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**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

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## **Executive Summary**

Executive leadership development initiatives in corporate settings or in executive MBA programs can use online technology to make executive coaching available to a large number of high-potential managers. Previously, the integration of classroom training and challenging work assignments into expanded leadership capability has been facilitated by individual executive coaching or mentoring. This limited the number of potential participants who could access these resources. Now, research on online behavioral interventions suggest that group online executive coaching could be a method of expanding effective leadership development programs to a larger number of participants. This paper presents a model of online executive coaching that integrates findings from leadership research, outcome evaluations of group leadership training programs, research on online behavioral interventions, and the literature on executive coaching.



## Introduction

Leadership matters more than ever. Global economic, demographic and cultural changes currently in progress are creating challenges and opportunities that require new ways of thinking. For example, projected resource utilization and environmental effects of the booming economies of China and India, when added to those of developed economies, suggest that new business models will be necessary to sustain global economic growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In their 1999 book *Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution*, Paul Hawken, Amory B. Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins explore the kind of creative strategic thinking that is required in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> As auto production, for example, creates about twenty-two thousand pounds of waste materials for each two thousand pound car, one could well argue that the biggest product of our industrialized economies is waste. With the concept of waste equals food, Hawkins and his colleagues show how basic concepts of design and manufacturing must be rethought. In nature, waste equals food because all of the output from each process is used.

William McDonough & Michael Braungart 2002 book *Cradle to Cradle/Remaking the Way We Make Things*, demonstrate with large scale projects in the real world, that products can be designed to yield cost savings, while becoming a net positive for the environment.<sup>2</sup> Examples include two billion dollar plant designed for Ford, and projects with Nike, the Chinese government, Herman Miller and others.

Business, governmental, and nonprofit leadership will need to perceive and pursue those opportunities, and to help solve these and other challenges to human survival and continued

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

development. But leadership itself requires development, and that development must utilize advances in technology and new ideas in order to keep pace with the challenges we face. This article examines how executive coaching in an online group format can be used for leadership development in a corporation, or in a university based executive development program.

To lay the empirical and theoretical foundation for this approach to leadership development, I will first summarize what we know about effective leadership. Then I will examine executive coaching as a method of leadership development. Following this, I will review group approaches to leadership development, and electronic communications and leadership development. Finally, I will describe what an online executive coaching program should look like given the previous reviews.

### **What Is It That We Develop In Leadership Development?**

The easy part of leadership education is academic: teaching about the relevant subject matter, history, concepts, and research results. The more difficult part is leadership development per se; facilitating changes in attitudes and behavior to more closely approximate those associated with effective leadership. Research has demonstrated that leadership effectiveness is impacted by personality characteristics, situational variables, and the interaction among them.<sup>3</sup> Leadership development should therefore focus on improving the individual's knowledge about, and ability to manage effectively, his/her own approaches to working with others in a variety of situations. It should hopefully also help the individual to select situations in which he or she is likely to be most effective.

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

As Hogan & Kaiser state, "...leadership primarily concerns building and maintaining effective teams: persuading people to give up, for a while, their selfish pursuits and pursue a common goal."<sup>4</sup> This conception of leadership is clarified in transformational-transactional leadership theory. Transformational-transactional leadership theory has received a substantial amount of support in the research literature over the past 20 years, and is the most frequently studied conceptualization of leadership.<sup>5</sup> Transformational leadership includes four dimensions: idealized influence (charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. The three dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward, passive management by exception, and active management by exception.

In their meta-analysis of 87 studies conducted prior to 2003, Judge & Piccolo found that transformational leadership and one component of transactional leadership (contingent reward) had high levels of validity.<sup>6</sup> They also found that transformational leadership and contingent reward had positive and significant correlations with follower job satisfaction, follower satisfaction with leader, follower motivation, leader job performance, and leader effectiveness.

