Exceptional executive coaches: Practices and attributes

Gavin R. Dagley*

Objectives: Human resources (HR) professionals responsible for purchasing executive coaching services represent a unique research resource as independent and invested observers of coaching practices. The research objective was to explore this group’s knowledge to better understand what differentiates the work of exceptional coaches.

Design: The study was a survey design.

Methods: Twenty experienced executive coaching purchasers completed 90-minute structured interviews based around a 40-item questionnaire regarding their experiences of locating and working with exceptional coaches. Saturation testing and a post-analysis survey provided support for the emergent themes.

Results: Purchasers defined a ‘great outcome’ from coaching as ‘behaviour change.’ Descriptions of executive-coachees’ experiences grouped around themes of engagement, deeper conversations, insight and responsibility, and positive growth. The exceptional coaching capabilities that facilitated these experiences were: credibility, empathy and respect, holding the professional self, diagnostic skill and insight, approach flexibility and range, working to the business context, a philosophy of personal responsibility, and skilful challenging.

Conclusions: Themes resolved into a process model of exceptional executive coaching that incorporated environmental, executive, and task characteristics as other influential factors. Discussion focused on the remedial implications of using behaviour change as the outcome definition. Despite this implication, executives nevertheless seemed to experience executive coaching as positive and, at times, transformational. The work of exceptional coaches may be at its most distinctive when the required behaviour change is particularly demanding, and when outcomes are based on transformational change.

Keywords: executive coaching, coach capabilities, practices, attributes, factors influencing outcomes.

In support of the needs of a young and rapidly growing discipline, coaching researchers are producing literature at an ever increasing rate (Grant, 2009). Within that body of research there exists a growing recognition by researchers of the particular differentiators that make executive coaching a unique sub-discipline within the broader coaching framework. Kilburg (2000), in an early definition of executive coaching, recognised two important differentiating features: the dual-client aspects of the work (i.e. the executive and the organisation), and the consequent need to produce outcomes for both within a business context.

The limitation of intervention approaches in the definition to ‘behavioural techniques’ may have been unnecessarily narrow. Grant, Curtayne and Burton (in press) extended this definition by demonstrating that cognitive-behavioural approaches also produce change in executive coaching work. Even Kilburg (2004) has extended the ‘behavioural techniques’ aspect of his earlier definition by providing extensive discussion of the applicability of psychoanalytic principles. Abbott and Rosinski (2007) went further and discussed the six evidence-based approaches to coaching as being cognitive-behavioural, psychoanalytic, adult development, action learning, systemic, and positive psychology.

Bluckert (2005) argued that outcomes from coaching were related to two different

*In conjunction with the Australian Human Resources Institute.
forms of executive coaching: one focused on learning and development, leading to performance improvement, and the second focused on change. That is, one area of work is helping executives acquire new knowledge and skills to help them be more effective in their roles. Change-based work, by contrast, has less of a focus on educational aspects than on helping executives to make different choices regarding their behavioural patterns, particularly in their interpersonal interactions.

Laske (2007) argued that these two forms may in fact be different levels of the same work. Whether or not they represent levels or substantially different genres, coaches working in these different forms may require identifiably different skill sets and experience bases. In a pair of studies, de Haan (2008a, 2008b) researched the difference between inexperienced and experienced coaches in critical moments of coaching practice. De Hann found that experienced coaches were more able to tolerate tension in the coaching relationship, and were more likely to deliberately inquire into those tensions with the executive. This implies a level of personal development in the coach to be able to tolerate and work with discomfort, and that such characteristics would not be developed through a skill acquisition-oriented training programme. Bluckert (2005) made this call for change more explicit and advocated for a need to shift the emphasis of coach training to incorporate a more substantial focus on the personal development of the coach.

Coaches may be expected to deal with more than discomfort in the coaching relationship. Spence, Cavanagh and Grant (2006) called for coaches to be better equipped to deal with the range and depth of issues that can be presented in a coaching environment, and that the coaching process may open up deep-seated anxieties (Gray, 2006). Grant (2007) indicated that coaches may also need to be equipped to deal with a range of psychological pathologies existing in the executive coachee cohort. Even where issues are not in the realm of disorders, coaches may be confronted routinely with long-standing behaviour problems (Berman & Bradt, 2006), and that exceptional coaches will be those who are the most effective in dealing with such issues.

Although there is a growing body of literature discussing recommended coaching practices and the factors that predict successful coaching outcomes, (e.g. Dagley, 2006; Greif, 2007), there seems to have been little or no investigation of the practices of those coaches identified as exceptional practitioners. An understanding of the work of exceptional coaches would serve to identify the sorts of outcomes that are possible from such work, and the practices that lead to those results. Such data would also provide a useful basis to inform the measurement of outcomes, the training and accreditation of executive coaches, and effective methods for coach selection. The focus of the present research was to provide a description of exceptional executive coaching work through the use of interviews with informed observers and purchasers of executive coaching services, and discussion of their experiences of working with coaches who they believed were exceptional. The specific objective of the study was to understand better what differentiates the work of exceptional coaches.

