

## **COACHING, MENTORING AND COUNSELING: THE WHOLE IS GREATER THAN THE SUM OF THE PARTS**

**BY BOB VAVRINA**

In 2005, with forty years under my belt as an HR professional – most of them at the executive level in Fortune 500 companies – I entered the executive coaching program at Middlesex University in the U.K. and had the privilege of studying under Dr. David A. Lane, who is known internationally for his work in credentialing and standards for the field of business coaching. Although U.K.-based, this is the only university-accredited masters degree in executive coaching offered in the United States.

My studies were nothing short of transformative for me personally and led me to think about potential reorientations in the coaching profession itself: specifically, the need to move strategically and fluidly among coaching, mentoring and counseling practices in our work with individual clients.

First, a little background.

Coming into the Middlesex program with decades of corporate work behind me, I quickly became absorbed in the academic and professional literature on coaching, mentoring and counseling. It was the first time in years that I had the luxury of thinking about human resources issues from a theoretical vantage point. I was hooked.

But as I continued my work, I could not escape the feeling that the theory and literature in our profession were missing a critical element: the real world of business pressures, time demands and dollars-and-cents value.

As a veteran corporate executive who has worked with hundreds of brilliant, intellectually active, top-notch business leaders, I can say that, generally speaking, theory and academic models do not play well in the corporate *modus operandi*. While they may be an underlying basis for the programs that companies develop, theory and academic models can never overtake practical application and results in the corporate world.

My transformation toward becoming the coach I am today occurred when I began filtering coaching theory through the lens of a business executive – when I began asking myself not only “is the theory intellectually correct, well-documented and sound?” but also “will these approaches deliver value?” and “how adaptable are they to the existing business situation?”

## THE THEORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF BUSINESS COACHING

Business coaching emerged as a formal, professional approach for improving performance in the 1990s, and since then, much of the literature has focused on validating the processes of coaching, mentoring and counseling vis-à-vis the paradigm of psychological therapy, rather than exploring how the processes themselves work to deliver value. Obviously, the need to justify the worthiness of an emerging profession is critical – and it often stems from and betrays an existential anxiety on the part of the profession itself. Validation is a starting point for getting a profession off the ground, but practitioners need to move beyond justifying their model if they are going to evolve their skills and practice.

A notable exception to the literature of justification is Bruce Peltier's book, *The Psychology of Executive Coaching, Theory and Application*. In that work, Peltier juxtaposes the goals and processes of coaching and therapy and highlights clear differences. In terms of applying coaching in a business environment, some of the most salient follow.

<b>Coaching</b>	<b>Therapy</b>
Focused on the present and future	Focused deeply on the past
Information on the client comes from the client and his/her organization	Information comes exclusively from the client
The client is both the individual and his/her organization	The client is the individual
The organization defines the desired outcomes	The client defines the outcomes (with guidance from the therapist)
Information about the client is shared with others	Information about the client is confidential
Working around personality issues is a key approach	Working through personality issues is a key approach
Boundaries are flexible, including business and social settings	Boundaries are rigid and contained to therapeutic settings

To this list, I would add that, in therapy, the client sets the timeframe for the engagement, whereas in a coaching situation, the organization ultimately sets the endpoint: if the individual does not meet corporate expectations within a reasonable amount of time, his/her advancement or employment with the organization may dead-end one way or another.

Peltier's distinctions set me thinking about and hunting for greater clarification among the coaching, mentoring and counseling processes in the business setting. An important text in my research was Florence M. Stone's *Coaching, Counseling & Mentoring*, where her thesis is that each process is oriented toward a different outcome. Stone argues that counseling is the desired process for working with employees who are performing ineffectively and need to make specific performance improvements. Coaching is the preferred process to use with capable employees who need to master certain skills as they advance their careers. Stone argues that mentoring is a process reserved for the very best performers so they can reach their maximum professional

performance, often in organizations that may not have leadership opportunities commensurate with the individual's potential.

I was relieved to find Stone's fine and useful distinctions among the coaching, counseling and mentoring models, because in my analysis, a number of conditions within our professions seem to stand in the way of understanding and integrating these processes to bring maximum value to our business clients. Specifically:

1. We have a problem with nomenclature surrounding "coaching," "counseling" and "mentoring," stemming in part from differing uses of the terms in the U.S. and the U.K., the evolution of what they mean, and the (sometimes overlapping) activities that fall under each.
2. There is a lack of quality comparative data to effectively evaluate, compare, contrast and explain the nuances among these processes and how they might support one another within a business situation.
3. There are considerable differences in how these processes are applied, often depending on the organizational rank of the individual rather than the challenge we are asked to address.
4. There is, in my opinion, a degree of rigidity – even snobbery – around the contemporary model of coaching ... an insistence that the client must "discover" the root problem at hand and find the solutions by him- or herself; frequently, I hear and read of coaches who assert that this is the only way that real learning and lasting behavioral change occur.

