# Back on track: The coaching journey in executive career derailment

## Peter J. Webb

*Executive career derailment seems to coincide with one of the most significant transitions in life - the midlife 'crisis'. Career derailment is most commonly caused by insensitivity; both to others needs and to the individuals own developmental needs for authenticity. Executive coaches can form strong developmental relationships with derailed executives through engaging them in the behaviours of individuation and supporting the development of a more authentic self. Coaching is conceptualised as a 'U-shaped' journey exploring 5 levels of meaning: (1) the executive's environment; (2) the executive's behaviour; (3) attitudes, (4) deep structure of the person; and (5) deepest structure.*
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BY THE TIME MANAGERS OF commercial enterprises reach mid-career their tenure in office seems increasingly fickle. Change comes faster than ever. Investors have turned unforgiving. Globalisation, deregulation, consolidation, acquisition, all create new and highly complex environments. Certainly, the degree of 'fit' between the individual executive, the organisation's receptivity to change, and external market forces might help to explain why some CEO's fail (Greiner *et al.*, 2003). But these factors by themselves don't explain the near epidemic of shortfalls and failures. What are the deeper causes of executive career derailment and can executive coaching help?

### Life stages

Executive career derailments seem to coincide with midlife, a critical transition regarded by adult development theorists as determining the quality of mental well being in the middle years (approximately ages 38 to 50) and beyond. Jung (1969) highlighted the developmental task of *individuation* in this period, which involves shifting the focus from the ego to the inner core of the self. There is often a lack of conformity to goals and values previously adhered to as 'expected' by society. The individual may feel compelled to explore unconscious aspects of their personality through taking up new activities, experiences, and social arrangements. In relation to Erikson's (1963) stages of life, this period is a time of confronting the discrepancies between the dreams of adolescence and the realities of current achievements or failures. The choice here is to either stagnate or to go beyond self and to help the next generation. Levinson (1978) described middle adulthood as the 'third season' and a time of significant transition during which a great deal of life re-evaluation takes place. These theorists all see midlife as a critical step towards a higher level of self-knowledge, a greater acceptance of strengths and weaknesses, and an increased tolerance and resilience towards others. Indeed, Sheehy (1995) talks about this passage as the 'little death of first adulthood' leading to the optimistic surge of the 'flaming 50s'.

To what extent does this critical stage of adult development impact on mid-career derailment? According to McCall (2003), insensitivity is the most commonly reported flaw amongst derailed executives. What were previously strengths become weaknesses, leading to blind spots, arrogance, and the poor handling of bad luck. A grandiose self-image is often apparent, reflected in the belief that the normal rules do not apply. McCall's dynamics of derailment seem at

odds with Jung's process of individuation suggesting perhaps, that these executives are still dealing with ego needs and have not yet begun to look inwards.

Kegan (1994) described six stages of adult development: incorporative, impulsive, imperial, interpersonal, institutional, and interindividual. Kegan's final interindividual stage involves a struggle with true interdependency, self-surrender, and intimacy in relationships, both work and personal self. This transition typically occurs through midlife and beyond, leading to the development of *wisdom*, although not all are able to master the change.

Van Velsor and Drath (2004) extend Kegan's stages into a set of beliefs about the self in relation to leadership. Leaders are expected to move from the *self-reading* belief that 'identity can be understood by reading it in the way important other people respond', to the *self-authoring* belief that 'one creates one's own identity according to self-generated standards'. Like Kegan, they propose a higher state of *self-revising* beliefs that 'while being the author of an identity, one is responsible for continuously re-creating it in alignment with one's environment' (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004, p.391). In a sample of managers and teachers, 36 per cent were transitioning from self-reading to self-authoring, and 48 per cent were in the self-authoring developmental position. Only one per cent were transitioning from self-authoring to self-revising (Van Velsor & Drath, 2004).

But is all development linear? Adult development theorists believe that each stage has its own challenges and requirements, which must be mastered before moving on to the next stage. Adler (1964) however, defined development in terms of a motivation away from *feelings of inferiority* toward *feelings of superiority*. The four 'life tasks' which facilitate this process can be arranged in a wheel comprising: relating to others, making a contribution, self-acceptance, and developing a spiritual dimension. Hudson (1999) likewise, suggests that development may be cyclical. Individuals are either in a 'life chapter' or they are undergoing a 'life transition' in moving away from a previous chapter or discovering a new one. Freud (1964) and other psychodynamic theorists have demonstrated that individuals not only fail to progress through stages but can in fact *regress* to an earlier stage under sufficient stress or conflict. Could this be happening in mid-career derailment?