Method
Participants
Of the 20 experienced purchasers of executive coaching services who completed interviews, 12 were female and eight were male. In their primary roles, 11 worked in general Human Resources positions and nine in specialist leadership development roles. Regarding geographical spread, 10 of the respondents were from Melbourne, nine from Sydney, and one from Brisbane. Three of the 20 participants now work as coaches or in coach training roles and two others are undertaking postgraduate study in coaching.

One of the purchasers became a participant as a result of responding to an electronic advertisement placed by the
Australian Human Resources Institute. All other purchasers participated as a result of snowball selection (Minichiello et al., 1995) through networked contacts. Only four of this group of purchasers were known to the researcher prior to participation in the research.

Purchasers had an average of six-and-a-half years experience working with executive coaches (ranging from six months to 15 years), and had been responsible for coaching programmes for an estimated 605 executives (costing approximately $6.2 million) in the preceding two years. Although the proportion of their roles spent on executive coaching averaged 14 per cent (and only one exceeded 25 per cent), the purchasers estimated that they had worked in some capacity with 210 coaches in the last two years, and felt they had sufficient exposure to 98 of them to discuss their work.

Materials
Structured interviews formed the basis for data collection. The interviews centred around a 40-item questionnaire designed to explore the purchasers' experiences and perceptions about the definition of 'a great outcome' from coaching work, description of a nominated exceptional coach, and case studies of exceptional coaching work. The questions are included in Appendix A. The interview included questions on a range of related topics including purchaser demographic information, coach location and selection methods, outcome measurement, and recommendations regarding executive coach accreditation. Questions 3.7, and 5.1 to 6.2 provided the bulk of the data that are the focus of this paper.

Piloting of the questionnaire and interview with one potential participant in the study provided the opportunity to improve question wording, and to check for the completeness of the questionnaire. As a result of piloting, the initial questionnaire was substantially shortened to enable completion of the interview within 90 minutes. Data from this interview was excluded from the analysis.

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Procedure
Interviews occurred face-to-face or by telephone and each lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Interview participants received a copy of the research proposal, and an information sheet describing the research, the procedures, and the rights and obligations of participation. The purchasers also received a written consent form for signature (which was agreed verbally in the case of phone interviews). Prior to commencing the interview, purchasers received a verbal briefing and had the opportunity to ask any questions.

Handwritten records of purchaser responses provided the source data for later transcription into Excel spreadsheets. A sample of respondents received copies of their transcripts for verification of accuracy and all were returned with only minor amendments.

Analysis
All interview data were transcribed into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets in groups that followed the section headings of the questionnaire (e.g. definition, assessment of outcomes, differentiation of coaches). The responses were then coded (within those section headings) regarding the concepts or lower-order themes that each comment addressed. These lower-order themes were then themselves coded to identify associated lower-order themes and the higher order themes to which they appeared to relate (e.g. 'maintains integrity of approach' and 'able to hold the dark stuff' as lower-order themes were coded to the higher order theme of 'holds the professional self').

Refinement and validation of the themes and development of propositions occurred through extracting the key supporting quotations and validating these against the higher order themes, and re-investigating the original transcripts for conflicting data. These processes, along with the reporting phase, follow the qualitative data analysis stages described by Taylor and Bogdan (1984).
The final three interviews in the series were not included in the initial analysis process. These last interviews were used as a ‘saturation’ check (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to provide assurance that all the major themes had been correctly identified and that further interviewing was unlikely to add further information. No new themes emerged as a result of the analysis of these final three interviews. Regarding the range of participants who have been quoted in the paper, 14 of the 17 purchasers whose data formed the original analysis supplied quotes included in the results section.

As a further check on the validity of the emergent themes, all participants received a survey requesting them to supply importance ratings for the themes identified in the analysis. Seven of the 20 purchasers replied to the survey and provided ratings.

Results

‘Great outcome’

Purchasers provided a range of responses in answer to the question ‘what characterises a “great outcome” from coaching?’ The responses can be grouped under four broad headings: direct coaching outcomes, identifiable measurement points, downstream effects, and factors that were influential in generating those outcomes.

Purchasers provided a clear message that great coaching results in ‘behaviour change.’ As one purchaser described it, ‘the superordinate goal is based around the belief that leaders shape culture, and improving the level of constructive behaviour of leaders is the underlying goal.’ All but one of the ‘direct coaching outcomes’ responses were related to behavioural change.

