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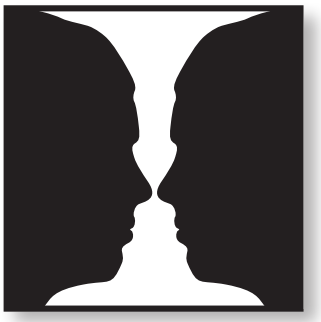

Seven domains for leadership mentoring and executive coaching
A reflective paper

Af Paul O. Olson

Abstract
This article discusses how coaching and mentoring can be integrated and work together as systematic tools for leadership development. The author draws on psychotherapy as a parallel for practitioner research and posits five validation hypotheses for coaching and mentoring. Arguably coaching is not sufficient to develop leaders, but a useful toolbox within mentoring. Internal mentors in particular have cultural and industry knowledge of direct relevance to the adept.

Seven domains are identified for an integrated framework: Insight from reflection and meta-learning; Working with the whole person; Competence modelling; Deep listening, beyond words; Emotional intelligence; Coaching for results; and Systemic thinking and team development.

***Keywords**: leadership, coaching, mentoring, internal mentors, executive coaching, practice theory.*

Introduction
With increasing global challenges and leadership shortage we need to find ways to develop better leaders faster than by traditional methods. Coaching and mentoring are two such accelerators and an opportunity for many of us. The European Mentoring & Coaching Council (EMCC) recently started a project to spread evidence based methods to practitioners; as well as generate research from actual practice (practice theory). There are gaps in both directions.

First, I take it for granted that coaches understand the importance of informed consent. But coaches and mentors are not always qualified and the Coaching @ Work Poor Practices Survey in 2010 documented questionable practices. In a world of marketing and social media, customers don't necessarily know what they are buying. Recommendations may be more proof of likeability than of valid practice theory. Second, skills such as good listening, co-creation and goal setting are present far outside coaching and mentoring; and they do not

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differentiate professionals from amateurs. Third, we see a need for systematic and critical reviews as practitioners don't have time to read basic research that is often fragmented and partial. We can then define prototypical problems within practice areas such as performance, leadership or life coaching.

Fourth, power asymmetry can be a substantial factor and in some cultures it will dominate the relationship. A manager cannot in fact ethically send a person to coaching in any country: a large Danish company was successfully litigated against because they sent managers to group coaching where the choice was felt like participating or losing your job. The four complainants had long term damage that needed psychotherapy; several such cases invalidate the claim that coaches are on the safe side of mental health: Some coaches are obviously out of depth without knowing it or simply ignoring the red flags for whichever reason.

Fifth, as supervisors we know that practitioners use the same words for very different behaviours and concepts; sessions should not be taped for privacy reasons so we need to understand our supervisees through their own words. Hermeneutic phenomenology is a useful framework to deal with multiple meanings, identified by Ricoeur (1983) as *polysemy*.

Sixth, we need to know if experienced practitioners actually do what they teach. It is certainly not a lame duck as in the young days of artificial intelligence (AI) medical doctors were asked to describe how they arrived at diagnoses. The resulting programs failed totally until researchers realised that expert diagnoses were based upon pattern recognition, while novices simply cannot (Medin & Ross, 1990). Yet both groups would explain what they did in terms of a logical approach! Since then Problem Based Learning has been used extensively in medical training to increase pattern recognition – not so in coaching.

Seventh, we struggle with neuroscience as we do not yet have a solid enough model of *consciousness*; conceptually Kahneman's (2012) metaphor of System 1 (patterns, associations, emotions) and System 2 (awareness, focus, thinking) probably comes close.

These and other gaps made EMCC create "Bridging the Research Gap" workgroups in the Spring of 2013 and I shall refer to the group that I lead as EMCC X as there is also a Group Y. The groups are transparent to each other but follow different paths. This paper should however not be taken to reflect the views of EMCC or EMCC X.

Using assumptions from psychotherapy

Are defence mechanisms, projections and parallel processes useful for coaching? With mentally healthy people phenomena such as transference, counter-transference and affect avoidance exist, but are they useful in understanding leadership? How can you remain authentic while trying to model somebody else? A good deal can be taken from both psychotherapy and pedagogy, but every method has hidden assumptions. Another example, Gestalt is somewhat constrained by being problem oriented (foreground, background, impasse, unconscious processes, introjection) but can be more easily modified for coaching. We can work in a dyad *within* the group, while after closure other members are invited to comment on how *they* were affected by what took place. We can add highly useful techniques such as bodywork, relaxation, mindfulness or taking sides; others should be avoided for coaching.