Peltier (2001) suggests that regression – reverting back to earlier, less mature behaviour – may be more widespread in commercial organisations than is admitted. Defensive behaviours represent a resistance to following the 'path of progressive development'. When executives exhibit these behaviours the impact on whole enterprises can be catastrophic (Berglas, 2002).

## The coaching journey

The process of coaching a senior executive can take on a unique trajectory. Kilburg (2000) talks about coaching as building 'islands of reflection' through which the coaching client can safely explore the dimensions of his or her life. Kemp (2006) views coaching as an 'adventure' and provides a framework for an 'adventure-based coaching cycle'. Lenhardt (2004) sees coaching as a progressive deepening of levels of identity and meaning for the individual executive. To the extent that coaching is an act of going from one place of meaning to another, particularly over a long distance of time and observation, the coaching process may be conceptualised as a *journey* (*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 1995, p.733).

The coaching journey must be guided by a theoretical framework that takes account of adult development and learning throughout the lifespan, but nowhere more significantly than the transition of midlife. In executive career derailment the coach recognises the primary developmental stage or belief pattern from which the executive is operating and provides the self-development opportunities and strategies to help him or her along their own developmental path

(Skiffington & Zeus, 2003). In particular, coaches should look for and encourage the behavioural indicators of individuation in derailed executives: (a) looking within for direction and energy; (b) questioning inherited values; (c) relinquishing outmoded aspects of themselves; (d) revealing new dimensions of who they are; and (e) allowing themselves to be more playful and spontaneous (Lyons, 2002).

The coaching journey may be thought of as a progressive exploration of five levels of meaning (see Figure 1). The first two are external and observable:
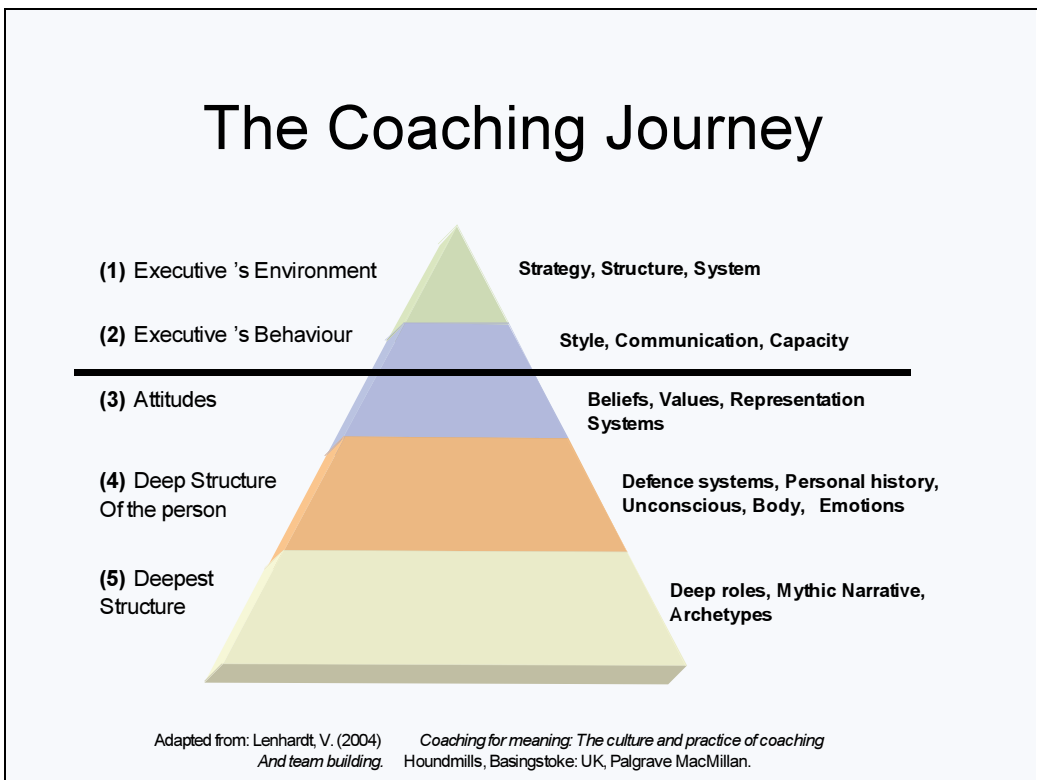
(1) The *executive's environment*, consisting of his or her strategic thinking, the structures and systems through which he or she implements action, and particularly the establishment and defence of status.

