

Executive Coaching: Success Factors and the Importance of Trust

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Abstract

This paper will explore the topic of executive coaching, the various definitions and approaches, and how coaching differs from mentoring and therapy. Over the course of this literature review, success factors between the coach and the client are examined. The importance of trust emerges as a significant factor in a successful coaching outcome.

Introduction

As a recent coaching recipient who experienced insight, growth, transformation and a new job, I've been intrigued to learn as much about this popular and growing field. In my prior role as a dean, I've coached faculty and students towards successful outcomes and have considered becoming a coach later in my professional life. In addition, coaching is a course in our MBA program and our corporate education division offers coaching services to enhance the learning's from training. This literature search addressed many of the following questions:

- How long has coaching been popular?
- What are the differences between mentoring, coaching, and therapy?
- What makes for an effective coach? Competencies? Training?
- What makes for an effective coaching outcome for the coachee?
- What is the coaching process? Tools and techniques used in coaching?
- What are the factors that enhance results and diminish results?
- How does learning and transformation happen?
- How much does emotional intelligence play into a coach's effectiveness?
- Why is trust so important in a coaching relationship?

These questions are explored in the following paper.

History

Judge and Cowell (1997) describe that widespread adoption of executive coaching by traditional human resource consulting forms began around 1990, although there were scattered offerings before that. Executive coaching is an outgrowth of executive development programs. Although executive coaching is most often used to complement executive training programs, some firms are so encouraged by its effectiveness that they are substituting it for all executive training. Managers claim that coaching includes frequent checkups and feedback that are missing from almost all training programs. Eggers and Clark (2000) reports that executive coaching is the fastest growing area among consultancy companies and individual management consultants.

What is executive coaching?

An executive coach is someone from outside the organization who is compensated for helping to improve the executive's performance. More recently coaching has been used in middle management in addition to the senior leaders. The term "executive coaching" is

now used for both senior leader and middle manager interventions. Below are a few key definitions and outcomes by some leading scholars who have written extensively on coaching:

- Executive coaching is an action-learning process to enhance effective action and learning agility. (Witherspoon and White 1996).
- The coach works with clients to achieve speedy, increased and sustainable effectiveness in their lives and careers through focused learning. (Rogers, 2004).
- Coaching is about change and transformation – about the human ability to grow, to alter maladaptive behaviors and to generate new, adaptive and successful actions. A coach supports us in the sometimes difficult process of change. (Zeus and Skiffington, 2002)
- People come to coaching for lots of different reasons, but the bottom line is change. They no longer want things to stay the same and they see that coaching can make the change happen. (Whitworth et al, 1998)
- Coaching is the facilitation of learning and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction. It invariably involves growth and change, whether that is in perspective, attitude or behavior. (Bluckert, 2005)
- The most quoted definitions of executive coaching comes from Kilburg (2000): Coaching is a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization within a formally defined coaching agreement.

The goals are for the purpose of improving the client's professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently, to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization. Two types of coaching include:

- Performance based: focuses on practical and specific business issues. Examples include: goal setting, project management or an interpersonal issue. (short term assignment)
- In-depth coaching: More psychoanalytical in approach, attempting to get at deep-seated issues and often exploring personal values, motivations and even family issues. (lasts longer)

How does coaching work?

Lary (1997) states that executives find that coaches can offer something that they cannot get in a company – a safe, objective, non-political sounding board against which

to hone their business skills and unload outdated behaviors and/or belief systems. Results often come in the form of heightened personal awareness and self-esteem, enabling better communication with peers and subordinates. This in turn often leads to increased morale and productivity and ultimately, bottom-line improvements. Often positive behavior changes follow.