Of those purchasers who described a ‘great result’ in terms of the identifiable measurement points of these outcomes, 11 of 12 identified the observations of the executives’ colleagues regarding the behavioural changes (in addition to the reports from the executive coaches themselves) as the best evidence of success. Downstream benefits of the coaching outcomes grouped under two headings: personal outcomes (increased self-esteem, confidence, engagement, and motivation), and realisation of potential (transition success, retention, and career development). The downstream gains are what appear to produce the benefits to organisations.

From my perspective, [a great outcome] is to hear about a [professional services firm] partner that has turned around a situation that they were struggling with, or have stepped up to the plate and are operating at the level you would expect. Our organisation uses practice teams and the leaders of those teams are reluctant leaders. Management is frowned upon here! They hadn’t been doing well, but through coaching they have been able to turn it around. Now they are able to influence and persuade partners to come on board, and that wouldn’t have happened without coaching, and it is an important outcome for the business.

The purchasers also provided responses that hinted at the mechanisms for coaching success – the ‘how’ factors of achieving behavioural change. Principal among these was the personal and professional development of the executive. One purchaser described how ‘I enjoy watching the executive uncover and develop an area which was a blind spot or something that was “unchangeable”’. That is, rather than simply adopting compliant behaviour, executives might be building the behavioural change on a foundation of addressing and building awareness about a blind spot or difficult area, and translating that awareness into action.

Exceptional coaching practices

In response to a question about what it was the exceptional coaches can do that weaker coaches cannot, purchasers provided indications about the experiences of the executives when working with exceptional coaches. As one purchaser described it, ‘They keep the motivation of the coachee. They produce change faster.’ Another reported that:
They get the individual to believe there is a reason to and then go about getting that change. They are ‘lights on and go’ right from the start. For tough issues they get the executive to really understand the issue, what they want to change, and to own it.

Another indicated that exceptional coaches are ‘able to get to deeper conversations more quickly, and motivate people to take personal responsibility for their own development and growth.’

These quotations indicate that executives’ experiences of exceptional coaching include the following themes: engagement, deeper conversations, and insight and responsibility. The themes that emerged from the remaining questions identified the coaching practices that prompted these executive experiences (as described in Table 1).

**Engagement**

Purchasers indicated that one of the central factors in producing behavioural change was the ability of the coach rapidly to connect and engage with the executive around the coaching task or mandate. Their responses indicated that three factors or coaching capabilities facilitated that connection: credibility, empathy and respect, and the ability of the coach to work effectively and in role when under personal or professional pressure – to ‘hold the professional self.’

Credibility was established (or lost) fairly early in the relationship. As one purchaser phrased it, ‘It’s about building credibility. It’s all about those first impressions. If a coach is not slick in the first meeting then it doesn’t work out as well.’

Purchasers indicated that credibility is based on both acquired experience and performance in-the-moment. In relation to experience, one purchaser commented that “[exceptional coaches] relate to the individual they are coaching in terms of knowledge and experience. Lower-level coaches just don’t have the experience of organisations, organisational politics etc. It’s about breadth and depth of experience.”

Experience, though, is not enough. As another purchaser described it:

The weaker coach just plays what is in front of him, and then drags out one of his tools or techniques. [The nominated coach] was able to slot into the executive team at a huge industrial organisation where he was coaching and was working with a very senior player who was not doing well. He was able to navigate that minefield exceptionally well. That is why he is top of the heap.

Purchasers also described a very human quality in the interactions between coach and executive. They listed empathy and respect, trust-building, rapport-building, subtlety, creating safety, and listening skills as

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Table 1: Exceptional executive coaching capabilities.
some of the factors that contributed to that quality. One purchaser described her nominated coach’s ‘ability to build rapport with our most difficult people. Other coaches would not be as quick to build rapport and that would give opportunities for the executive to exit the coaching.’ Another said that ‘[exceptional coaches] are able to immerse themselves in the coachee’s world. Others pretend that they do but they don’t. That’s the biggest [differentiator].’

The theme of holding the professional self represents a complex mixture of interrelated ideas. Sub-themes in this grouping include maintaining integrity of approach; the ability to remain un-phased and effective in working with conflict, tension and anxiety; staying ‘ego-free’; maintaining professional separation and boundaries; humility; and remaining focused on the executive’s needs rather than on the coach’s own personal or business development needs. One purchaser commented that:

to be extremely honest, we use [this nominated coach] with our most difficult executives. She is able to engage with them without engaging in a ‘pissing competition.’ These are usually men, very senior, and aggressive, and can easily result in a clash of egos. She seems to be able to do it ‘ego free.’

Another commented that:

[Exceptional coaches] can sit with the ambiguity of the situation. They are comfortable in being uncomfortable. They are not overly concerned if the executive is uncomfortable and they are not tied up in their own egos about making the executive feel good. It is about getting the right result.

