

Welcome to our first Bulletin of 2011, especially to new readers who have joined us through our partnership with Melbourne Business School and Mt Eliza Executive Education. Our other big news is that the new Standards Australia Coaching Guidelines, currently in draft form, have been well received. Once finalised, the Guidelines will provide the common set of definitions and principles that many clients have been seeking for a while now. Onto the Bulletin...

The thinking for this study stemmed from last year's Autumn Bulletin, where we reported how coachee's expectations of coaching appear to change over the course of an assignment. Some coachees spent more time than they anticipated learning about themselves, with consequent enhancements in confidence and resilience. With reference to adult development theories, we wondered if this effect may be age related, or perhaps gender related? In analysing the data we indeed found age and gender trends, but other possible trends as well relating to the evolution of coaching as a discipline, organisational culture and coaches' professional development. A new model for classifying coaching assignments emerged, one which we think sheds further light on the 'art or science' of coach matching (as discussed in Bulletin #4). We are excited about some of the possibilities implied by this analysis and hope you will be too – especially if you're responsible for purchasing coaching services.

Ann Whyte, Paul Lawrence & the Whyte & Co Guilds

Coaching – one loop or two?

Summary

We studied 271 coaching evaluation forms, seeking to understand better what actually goes on in a coaching assignment. In reviewing the content of the forms, we found that coachees appeared to be undergoing two fundamentally different processes, which we related to theories of single-loop and double-loop learning. About half our coachees were apparently focussed solely on the external world, on seeking to effect change without reference to their own motivations and perspectives (single-loop learning). The other half seemed equally focussed on self, including themselves as aspects of the situation that may need to undergo change (double-loop learning).

We believe these findings offer practical insights to purchasers of coaching services. Our results suggest that different coachees have different appetites for exploring self. At one end of the spectrum, coachees may expect the coach to focus on the external task at hand. The coach is more likely to be asked to provide advice and suggestions for enhancing skills. At the other end of the spectrum coachees will appreciate the coach's capacity to create a safe space in which to facilitate self-reflection.

In cross-tabulating single-loop and double-loop learning against other variables we discovered some fascinating trends. In comparing single-loop/double-loop learning ('learning approach') to the year in which the coaching assignment started, for example, we found that there appears to have been a sizeable shift toward double-loop learning from about 2006–2007. This suggests that coaching as a discipline may be going through a seismic change in terms of the kind of benefits that coaching can bring to organisations and what purchasers expect of a competent executive coach.

The second significant correlation we found was between organisation and learning approach, raising the possibility of being able to develop markers of an organisation's capacity to undergo transformational change.

We also found a correlation between coaches and learning approach, suggesting that some coaches may be more disposed to facilitating double-loop learning than others.

Adult Development

In Research Bulletin #2 we reported a study in which we found that some coachees spend more time than they expected working on self awareness, and that they experience unanticipated enhancements in confidence, assertiveness and resilience. With reference to theories of adult development, we wondered if this effect may be age-specific?

Several adult development theorists have suggested that there are particular times in a person's life when they may be especially disposed to reflecting on who they are and what they want to achieve in life. Daniel Levinson, for example, proposed that men and women go through a 'mid-life transition' between the ages of 40 & 45 during which they reflect upon their lives to date and yearn for a new life, in which their desires, values, talents and aspirations can be fully expressed. More recently Robert Kegan proposed that adults experience changes in the way that they make meaning of the world, and that some adults make a transition from a '3rd order' state, in which they are able to subordinate their desires to the desires of others, to a '4th order' state, in which they are more self-motivated.

We wondered if we might find evidence of such transitions across our own coaching assignments, for if this is a real phenomenon it may have significant implications for coach matching and coach development.