Coaching can take on a variety of roles according to Witherspoon and White (2006). These include:

1. coaching for skills, with a focus on specific skills for a current job
2. coaching for performance, with a focus more broadly on a present job
3. coaching for development, focused on learning for a future job
4. coaching for the executive's agenda, directed on learning related broadly to the executives' own interest

Coaching approaches by Peltier (2001) vary according to their backgrounds and intellectual traditions. The five different approaches are summarized as follows:

- Psychodynamic: psychoanalysis is used to help executives explore unconscious thoughts and to increase their understanding of how they think, feel, and react at work.
- Behaviorist: coaches help clients understand observable behavioral principles so that clients can be more effective in motivating and communicating with others at work.
- Person-centered: coaches help develop empathic relationships with clients and help them see themselves as others see them and as they see themselves.
- Cognitive therapy: coaches explore with executives what thoughts "set off" their emotions at work, often in unproductive ways and help to develop techniques for blocking negative thoughts or rechanneling them in more constructive ways.
- Systems-oriented: coaches try to become knowledgeable about the total organization so he can help the executive develop more effective ways of dealing with it. This is the most complex and comprehensive approach to coaching.

Blackman-Sheppard (2004) says that the foundation stones for executive coaching – quality integrated thinking, confidentiality, trust – are equally important to its entire people if an organization is to perform well financially and sustainably. Why does coaching work? Consider the following:

- Time out pressures of constant decision making
- Confidentiality and safety
- Detached companionship (In coaching, trust is everything and the coach has no other agenda than to serve the client well.)

Mentoring vs. Coaching

Mentoring is different than coaching. A mentor performs many of the same functions as a coach, but is someone on the inside of the organization who may have other interest besides assisting the executive. Internal coaches cost less and understand organizational culture, but are perceived as a confidentiality risk. (Hall et al. 1999)

Mentoring is a relationship often internal within an organization whereby more experienced often senior or executive managers usually in the same specialty provides support and a role model for less experienced colleagues (Megginson and Clutterbuck, 1995). The following outlines these various differences:

Mentoring:

- Networking
- Educational
- One on one or group
- More reactive
- Sharing of one’s knowledge and experience
- Adds one’s perspective
- Provides advice
- Better understands work environment, culture, politics
- Teach something specific
- Voluntary, no formal process
- Extra activity
- No specific qualifications

Coaching:

- Directed by the coachee
- One on one or group
- Develop leadership capabilities
- Enhance career development
- Fix performance problems
- Retain high potentials
- Manage leadership transitions
- Formal arrangement – paid
- Skilled professional

Mentors can also be viewed as internal coaches. Hall, Otazo, Hollenbeck(1999) claim that trust is probably the most complex issue for coaches, whether external or internal. Below the relative advantages of each kind of coach are summarized, and the ability to trust the coach emerges as common for both.

Advantages of External and Internal Coaches:

External Coach	Internal Coach
Anonymity, confidentiality	Knows this environment, its history
Experience in many businesses	Knowledge of politics (hot buttons)
Expertise in political nuances	Easy availability
Wider ranges of ideas	Can help focus on highest priorities
Less likely to evaluate, judge	Personal trust
Expertise based on extensive experience	
More objective, can say the “unspeakable”	
Trust not to use personal information	

It is all about Trust

Throughout the literature search on coaching, it became apparent that in order for coaching to be successful, trust must be developed between the coach and the client. “The most important thing is that the executive finds someone he or she can trust and be assured that the whole process will be confidential,” says Kathryn Williams of KRW International, a leadership development firm specializing in the needs of fortune 500 executives.

Bluckert (2005) claims that for the client, trust enables them to feel safe enough to say whatever they need to or reflect on mistakes and deficiencies – to be fully honest with themselves. Trust has two important dimensions for coaches: integrity and competence. One careless comment or act of gossip can completely undermine trust and potentially wreck the coaching relationship. Competence issues arise when the client experiences the coach as suspect in their approach, judgment or behavior. Despite the fact that most coaches know that their job is to facilitate rather than tell, some can be prone to drift into advice-giving. Another version is when the client feels that they have been taken into deep emotional terrain by a coach who lacks the skills and understanding to operate as a proper guide and safety net. This can lead to a real sense of anxiety for the client. Competence then is as important as integrity in building and maintaining trust in the coaching relationship. One of the ways it is transmitted is when the coach clearly knows their own strengths and limitations and acts within them. This is an important aspect of what professionalism is all about.

For trust to exist, one needs to deal with such complicated issues as openness, honesty, active listening, communication, consistency, fairness and mutual respect. Trust makes for constructive conflict resolution, constructive conflict resolution makes for genuine commitment and commitment makes for accountability – all factors that have an enormous impact on the bottom line of an organization.

