

**Exploring the Place and Value of Coaching
Within the Range of Support Available to Senior
Leaders Experiencing Significant Career
Transitions**

A project submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Masters in Work Based
Learning Studies (Professional Coaching)

Penny Jones

M00144402

May 2008

i-coachacademy

National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships, Middlesex University

Keywords: Coaching, Transitions, Learning

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
1.1 Work Context	5
1.2 Relevance of the Research	5
1.3 Main Themes of the Research	6
1.4 Anticipated Benefits of the Research	6
CHAPTER TWO: OBJECTIVES AND LITERATURE REVIEW	8
2.1 Research Aims and Objectives	8
2.2 Literature Review	9
2.2.1 Making the Links	9
2.2.2 The Experience and Prevalence of Transitions	9
2.2.3 Learning from Transitions	10
2.2.4 The Role and Value of Coaching	12
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	14
3.1 Rationale for the Research Approach	14
3.1.1 What do I need to know and why?	14
3.1.2 What is the best way of collecting the information?	15
3.1.3 What shall I do with the information?	20
3.2 My Role as Worker/Researcher	21
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ACTIVITY	23
4.1 Conducting the Literature Review	23
4.2 Selecting the Sample and Securing a Commitment to Participate	23
4.3 Preparing the Data Collection Tools	24
4.3.1 The Interview Framework	24
4.3.2 Piloting the Interview Framework and Interview Techniques	25
4.3.3 The Questionnaire	26
4.4 Data Collection	26
4.4.1 The Interviews	26
4.4.2 The Reflective Follow Up Questionnaire	28
4.5 Data Analysis	28
4.5.1 The Interview Notes	28
4.5.2 The Reflective Questionnaire	29

CHAPTER FIVE: PROJECT FINDINGS	30
5.1 The Experience and Significance of Career Transitions for Senior Leaders	30
5.1.1 Significance of the Transition to Themselves and Others	30
5.1.2 Anticipating and Preparing for the Transition	32
5.1.3 The Experience of the Transition	34
5.2 The Learning the Transition Provided for the Senior Leader	35
5.3 The Support Senior Leaders Access for their Transition and the Rationale for this Choice	37
5.4 The Role and Value of Coaching within the Support Arrangements	39
5.5 Opportunity for Further Learning Provided by the Focused Reflection of the Interview	43
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	44
6.1 Conclusions	44
6.2 My Learning as a Researcher and a Coach Working with Leaders in Transition	47
6.3 Recommendations	48
6.3.1 All the participants as senior leaders and leaders of organisations with influence to make a difference in the transitions of themselves and others.	48
6.3.2 The Coaching Community	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51
APPENDICES	53
Appendix 1 - Alternative Research Methods for the Research Proposal	53
Appendix 2 - Ethical Protocol for Participants	54
Appendix 3 - Initial Email Contact with Potential Participants	55
Appendix 4 - Interview Data Collection Sheet	56
Appendix 5 - Research Project: An Exploration of the Role and Value of Coaching for Senior Leaders Experiencing Significant Career Transitions.	57
Appendix 6 - Follow Up Questionnaire	60
Appendix 7 - Learning Leadership	61
Appendix 8 – Decade Orientation in the Life Cycle	62
Appendix 9 - The Three Phases of Transition	63
Appendix 10 – Learning Log Extracts	64
Acknowledgements	67

Summary

This study explores the role and value of coaching for senior leaders experiencing significant career transitions. The research objectives were:

- To explore the experience of, and learning from, career transitions and within that the extent to which the participants were conscious of the transition as an opportunity for learning and leadership development.
- To establish the range of support senior leaders put in place to support their transition and the role and value of coaching within that support.

I adopted a qualitative approach to explore the perceptions of the senior leaders, collecting data through a guided interview and a reflective questionnaire. The participants were from the NHS, Local Authorities, a charity and the hospitality industry providing the perspectives of a range of senior leaders, including commissioners of developmental support services and those of recruitment and search companies.

From the findings I drew the following conclusions:

- Personal choice and control of the transition was critical to the participant's mindset, the approach adopted for preparation and the support accessed.
- All the participants learnt from their transitions but at different times.
- When the transition takes place in adverse or diverse situations the learning can be greater but so are the support needs.
- Despite the value attributed to coaching by 9 of the participants it was only used by 5 of them during the transition. I surmised that this could reflect the lack of awareness, by some, of the transition as a process to be managed and learnt from and the value added by coaching at this time.

Recommendations include the need for leaders, commissioners, recruiters and coaches to promote awareness of the process of transition as a learning opportunity and something to be managed and supported.

Chapter One: Introduction

This chapter provides the context for the project, explains the importance of the project area and the main themes that are being investigated.