For team coaching the Bion/Tavistock tradition is still popular in some executive MBA's. Groups are thought to act like a super-organism in the same way as individuals, yet the apparent convergence of behaviours are perhaps more easily explained in social psychology as identity, us/them and majority/minority. At a deeper level preferences and values are social cognitive meanings; forming webs such as pointed out in the fifties already by Foulkes and Lewin. It is an area undergoing total revision in modern psychology.

NLP should be mentioned as it is widely popular and marketed as a general solution for just about anything. In one recent book called *The Ultimate Introduction to NLP: How to build a successful life* Bandler *et al.* (2013) argue that even schizophrenia is just a personal map that can be changed because NLP *is more powerful than* psychotherapy. Allegedly Virginia Satir and Milton Erickson were able to cure schizophrenia. Probably these were cases of delusional thinking or personality disorders rather than schizophrenia. Schizophrenia was heavily over-diagnosed in the US at the time. Recently I learnt about a coach (not a qualified psychologist) who apparently tried NLP with such a coachee – the first six months went fine, for what followed the coachee was too fragile and ended in an acute

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locked ward. The coachee has an excellent case for compensation and not only money back.

On the other hand, the difference from psychotherapy may be artificial once we loosen some of the assumptions. CBT style coaching (CBC) is particularly promising as an evidence-based approach. It is not restricted conceptually to mental illness or difficulties such as stage fright, perfectionism or barriers to change, but can be used to develop positive beliefs, motivation and personal growth. Fredrickson's (2009) positive psychology could integrate elegantly with CBC. I would also include Applied Behavioural Analysis, which has progressed to almost perfection since Skinner in the 1950ies.

An integrated theory must triangulate not only with neuroscience but with neuropsychology and phenomenology. One of my favourite areas is the study of *consciousness* states such as sleep, psychosis, mania and habit formation. The objects of thinking could not exist without *primacy of perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1963) as our world is first created through our senses and connected with emotions. Known as *primacy of language*, we also cannot make sense of the world without naming, categorisation, metaphors and common abstract concepts; and we will have little to communicate.

We need practice theory

Most coaching ideas can be conceptualised as practice theories and are often easy to decipher as *Zeitgeist* and/or family tree. Until the fifties psychodynamic theories had little competition and we have accepted *the unconscious* as valid theory because it seems to make sense (yet it is a kind of black box and therefore a very weak theory). Coach trainings use the Johari window in this way and all variants of psychoanalysis (classical, Kleinian or object relations), Jungian analysis (incl. shadows in MBTI) and even Gestalt included the idea of the unconscious and defence mechanisms. In contrast, Ellis and Beck built upon initial cognitive psychology while self-actualisation dominated Human Potential Movement. Now neuroscience is *en vogue*, like in the sixties coaches and trainers can again promise the world. If you believe enough, the reward system will thrive on dopamine and not know the difference between real and imagined.

Just act as if you were a millionaire and you will become one. If you're not successful, you didn't try hard enough. This focus is culturally biased towards individualism, as is the assumption that we will converge in a global (of course Western type!) culture. Ethnocentrism means that important cultural and existential concepts like collectivism, religion, fatalism, embeddedness and harmony are commonly neglected in coaching, as are indigenous concepts. What works in France *could* work in the UK, we just never tried it. Culture is simply what has worked for us in the past – a kind of local common sense at that.

Practice theory is a movement from recognising what goes on to experimenting and deciding what works and why. Coaching and mentoring are similar to leadership. Frederick Herzberg, a well-known guru, has opined that leadership is more art than science and giant thinkers such as Peter Drucker did not present scientific evidence behind every word about leadership. We should all be reflective thinkers who try to understand praxis, paradigms and practice theories. For EMCC X the gap between research and practice is not explained by saying that practitioners are not interested in science. We are. But.