**Deeper conversations**

A number of purchasers commented on exceptional coaches’ diagnostic ability to intuit and understand the underlying factors that are at the core of the work with each particular executive. They commented that this ability relates to having a deep understanding of the human condition and an awareness of systemic issues at play. Comments included:

She is exceptional at seeing patterns and unconscious responses, defences and behaviours ... The most powerful changes occur at the core, where her expertise is.

She can really get to the nub of the issue – the difficult places that the individual doesn’t want to go. Other coaches can work with surface issues but haven’t the skills to get to the nub of the issue.

Purchasers indicated that exceptional coaches have a broad range of approaches and methods in their repertoires, and are flexible in the way they approach the work.

Weaker coaches have an ‘I have this 10-step method and I will apply it’ approach, rather than tailoring the work to each executive. It is not ‘one-size-fits-all’. Weaker coaches’ work is a monologue, not a dialogue. It is not about engaging, not about discussing. They come with a preconceived notion and dump it onto the executive, give them homework, and then expect outcomes.

**Insight and responsibility**

In supporting the executive experience of greater insight and an increased sense of personal responsibility for action, purchasers indicated that exceptional coaches remain aware that they are working in a business context. They recognise that (usually) they have two clients – the executive and the organisation funding the work. Comments indicated the exceptional coach was business-centric, aware of the organisational context, and was reliable in working to the brief and thorough in following-up. For example,

[this coach] is thorough. Some coaches will say they will do things and not do it. When we follow up together she opens her little notebook and she carefully closes the loop on all things she said she would do.

This does not necessarily imply that the coach is constrained by the brief. A few
purchasers alluded to the need to satisfy the business brief and, where necessary and appropriate, go beyond the brief to get to what is important for the development of the executive (as intimated by comments in the previous sections about diagnostic insight and approach flexibility). By way of example, a purchaser commented that one of the key factors in the success of the work described in his case study was due to ‘the flexibility of [the coach’s] approach and an open-mindedness and willingness to push the boundaries past what the organisation required.’

Exceptional coaches are able to engage and motivate executives toward action and change. This category of responses represents two important sub-themes. Firstly, the exceptional coach uses an approach that is underpinned by a philosophy that the primary responsibility for change rests with the executive, not the coach. Secondly, the coach uses highly-refined coaching practices intended to raise and work with issues that are difficult or uncomfortable for the executive – the practice of ‘challenging.’ One purchaser indicated that both these key factors were instrumental in the success of her nominated coach. ‘[It is not only] her philosophy of coaching and of personal responsibility, but also her courage. She would probe into areas that were maybe uncomfortable.’

In assisting executives to take responsibility for action, exceptional coaches recognise the need for coaches to stay in the coaching role rather than moving to an expert or consultant role. The purchasers identified the markers of this ability to manage the responsibility for developing solutions. Firstly, they identified what happens in the coaching. As one purchaser observed, his nominated coach is able to ‘motivate people to take personal responsibility for their own development and growth.’

Secondly, the purchasers identified two practices that supported this philosophy of personal responsibility. Those practices are to ask good questions and never give advice. For example:

I’ve seen weaker coaches give misguided advice – choosing the path for the executive rather than the executive choosing – for example, advising a person about an important decision. You need to be careful with coaching as you can end up with more issues, particularly if the coach lets his or her ego get in the way. More than half the respondents provided relatively lengthy quotes about the importance to success of the coach’s skilful challenging of the executive, including the ability to deliver difficult messages. As one purchaser put it:

The skill was about delivering the feedback that no-one else in the organisation could give. The coach supported the person, while delivering the hard stuff. That was the exceptional bit. There is such a high potential for shame in those situations.

The purchasers were clear that skilful challenging was more than just the ability to articulate difficult, uncomfortable or anxiety-provoking messages. The practice represents a combination of: courage, the (previously discussed) ability to hold the professional self, the ability to deliver the message with sensitivity and respect, and the ability to deliver the message while maintaining the connection and relationship. The following quotes provide some illustration.

It’s … a style thing. Managers in this organisation expect to feel ‘push back’ and exceptional coaches can do that. It takes a fair amount of personal fortitude for a coach to do that considering the risks to the assignment. Executives have said about this coach that ‘he won’t let you get away with things.’

[The outcome] was about the ability to challenge and ask hard questions. [But he also] demonstrated a sense of respect and appropriateness in the way he went about the practice. And it was again that boundary awareness.
Other factors
Purchasers responded to a question about what factors, other than the coach, had a major influence on outcomes and results. They identified three areas: factors in the environment, factors related to the executive, and the characteristics of the task or mandate for the coaching work.