(2) *The executive's behaviour*, which involves paying attention to communication methods, relationship management, and managerial style. Here, the emphasis is on noticing and controlling behaviours and preventing more profound, impulsive behaviour patterns from returning under stress.

The next three levels are internal and invisible:

(3) *Attitudes*, calls into question the executive's beliefs and values, those that govern his or her life, work, relationships, whether to trust or not to trust. And how values influence choices with respect to career, money, success, and power. Included here are the executive's *representation systems*, how he or she sees the world. For example, the executive might view themselves as 'stuck' in a

Figure 1: Five levels of meaning in the coaching journey.



## The Coaching Journey

**(1)** Executive's Environment — Strategy, Structure, System

**(2)** Executive's Behaviour — Style, Communication, Capacity

**(3)** Attitudes — Beliefs, Values, Representation Systems

**(4)** Deep Structure Of the person — Defence systems, Personal history, Unconscious, Body, Emotions

**(5)** Deepest Structure — Deep roles, Mythic Narrative, Archetypes

Adapted from: Lenhardt, V. (2004) *Coaching for meaning: The culture and practice of coaching And team building.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: UK, Palgrave MacMillan.

fishbowl because of the way their actions are viewed and analysed by others, or they may see the organisation as a mechanical entity with success dependent on 'pulling the right levers'.

(4) *Deep structure of the person*, or 'character' aspect of personality. This is where the person's defences and unconscious beliefs, developed over their life history, reside. Executive career derailment often emerges as an unconscious response to perceived 'attacks' on his or her structured defence system. Progress is only possible through openness, trust, self-appraisal, and realisation.

(5) *Deepest structure*, constitutes the most intimate development of the person, beyond the defensive systems, to the essential nature of human consciousness or 'spirit'. This is the cornerstone of the architecture of identity. Access to this

level may be gained through deep reflection and meditative practice, and through the recognition of mythic narratives and archetypes that give deep insight to 'life, the universe and everything' (Adams, 1982).

The coach conducts the coaching journey as a 'U-process', starting with the visible elements of the executive's domain of experience and then guiding the person into a progressively deeper exploration of meaning. The process starts out as a series of 'shallow dives', each time coming back to the surface to 'draw breath'. Depending on the nature of the relationship between the coach and the executive, both may be prepared to spend longer periods of time at the deeper levels before returning to the 'visible world' with fresh insights and realisations (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: The 'U-process' in the coaching journey.**



# The Coaching Journey

**(1) Executive 's Environment** — **Strategy, Structure, System**

**(2) Executive 's Behaviour** — **Style, Communication, Capacity**

**(3) Attitudes** — **Beliefs, Values, Representation Systems**

**(4) Deep Structure Of the person** — **Defence systems, Personal history, Unconscious, Body, Emotions**

**(5) Deepest Structure** — **Deep roles, Mythic Narrative, Archetypes**

Adapted from: Lenhardt, V. (2004) *Coaching for meaning: The culture and practice of coaching And team building.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: UK, Palgrave MacMillan.

## A case study

'Charles' was a successful legal partner in a national law firm, aged 47, happily married with two children. At our first coaching session he told me his aim at university had been to become a partner by the time he was 30, and in fact he achieved this at the age of 28. Charles was appointed Partner-in-Charge of the head office at the age of 44, HR Partner and Department Managing Partner at 46, and then he was told he was being groomed to become the next Chief Executive Partner (CEP) at the Board elections in two years time. Charles sought coaching to help him prepare for this likelihood and to enhance his ability to have a positive impact on people and the business in what was a highly-charged political environment.