Practitioner research

Since the 1950ies we have enjoyed several generations of psychotherapies and psychotherapy research and we should want to avoid a similar situation to the 400+ historical variants of psychotherapy and counselling (Corsini & Wedding, 2010). There is much to learn from it. In 1952 Eysenck asked if psychotherapy works and in 1967 Gordon Paul reviewed the state of psychotherapy research and posted a new challenge in the Journal of Consulting Psychology:

> "What treatment by whom is most effective for this individual with this specific problem, and under which set of circumstances" (Paul, 1967: 111 in Woolfe, Dryden & Strawbridge, 2003)

Following this challenge it has been long established that psychotherapies do work, some better than others, and we know a good deal about why (e.g. Barkham, 2002; Roth & Fonagy, 1996; Smith, Glass & Miller, 1980). The case for specific therapies has been generally accepted; as has the realisation of factors such as placebo (expectation) and general factors such as respect, interest and exploration. Whether we call it stretch, cognitive dissonance, reinforcement, feed-forward – these are

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names for similar phenomena. Sometimes we work at an individual level, or we must include organisations, teams, teaching or family systems. As new behaviours settle via consistent situational leadership, new meaning is constructed and generalised.

Such research is problematic in many ways. My own null hypothesis for coaching would be: *"The impact my mother would have in the same situations that we are coaching and mentoring for, as she has no knowledge of coaching technique."* The following could be a minimal quality assurance:

- The null hypothesis (H0) must be a value "p" much higher than zero such as to compensate for spontaneous recovery and placebo outcomes.
- H1 that we probably do not know what coaches and mentors actually do and why. Which methods do they use for which impact? What works for whom and how do they know beforehand? What is their threshold intensity for a tool or technique to be effective?
- H2 that people name themselves as something that they might not actually be and thus those who volunteer for research might not be a valid, purposive sample.
- H3 that the protocols may not match reality but practitioners tweak the actual sessions instead of letting the protocol collapse; and
- H4 that results may be the effects of person-situation interaction and not caused by coaching or mentoring.

If any of these hypotheses are correct, the research could be invalid. Of the range of approaches listed in Hesse-Biber & Leavy (2008) *Handbook of Emergent Methods*, action research and social constructionist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006, 2008) is perhaps the most promising avenue to construct practice theory from practitioner research.

The issue of definitions

Research must either be based upon definitions or create definitions; yet definitions may not resolve *polysemy,* Ricoeur's (1981) notion that abstract ideas and metaphors have multiple meanings. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz was early to conclude that to describe culture you need thick descriptions – in business and politics 'evidence' is often constructed for the sake of marketing. In political discourse definitions are often stolen or taken over by other parties when they carry positive meaning for constituents or negative meaning for others, depending on our purpose.

Do definitions actually define practice? For coaching psychology (Palmer & Whybrow, 2008) one definition is:

> Coaching psychology is for enhancing *well-being and performance* [my italics] in personal life and work domains underpinned by models of coaching grounded in established adult and children learning and psychological approaches. (p. 3)

Models in this picture would include motivational theory, behavioural approaches and positive psychology. The intersubjective nature of well-being and existence should be made explicit: taking into account that most coaching and mentoring praxis is culturally biased towards Western self-efficacy and ignore such values as embeddeness, harmony and religion. EMCC (2013) define both coaching and mentoring as developmental:

> Coaching and mentoring are [i.e. both] developmental activities within relationships based on trust and established through conversations. These activities aim to develop the personal or professional competencies of the client. The focus is on the individual or the team and the resources and solutions they generate for their specific personal or professional context.

The purpose of mentoring is clearly personal growth and learning. Do definitions lead to different practice models? Do we care? Arguably, coaching brings support rather than content; consulting brings content rather than support; and mentoring provides both. While definitions should guide praxis, do they also reflect what we *want* to do? If not, we simply won't walk the talk.

Seven possible domains for leadership mentoring

I contend that mentoring and coaching overlap in practice – and I guess most of us don't see it as a problem. In the following I shall therefore present seven domains as a practice theory for integrating leadership mentoring and executive coaching.

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It has an implicit hierarchy of learning consistent with cultural psychology (roles, expectations, artefacts and context). I regard goal setting, reflection and deep listening as foundational skills; while team competencies and systemic thinking become increasingly important from middle-management. Fortunately, boards of directors and management teams often have gaps in this area. We have work to do.

