coach wants to truly reach his goal, Flores said, "One is, I'm going to be a good Samaritan and help this guy. But that is the compassion of the weak. The compassion

of the strong is in waking people up to their blindness. For that, you need to be a warrior (Rubin 1999, p. 7).

Dialogue in the coaching processes needs to produce the same sense of reality and fact that the real world has. Small groups are seen to be molded and dominated by people's self-interest and assumptions but a group of 20 or more people are enough to represent a "microcosm of the whole society" (Bohm 2004). This number of people can easily be constructed in a virtual environment. The size of the group seems to determine the level of conflict that can occur. Small groups are seen to be a haven of longwithstanding conflict while it was easier to place a face of resolution in large groups (Bohm 2004). Since a greater number of people in a group represents a part of the community, it represents society as a whole, while small groups can only represent small segments of society.

The placement of people in a virtual world can create different situations in which coaching can be used as a medium to stimulate insights and learning as well as a shift in performance. Second Life can provide the advantage of group phenomenon in which the clients can experience emerging as a leader in a realistic setting with an appropriate number of people that can simulate the community at large. Virtual reality settings eliminate some the risks of the real world and encourage clients to emerge and cross boundaries they normally may not cross in their normal leadership behavior.

Fernando Flores was interviewed for this paper via telephone from his offices in Chile. Flores has been considering the implications and application virtual reality related to leadership development and is considered an expert in computer communications. One of the main issues he discussed when relating enhanced leadership capabilities and coaching with virtual environments was human language.

According to Flores:

> It was not that we produce sounds that are understood. Our language reveals our way of being. It is our ability to co-ordinate commitments we make with others and our interpretation of communication. In the virtual realities now made possible by the Internet our social relationships have been globalized.

He referred to the virtual environments provided by Second Life and World of Warcraft as places wherein the avatars represented the individuals' identities. In this manner, the user becomes free of the usual inhibitions that were presented in the real world. Personalities like shyness or introverted clients could be more at ease with the protection of the avatar. Seeing beyond the problems offered by the real world as well as the limited perception it offered, Flores moved that virtual environments could reveal to individuals, even the coaches, their own shortcomings and reveal to everyone who they really were.

In such environments, it was evident that users became part of a social group that was similar to real world environments. In such setting, it would be easier for the coach to keep the people motivated and committed. The network would then be solely based on human communication in a social environment working towards the development of the clients. Flores also noted that environment simulation was also developed at such a low cost. While such environments did not represent the final test, it was a way for the people to experience different approaches and results even if it was not physically produced.

Flexibility was a noted benefit of VR communities. Fluctuations in the membership of such groups would enable users to meet different people. This would develop the social flexibility of the individuals and develop a sense of identity. It would also develop in them diversity acceptance as well as collaboration in diversity (Dede & Spicer 2006). Evidently, such communities were more affordable as money

and time were used up through regular face-to-face meetings. It was also affordable when it came to the number of people and the number of times coaches and clients would be able to meet (Dede & Spicer 2006).

The IBM Business Institute offers 2 courses; Virtual Leadership & Teaming in a Virtual World wherein the student had never met any of his teammates and was expected to get them to work together and inspire them to make great contributions to the virtual team. This was a class that was designed for executives and high-level managers who would need virtual life training in leading such teams. This would actually enable them to better focus their efforts and improve the effectiveness of individuals as a team leader. The virtual world would be the practice field for different resources and strategy trials. This would also teach the students to establish a sense of presence and clarity even if the team was not in the same vicinity

Conclusion

Virtual reality technology, instead of being a threat to human interconnectedness and interaction, must be viewed as a major advantage for the users. Coaching was recognized to be enhanced with the use of virtual environments because of the different opportunities it presented. There were the factors of a simulated reality that coaches could actually use with their clients.

There was a different impact when people could have a more holistic and well-rounded view of real life. It could only be gained through being a part of a coaching team in a virtual environment. The setting alone was not enough for these individuals to discover themselves and develop their potentials. It was the competence of the coaches that would enable them to go into VR environments and discover to resolve problems, step up as leaders and be effective decision makers from the different simulations of reality such environments offered. The question could be are

virtual environments sufficient on their own to produce an effective coaching process between the clients and the coaches. This would be an approach that would be worth looking into in a more in-depth manner.

Virtual realities offered so many opportunities that it would be difficult not to utilize them. It would be very innovative to incorporate them gradually in the present coaching strategies in order to develop a sense for its effectiveness. It would also be worthy to research more on the different environments and situations that such environments could offer in order to utilize the potentials it had for executive coaching.

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