There is also an implicit ethical dimension to transformational-transactional leadership that needs to be made explicit. An essential part what makes transformational-transactional leadership effective appears to be the creation of a sense of trust and perceived justice. In a meta-analysis of 106 studies on leadership and trust, Dirks & Ferrin found trust to be highly correlated with transformation and transactional leadership, and with distributive, procedural, and interactional justice.<sup>7</sup>

We know something else about the characteristics and behavior of effective leaders. Personality predicts leadership emergence and effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> The Five Factor Model of

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

personality (Big Five) “...brings together over 40 years of research on the emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal, and motivational style of an individual.<sup>9</sup> The Big Five traits are emotional stability (neuroticism), extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. Judge, Bono, Llies, & Gerhardt performed a meta-analysis of 78 studies conducted between 1967 and 1998, examining the relationship between Big Five traits and leadership.<sup>10</sup> Extraversion was most strongly and positively associated with effective leadership, followed in diminishing strength by conscientiousness and openness to experience. Neuroticism was negatively related to leadership effectiveness at a level of strength similar to openness to experience.

While still relatively new, emotional intelligence (EI) also appears to be a useful construct in determining leadership ability. In a meta-analytic review, Van Rooy, Viswesvaran & Pluta concluded that the ability model of EI developed by Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso has been more successful at measuring something distinct from Big Five traits, than has the mixed models of Goleman and Bar-On.<sup>11</sup> However, Van Rooy et al. also conclude that both types of models of EI appear to have some validity and utility. The Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) has demonstrated reasonable reliability.<sup>12</sup> The MSCEIT has four dimensions: 1) perceiving emotions accurately, 2) using emotions to facilitate thought, 3) understanding emotion, and 4) managing emotion.

With the growing globalization of economic and political activity, one of the biggest questions since Hofstede’s ground-breaking 1980 book is the relationship between culture and leadership.<sup>13</sup> A massive research program called Project GLOBE, involving 170 social scientists from 61 cultures throughout the world, sought to clarify this relationship building on and

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

extending Hofstede's work.<sup>14</sup> Project GLOBE found that countries vary considerably in the extent to which their populations value assertiveness, a future orientation, gender differentiation, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism/collectivism, a performance orientation, and a humanitarian orientation.

In contrast to the cross-cultural differences noted above, Project GLOBE also identified 21 leader attributes universally associated with effective leadership.<sup>15</sup> Eight of these attributes are about inspirational and visionary leader attributes; three consist of being trustworthy, just and honest; four are related to team work and communications skills; and others include an excellence orientation, decisiveness, intelligence, administratively skill, and diplomatic skill. These characteristics are to a large extent consistent with the transformation-transactional leadership, Big Five personality traits, and emotional intelligence factors discussed previously. These two sets of results indicate that global leadership development can be based on the core research on leadership, but must also be cognizant of the variation that does exist across cultures.

### **Executive Coaching As a Method for Leadership Development**

Kilburg's 1996 working definition of executive coaching still seems quite applicable today:

“..executive coaching is defined as 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 help the client 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.”<sup>16</sup>

In the same article, Kilburg defined three foci of organizational consultation, and the particular emphasis that distinguishes executive coaching from other consultations. The three foci are the

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

individual executive (executive focus), the organizational systems (system focus) and the relationships and behavioral factors that mediate between executive and system (mediated focus). Kilburg conceptualized executive coaching as dealing primarily with the executive focus, and delving into the other two foci only as they relate to helping the individual to function better within the organization.

Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson provided a comprehensive review of the literature on executive coaching. They found only seven empirical studies of executive coaching, as the literature consisted primarily of practice-based reports on individual cases, and conceptual discussions.<sup>17</sup> Five ideas found support in their reviews of both empirical and practice-based literatures:

1. Executive coaching helped both the executive and the company
2. Increased learning occurred in executive coaching
3. Behavioral changes also occurred in executive coaching
4. Ninety percent of executive coaches had master's degrees in business or social science
5. Executive coaches use a variety of approaches (from behavioral to psychodynamic); but all also use 360 degree assessments of some kind

Executive coaching applies any of the techniques and concepts that have are effective in changing self-awareness and emotional and interpersonal skills to the specific task of helping leaders to become more effective. The most extensively used and well developed models for executive coaching come from the systems and psychodynamic approaches that were previously developed for family and individual psychotherapy.<sup>18</sup> Systems interventions assume that problem symptoms exhibited by an individual, are actually the result of dysfunction in the relationships within the family or other group system of which that individual is a part.