There are more than fifty leadership theories to sympathise with, yet a mentor/coach cannot choose freely. Organisations should pay not for a particular leadership style, but a coherent model appropriate to context and culture – at least this was what we did in General Electric with great success. Crucially, after the financial crisis business schools such as Harvard have concluded that there was no best leadership tradition and Americans should also look to Europe (read: Germany, Scandinavia, UK) or India.

The 7D is an overall structure for combining executive coaching and mentoring at a practical level together with cultural psychology and systemic thinking. Mentoring should include many of the same skills as coaching e.g. listening, exploring, challenging and other key skills, but we also want to transmit cultural values and wisdom. A qualified executive coach with a psychology background should be particularly useful as a companion to internal mentors and a safeguard in case of problems. In the US mentoring means opening doors and helping to build a career, while in Europe mentoring is perhaps more about sharing wisdom and facilitating professional growth.

Representing an important group of stakeholders, Institute of Directors (UK), an organisation with 60,000+ members say:

> Coaching is taken for granted in the world of sport where individuals and teams have a coach to provide motivation, enhance skills and refine performance. Ultimately coaching aims to bring out the best in an individual to enable the team to work better as a whole. The same can be said of business and its leaders. […] IoD executive coaches have a broad spread of experience and skills. […] Mentoring implies a longer, less formal and structured relationship." (IoD, 2013)

They make no strict divide between coaching and mentoring for directors and senior managers, a view also shared by Olson (2008) and Passmore (2010). Passmore sees the major contributions of leadership coaching as (1) transferring learning, (2) enhancing skills, (3) greater self-awareness, (4) enhancing motivation, (5) developing stronger personal confidence, and (6) catering for well-being.

The following will be further detailed in my forthcoming book *Great Mentors, Great Future: Seven domains for leadership development in individuals and groups*:

Insight from reflection and meta-learning (1). Both coaching and mentoring will here include learning from experiences and reflecting on learning (meta-learning). Some coaches insist that coaching is about crystallising what the coachee already knows, while mentors transmit wisdom or seniority. From blogs it seems that most executive coaches position themselves in the middle, being mindful rather than dogmatic about what the coachee needs to progress.

Handbooks in fact differ in how they see this learning process. Hawkins & Smith (2013) have a comprehensive view of coaching, mentoring and organisational consultancy from a supervision and development point of view. They include authorities such as Revans (action learning), Kolb (learning styles/personality), Argyris (double-loop), Schein (clinical consultancy) and others, while these are not recognised in e.g. the contributions in Passmore (2010), an otherwise useful handbook. I also find Vygotsky's analysis of play as a rehearsal of scripts and his concept of 'zone of proximal development' a useful guidance for planning personal or professional growth, whether a toddler in need of scaffolding, encouraging, trust, and a safe fallback. A good mentor provides such challenge, but not so far as to destroy mastery. No two persons are alike.

Working with the whole person (2). In an EMCC X thematic analysis of the EMCC Research conferences (2011-2013) and the BPS sponsored coaching psychology conferences (2007-2012) we found several main themes: self-care, awareness, hope, self, self-acceptance, attachment, motivation, confidence, stress, well-being, emotions, relationships *et cetera*. Interestingly there were six discernible practice or interest areas: Performance and goals

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coaching; Developmental; Health/resilience; Career transition/navigation; Executive and leadership; and Systemic (teams and organisations). Three of the areas are more personal (a potential contracting issue).

Perhaps the easiest to reconcile with coaching, but in the future we must expect that there will be demands for better work/life balance. Money has diminishing returns above comfort and safety (e.g. Diener & Suh, 2003). Judging from the financial industry before and after the crisis, Maslow has not been right to assume that we become more altruistic as we climb the ladder towards self-actualisation. Some do, some certainly don't and we have not been able to control it. Society now needs leaders who build a sustainable world – money should follow better values and executive coaches must expect that the dilemma between values and results will be part of coaching sessions more frequently in the years to come.

Competence modelling (3). Competence inventories should build culture but cannot if they are just long lists of should-have – sometimes overwhelming and often unrealistic. Leadership is a matter of reacting to situations but also planning for the right situations to happen. Talent management is increasingly important and the higher in the hierarchy, cultural psychology will become more important for organisational changes than formal competence modelling.