Environmental factors
Purchasers indicated that important environmental factors included: organisational perceptions about executive coaching, organisational culture, the ability of the executive to make time for the work, the length of the assignment, and the setup of the assignment including the negotiation of confidentiality. Regarding confidentiality, one purchaser commented that

[It's about] confidentiality and the 'hygiene factors.' Despite the fact that a lot of senior executives use coaches, few are comfortable to talk about it. It is not about weaknesses, but about building strengths. A lot of HR managers ask 'how is it going,' but that confidentiality – it's almost sacred. They should be focusing on outcomes, not what is going on inside the coaching.

Among the organisational factors, the most common theme was the involvement of and support from the sponsoring leader. One purchaser commented that '[an important factor is the] support from the direct manager. Without that support it doesn’t really matter what they do. But with strong buy-in from the manager it usually means the coaching will be successful.'

Executive factors
More than organisational factors though, it was factors related to the executive-coachee, and in particular, the executive’s orientation to the coaching task that drew the most comment. One purchaser’s response summarised the theme:

[A major influence was] the conclusions the executive has reached about themselves and what they need to do, [as well as] the conclusions of significant others (be that the boss or the spouse or someone else) – who can focus the executive on doing something differently. It is also about the life stage that they are at. There are transition points in life and careers, and where [the executives] are in relation to those can affect the coaching.

Purchasers generally did not discuss in any depth the characteristics or circumstances of the executives that might predict or influence their orientation to coaching tasks. One purchaser, however, shed some light on the perception issues that might underpin executive reluctance.

[This] was a very senior manager who was recently promoted, but had previously had a ‘fatal flaw.’ He was performing exceptionally well at the lower level but showed behaviours that would just not be acceptable at the next level up. He was given feedback that he would not progress any further in the organisation if he didn’t change, and may even lose his current role. It was politically a very sensitive issue. The executive was not happy about doing executive coaching and felt that in agreeing to do this he would be accepting that he had a problem, and he was a really challenging individual to work with. It was pretty charged for the individual and for his manager.

Task factors
Purchasers also identified the task itself as an influential factor, particularly as regards task clarity and the extent of the communication and agreement around the objectives. The majority of those discussing the influence of task indicated that it was important to 'be really clear on the outcomes you want to achieve for the individuals and the business.'

Sometimes, however, a coach will need to operate in an environment where the task description has not been well articulated. For example, one purchaser commented that '[it is important] there are clear goals...
upfront from both parties. [But] often the manager doesn’t convey his or her expectations that well to the executive.’

**Outcomes**

Purchaser responses suggest that the relationship between task and outcome is not always a direct relationship, but is mediated by (or results in a concurrent outcome of) a positive and transformational change in the executive. In describing a case study of exceptional coaching, one purchaser commented that ‘the coach inspired an increased confidence in the executive in a way I didn’t think possible.’ Another reported that ‘I’ve seen this [coach] start, and within the first few minutes, recognise the acute anxiety of this person and be able to reframe that as positive energy in a short time. That’s a really key attribute.’

The executives’ experiences ultimately seem to have been positive and personally valuable, despite the difficult material addressed. A purchaser described the following example.

Six months into the programme I received a call [from the executive coachee]. ‘I just had to give you this feedback. I have had this problem with anger for most of my life but I regard these six months as the best investment of time in my entire life. I have learned so much. I have come so far. It doesn’t mean I won’t regress, but it is the best thing I’ve done.’

This transformation might sometimes be evidenced by the strength of the residual relationship with the coach. Sometimes, however, that residual relationship can have negative connotations.

Some other coaches in this organisation, the ones I call ‘the Rasputins’ have their own hooks into the business. They have lost their objectivity and don’t really add value even though they charge a lot. They seem to act more as ‘trusted friend.’ The coaching I saw [from the nominated exceptional coach] was the opposite of that.

**Models**

The following models, illustrated in Figures 1 and 2, represent an interpretation of the linkages between the various themes identified in the purchasers’ responses about exceptional executive coaching work. The first model (Figure 1) represents a high-level interpretation of the themes of what it takes
to achieve ‘great outcomes,’ without differentiating any individual coach intervention practices.

The various components of exceptional coaching that exist between the identification of the task and the resulting behavioural change can be grouped on three levels. Level 1 represents the parts of the model that are visible to people outside the coaching relationship – in particular, the task or mandate that prompted the coaching work, and any behaviour change that resulted. Those external people (such as the HR manager, the sponsoring manager, and subordinates) are usually not privy to the interactions and events that occurred between coach and executive.

Level 2 represents the experiences of the executive within the coaching relationship. They are divided into two parts: the processes that the executive experiences (engagement, deeper conversations, and insight and responsibility), and the results of those processes (being positive personal and/or professional growth). An assumption underpinning the model is that sustained changes in entrenched and complex behaviours will not occur without personal and/or professional growth.