The Study

We studied 271 coaching evaluations, covering assignments conducted between 2004–10. For each assignment we collated the following information:

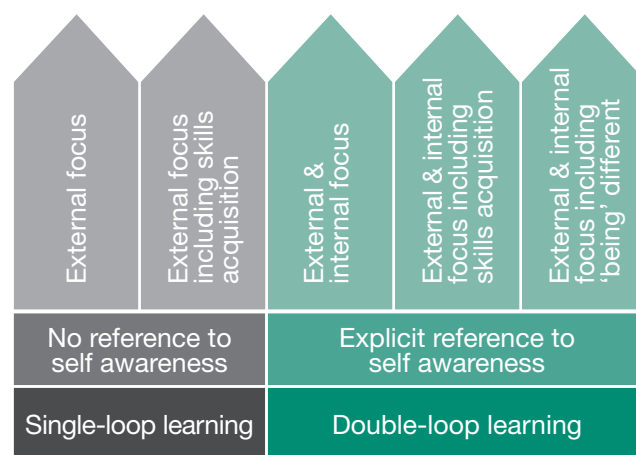
- » The year of the assignment and the number of sessions conducted
- » The gender of the coachee, and their age at the time of coaching
- » The organisation the coachee was working for and the name of the coach
- » What kind of goals the coachee set, how many goals were formed, and what measurements were established by which to evaluate the success of the assignment
- » How the coachee articulated the benefits coaching at the end of the assignment.

While reading through the evaluations and thinking how to categorise assignments, it struck us that coachees appeared to be undergoing two fundamentally different processes. Some coachees were focussed solely on the external world, while others seemed equally as focussed on self, including themselves as aspects of the situation that may need to undergo change. This reminded us of the work of Argyris, and his theories of single-loop and double-loop learning.

Single-loop & Double-loop Learning

The difference in a nutshell between single-loop and double-loop learning is that those engaged in single-loop learning focus on identifying and correcting errors in the *external* environment, whilst double-loop learning means looking inward, and reflecting critically on one's own behaviour. This distinction forms the basis of a system by which we were able to neatly categorise the content of assignments. This system is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Classifying coaching assignments



Those assignments which showed evidence of progress toward clearly defined goals, but made no mention of skills acquisition or self-awareness, we classified as '**external focus**'. A simple example of an externally focussed goal might be to "*develop a high level strategic plan*".

Assignments which included clearly defined goals, which did mention skills acquisition, but made no mention of self-awareness, we classified as '**external focus including skills acquisition**'. A simple example of such a goal might be to "*improve my communication and presentation skills*".

Assignments which included clearly defined goals, and mentioned self awareness, but made no mention of skills acquisition or 'being' different, we classified as **'external & internal focus'**. A simple example of such a goal might be to *"develop a better understanding of my own motivations"*.

Assignments which included clearly defined goals, and mentioned both self awareness and skills acquisition, we classified as **'external and internal focus including skills acquisition'**. A simple example of such a goal might be to *"develop better interpersonal skills based on a more profound understanding of my own motivations and needs"*.

Assignments which included clearly defined goals, and mentioned both self awareness and a desire to 'be' different, we classified as **'external and internal focus including 'being' different'**. A simple example of such a goal might be to *"develop a different leadership style based on a more profound understanding of self"*.

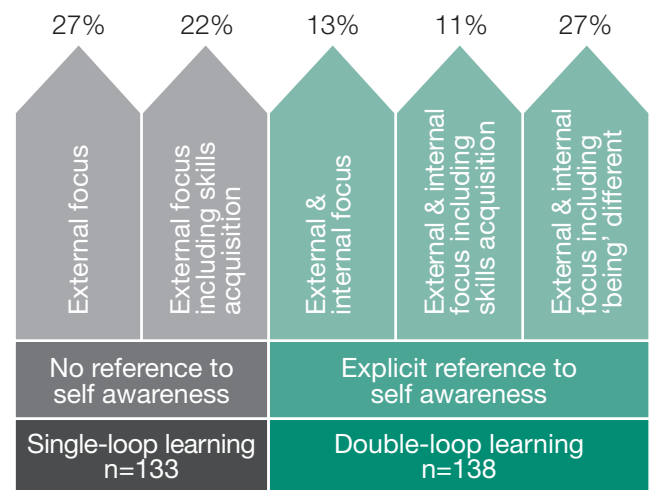
We couldn't classify assignments based on the expression of goals alone; we needed to examine the coachee's reflections on the completed assignment to understand how they approached the goal. For example, a goal such as *"enhance my capacity to influence others,"* would be classified as **'external focus'** if all of the actions were around seeking media presence. It would be classified as **'external focus including skills acquisition'** if the actions were around skills acquisition without any reference to self awareness, and **'external focus including 'being' different'** if the actions were around seeking to 'be' different, based on some kind of self analysis.

