
Beyond Coaching Psychobabble: Let the Buyer Beware



By Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries , INSEAD Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change

The advertising pitches of many coaches raise false expectations and seem designed to fool the gullible.

I find myself increasingly intimidated by people in the executive coaching world. They give me a sense of unease about my own abilities. Many in the profession claim to be able “to unlock clients’ dormant potential and to provide them with a sense of self-fulfillment”. As these coaches seem to have so much to offer, how can I reach the Olympian heights they profess to dwell in? With their amazing skills, they say they can “deepen their clients’ learning, improve their performance and enhance their quality of life, both personally and professionally”. It must be true because they present glowing testimonials of clients who, thanks to their life-changing interventions, have become phenomenal leaders.

Amidst the boom of executive coaches, there appears to be an even more elevated type of coach: the master coach. These remarkable professionals differentiate themselves from the pack by being “always on the lookout for the things their clients don’t want to see or don’t want to hear”. They are

their clients' early warning system, the very key to their self-actualisation. These coaches bring their clients to places they never thought they would be able to reach.

I must admit that these autobiographical descriptions of exceptionally qualified master coaches further harm my self-confidence. Do I have what it takes? But joining their lofty ranks seems to be an accounting game, requiring (according to the websites of some of these master coaches) between 2,500 to 10,000 hours of direct coaching experience. Another requirement is to regularly practise "self-coaching", a process that can "allow your soul to emerge and be seen". What this is all about remains somewhat puzzling to me. But as an executive coach myself, I would apparently be "more fulfilled" – and make "more money" – if I were to sign up for one of their training programmes.

But lo and behold, there exists a yet more select qualification: the most trusted advisor. Compared to run-of-the-mill executive coaches or master coaches, these most trusted advisors shine (or so they say) by being reliable, credible, personable, passionate, authentic and able to connect emotionally. And, if we believe their self-descriptions, they also provide their clients with an "Echo", "Anchor", "Mirror" and "Spark" function. Although many of these words puzzle me, I bow to these supermen and superwomen of the coaching world.

Of course, these executive coaches, master coaches and most trusted advisors have designed sophisticated frameworks to help them fight the good fight. Interestingly enough, in describing their schemes, they seem to have a preference for acronyms, all of them very catchy, such as FUEL, GROW, SMART, PURE and CLEAR.

Preventing coaching from becoming a fad

However, when I put on my "sceptic hat", I wonder whether these distinctions between executive coach, master coach and most trusted advisor are somewhat of a marketing segmentation plot – a way to fool the gullible. Many of these descriptions sound to me more like psychobabble, language that is heavily reliant on psychological jargon and expressions. And based on my experience, the people who tend to resort to this kind of language often have little or no real training in psychology.

Referring to all these acronymic models, I would like to add that, to the best of my knowledge, the psychological dynamics that guide human behaviour are far from neat. Human behaviour doesn't fit elegantly into boxes or categories. While these various acronyms may facilitate visual and verbal recognition, by excluding the subtle nuances of human dynamics, they easily turn into fads. Oversimplified models fail to build an understanding of what's really happening in the coach-client interface.

Furthermore, I believe that the coaching profession isn't doing itself any favours by exaggerating what it has to offer. Contrary to all the hype found in the literature of coaching training programmes, creating behaviour change isn't easy, fast or linear. There are no miraculous cures in the helping professions. As any psychiatrist, psychoanalyst or clinical psychologist can tell you, behaviour change is hard work that comes with many setbacks. In most interventions, it's two steps forward, one step back. Therefore, the exaggerated promises made by executive coaches, master coaches and most trusted advisors create highly unrealistic expectations.

Perhaps it's fair to describe the offerings made by many of these coaches and coaching programmes as a somewhat questionable sales pitch. This lack of truth in advertising only debases the coaching profession. It's high time to debunk the shallowness behind the proliferation of jargon and boastful claims in executive coaching. In its place, we need richer frameworks to define the kind of work coaches are capable of, as well as ways of assessing the quality of their coaching interventions.

The American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. once said: "A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions." Coaching as the language of change and learning has a salient role to play. However, while doing so, it must stay grounded and avoid turning into a fad.

Manfred Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus. He is the Founder of INSEAD **Global Leadership Centre** and the Programme Director of **The Challenge of Leadership**, one of INSEAD's top Executive Development Programmes.

Professor Kets de Vries is also the Scientific Director of the Executive Master in Coaching and Consulting for Change (**EMCCC**). His most recent books are: **You Will Meet a Tall, Dark Stranger: Executive Coaching Challenges**;

Telling Fairy Tales in the Boardroom: How to Make Sure Your Organisation Lives Happily Ever After; and Riding the Leadership Rollercoaster: An Observer's Guide.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/beyond-coaching-psychobabble-let-buyer-beware>

About the author(s)

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries is the Distinguished Clinical Professor of Leadership Development & Organisational Change at INSEAD and the Raoul de Vitry d'Avaucourt Chaired Professor of Leadership Development, Emeritus.