Level 3 of the model represents all the practices and attributes that the coach brings to the work. These, along with the other external drivers, are described below in Figure 2.

This model represents a complex development of the previous model (Figure 1), and includes the detail of the eight exceptional coaching practices discussed by purchasers. The other major development of this model over its predecessor is to describe in more detail the construction and the ongoing role of the working relationship. This model illustrates that the working relationship is a result of three factors; environmental factors (such as the sponsoring leader’s involvement and support, and the organisational culture), factors and characteristics related to the individual executive (such as personality, and motivation to engage in coaching), and the coach’s abilities at forging a connection with the executive. The linkages between these factors and the working relationship are not direct, but are mediated by the characteristics of the task or mandate of the coaching work.

The second important aspect of the working relationship is its pervasive and ongoing influence in facilitating the deeper conversations and the insight and responsibility components of the executive’s experience of coaching. That is, the working relationship forms a foundational component of all the coaching work, and is reciprocally interdependent with other aspects of the executive’s experience of the work.

Model validation
To test whether the model in Figure 2 represented a valid interpretation of the data, the 20 purchasers who participated in the interview process each received an e-mail that listed the components of the model. The seven who responded provided ratings on a 10-point scale regarding the importance of each component, with ‘1’ indicating not important, ‘5’ indicating moderately important, and ‘10’ indicating critically important.

Purchasers responded to two questions, and indicated the importance of each of the factors to: ‘exceptional executive coaching work that results in behaviour change in the executive’ (see Table 2), and ‘the ability of the coach to deliver exceptional executive coaching’ (see Table 3). The average ratings for all factors were 7.4 or above, indicating that the identified factors were important components in achieving outcomes through executive coaching.

Purchasers also described any factors that had not been listed, but that they believed had an important bearing on achieving successful outcomes in executive coaching work. Their responses described factors related to task clarity, executive commitment and disclosure, and the sustainability of changes. All of these factors had been identified in the original data and had been subsumed under higher-order factors in the model.
Figure 2: Detailed model of exceptional executive coaching.
The objective of the research was to understand the factors that differentiate the work of exceptional coaches. The results indicate that such coaches are able to deliver against an identifiable range of capabilities as required by the work, and deliver with considerable skill.

**Discussion**

The objective of the research was to understand the factors that differentiate the work of exceptional coaches. The results indicate that such coaches are able to deliver against an identifiable range of capabilities as required by the work, and deliver with considerable skill.

**Exceptional coaching**

**Multiple factors**

Both the interviews and the subsequent validation inquiries indicated that exceptional coaching results are products of both the coach’s delivery and of a number of other critical factors that can materially affect outcomes. Those critical factors were: environmental factors (such as the involvement of the sponsoring manager, the culture of the organisation, and the structure of the coaching programme), executive factors (including the motivation and commitment of the executive, personality factors, and outside influences affecting the executive’s professional life), and task factors (such as the clarity of the objectives, and the perceived remediality of the work).

The results also provide a clear indication to purchasers of coaching services that simply hiring a good coach, without paying...
attention to the other key factors, may well limit results. Purchasers provided a long list of these detracting factors, the most common being an unmotivated or uncommitted executive, poor feedback and clarification about the reasons for coaching and the task being undertaken, and the lack of involvement or lack of support of a sponsoring executive.

**Exceptional coach characteristics**

Exceptional coaching seems to be related to the ability of the coach to facilitate particular executive experiences (i.e. engagement with the coach, in-depth conversations, the development of personal insight and responsibility for action, and a sense of personal and/or professional growth). The results, along with the subsequent validation work, indicate that exceptional coaches employ eight practices and attributes in their work, and that these practices and attributes influence the capacity of the coach to facilitate those executive experiences.

One of the important findings from this research is that exceptional coaches do not appear to display factors or characteristics that are absent in less accomplished coaches. The primary point of differentiation appears to be that they are able to deliver against all and any of these quite basic characteristics (as is required in the work), and deliver at an observably superior level of expertise.

The most demanding of these characteristics are likely to be those that create personal discomfort for the coach (de Haan, 2008a, de Haan, 2008b). The purchasers indicated that exceptional coaches tended to earn their reputations around the ability to work in conflicted situations, to resist the temptation to move from a coaching role (and start to supply solutions), and to provide uncomfortable and challenging feedback while maintaining connection with the executive. As intimated by DuCharme (2004) and Laske (2007), effective functioning in such environments may make demands that go beyond a cognitive-behavioural skill set, and are related to the personal qualities and personal development of the coach.

**Outcome definition**

The interviewees in this research were clear about the purpose of executive coaching. Almost without exception they described a ‘great outcome’ from coaching as being ‘behaviour change.’ Behaviour change has a clear implication that the executive’s current behavioural set has been observed as inadequate or detrimental to the effective performance of the executive in role, and that the task of coaching is to improve behaviours – to make a positive change.