Results overall

Our assignments fell about 50:50 into single-loop and double-loop learning. More than half of those engaged in single-loop learning were using coaching to tackle an external challenge without any reference to learning new skills. The rest were explicitly learning new skills as part of their strategy.

27% of our sample used coaching to undergo some form of personal transformation; those whose focus included 'being' different, whilst a further 24% (the rest of those engaged in double-loop learning) went some distance along that path.

Figure 2 Results overall



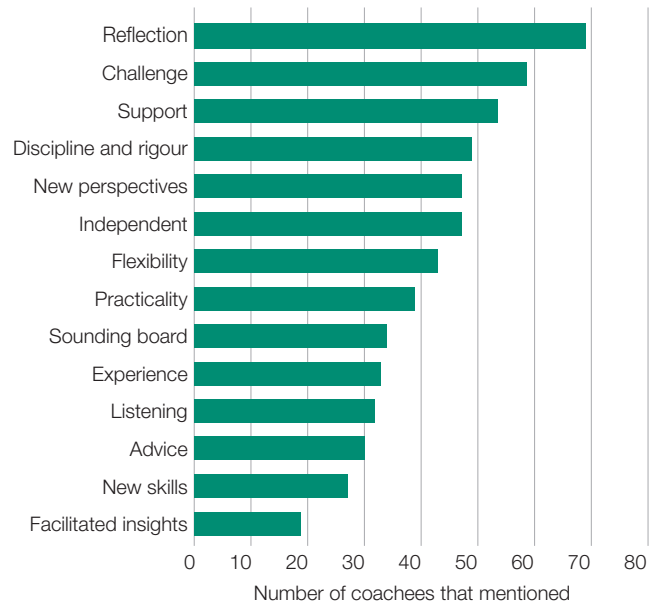
Our findings are consistent with those of De Haan et al (2010) who interviewed coachees about 'critical moments'. These workers found that about 50% of personal realisations were about 'issues', including knowledge and understanding of situations, and 50% were about 'self', including recognising unhelpful patterns of relating and personal 'hang-ups'. Consistent with Argyris' model, they suggested that:

“The experience of change seems to be internal in some cases and external in others.”

The Coaching Process

Figure 3 shows what coachees said were the most important attributes of their coaches overall:

Figure 3 Benefits of executive coaching (n=271)



Cross-tabulating this data vs. single-loop and double-loop learning revealed that ‘challenge’, ‘practicality’, ‘facilitated insights’, ‘reflection’ and ‘flexibility’ were all mentioned more often by coachees engaged in **double-loop learning**. Discipline & rigour, new perspectives, sounding board, advice and new skills were mentioned more often by coachees engaged in **single-loop learning**.

This data gives us an insight into what happens in coaching and the nature of the change process. Schein (1993) talks about the nature of change:

“The first problem of listening to others is to identify the distortions and biases that alter our own cognitive processes. We have to learn to listen to ourselves before we can really understand others, and such internal listening is, of course, especially difficult if one is in the midst of an active task-oriented discussion. Furthermore, there may be nothing in our cultural learning to support such introspection.”

Schein (1995) also says:

“A learner or change target can be highly motivated to learn something, yet have no role models or initial feeling for where the answer or solution might lie. The learner then searches or scans by reading, travelling, talking to people, hiring consultants, entering therapy, going back to school, etc... to expose him or herself to a variety of new information that might reveal a solution to the problem. Alternatively, when the learner finally feels psychologically safe, he or she may experience spontaneously an insight that spells out the solution.”

If we think of Schein’s comments in the context of coach attributes, we find that reflection comes top of the list, providing ‘new perspectives’ comes 5th in the list, and ‘support’ comes 3rd (safety was specifically mentioned 4 times). This points to a coaching model, at least for double-loop learning, whereby the critical attributes a coach brings to an assignment include the ability to facilitate reflection and the provision of new information, all in a space that is psychologically safe. The result is that coachees are more likely to experience their own spontaneous insights.

Our cross-tabulation data suggests that all coachees experience a fundamentally similar process in that reflection is important for types of learning, but those engaged in single-loop learning may be more task oriented than those engaged in double-loop learning,

such that discipline, advice and skills development are more highly valued vs. the facilitation of the coachee’s own insights.