Trust is an important component in values driven leadership. Mussing (2003) outlines a model of value driven leadership in order to work towards identifying the key leadership competencies required to manage meaning. Honesty and trust are closely interwoven, and there is endless research evidence supporting the importance of trust in both leadership and management. Kouzes and Posner (1993) advocate the foundation for effective leadership is found in establishing credibility between the leader and the constituents who choose to follow. Building credibility is about creating trust and creating trust is about values-oriented leadership.

Manfred F.R. Kats de Vries (2005) also discusses that group coaching establishes of foundation of trust, makes for constructive conflict resolution, leads to greater commitment, and contributes to accountability, all factors that translate into better results for the organizations. Trust is even more important in the virtual role of teams today. Without the glue of trust, teams don't work well and virtual teams don't work at all.

In addition to building trust between the coach and the client, Judge and Cowell (1997) report that a common skill area explored by coaches to help the client was that of building trust in relationships with others. Change is much easier to handle when the firm has an atmosphere of trust. Similarly, interdependency is growing in most industries and

the ability to develop trust among business partners can be the key to success. Trust may be particularly difficult for high achievers who thrive in a competitive environment.

Therapy vs. Coaching and the linkage to psychological mindedness

Manfred F.R. Kats de Vries (2005) distinguishes between therapy and coaching in the grid below:

Therapy vs. Leadership coaching

Therapy	Leadership Coaching
Past, present and future focus	Present and future focus
More passive/reflective	More action/goal and action oriented
Information from client	Information from client and key others
Symptom/character analysis	Growth and skill development
Who the client is, is clear	Who the client is, is more fuzzy
Confidentiality is absolute	Confidentially is not clear
45/50 minute sessions/more rigid boundaries; Therapist's office	Sessions of variable length/more flexible boundaries; Various settings
Help to client stands central	Client/organization helps stand central

The theoretical framework of executive coaching currently draws heavily upon the principles and processes of psychotherapy (Judge and Cowell, 1997). This is because the psychotherapeutic perspective gets clients to freely discuss personal issues, and to explore “blind spots”, biases and shortcomings in order to gain new perspectives and insights. Most coaching interventions are preceded by an assessment of the coachee’s psychological profile. It is quite common for coaching practitioners to make use of Myers-Briggs Type Indicator. For coaches, psychotherapy encourages a commitment to confidentiality and adopting an ethical stance, to providing feedback, to establishing strong boundaries between personal and professional relationships, and to supporting and challenging the coachee.

Sustainable change seems to require that the client recognizes the deep motivators that underlie his or her behavior. This in-depth approach looks at the client holistically, not just in terms of work role, but also his or her personal history and current personal life – alignment of head and heart (Williams et al. 2002: 121). Psychological testing is used to assess the client’s effectiveness and to understand internal motivators – beliefs, emotions and unconscious assumptions. Interviews may be conducted with the client’s friends and family exploring family relationship and early family history. This psychotherapeutic approach is in sharp contrast to skills building, which may be reticent about delving into the client’s personal or emotional life.

Rogers (2003) one of the founding fathers of the humanistic psychotherapy movements, saw person-centered therapy as a means by which the therapist offers personal congruence, empathetic understanding and unconditional positive regard to the client. Facilitators must show a caring and respect for the learner, which includes empathetic listening and trust.

Bluckert (2005) claims that the critical competencies of executive coaching are the awareness and acceptance of psychological-mindedness. The psychological skills and competence include interpersonal effectiveness, listening, empathy, patience, adaptability, analytical problem solving, humor and creativity (Wasylyshun, 2003). Auerbach (2002) adds unconditional positive regard, acceptance of emotions and being non-judgmental. MODOONO (2002) adds the ability to read another's underlying emotions and capacity to monitor own feelings when dealing with others.