Rather than tackle each of these points separately, I would like to look at them in relation to process application within the corporate hierarchy.

Because the terms are blurry and because "coaching" holds an executive caché, we may be asked to coach a young executive with great potential but with a short-term, non-chronic performance problem – i.e., the sort of problem that responds best to counseling. Similarly, we may be asked to coach a high-performing, mid-level manager who delivers the goods day in and day out – someone who is a star but consistently receives a loud "but" when her overall performance is discussed one or two levels up. She delivers, "but" on the backs of others. She delivers, "but" at the expense of her peers. Again, in this situation, counseling should be the process we apply primarily. But in both these cases, we have been asked to coach because most business professionals sense that counseling is reserved for lower-level staff – those who are normally "told" what to do ... a classic case of *noblesse oblige*.

In my experience, problems in more junior staff are typically labeled as counseling issues while the same problems at more senior levels are regarded as coaching opportunities.

Maybe the situation described above is just an exercise in semantics, but I believe problems encountered in more "junior" scenarios get labeled as "counseling issues" while the same problems that occur at more senior levels get characterized as "coaching issues." Yet, they are

what they are, and we need to deal with these relative challenges when applying the appropriate response process – regardless of the level, potential or particular influence of the individual. When we include “mentoring” into the equation, the change-landscape becomes even more complex because mentoring, like coaching, often has different cultural implications and perceptions, company-to-company and country-to-country, which contribute to confusion in the literature.

My reflective view is that during the formative stages of Human Resources Management (in the Pleistocene Age called ‘Personnel’), counseling ruled as the predominant business-change process. HR practitioners refined the process over the years, adopting some practices from related fields ... some from other, more traditional, more professionally grounded fields, such as psychotherapy. Somewhere along the way, mentoring came into the picture, arguably in an elitist fashion; then, within the last ten years, coaching trumped counseling and mentoring as the change management/change development model of choice. I believe the conventional wisdom is that the three evolved chronologically or, perhaps more accurately, that the three have evolved largely by level, with the latest preferred approach (coaching) going to the more senior members of the organization.

### **THE BUSINESS CASE FOR BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES**

It has become increasingly apparent to me that the various change-oriented processes of coaching, counseling and mentoring can be highly interactive and mutually supportive depending on the situation in which they are applied.

Further, my studies, my frustration with the problem of terminology and my on-the-job work with clients have guided me in constructing the following differentiation grid to illustrate the varied and complementary distinctions among counseling, coaching and mentoring. My belief is that coaches need first to understand these as specific and discrete processes and, second, to know how to move among them fluidly and consciously as the situation requires.

<b>Differentiation Grid for Situational Coaching</b>			
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	<b>Counseling</b>	<b>Coaching</b>	<b>Mentoring</b>
<b>Goal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staying in the game</li> <li>• Improving job performance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leveling the playing field</li> <li>• Achieving skill mastery</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shortening the playing field</li> <li>• Accelerating personal growth</li> </ul>
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correcting skill deficiencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closing skill gaps</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orchestrating top-talent succession or development</li> </ul>
<b>Target Group</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees who are working ineffectively or underperforming</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Capable performers who may be challenged or blocked in current roles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Top talent who have been identified as succession/development candidates</li> </ul>

Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Present</li> <li>• Future</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Future</li> </ul>
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling</li> <li>• Directive</li> <li>• Remedial</li> <li>• Active</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking</li> <li>• Non-directive</li> <li>• Self-discovery</li> <li>• Reflective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advising</li> <li>• Directive</li> <li>• Navigational</li> <li>• Active</li> </ul>
Duration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Short-term</li> <li>• Pass/Fail</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intermediate</li> <li>• Situational</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long-term</li> <li>• Succeed and move on</li> </ul>
Ethics & Boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear</li> <li>• Rigid</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex</li> <li>• Flexible</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complex</li> <li>• Flexible</li> </ul>

To some extent, I am advocating a heretical break from the paradigm of therapy and the traditional coaching practice, where the thrust is to coax insight out of the patient or client. While I completely buy into the notion that the OPTIMAL learning outcome occurs when the client uncovers a personal or career-limiting problem by him- or herself, the reality of the business situation is that cultural pressures, corporate issues, sales cycles, time constraints and other demands invariably place a time-clock on progress and results. The business coach who is tied rigidly to a discretely OPTIMAL approach – insisting on self-discovery as the gold standard for moving a client forward – is out of touch with the realities of the corporate world.

As an HR executive for most of my professional life, the greatest change I’ve seen over the years is the insistence on measurable value. As companies grapple with difficult economic realities, the competition for corporate dollars grows more keen. Organizations are wary of investing in human capital without assurances that they will realize a dividend in terms of improved individual or managerial performance. And they are unwilling to invest indefinitely. Results matter more today than ever, and even the most generous companies want to see demonstrable improvement in a matter of months ... sometimes weeks ... certainly not years.