It was something of a surprise to see ‘practicality’ mentioned more often by those engaged in double-loop learning, but this may reflect Argyris’ comment that:

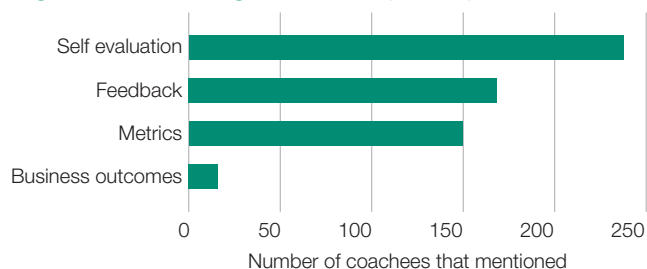
“The key to any educational experience... is to connect the program to real business problems.”

In other words, coachees are not inclined to reflect upon themselves for the sake of it, but only in the context of a dialogue in which the benefits of such enhanced self awareness become apparent.

Measuring outcomes

Our coaching evaluation forms include a column where coachees are asked to decide how they will measure progress to achieving their goals. Coachees specified four types of measurement. A small minority of coachees set measures including the direct achievement of business outcomes, including financial targets. More than half the coachees established some form of measurable internal KPI, or metric, 60% included feedback from others, and nearly 90% included subjective measures.

Figure 4 Measuring outcomes (n=271)



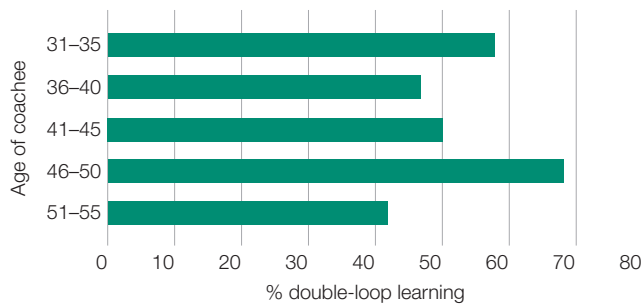
Cross-tabulating this data vs. single-loop and double-loop learning revealed that metrics were mentioned more often by coachees engaged in **single-loop learning** with the other three measures mentioned slightly more often by those engaged in double-loop learning. Given that it is easier to define a metric for some forms of external change than it is for internal change, this result wasn’t surprising.

Age & gender

This study started with the intention of seeing if people of a certain age or gender may be more likely than others to spend time on self awareness. In other words, are people of a certain age or gender more or less likely to undertake single-loop or double-loop learning?

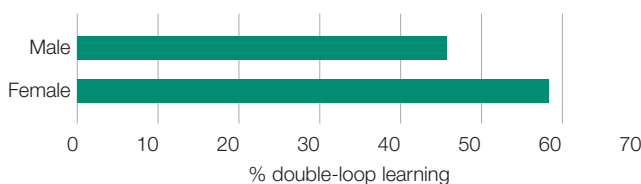
We cannot claim that the data shown in figure 5 demonstrates statistically significant differences, but the graph suggests that coachees aged 46–50 may be more likely than average to engage in double-loop learning, and that coachees aged 51–55 may be more likely to engage in single-loop learning. This data points to the intriguing *possibility* of an age-related effect whereby coachees may be more prepared to consider themselves to be part of the issue when in their mid-late forties, and that their focus is likely to become more external again once they pass 50. This brings to mind Charan’s comments, reflecting upon the January 09 HBR report on executive coaching, implying that CEOs are more likely to value ‘coaching’ from other retired CEOs, whilst ‘middle-managers’ are more likely to value the services of someone with a background in psychology. We should emphasise again though that our findings may not be statistically significant.

Figure 5 Age & double-loop learning (%)



We also looked at gender. 46% of 158 male coachees showed evidence of double-loop learning, compared to 58% of 113 female coachees. This again raises the *possibility* that females may be more likely to see themselves as part of the ‘issue’ than males. This could be for a variety of reasons, including i) females may be more self-critical (e.g. Beyer & Bowden, 1997) ii) males may be less inclined to engage with their emotions (e.g. Brizendine, 2006) or iii) males may be referred more often to coaching, such that we have a greater proportion of unwilling participants. Again, our findings cannot be said to be statistically significant, and should be interpreted with caution.

