

### **Three Executive Coaches Share Best Practices**

Since it began in September 2000, the *Journal* has built a proud tradition of breaking new ground. This issue does that, and more. Through penetrating interviews with three female leaders in the field, author Claire Carver-Dias explores the relatively new world of executive coaching, unearthing important parallels with sport coaching, both in perspectives and techniques. She offers conclusive evidence of the overlapping link between two facets of the coaching profession, citing multiple learnings on how best to have an impact on people, whether athletes or clients, and their ability to perform effectively. We are confident that this important article will provide valuable information to female coaches, regardless of their sport, and strongly support the “open dialogue” Claire urges. – Sheila Robertson, *Journal* editor

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### **Three Executive Coaches Share Best Practices**

By Claire Carver-Diaz

Since the late nineteenth century coaching has been accepted as an integral part of sport training. Athletes of all skill levels and experience rely on coaches to help identify areas for improvement and work towards them, and the public embraces this concept. Only recently, however, has the profession of coaching been welcomed in the business world. Executive coaching in the workplace only really began to take root in the 1980s and 1990s. It was John Whitmore’s 1992 book, *Coaching for Performance*, that made coaching more accessible to the workplace, and helped draw additional attention to the profession.

#### **A booming industry**

Executive coaching, as a means to aid work performance and employee contentment, was truly picking up speed as an industry by 2004, when an INTRAC study reported that there were more than 30,000 coaches in 30 countries worldwide. According to a 2007 MarketData Report, an estimated 40,000 people in the United States work as business or life coaches, and the \$2.4 billion industry is growing at rate of 18% per year, making it the second fastest growing industry behind information technology. A Global Coaching Study in 2009 found that there were now more than 50,000 coaches operating in 85 countries around the globe.

As the presence of executive coaching has increased in corporate settings, many studies have scrutinized coaching from a Return on Investment (ROI) perspective. A recent MetrixGlobal

study of executive coaching in Fortune 500 companies reported a 529% ROI. Likewise, a Manchester Inc. survey of 100 executives reported that coaching provides an average return on investment of almost six times the cost of the coaching.

### **A fresh take on coaching?**

As a relatively new and fast growing industry, there is a great deal of excitement around executive coaching and its potential. Put simply, there are fresh eyes observing this branch of the coaching profession. Certainly, executive coaches have long looked to sport for inspiration and ideas, but perhaps the sport world can benefit from all the recent attention being paid to executive coaching techniques and approaches. For this article, I interviewed three seasoned and successful female executive coaches to glean from them what they've learned as coaching professionals working in the business world, in the hopes that their philosophies, observations, and approaches might shed new light on the practice of sport coaching.

### **Meet the coaches**

In 2003, **Sandra Oliver** launched Sandra Oliver Consulting, now Impact-Coaches Inc. Her professional background includes 20 years of experience coaching senior executives, including 17 years in Corporate HR leadership roles across North America. Oliver holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Organizational Behaviour from Western University, a Masters of Industrial Relations and Human Resources from the University of Toronto, and an MBA from the Ivey School of Business. In addition to running a firm of 13 coaches who provide coaching services to executives in dozens of blue chip companies, she shares her expertise by writing featured articles for CareerVision and the Conference Board of Canada, and conducting Webinars for CPA Source on career development. She has also been honoured in the 15<sup>th</sup> annual PROFIT/Chatelaine ranking of Canada's Top Female Entrepreneurs for 2013 and 2014.

**Dr. Kirsty Spence** is an executive coach and award-winning educator, having taught children and adults from kindergarten to master's level in Canada, Russia, Taiwan, and the United States since 1991. After completing her PhD at the University of Massachusetts in 2005, Spence joined the Department of Sport Management at Brock University in St. Catharines, Ont., where she also served as Department Chair from 2010 to 2013. Beyond working as an Associate Professor and Chair at Brock, Spence is certified by Integral Coaching Canada® and works as a certified Master Integral Coach™, assisting clients as coach or consultant with work-related projects. Of late, she has consulted with sport leaders within the newly-renovated BC Place in Vancouver and the Hamilton Tiger Cats in Hamilton, Ont., in guest service training and leadership development projects. She combines her passions for leadership and management theory, education, and development to write about leadership development and to assist people in work- and education-related contexts.

**France Cloutier** is an executive coach with a focus on personal transformation, leadership, and organizational change. She supports individuals and organizations as they navigate the internal and external aspects of work transitions. Her background in business as a Chartered Professional Accountant gives Cloutier an understanding of the business realities that drive change, and her Masters of Science in Organizational Development from Pepperdine University in California provides her with the tools and concepts to assist people to orient themselves during their transition and in their new environment. Assessments are an integral part of the methodology

Cloutier uses with individuals; she is certified in the Center for Creative Leadership tools, such as Benchmarks, Skillscope, The Leadership Circle, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Strength Deployment Inventory and Conflict Dynamics Profile. She regularly collaborates with the Niagara Institute as a Senior Associate, to design, develop, and facilitate leadership development workshops, and provide executive coaching services.