1.1 Work Context

I established Azurite Coaching, my executive coaching practice and consultancy, in 2007 after 20 years of leadership experience in the Local Authority and the NHS most recently as a Chief Executive. During that time I led complex organisational and service change and supported others through significant organisational and personal transitions. My coaching clients are from the public sector (predominantly the NHS), the not for profit sector as well as the hospitality industry. Clients are typically in a career transition that sometimes is in parallel with a life transition. Essential to the coaching provided is the intention to create a trusting relationship, a learning partnership and for the client to build capacity for self organised learning.

1.2 Relevance of the Research

Organisations are subject to continual change and subsequent restructuring. I personally experienced five significant organisational restructurings over a period of 15 years in the public sector each one requiring new leadership selection at all levels. The literature suggests that a typical college graduate today is expected to have six to eight careers in a lifetime, Hudson (1999a:7). Recent research concludes that transitions or 'leadership passages' can provide significant opportunities for learning and leadership development and that accessing support at this time can enable more speedy and effective transitions.

Elsner and Farrands (2006:198) offer four things new leaders need to do to move successfully through transitions. Two are of particular relevance to the focus of this research:

- Demand and use appropriate support
- Work the transition as a process not an event

Coaching is a method of achieving both the above. It offers reflective learning conversations and protected time in a safe environment. This has been my experience and as such has encouraged the development of my coaching practice.

The relevance for me of the research is that I have personal and leadership experience in this area, having experienced a number of significant career transitions each with varying degrees of support. More recently I have supported senior leaders working in complex organisations through career transition as an executive coach or mentor.

1.3 Main Themes of the Research

This research explores these issues in some depth, with a small number of senior leaders reflecting the organisational context in which Azurite Coaching provides services; the NHS, Local Government, the Not for Profit Sector and the Hospitality Industry. The specific aim is to gain greater understanding of the extent to which the significance of their transitions as learning opportunities is recognised and the role and value of coaching within the range of support accessed. The themes the research will explore are:

- The experience and significance of transitions for senior leaders
- The learning the transition provides for the leader and the organisation
- The support senior leaders access for their transition and the rationale for the choice and its effectiveness.
- The role and value of coaching within this support

1.4 Anticipated Benefits of the Research

This research project has broadened my understanding of both the experience of and learning from transitions, transforming my practice to one that is now increasingly focused on supporting my clients through all phases of transition. I will share the findings and recommendations with both my coaching network and organisational leaders through presentations and publication on my web site.

Participating senior leaders had dedicated time to consider the issues in a confidential environment providing an opportunity, through focused reflection, to increase their learning from their current transition as well as previous experiences. The findings and the conclusions of this research will be shared with participants for their consideration. This is important as a key product of the research is to raise the awareness of the participants for their individual benefit and to influence the approach their organisations takes on supporting senior leaders in transition.

Chapter word count - 653

Chapter Two: Objectives and Literature Review

This chapter sets out the specific aims and objectives of the project and the literature review.

2.1 Research Aims and Objectives

This research aims to:

Explore the place and value of coaching within the range of support available to senior leaders experiencing significant career transitions.

Objectives include:

- Understanding similarities and differences in their experience of the transition
- Exploring the extent to which learning and leadership development is a recognised aspect of the transition and a conscious focus of the experience
- Establishing the range of learning experiences and how the learning occurred
- Reviewing the arrangements that support those in transitions paying attention to the initiating factors and value attributed
- Establishing the role coaching and mentoring has in supporting the transition process
- Establishing the value of coaching for those who have accessed it
- Reviewing the opportunity for learning provided through the focused reflection of participants in the interview

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 Making the Links

This literature review builds on my earlier work in the programme that focused on coaching or mentoring clients at the time of life or career transitions. As the impact of transitions became increasingly evident my research question was formulated. The question I wrestled with was what linked career transitions with executive coaching and mentoring. I concluded that it was the process for learning and development arising from the transition and the role played by coaching and mentoring in supporting that learning.

My personal coaching framework has at its heart building capacity for self-organised learning and the use of learning conversations in a learning partnership in the safe and protected time offered by the coaching relationship. Coaching provides the time for personal reflection and, in line with Kolb's learning cycle cited in Dotlich et al (2004), the person can reflect on their experience and apply theory to that experience prior to another attempt.

2.2.2 The Experience and Prevalence of Transitions

This review focuses on the experience of the process of transition rather than on how to do the new job. Although recognising the prevalence in organisations of 'the Darwinian approach of sink or swim for leaders in transitions', Dotlich et al (2004), the focus here was on the literature supporting a more managed approach, particularly consideration of the learning and development consequences. Watkins (2003:5) suggests there are exceptions to the 'sink or swim' approach where individuals and organisations recognise transitions or passages 'as a *crucible* for leadership development that should be managed accordingly'.