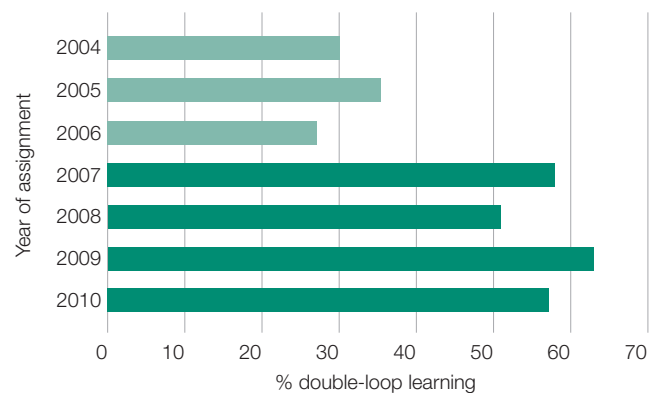
Figure 6 Gender and double-loop learning (%)



Year of Assignment, Organisation & Coach

First, we looked at the year each assignment started, and cross-tabulated against single-loop and double-loop learning. Figure 7 shows that the proportion of double-loop learning *doubled* between 2006 and 2007. This suggests something significant happened about that time, such that coachees became much more likely to explore issues of self-awareness.

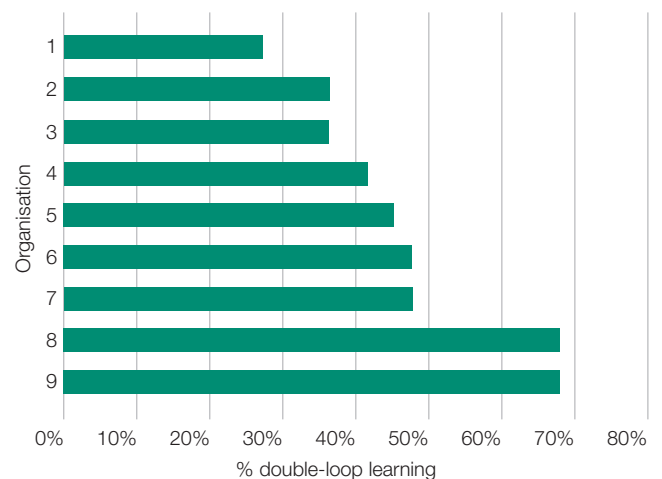
Figure 7 Year of assignment & double-loop learning (%)



Second, we looked at organisations. Is double-loop learning more likely to take place in some organisations than others?

There were 9 organisations in our sample with 10 coachees or more (figure 8). The graph indeed shows significant variance. At one end of the scale we see an organisation (n=29) with 28% double-loop learning, and at the other end of the scale we see two organisations (both n=15) with 67% of double-loop learning.

Figure 8 Organisation & double-loop learning (%)

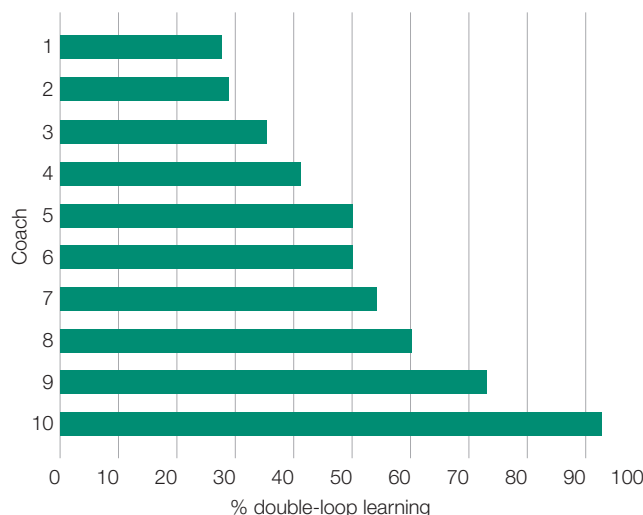


We must ask ourselves though – is this a real effect – or are the organisations where double-loop learning is lowest the same organisations who used coaching services predominantly between 2004–06? Further analysis of the data *does* suggest that there is a relationship between the year when coaching was conducted and the proportion of double-loop learning.