#### **What makes a successful executive coach?**

All three coaches agree that three key attributes of a successful coach are curiosity, courage, and a sincere interest in the individual (client). Oliver explains: “A great coach moves well beyond instruction and seeks to understand the underlying motivations behind a client’s words, actions, or lack of action. They suspend judgment and are usually open-minded. They are willing to challenge the client, without the fear of being fired. Their main interest is in helping the client improve.”

Oliver also contends that a successful coach has to have a deep understanding of the industry of their client. “A good executive coach has to have a business background and understand the basics of the corporate game. They research, interview, and keep current.”

She insists that coaches should pay attention to more than just what their clients are saying. They should watch the client’s body language and listen to their own intuition, as well as understand the work context of the client. A coach may want to understand the client’s competitors and the broader market conditions. They may even look for best management and leadership practices outside of the client’s particular market and share those, if relevant. Paralleled in a sport context, this could mean that a coach keeps an eye on techniques and athletic research outside of their particular sport context.

According to Cloutier, strong listening skills are essential for coaching. “Coaches have to listen carefully to the client and catch things that are not being said.” Spence agrees: “Coaches have to pay close attention to the client, the words they are saying, the non-verbal cues, and even use intuition.” Oliver calls this “being fully attuned to the client.” Exemplary coaches must do their best to eliminate distractions, focus in on the client, exercise curiosity, share observations from the listening experience, and sensitively dig into the subject areas they believe will facilitate learning. This all takes time and often requires great patience, but when done well, the client learns and grows.

The coaches interviewed, however, believe that good coaches concentrate on helping the client uncover what they already know. They draw knowledge out of the client rather than impose knowledge on the client, and encourage reflection rather than offer direction. They hold the belief that the expert in a coaching relationship is, in fact, the client.

Do sport coaches resist the temptation to jump into instruction-mode, and take the time to probe whether the athlete knows what needs to be corrected? When it comes to decision-making and soft skills, do coaches exercise the patience needed to guide rather than point the athlete towards a conclusion? A “listening first” approach to development could easily be applied in sporting circles, particularly when more mature and experienced athletes are receiving coaching. The coach could employ techniques of powerful questioning; for example,

“What did that feel like?” or “How would you like to feel while you are performing?” or “How could you make changes in your approach/technique to reduce errors?” to draw out the athlete’s intrinsic knowledge. This learning will be longer lasting. But, as Oliver has suggested, there are likely times when it is appropriate to direct and suggest. The underlying principle here, however, is that the coach see each athlete/client as a unique individual with valuable knowledge and expertise.

### **Some key components of executive coaching methodology**

While each of the individuals interviewed describe their coaching methodology in distinct ways, using distinct nomenclature, there were some clear commonalities in their approaches. One was the emphasis on beginning the coaching relationship with an in- depth assessment phase, also referred to as the diagnostic component or intake process. During this phase, the coach uses a variety of tools and methods to learn as much as they can about the client. The coach may use a combination of psychometric assessment tools (such as Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, Team Management Profile, and Birkman method), intake conversations, and a 360 assessment process, (where the coach interviews and collects feedback from the individuals who interact regularly with the client and prepares a report of the findings.) These tools are designed to assess the client’s communication style, experience, competencies, personality traits, motivators, support system, strengths, gaps, stressors, concerns, barriers, goals, and targets.

“If coaches really want to help clients define their objectives and then coach them towards the achievement of those objectives, they need to get to know and understand the client well,” says Oliver. “For example, some clients like lots of direct feedback from the coach, others appreciate a softer touch. As a coach, I need to learn what’s the best approach for me to take in order to motivate, not demotivate them.”

Spence echoes this final point, claiming that “the person is most important; understanding the motives of what makes that person tick is essential to a healthy coaching relationship.”

Cloutier, who specializes in helping clients through work transitions, insists on a thorough assessment phase as well. “A baseline of assessment work provides executives with a realistic evaluation of their strengths and work-life realities. These assessments give us a solid base from which to navigate their transitions.”

Spence explains that there are often emotions that emerge during the intake period: “When the (client) begins to discuss their goals and dreams, often times there are tears. Sometimes they are surprised by these emotions, so I must be able to develop a safe space in which the client can freely express and explore such emotions.”

While ‘getting to know you’ or ‘initial assessment’ practices certainly exist in the sport world, it is worth considering how in-depth they are or how consistently they are applied and how involved the coach is in the process. Is this a process delegated to a sport psychologist and not considerately and respectfully discussed between the coach and athlete? At the outset, how much time do sport coaches spend getting to know their athletes, particularly in team sports, beyond the physical assessment work? How broadly are psychometric tools applied? Investing more time in learning about athletes at the beginning of the coaching relationship will offer the

opportunity to analyze athletes holistically and learn about what drives them, their cognitive strengths and gaps, their attentional style, their communication preferences, their stressors, their motivators, fears, and dreams.