The coach's psychological mindedness includes self awareness. Coaches demonstrate a capacity to:

- stand back from their own experiences and notice the preferences, biases and blind spots that underpin their behavior
- give an account of their personal history, with emotional relatedness to the meaning of key events
- reflect on their own behavior and surface unconscious motivations
- examine their feelings, thoughts and reactions and distinguish those evoked by others from those deriving from their own psychology
- shift their focus of attention across different aspects of their mental and emotional experiences and entertain multiple explanations for events

The coach's psychological mindedness also includes awareness of others. Coaches demonstrate a capacity to:

- suspend judgment about a person's feelings, thoughts and behaviors
- evoke and build an account of a person's history and its emotional meanings
- understand the conscious and unconscious motivation of others and its affect on their thoughts and behavior
- identify patterns of relating from the past that are being re-enacted in the presence
- make links between different domains of a person's experience (Lee, 2003)

The ultimate purpose of personal development work is to be more tuned-in both cognitively and emotionally- tuned into yourself, other people and the relationship between. It is that connectedness that enables rapport to develop, trust to be built and intelligent interventions to be made. It is the foundation of the psychological approach to coaching and may be every bit as important as good theoretical understanding and a wide coaching toolkit and skill-set. (Bluckert, 2005)

The relationship between the coach and the client

Two reviews of the scientific literature on executive coaching have identified the coach-coachee relationship as one of the key variables of the coaching process (Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson, 2001; Smither and Reilly, 2001). Kampa-Kokesch and Anderson (2001) also noted that establishing a relationship of trust constitutes the first step in the executive coaching process. It is during this phase that the coachee determines the professional and relational credibility of the coach, which influence the probability of the coach's suggestions having an influence on the coachee. In addition to trust and chemistry, reputation is another consideration in selecting the right coach. The executive must feel confident that once the process begins, it will be competently managed until

desired results are achieved. Other studies have discussed various success factors in the coaching relationship as noted in this section.

Bluckert (2005) writes that key characteristics of the coaching relationship such as rapport, trust, support and challenge are examined on how to establish a coaching relationship. Wasylyshyn (2003)'s study said that the top three personal characteristics of an effective coach were reported as:

1. the ability to form a strong connection with the executive (86 percent);
2. professionalism (82 percent); and
3. the use of a clear and sound methodology (35 percent)

Kilburg (1997) outlines the following characteristics of a successful coaching relationship:

- predictability and reliability
- the hygiene factors of time, place, confidentiality, fees and cancellation are properly set out from the beginning as well as the coach's expectations about homework, etc.
- the coach displays respect, consideration and understanding for the complexities of the clients' experience
- the coach demonstrates empathy for the client
- the coach interacts in an authentic and genuine fashion and provides an experience of non-possessive regard.

Kilburg (1997) also lists the behaviors which the coach needs to display toward the client:

- respect for the client as a person
- consideration and understanding for the complexities of the client's life and his/her inner world;
- courtesy;
- accurate empathy and
- tact

Rogers (1961) proposed that there are a number of core conditions which determine the quality of the therapeutic relationship:

- unconditional positive regard and acceptance
- accurate empathy
- congruence/genuineness
- non-possessive warmth

Louis, Marin (2009) show four significant correlates to the coach-coachee relationship:

1. the coach's self-efficacy with regard to facilitating learning and results
2. the coachee's motivation to transfer
3. his or her perception of supervisor support
4. the number of coaching sessions received

Ting and Hart (2004) suggest there elements for a good relationship:

1. the connection between the coach and the coachee
2. their collaboration
3. their mutual commitment to the process

A study by Dingman (2004) polled 92 coaches who had completed a coaching process. The results showed a positive and significant correlation between the quality of the coaching relationship and the coachee's self-efficacy. In that study, the quality of the coaching relationship was conceptualized in three dimensions:

1. the coach's interpersonal skills
2. the coach's communication skills
3. the instrumental support offered by the coach which refers to the ability to stimulate the client to think and feel in a new way

Effective coach competencies and the importance of Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Washlyshyn (2003) noted criteria most frequently cited of important coach competencies include: graduate training in psychology, experience in, or understanding of, business; established reputation as a coach; listening skills; and professionalism (i.e. intelligence, integrity/honesty, confidentiality, objectivity). The IFC, the largest training and certification association for coaching, recognizes four basic coaching skills:

1. meeting ethical standards
2. the capacity to create a trusting relationship
3. the capacity for effective communication (active listening, questioning, direct communication) and
4. the capacity to facilitate learning and goal-reaching, or in other words the ability to increase self-awareness, design action plans and translate them into behaviors, establish goals and monitor the client's progress, and make the client responsible for his or her actions.