Psychodynamic approaches assume the individual has incorporated a lifetime of interpersonal

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

relations and conflicts into mental, emotional and behavioral patterns, some of which are maladaptive. The therapist helps the person to bring the sources of conflict into awareness and resolve them. We also know that there is a body of research demonstrating effective methods of improving emotional self-management and relationships using cognitive behavior therapy.<sup>19</sup> Cognitive behavior therapy is based on the idea that emotions are reactions to thoughts (cognitions). The final major approach to psychotherapy is the humanistic/existential approaches, which focus on helping a person to clarify values by viewing her with unconditional positive regard.

Just as most psychotherapists use a mix of different techniques, executive coaches do not hesitate to use an eclectic approach, applying whichever techniques are most useful to the particular situation. In addition to therapeutic techniques, the executive coach will benefit from keeping in mind issues related to adult development.<sup>20</sup> Intensive long term case studies of men and women from management and other careers demonstrate patterns of adult development that effect both work and personal lives.<sup>21</sup>

While using techniques and concepts from psychotherapy, executive coaching differs from therapy in focusing on issues directly related to leadership performance. Hart, Blattner & Leipsic conducted interviews of thirty masters' and doctoral degreed professionals experienced in the practice of both coaching and therapy.<sup>22</sup> Participants described coaching as more "...goal directed, action based, and outwardly defined" and as a more co-creative process than therapy.<sup>23</sup> Quick and Macik-Frey also distinguished coaching even when focused on deep interpersonal communication from psychotherapy; the goal being to get behind the mask and help "...an authentic person to become an authentic leader..."<sup>24</sup>

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

Executive coaches usually also have the benefit of obtaining assessments of the client from organizational superiors, peers, and subordinates, in addition to self-assessments. This facilitates a more limited and goal directed process than in psychotherapy. Executive coaches also need to be well-versed in business, political and leadership issues in addition to techniques for emotional, behavioral and interpersonal change.<sup>25</sup>

Executive coaching is usually described as a one-to-one process; one person being coached by one professional. However, when considering coaching as part of leadership education and development, a team approach is probably more practical, and also more consistent with our increased understanding of leadership as occurring in the context of team work.<sup>26</sup>

### **Group Approaches to Leadership Development**

In contrast to the mostly anecdotal nature of the literature on executive coaching, there is a substantial body of empirical research on the effectiveness of group approaches to leadership and management development. Collins & Holton conducted a meta-analysis of 83 studies of managerial and leadership development programs from 1982 to 2001.<sup>27</sup> Their results showed that managerial and leadership development programs were effective in increasing knowledge, expertise and system outcomes. This confirmed the overall finding of training effectiveness reported in an earlier meta-analysis.<sup>28</sup>

The types of interventions used in the studies analyzed by Collins & Holton were categorized as: "...problem solving and decision making; strategic stewardship; employee performance; human relations; job and work design; and general management."<sup>29</sup> In the Burke &

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

Day meta-analysis, the training content were categorized as general management programs, human relations/leadership programs, self-awareness programs, problem solving/decision-making programs, rater training programs, and motivation/values training programs.<sup>30</sup>

In developing a group executive coaching program, we seek to incorporate some aspects of executive coaching, such as 360 degree feedback, into leadership training with a small group of about five executives or managers with executive potential and aspirations. In the context of a corporate leadership development program or an academic executive MBA program, it seems reasonable to utilize the demonstrated effectiveness of group leadership training to create a more personalized development experience with some of the techniques of executive coaching.

However, we aim to go one step further and also incorporate the benefits of electronic communications, using conference or meeting software; which provides a teleconference bridge and document sharing for synchronous communication. It is therefore necessary to review the use of electronic communications to facilitate leadership development and other behavioral change interventions.

### **Electronic Communication and Leadership Development**

Based on the discussion above, it is clear that leadership development can be conducted effectively in group as well as individual formats. The question now is whether this can be accomplished using electronic communications, rather than in face-to-face meetings. Providing the subject matter content of management and leadership training online is now so common in corporate training and MBA programs as to not require much discussion. The issue is whether the development of interpersonal and emotion management skills and related behavioral changes,

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

that is usually accomplished in face-to-face executive coaching and groups, can also be done electronically.