Add to these significant time pressures the nature of a business coach’s complex client relationship. If the corporation is paying for the assignment, then the corporation is ultimately the customer. The individual receiving the coaching is, strictly speaking, a corporate asset; the coach’s task is to develop that asset to provide greater value for the company – and the company ultimately approves the goals and timeframe. No matter how close and personal the relationship between coach and coachee becomes, they are collaborators in meeting the company’s need for high performance. The corporation, not the coach or the individual, is the customer and judge of success.

And even in rare cases where an individual might be paying for his or her own coaching, time matters (e.g., a senior executive considering her next career moves, an unemployed individual reinventing himself in today’s economy). In virtually every situation, to service our clients, we coaches need to move quickly – and that means using all the tools we have, depending on the requirements of each situation. It does not mean keeping our experience, our observations and

our counsel to ourselves while we wait for our clients to arrive at insights we have under our belts. Holding onto a critical piece of information while a client searches for it himself costs precious time and can threaten our ability to achieve coaching goals efficiently.

I'm being deliberately over-dramatic here to make a point: the most transformative milestones in coaching occur when individuals receiving our services arrive at their own break-through moments. But in a business situation, the coach fails both the corporation and the individual by forgetting that time is part of the equation for success. An effective coach is always a time-keeper. He or she is always looking two or three sessions ahead and establishing a trajectory oriented toward delivering pre-determined outcomes within a prescribed timeframe. That requires knowing when to coach, when to counsel, when to mentor – and the differences among the three approaches.

One recent example will illustrate my point.

A corporate client had hired me to coach a mid-level communications manager in a mid-sized company. The individual had been in his job for five years and had recently moved into a director-level position, where he was interacting regularly with senior management. He was highly regarded for his creative thinking but had been receiving feedback regarding his impatience with corporate processes and for holding onto his ideas too rigidly.

During the course of our sessions, he confided in me that he was interested in developing his talent as a creative writer and shared some of his work with me to demonstrate his ability. I found the work moving, and I could see immediately how his sensibility as a creative writer was at odds with what the corporation expected from someone at his level: a consistent stream of creative ideas which (in his eyes at least) would be “diminished” by corporate processes.

It may have taken months for this individual to see and accept the fact that his creative talents would never flourish where he was. So I told him. Within a month, he laid plans to launch a freelance business and gave notice to his supervisor. The department reorganized shortly thereafter and, two years later, my coachee is running a successful business and submitting work to publishers. I cannot say that my insight into his situation was unique, but I believe I saved him, his supervisor and his corporation months of angst and frustration by breaking the boundaries around traditional coaching and giving him the straight-forward counsel he needed to move forward.

This short case study supports the argument I'm making for a transformation in coaching practice. No one – not the individual nor the corporate client nor the coach – can afford for salient insight, observations or direction to be kept under wraps. Clearly, a coach cannot simply lay out a course of action: he or she would be functioning as a supervisor in that case. But failure to deliver results against a corporate time clock threatens the individual, the corporation, the coach and our profession overall.

## **THE FUTURE OF OUR PROFESSION**

My professional experience has taken me from the business world through the halls of academe and now back into business – this time as a consultant-for-hire working with corporate and individual clients.

The spiral reminds me of T.S. Eliot, who says: "We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

Our profession – not much more than 20 years into its maturity – is in much the same place.

It is not that the psychotherapeutic paradigm of coaching is wrong, but the starting point – the purist insistence that the client must arrive at his or her own insights – is too limiting to meet the very real, time-boxed pressures of the clients and organizations we serve.

Coaching, counseling and mentoring are complementary practices. None is complete in itself. The particular application of these processes is tied directly to the situation that the coach has been retained to address.

By moving carefully and thoughtfully among counseling, coaching and mentoring, business coaches can enable clients to achieve excellent personal, on-the-job growth that meets corporate needs. In Situational Coaching, we do not allow the perfect or the OPTIMAL to be the enemy of the good or the excellent. This is the heart of Situational Coaching and, in my view, is the crux not just of my effectiveness as a coach but of the ongoing maturation of our profession as well.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Bob Vavrina is a veteran business executive with 30 years of human resources and operations experience, including senior executive leadership positions. He is also an academically trained master coach, holding a Master of Arts Degree in Executive Coaching, with distinction, from Middlesex University in London.

Combining extensive business-world experience with advanced study, Bob is uniquely positioned to lead managers and executives through a tested and proven coaching process that uses a leader's strengths to significantly enhance personal and organizational performance.

Visit Bob's website at [www.vformationcoaching.net](http://www.vformationcoaching.net) to learn more about how Bob can help you and your company improve bottom-line performance through increased management excellence. Bob is an ELINVAR Alliance Partner.