Such a definition has an unpalatably strong flavour of ‘remediation.’ This may be a key factor regarding difficulties with: the positioning of executive coaching in organisations, the ability of sponsoring managers to provide clear feedback about the issues that they would like to see resolved, and (therefore) the ability to measure outcomes. One can almost hear the internal dialogue of the sponsoring manager or HR professional. ‘The coaching is not remedial – really – it’s developmental! So we can’t really say it’s because you’re not doing well here!!’ These points may mean that the differentiation of ‘remedial’ and ‘developmental’ coaching may not be as clear as one might hope. A possible redefinition of the two forms might differentiate the work simply on the basis of the starting point, with remedial work having a larger element of mandated participation.

This emphasis on behaviour change may be the result of the study design. The purchasers who provided interview data were discussing the work of exceptional coaches. Exceptional coaches are likely to distinguish themselves when the work is at its most difficult. It would not be a stretch to describe those assignments as the charged or complex ones, dealing with entrenched behavioural issues.

The term ‘behaviour change’ also appears to be an insufficient description of the results of exceptional work. The sorts of
changes observed by purchasers were idiosyncratic, complex, and around entrenched patterns (which might not be obvious at the outset of the work – see Berman & Bradt, 2006). Further, the outcomes seemed to be sustainable (rather than simply compliant), and such changes seemed to occur as a result of positive individual personal and/or professional growth.

The purchasers did not, however, emphasise (or even describe) negative experiences for executives when working with exceptional coaches. They certainly provided evidence of challenging and demanding moments in the work, but the executives’ experiences overall appeared to be positive and often transformational.

One of the characteristics of the work of exceptional coaches may be the ability to identify and persist with difficult tasks in such a way that executives come away with a sense of accomplishment and increased self-belief at the end of the work. Purchasers supported Bluckert’s (2005) contention that there are distinctions between various forms of executive coaching. Examples of these forms included ‘C-suite’-level coaching versus coaching for mid-level managers, and coaching for particular skills or issues versus ‘fatal flaw’ coaching. One of the key differentiators between the coaching subtypes may be the balance in the work between the executive’s need for skill acquisition, and the need for insight and taking on of responsibility for change (or as one purchaser described it, building the capability in individuals to ‘improve through reflecting on practice’).

Such a distinction would also tend to indicate what coaching attributes, and therefore which coaches, are likely to be the most effective. The evidence from the interviews is that exceptional coaches can be effective in both areas – skill acquisition and more fundamental change – but that less accomplished coaches (commonly with a more systematised or rigid approach) may only be effective when skill acquisition is the key task.

**Limitations**

In respect of its generalisability, the obvious limitations of this study are the small number of respondents (in both the original sample and in the validation study) and the opportunistic sampling technique. These limitations may result in biases in the data due to under- or over-representation from particular purchaser groups.

The effects of these limiting factors have been mitigated to some extent by the use of saturation testing (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and of post-data-analysis validation surveys to provide some support that: (a) all the themes that might be present in the population group have been captured in the data collection process; and (b) that those themes have been correctly identified through the analysis process.

A further limitation to the generalisability of the results is that the themes identified in this research may not be applicable to mainstream coaching work – work that would not satisfy the ‘exceptional’ label. The data collected in this study represent an exploration of one extreme end of a continuum of coaching delivery, and therefore its generalisability may be limited.

**Future research**

This study is the first of three in a planned research programme. The second study consists of interviews with the exceptional coaches nominated by purchasers in the current study. Interviews with executive-clients of these nominated coaches form the basis of the third study in the series. Data collection for both these studies is well under way, with a number of interviews completed with nominated coaches and executive clients. It will be fascinating to compare the impressions of the purchasers in the current study with the realities and perceptions described by coaches and executives in the later studies.

The development and growth of a discipline (or industry, or profession) that purports to hold integrity and human values at its core seems to demonstrate a remarkable resemblance to some of the early stages of
human social development described by Erikson (1963) – in particular, the striving for: a sense of personal (vs. professional) adequacy, intellectual and applied competence, and an integrated image as a unique individual (vs. discipline). Unfortunately, when compared to Erikson’s model, executive coaching appears to be squarely in the middle of its teenage years. Drake (2008) described a hope that the executive coaching industry may be moving toward an era that belongs to the artisan. That time may indeed be approaching, and a broad and thoughtful research base will mean that such an era can be embraced both on the basis of evidence-based principles and the recognition of artistry. One of the key messages from this research is that exceptional coaches may be artisans, and that what differentiates them is not what they do (the described factors are unsurprising), but the exquisite expertise in how they do it – and the essentially human and personal qualities that underpin such expertise.