This area is targeted at building necessary skills alongside carefully selected challenges to match precisely with each person's individual career plan. The legacy model that had all education ahead of your career is now insufficient, which means that more emphasis must be put on continuous learning going from specific, contextual and limited in the beginning of your career to more systemic and strategic when those skills become required and you have mastered the lower level of individual contributions and informal leadership. Coaching is more efficient when combined with mentoring.

Deep listening, beyond words (4). A skill that is different from emotional intelligence as it entails an open presence and attention to what is going on. It has nothing to do with influence and everything to do with understanding: Dialogue and cooperation is only possible if we understand each other. Both what we are saying and why we are saying it matters.

The lack of this skill is one obvious reason why conflicts become entrenched and why the transition from organisational silos to matrix management almost always requires more patience than shareholders and directors expect. With managers who are interested to listen, not just create maps and strategies, the probability of success increases dramatically. In particular, you need deep listening in such change projects such as LEAN management, mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and supply chain management.

Emotional intelligence (5). This well-established concept parallels 'theory of mind', which builds on Vygotsky's and Luria's ideas already. Emotional intelligence is generally thought of as influencing and does not require deep listening; therefore the two are kept separate in this model. Both are based upon empathy but are experience based and become mixed with personality factors – we form personal theories about interpersonal relations such that we can predict and handle various situations.

Its true value for leadership may not be in influencing here-and-now, but knowing what to expect and prepare for the right things to happen. Emotional intelligence guides us in both individual and group situations, beyond empathy in the moment. For leaders this domain must be mastered as a core skill, but requires development when the context changes and you start to lead more people than you can handle one-on-one. From working with hundreds of senior managers my rule of thumb is 30-40, less if geographically dispersed. If you cannot handle this transition, you will probably fail in senior management.

Coaching for results (6). For individual goal setting and motivation we have mature techniques. This is the area targeted by performance coaching in particular, whether based on existing goals or the result of exploration, insight, problem solving and goal setting. It is less easy for individuals who are in changing or flexible teams and organisations simply because goals are subject to social dynamics, resources, constraints and a host of external factors beyond your control.

So if everybody is setting their own goals, the result can only be that more and more people will be

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running faster and faster in different directions. The fewer the goals and the more similar, the better; in fact there is some interesting research against personal SMART goals and balanced scorecards. The problem is that alternatives such as LEAN, Theory of Constraints or matrix resources all require an acceptance that systemic thinking will generate goals and principles that are often counter-intuitive at least on local levels. Most companies sub-optimise and performance coaches are often contributing to a local success that hurts overall performance of the system.

Systemic thinking and team development (7). Your degrees of freedom actually decrease when systems grow and get more complex – one of the reasons why mega-mergers are usually disappointments. For the same reason, bigger seldom becomes better. Increasing sales in a system that cannot handle it (e.g. production, funding, logistics or skills) is a sure path to bankruptcy. Coaching programs are clearly a risk for setting conflicting goals and thus destroy value rather than facilitating it (Olson, 2008).

Yet this is less ominous than it may sound – in many cases it is just a matter of seeing things from a systems perspective (i.e. domain 1). Some companies use Ravens' matrices to measure the 'g' factor i.e. managers' ability to deal with abstract thinking, yet for most purposes we can say that this domain is built through the quality of the career path. The higher up in an organisation, the more important it is to understand how people and parts work as a whole dynamic system, what strategies to employ, how people in the top team influence each other and how you can modify or create parts that support the whole.

Concluding remarks

Success in one environment cannot guarantee success in another. Leadership development following a model such as the seven domains will mean talented leaders can climb much faster, maybe five years from middle management to senior management. With 70-80% of mergers, acquisitions, joint ventures and organisational redesign still failing to deliver on goals, better and more leaders would be very helpful. In the above I have argued that there are overlaps between mentoring and coaching with internal mentors as valuable agents for the organisation's culture.

The Seven Domains is just one possible framework for a practice theory. A practice theory can lead us to a different *modus operandi* where we work in teams rather than alone. For EMCC X this is part of what practice theory is: a necessary element for joining forces in the field. The better the quality of service and the evidence behind our methods, the better we stand.

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