This review, therefore, explores the possibilities and opportunity of managing the transition in a way that maximises the learning and development and minimises the personal and organisational costs of the senior leader's failure to thrive at this time. It is important to note that Elsner and Farrands, Dotlich et al, Bridges, Watkins and Hudson have established coaching and consultancy type practices that provide a variety of support to individuals and organisations in transitions and therefore have a vested interest in promoting the benefits of the support packages they provide.

Recent leadership literature highlights how common transitions are. Watkins (2003:6&7) suggests that 'each year slightly fewer than a quarter of the managers in a typical Fortune 500 company change jobs.....each year over half a million managers enter new positions in Fortune 500 companies alone'. In addition there is a significant cost to both individuals and organisations when career transitions do not go well. Watkins (2004:8) cites studies that found 'more than 40% to 50% of senior outside hires failed to achieve desired results'.

Hudson and Bridges both provide a framework for understanding the process of transitions. Bridges (2003:3) stresses the importance of understanding the difference between *change* which is situational and *transition* being the state that change puts people in, the psychological process that requires people to go through a three phase process as they internalise and come to terms with the details of the new situation that the change brings about.

2.2.3 Learning from Transitions

Leadership Passages is a term used by Dotlich et al (2004:6) to convey change and transition in that the experience 'can change your perspective and motivate you to acquire new skills or try alternative behaviours in order to be more effective'.

Transitions are considered to be predictable and therefore individuals can learn to expect them, learn from their previous experiences and develop the

skills to improve their management of them, Hudson (1999a). Elsner & Farrands (2006) suggest that transitions can be unavoidable and their evolution is hard to predict but that an understanding of the structure of the transition enables those with this knowledge to be more effective at this crucial time.

Transitions vary in their level of challenge. Elsner & Farrands (2006:9) suggest that some transitions are more complex than others heightening the significant challenges generally as 'there are larger thresholds to cross' and identify the following as examples:

- Entering a new sector or industry
- Moving from one organisation to another but within the same sector
- Moving up to a larger functional role from within a function but where the specialism has to involve a wider remit
- Moving into a senior general manager role where the leader's specialism is less vital to the content of the role

Drotter & Charan (2001) identify six passages or turns in a *Leadership Pipeline* and stress the importance of understanding the challenges involved in each of the transitions and their particular support requirements.

Underpinning the themes described above and crucial for this research is an emphasis on how leaders learn and the extent to which they are conscious of both the need to do this and the actual experience of learning. Dotlich et al (2004:24), when considering this question, identify the benefits of experience-based learning for leaders using Kolb's Learning Model to demonstrate this whilst also stressing the need to understand the leader's motivation to learn. The crucial aspect of the latter is being open rather than closed to new experiences. With an open attitude leaders can go into a new situation in an open way that allows them to 'formulate a theory or new assumption as a result of the experience' as opposed to a closed attitude where the leader is looking 'to fit it into a preconceived theory or set of assumptions'.

2.2.4 The Role and Value of Coaching

The purpose of the research is to consider the place and value of coaching in the support accessed at the time of transition. This recognises that formal external or internal coaching isn't the solution for everyone and that it can be provided in different ways and most importantly that individuals are responsible for their own learning and will choose to do that in the way that works best for them. The use of informal and formal mentoring and other forms of action learning are all anticipated to be part of the support arrangements some leaders used to support them in transition.

I was particularly interested in exploring the extent to which there was a conscious choice to learn through and from the process of transition itself for the leader's personal and leadership development and if coaching was used or considered to support this learning.

Elsner & Farrands (2006) suggest support should be demanded and used in transitions and that coaching and mentoring are elements of that support. Hudson (1999a:6) suggests 'that coaching can help people manage career changes, to move in and out with a degree of confidence and inner leadership'. Hudson (1999a:194) also suggests coaches engage clients on a learning agenda through dialogue based on their 'profound relationships' and through 'experiencing the reality of the client'. Bridges (2003) writes that no training programme can prepare leaders to manage a transition rather there is a need for individualised assistance which he suggests is the creation of plans supported by a good coach to help the leader discover their own best approach.

Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005:7) argue that the structure and pace of work allows less and less time to think about what we are doing and why. The antidote they prescribe is the 'creation of reflective space.....Coaching providing an opportunity to halt the frenetic pace of doing and to refocus on being'.

There was no intention to continue the debate on the definition of coaching and mentoring, Clutterbuck and Megginson (2005), provide a perspective on this debate and its consequences. I used the terminology as the participants used it and sought to explore their explanation of the terminology if necessary.

For the purposes of this study I am adopting the conclusion of the recent CIPD research (2007:5) which was that coaching is often used for individuals or teams in transition as it can be organised quickly and put in place with 'relatively low levels of coordination and budget compared with programmatic interventions'. It is tailored and personalised and valued for these qualities by coaches, line managers and learning and development professionals.

Chapter word count 1,480