Each coach likewise indicates that clearly defining objectives is an essential part of any coaching process. This is likely an area where many sport coaches excel already. Spence emphasizes, however, that it is important for the client to define the objectives, not the coach. A coach should not make assumptions about what the client wants. “Along with the assessment phase, this is extremely important,” insists Spence. “As a coach I have an ethical obligation to another human being. I have to be really clear on what that person needs and wants.”

“Not everyone simply wants to ‘win’ or earn the next promotion,” says Oliver. “Sometimes the client’s objective is more nuanced than that. The client needs to define what it is they are working towards. If they can’t describe or imagine it, they cannot achieve it.”

### **When it’s not working**

The coaches emphasize the fact that ‘good fit’ in the coach-client relationship is necessary to increase the probability of meaningful growth and development for the client. They feel that it’s crucial for the coach and the client to have interactions where there is open dialogue and mutual respect (again, this underlines the importance of the upfront assessment work to help establish a strong foundation for the relationship).

On the very rare occasions where the relationship feels awkward or where the coach may not have the expertise needed to help the client work towards a specific goal, the coach discusses these issues with the client and they work together to address the concerns or discuss other options. The coach will investigate with the client whether taking a different approach to the discussions will help, or whether trying a different coach might be the best option.

In sport, there is not always the option for athletes to switch coaches, particularly in a team sport environment. There may be creative ways to address this, perhaps through the integration of help from other coaches or by bringing in special experts to fill in where there is a gap in the coach’s skill set or an awkward connection between the coach and athlete.

The interviewees feel that it is essential for the coach to check in regularly with the client to assess how the client feels the engagement is going. Oliver insists on asking her clients for feedback throughout the coaching process: “If I provide the client with regular opportunities to share specific feedback with me, I can adapt my approach.”

A coach might ask questions like: How are you feeling about the coaching? What is working well for you? What isn’t working? What could I do more of? Do you have suggestions for how I can adapt my approach to better support you?

All coaches can make missteps. Spence, Cloutier, and Oliver concur that coaches need to admit openly when they’ve messed up. “When I make a mistake as a coach, I acknowledge it to the client,” says Spence. And just as she encourages her clients to do for themselves, she lets herself

off the hook: “I view mistakes as learning opportunities. I exercise self-compassion and move on.”

It may be worth it for sport coaches to assess how they can engage their athletes in regular open dialogue about how the training is going and specifically what the coach could do differently. Likewise, sport coaches can consider how they can demonstrate humility with their athletes when they’ve made errors; for example, “I thought about the tone I took yesterday during training, and felt that it might have been overly negative...”).

### **Asking for help**

Many executive coaches have coaches, mentors, and a support system of their own. “I lean on a network of local coaches,” says Cloutier. “I turn to them for advice and support. Having this outlet is essential.”

Since Oliver works primarily with top-level corporate executives, she turns to her network of savvy business people for insight and to continue learning. She also leans on her team of 13 coaches for input. “We hold regular technical sessions as a team where we share best practices and issues, and dig deep into specific coaching skills. This open and honest interaction and discussion makes us all better coaches,” she says.

Spence also emphasizes the need for coaches to reach out to colleagues, family, and friends for support. “I get together with close colleagues for *klatsch* (German word for a casual gathering of people), where we drop in informally and have coffee together. Sometimes our conversations are personal, sometimes social. Having this time gives us a safe space to share ideas.”

### **Synergy**

Undoubtedly, there are coaches around the world already employing versions of the best practices and techniques described by the executive coaches interviewed for this article. Nevertheless, it is well worth sharing these insights in case they provide a new perspective of established practices. As the profession of executive coaching continues to grow and garner the interest of researchers, there will be new techniques developed, fine-tuned, and studied. Their effectiveness in terms of ROI will be tracked carefully as well. The fields of sport coaching and executive coaching must maintain an open dialogue in order to reap the benefits of research and development in their respective worlds.

### **About the Author**

Claire Carver-Dias is an executive coach and Practice Leader with Impact Coaches. She specializes in helping leaders in professional service firms achieve their objectives and build their teams. Her coaching expertise is informed by her 15-year career as a synchronized swimmer, which culminated in two Pan American Games gold medals, two Commonwealth Games gold medals, and an Olympic bronze medal. Over the years, Claire has provided communications and marketing services for numerous sport organizations. She has served as president of AthletesCAN and as a director on the board of the Coaching Association of Canada, and is currently a board member for Commonwealth Games Canada. A published writer, Claire holds a BA (University of Toronto), MA (McGill), and PhD (University of Wales, Bangor) in English.