Finally, we looked at coaches. Could it be that some coaches tend to direct coachees toward single-loop or double-loop learning?

There were 10 coaches in our sample who coached 10 coachees or more (figure 9). The graph again shows significant variance. At one end of the scale we see a coach (n=39) with 28% of coachees engaged in double-loop learning, and at the other end of the scale a coach (n=15) with 93% of coachees engaged in double-loop learning.

Figure 9 Coach & double-loop learning (%)

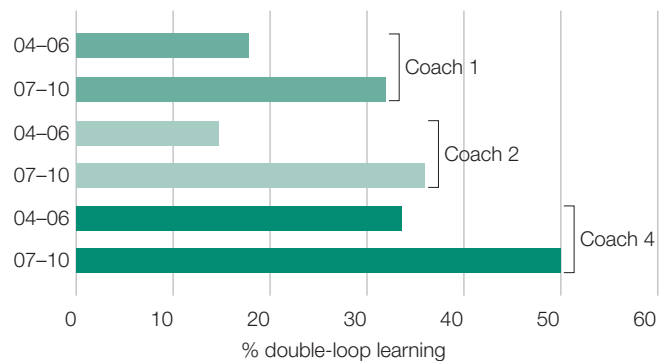


Again we must ask ourselves – is this a real effect – or are the coaches showing the lowest proportions of double-loop learning the same coaches who were coaching between 2004–06?

Here we do have enough data to explore further. Figure 10 presents data from the three coaches in our sample who conducted at least 5 assignments between 2004–06, and at least 5 assignments between 2007–10. In every case, the coach facilitated a greater proportion of double-loop learning in the period 2007–10 than in the period 2004–06. This could reflect a shift in what clients or coachees were looking for from coaching, or the coach developing their approach through ongoing professional development.

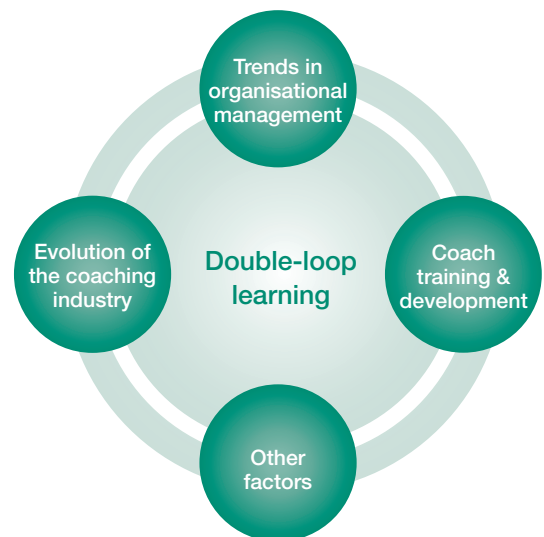
Although each of the three coaches shows a significant shift from single-loop to double-loop learning over time, nevertheless they each facilitated less double-loop learning than most other coaches, even in the period 2007–10.

Figure 10 Coaches, year of assignment & double-loop learning (%)



The bottom line is that we don't have enough data to be able to isolate the impact of each of these three factors; time, organisation and coach. What we can say is that a number of factors may come into play in determining the extent to which coachees are prepared to engage in double-loop learning (figure 11).

Figure 11 Factors influencing learning approach



Intuitively, we do think that the coaching industry has evolved significantly over the last 5–10 years. We may be looking at evidence of “*the maturing of client’s understandings of the values of different disciplines, especially psychotherapy and psychology*” suggested by one of the participants in the roundtable discussion reported in Research Bulletin #4.

Instead or as well, there may be other, organisation-specific, factors standing in the way of double-loop learning. This again feels intuitively right. If double-loop learning is facilitated by guided self-reflection, could it be that practices that encourage reflection, even in the face of heavy workloads, may encourage more fundamental shifts in the way organisations go about being successful?

And what kind of coaches should you select, and for which coachees? We know, generally, that some coaches are more able than others to work with task-oriented coachees who want advice and guidance; and that other coaches are more capable of facilitating self awareness and personal transformation.