We have anecdotal reports that executive coaching using the telephone, instant messaging with voice, and video is becoming more common, but not empirical studies of effectiveness or even frequency of use.<sup>31</sup> We do, however, have a growing body of studies showing that telephone counseling or supervision can be effective with a range of populations including clinicians, people with sleep apnea, smokers with HIV/AIDS, heart failure patients, and lung transplant candidates.<sup>32</sup> Studies also show that behavioral counseling over the internet can be effective with obesity and weight loss, jet lag and diabetes.<sup>33</sup> These studies suggest that a wide range of behavioral change interventions that are usually delivered face-to-face can be effective delivered using telephone and the internet. It is therefore reasonable to expect that this would also be the case for executive coaching and leadership development.

### **Online Group Coaching As a Method of Leadership Development**

In the context of a corporate leadership development program or an executive MBA program, the purpose of online group coaching is to help executives or managers with executive potential to expand their repertoire and range of intrapersonal and interpersonal skills, in the areas known to be related to effective leadership. The academic portion of the program can provide them with increased knowledge about leadership theory and organizational behavior, and about management of finances, operations, marketing and technology. Challenging individual or team work assignments can provide opportunities to integrate that knowledge with their current and past work experiences. But the online executive coaching in small groups of about five to

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

seven members will provide the setting to work, on a weekly basis or bi-weekly basis over a course of several months of the program, on honing self-awareness and interpersonal skills under the guidance of a highly experienced coach. The small group setting encourages the development of trust and provides peer support as well as peer encouragement in the change process.

Each group of a coach and five to seven will meet weekly or bi-weekly for approximately one hour, using meeting software that enables a voice teleconference as well as document sharing. One of the key elements of executive coaching is assessment, including 360 degree assessment, and feedback.<sup>34</sup> The assessment instruments should relate directly to the components of effective leadership discussed previously; including transformation-transactional leadership, Big Five leadership traits, emotional intelligence, and intercultural skills. Participants will take the first battery of assessments online prior to beginning coaching sessions.

The first task of the participants in executive coaching is to develop a contract or intervention agreement which establishes the goals, time commitment, methods and confidentiality constraints that will guide their work.<sup>35</sup> The overall goal of the executive coaching will be for each participant to identify his or her current capabilities, limitations and preferences in relations to at least the following aspects of transformation-transactional leadership, Big Five characteristics, and emotional intelligence that have been shown effective in leadership; and to expand those capabilities:

- idealized influence (charisma)
- inspirational motivation
- intellectual stimulation
- individualized consideration

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

- contingent reward
- extraversion
- conscientiousness
- openness to experience
- perceiving emotions accurately
- using emotions to facilitate thought
- understanding emotion
- managing emotion.

In pursuing improvement in these capabilities, the content of the coaching sessions will include discussion of:

- experiences from online leadership simulations performed individually
- assessment results
- work experiences
- ongoing experiences with content-oriented executive courses
- the group process itself
- relevant personal experiences

The coach will review assessment results individually with each executive. Within the group context, the coach will encourage openness by helping to create a safe environment; but will also allow each participant to determine how much detail of the individual assessment to share with the group, and when to share it. As Kilburg describes, another early task of executive coaching participants is to establish a working alliance.<sup>36</sup> It is expected that executive coaching groups will experience the commonly observed small group development stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning.<sup>37</sup> The experienced coach will know when and how to intervene, and when to let the group set its own pace and direction. While the established goals and contract set parameters, each group will find its unique path to growth and development for its members.

**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

Kilburg suggests an ongoing evaluation process in which the coach and executive assess the success or failure of each coaching session.<sup>38</sup> In the group executive coaching sessions, the coach should encourage members to assess their progress on a regular basis in relation to the goals for which they have contracted. In addition, the program as a whole should include an evaluation component. As suggested by Collins & Holton, single group pretest-posttest studies are an effective and practical means of evaluating training programs, and also have the benefit of incorporating individual learner differences in response to the intervention.<sup>39</sup> In this single group pretest-posttest model, each participant will complete certain outcome measures at both the beginning and end of the program, and these will then be analyzed statistically in relation to the goals of the program.

As I stated in the beginning, leaders in business, government and nonprofit organizations face unprecedented challenges on a global basis for the foreseeable future. Leadership training must use new technologies and ideas to successfully face those challenges. Online group executive coaching is such a method.

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**UMUC Working Paper Series – Number 2009-001**  
**Leadership Development Using Online Group Executive Coaching**

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