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is also an important competency needed by the coach as he or she often tries to train this very skill to his or her client. Roberts (2005) describes his style of coaching which helps people to actually capitalize on their existing conflicts and to prevent damaging future conflicts. People's interactions embrace many things, including EQ, which is characterized by trust, feelings, contact, fairness, awareness asking and pulling together. EQ in the extreme is about helping people create their own potential in the spirit of unity, which raises productivity, innovation and creativity, strengthens relationships, reduces absenteeism and increases satisfaction. This emphasis on managing interpersonal relationships has grown as organizational leaders have come to realize that talent and human capital are what differentiates mediocre from high-performing organizations.

Herman (2008) provided an overview of how he used a coach in his role as a medical director in a pharmaceutical company. He needed assistance in "managing up" to his boss. But first he needed to manage himself, which included:

- Self awareness (how your personal styles affect others, and the ability to make adjustments)

- Receptivity to construct criticism (and the ability to respond positively and effectively)
- The ability to develop and maintain positive work relationships
- Projecting an image of trust, fairness and reliability

These “soft skills” are all part of building one’s emotional intelligence which may account for close to 90 percent of what distinguishes outstanding leaders from those judged as average. Cognitive intelligence, by contrast, involves abilities such as logic, reasoning, reading, writing, analysis and prioritizing. Research indicates that IQ is relatively fixed and static; however, EQ can be developed and improved throughout life (with the help of a coach.) Herman was able to reduce the level of conflict, to develop an effective, productive relationship with his boss which helped solidify the enormous gains in trust and respect that strengthened over the year.

What are the factors that contribute to successful coaching outcomes?

According to Hall, Otazo, and Hollenbeck (1999), coaches have a longer list of success factors as listed below:

What works best in coaching:

From Executives	From Coaches
Honest, realistic, challenging feedback (both positive and negative)	Connecting, personally, recognizing where client is
Good listening, sounding board	Good listening, being a sounding board
Good action ideas, pointers	Reflecting
Clear objective	Caring
No personal agenda	Learning, demonstrating trial and error attitude
Accessibility, availability	Checking back, following up
Straight feedback	Committing to client success and good organizational outcome
Competence, sophistication	Demonstrating integrity, honesty
Seeing a good model of effectiveness	Openness, initiative of client coaching
Coach has seen other career paths	Having good coach/client fit
	Knowing the “unwritten rules”
	“Pushing” the client when necessary

What works least well in coaching:

From Executives	From Coaches
Nothing	Being judgmental
When recommendations are self serving for the coach	Poor timing or impatience regarding executive’s readiness
When feedback is all negative	Finding the right degree of bluntness and honesty for the individual
Feedback only, no action ideas	
When feedback deals with others’ feelings, not results (“touchy-feely,” invasion of	

privacy)	
When recommended action seem naïve or unrealistic	

Van Velsor and Gurthrie (1998) identified some cognitive abilities that may predict positive coaching experiences. They suggest several personality traits (e.g. self esteem, openness to experience, conscientiousness and the need for achievement) that may positively influence the ability to learn from developmental experiences. London (2002) and Goleman (1998) suggest that a high feedback orientation and emotional intelligence may also influence the extent to which a client is able to benefit from a professional coaching relationship.

Kilburg (2001) offered a model of coaching effectiveness that involves eight elements:

1. a client's commitment to progressive development
2. a coach's commitment to the client's development plan
3. characteristics of the client's problems and issues (frequency, intensity, duration , degree of conflict, and emotionality)
4. structure of the coaching engagement (clarity of agreement, goal specificity, resources committed, roadblocks identified)
5. the amount of trust and empathy in the client-coach relationship
6. choice of coaching interventions
7. adherence protocols e.g., plans for clients to keep appointments and prepare for coaching sessions
8. the client's organizational setting (e.g., support for coaching)

What is the typical coaching process?