General discussion

We begin this discussion by issuing a couple of health warnings. First, what is written on a coaching evaluation form rarely constitutes a comprehensive account of what *actually* goes on in a coaching session. Secondly, our model divides coachees into those who showed *no* evidence of double-loop learning, and those who showed *any evidence at all*. The model is necessarily simple, and a propensity for double-loop learning is likely to be continuous, such that if we had more data we could plot coachees along a continuum. Nevertheless, our overall results are highly comparable to those of De Haan et al, suggesting that the distinction between single-loop and double-loop learning may be important.

Coaching and change strategy

People engaged in single-loop learning respond differently to the prospect of change than those engaged in double-loop learning. Someone operating as a single-loop learner, faced with evidence of the need for change is more likely to respond defensively. Twenty years ago, Argyris described a group of professionals attempting to engage in an agenda of continuous improvement. The longer the continuous improvement efforts continued, the less successful they were. Argyris said:

“The professionals began to feel embarrassed. They were threatened by the prospect of critically examining their own role in the organisation. Indeed, because they were so well paid, the idea that their performance might not be at its best made them feel guilty. They projected the blame for any problems away from themselves and onto what they said were unclear goals, insensitive and unfair leaders, and stupid clients.”

Both Argyris and Schein suggest that an effective way of helping such people embrace double-loop learning is through dialogue – the very currency of the executive coach.

If coaching can facilitate a shift toward a more open response to change, through providing a safe space for people to contemplate their own role in a situation, then internal and external coaching are potentially invaluable components of any change strategy. This perspective highlights potential downfalls in the use of assessment tools, including 360s. Assessment tools are sometimes used as standard components of leadership programs, where individuals may feel compelled to participate. Pushing people engaged in single-loop learning into such a process may have unintended consequences. The more the organisation pushes, the more defensive and anxious they may become.

Coaching on the other hand, is a potentially useful intervention in this space, on its own or in combination with an assessment tool. A competent executive coach knows how to create a psychologically safe space, understands the need to be flexible and accommodating, and has the ability to encourage open enquiry and facilitate personal insights – all attributes commended by coachees in this study.

Single-loop learning isn't 'bad'

This analysis shouldn't be construed as suggesting single-loop learning is *bad*, or that all coaching should be aimed at facilitating self-awareness. Many challenges can be overcome without the need for personal transformation. Just because someone doesn't show signs of double-loop learning in tackling a particular issue doesn't mean they are not capable of double-loop learning. For at least some of the coachees in our study, working in their particular context, single-loop learning may have been an effective approach. Likewise, the coach who tackles every assignment as if the coachee *should* go through a voyage of self awareness to reach their destination, risks imposing their approach even when it may not be effective or timely.

Rather, what we may be seeing is a coming together of certain factors; including the readiness of the purchasing client and the coachee, and the skill of the coach, such that double-loop learning is now being adopted more often – *when appropriate* – such that learning outcomes are more sustainable.

In 2011, organisations and individual executives may be more aware of the potential value of reflection. This is consistent with our findings in Bulletin #2, where we reported how some coachees seemed surprised at the reflective nature of the coaching process. Word may be spreading!

Implications for coach matching

In some texts, coaching is positioned squarely as a self reflective process with coach as facilitator. This is often then contrasted to mentoring, in which mentors hand out advice based on their own experience. Our study suggests that life is not so simple, that what coachees seek of a 'helping' relationship may be largely independent of such definitions. The challenge for the purchaser of coaching is to develop an initial sense of the potential coachee's approach to learning and match this to the approach, skills and experience of the coach. Simply establishing the goals for an assignment is unlikely to be sufficient to make such a recommendation, since there are different ways to achieve the similar outcomes.

If the coachee wants to engage in double-loop learning, or has the capacity for double-loop learning, then it may be appropriate to contract a coach with some kind of behavioural science background and some demonstrable skills in this area. If, on the other hand, the coachee is likely to want advice in a particular domain, or to request skills development, then these factors may be more important in recommending the right match.

The challenge for coaches is to be able to accurately identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and their own disposition for different forms of coaching, and position themselves accordingly. This highlights the importance once more of ongoing professional development, including some form of supervision, and the need for purchasers of coaching services to include professional development and supervision as a criterion for coach selection.

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