The underlying purpose of this research goes beyond simple description of complex work. Research such as this has little value if it does not serve to inform (and possibly educate) the buying public. Positioned in that conflicted nexus between human development and organisational performance pragmatism, executive coaching can only flourish in the longer term in an environment of informed and critical purchasers.

Correspondence
Dr Gavin Dagley
Perspex Consulting,
PO Box 481,
Flinders Lane,
VIC 8009,
Australia.
Tel: 0425 795 675
E-mail: gavin.dagley@bigpond.com

References
1 Definition of executive coaching:

1.1 The following is a frequently quoted definition of executive coaching:

‘Executive coaching is a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organisation and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioural techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually defined set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client’s organisation within a formerly defined coaching agreement.’ (Kilburg, 2000)

How well does this match with your ideas of a good definition?

Does this match sufficiently to use as a definition for this interview?

1.2 In your view, what changes could be made to the definition to make it more complete or accurate?

2 Experience of respondent and contact with coaches

2.1 What is your current role?

What proportion of your work is related directly with executive coaching?

2.2 For how long have you been in working with executive coaches (other than working as a coach)?

2.3 Approximately how many executives would have been involved with executive coaching programmes for which you held significant responsibility in the last two years?

2.4 What is the approximate average cost per executive for these coaching programmes?

What was the average duration (number of sessions or elapsed time) of the programmes?

2.5 How many coaches have you worked with in the last two years?

2.6 How many coaches have you worked with in the last two years whose work you feel you know well enough to discuss?

3 Methods of assessment of coaching outcomes

3.1 In the executive coaching programmes you have been involved with, how have you or the organisation measured the results?

What is your principle method?

3.2 How strong and credible has the data been that resulted from these approaches?

Which parts have been the most useful?

3.3 How difficult have you found it to get really strong measures of executive coaching outcomes?

Appendix A: Interview questions

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What is your principle method?

3.2 How strong and credible has the data been that resulted from these approaches?

Which parts have been the most useful?

3.3 How difficult have you found it to get really strong measures of executive coaching outcomes?
3.4 What constraints exist that might make the measurement of executive coaching difficult to achieve?
3.5 What advice would you offer to those seeking to use executive coaching regarding the measurement of outcomes?
3.6 To what extent have you attempted to assess and compare the individual performances of your coaches?
   How well has that approach worked?
3.7 What characterises a ‘great outcome’ from coaching?

4 Nomination of an exceptional executive coach
4.1 Can you offer the name of an executive coach who you believe is outstanding or exceptional?
4.2 Would you be happy for me to approach her or him for participation in this research programme, on your recommendation?

5 Differentiation of an exceptional coach from lesser coaches
5.1 For what reasons do you rate this coach as exceptional?
5.2 How much of your belief that this coach is exceptional is influenced by your personal experience of the coach (vs feedback from other sources)?
5.3 At what point and why did you suspect this coach might be exceptional?
5.4 What characterises the differences between this coach and some of your weaker coaches?
5.5 What can these exceptional coaches do that less effective coaches cannot?
5.6 What other factors can have a major influence on outcomes and results?
5.7 As regards coaching approach or method, how well does the use of a single consistent model work in executive coaching?

6 Case example of exceptional coaching work
6.1 Can you describe an example of the coach’s work that best illustrates what it is that makes this coach exceptional?
6.2 What was it about the coach that most contributed to this exceptional result?

7 Location and selection of coaches
7.1 How do you currently go about finding your coaches?
7.2 What selection methods do you use to evaluate potential coaches?
7.3 What is the relative importance of the following criteria in your selection process (using a 4 (high rating) to 1 (low/nil rating) scale)?
   qualifications and training   business experience
   coaching experience/clients list   counselling experience
   face credibility   psychologist
   clarity around method(s)   industry experience
   use of supervision   professional/ethics
   other (please specify)
7.4 What important things have you learned about how to go about selecting coaches?
7.5 What proportion of your selection decision would actually be based on your subjective opinion (be that an impression, your intuition or your experience) vs. strict criteria?
7.6 What things to do not necessarily point towards coaching efficacy (that is, what can lead someone astray in the selection process)?
7.7 Can you remember a time when you have been fooled that a coach seemed better than he or she was? What were the circumstances?
7.8 How did you find this particular nominated exceptional coach?
7.9 What selection methods highlighted the particular factors and skills that make him or her exceptional?
7.10 If you urgently had to find another exceptional coach, how would you go about it?
7.11 In your opinion, can anyone be an excellent coach with appropriate training?
7.12 If you could mandate it, what would you require in terms of (1) training and (2) experience as the minimum for a professional accreditation?

8 Changed perceptions as a result of interview
8.1 How, if at all, has this interview clarified your perceptions of exceptional executive coaching?
8.2 What question would you have liked to discuss that wasn’t asked?