The typical phases of coaching include:

- data gathering
- feedback
- periodic coaching sessions
- evaluation

Noer (2005) created a coaching behaviors inventory to assess their coaching behaviors. This 30-item self-assessment inventory is based on the Triangle Coaching Model which conceptualizes the coaching process as a dynamic interaction of three sets of behaviors: assessing, challenging, and supporting. These dimensions are similar to diagnosis, coaching and maintenance support described in the Individual Coaching for Effectiveness model developed by Personnel Decisions, Inc (Hellervik, 1992)

Triangle Coaching Model Dimensions

<p>Assessing: using analytical processes that lead to measurement and goal-setting. The behavioral components are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Data gathering – collecting information that will be of use to the person being coached• Gap analysis – utilizing the difference between the current reality and the desired future state to develop action plans• Goal setting – helping the person being coached develop concrete plans to meet desired objectives• Measurement/Feedback – establishing criteria to assess progress against goal achievement and developing mechanisms for feedback of behavioral changes
<p>Challenging: stimulating the person being coached to confront obstacles, re-conceptualize issues, and move forward with energy and self-reliance. The four behavioral components are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Confronting – helping the person being coached face and understand issues, behaviors, or perceptions that are blocking him or her• Focusing/Shaping – moving the coaching interaction from the general to the specific, toward concrete, actionable outcomes• Re-framing – helping the person being coached examine and validate his or her assumptions and interferences. This involves helping him or her discover alternative interpretations of the data used to form conclusions.• Empowering/Energizing – helping the person being coached develop an increased sense of purpose, energy, and self-reliance
<p>Supporting: creating an interpersonal context that facilitates trust, openness, respect and understanding. The five behavioral components are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Attending – using body language, voice tone, eye contact and physical setting to reduce defensiveness and create an open trusting coaching environment• Inquiring – asking questions to elicit information, clarify perspectives and promote understanding• Reflecting – promoting clarity and demonstrating by the coach stating in his or her own words, what he or she thinks the person being coached is saying or feeling• Affirming – communicating that the coach believes the person being coached has the ability to learn, change, or develop.• Airtime – managing the coaching conversation as to allow the person being coached to have ample opportunity to reflect and express his or her feelings.

Data comes in through various assessments. Good data is often the key to successful development. Questions such as focusing on strengths and weaknesses are asked. Judge and Cowell (1997) claim that the best executive coaches use 360 feedback which is one of the best methods to promote increased self-awareness of skill strengths and deficiencies in managers.

Reflection, Learning and Transformation

Gray (2006) reviews the transformative learning theory and the concept of critical reflection, whereby the coach seeks to foster in the coachee, a deeper critical awareness of personal and organizational assumptions and to take action. According to Jarvis (1987), learning is the process of transforming the present experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and emotions which, in turn, modify the individual biography of the learning. Learning is both primary through direct experiences and secondary through linguistic communication being described to the learning by someone else.

Boud et al (1985) describes a model of reflection that offers valuable guidance to coaches. For learning to emerge from experience, scheduled time must be put aside (such as for a coaching session). During these reflective sessions, the learner must be encouraged to work through three stages:

1. Returning to the experience to recollect events and feelings, but avoid making judgments
2. Attend to feelings. Positive feelings can provide an impetus to persist in challenging situations and can help to see events more closely. Negative feelings can block new learning. The expression of feelings needs to be within a supportive environment
3. Re-evaluate the experience.

The outcomes of reflection may be the clarification of the issue, the development of a new skill, or the resolution of a new skill. The benefits of reflection must be moved to action. The idea of reflection leading to action is an essential element of the transformative learning model.

Transformative learning theory sees the educator as taking responsibility for fostering critical self-reflection and helping learners to then take action. Transformation is not complete without the learner acting on the basis of their new learning. It is this emphasis on encouraging self-reflection on fostering action and on co-learning that makes transformative learning a potentially powerful guide to coaching and coaching a powerful tool for generating transformative learning. Allee (1997) argues that the transformative learning process is capable of producing dramatic and sweeping changes in individuals.

Compassionate coaching is good for the Coach

Finally, one interesting study examined the beneficial effects of coaching for the coach. Boyatzis, Smith and Blaize (2005) found that when leaders experience compassion through coaching the development of others, they experience psychophysiological effects that restore the body's natural healing and growth process thus enhancing their sustainability. We should all learn to be compassionate coaches!

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