Coaching dialogue began at Level 1 as an affable leadership development discourse drawing on data from his Hogan Development Survey (Hogan & Hogan, 1997). By session three Charles was reflecting on observations of his own and others' behaviour with comments such as: 'I'm not as bad as I think I am', 'I watched myself in a meeting and noticed that I had a more open frame of mind', 'others seem to be playing to my 'derailers' (Level 2). I asked Charles how he defined his leadership. He reflected for a moment and then admitted that he craved to be the centre of attention. I suggested that his leadership style was like the 'circus ringmaster'. This seemed to resonate strongly with him as a *representation system* (Level 3). At each session I encouraged Charles to 'dip' below the surface of Levels 1 and 2 by asking him reflective questions such as 'what does *detachment* mean to you?' 'What do you *choose* to be attached to?' In this way Charles was able to articulate and reflect on some of his key representation systems in relation to his identity as a leader. At the same time I recommended readings that might facilitate reflection at Levels 4 and 5 (Tolle, 2000; Ruiz, 1997, Coelho, 1994; Chopra, 1996).

However, the journey began to go off the rails at session seven. Charles reported that pressure was being exerted on him to relin-quish his Partner-in-Charge and Department Managing Partner roles in order to generate more fees for the firm. He immediately resisted and mounted a vigorous campaign of self-righteous e-mails to the CEP and other Managing Partners. Here was evidence of his deep defence system (Level 4) at work as predicted by the Hogan Assessment (2002). Charles rated in the 'moderate to high risk' category for four of five factors regarded by Kaiser and Hogan (2006) as '*Intimidation*: gaining security by threatening people and scaring them away', and in the 'moderate to high risk' category for all four factors described as '*Flirtation and Seduction*: winning recognition with self-promotion and charm'. In fact, Charles scored in the 100th percentile for *Bold* showing the highest risk for impulsive, self-promoting, unresponsive to negative feedback, competitive and demanding behaviours, broadly consistent with a *narcissistic* personality (Judge *et al.*, 2006).

Ultimately, Charles' actions did nothing to advance his cause, and the CEP unilaterally appointed another Partner to take over Charles' role with no consultation and no evident support for Charles' candidacy for the upcoming CEP elections. Charles felt hurt and 'abandoned'. He announced that he was withdrawing his candidacy, effectively 'derailing' what had been a stellar career.

Some of these 'career risk' behaviours had been pointed out to me by HR and L and D stakeholders beforehand but were certainly not evident in my early coaching experience of Charles. However, as circumstances unfolded I began to see him enacting his 'dark side' (Hogan & Hogan, 2001). Yet, at session nine we had collaborated on writing a set of guiding principles for his behaviour (Levels 3 and 4) such as; 'more listening and not interrupting', 'making suggestions rather than giving directions', 'compassionate detachment: not so attached to the outcome as to be emotionally driven by it', and 'ethical integrity – supporting the *higher* ethical stance' as evidence of 're-forming' character (Kaplan, 1990). I believe

this helped prepare the way for Charles' later 'career recovery'.

Four months after our 10-session contract concluded, Charles requested a continuation of coaching. At this stage the story had fully unravelled and Charles reported feeling as though he had been 'thrown off the city wall from a great height!' It seemed appropriate to take a 'deep dive' rather than just 'skim the surface'. We explored the archetypes of *orphan* (how the *hero* experiences, and learns from, adversity), and *wanderer* (how the *hero* rides out to face the unknown) (Pearson, 1998) at Level 5, and then developed more resourceful *representation systems* such as; 'life isn't linear, it's a series of cycles and rhythms', 'I have all these good things going on in my life', 'everyone else (protagonists and victims) is at different stages of their own cycles and rhythms' (Level 3).

By session 14, Charles reported 'being available and present to the situation but not driven by the event', and 'spending more time with people'. He now identified more with the archetype of *wanderer* (seeker of truth) than *orphan* (wounded victim) (Pearson, 1998). 'How do you feel?' I asked him. 'Like being on holidays from my ego!' he said. Our coaching dialogue now regularly took on a more dialectical tone, consistent with Levels 3 and 4: 'realising that both questions and their answers evolve over time, and that the answers to important life questions can differ at different times in one's life' (Sternberg, 2001, p.238).

Charles was now able to see that 'they're attacking my *process*, not me!' We collaborated on transferring competency from his professional negotiating skills with clients to negotiating his relationships with fellow partners to bring him fully into Levels 1 and 2. Charles now felt that he had some behavioural skills to transform his style of influence and regain control of his environment.

## Conclusion

Executives can become distanced from their own emotions and from authentic communication with others. As McCall (2003, p.195) points out, 'blind spots matter eventually' and as with Charles, what seemed a benign flaw at one level of development can become lethal with a change in context. Leaders must be committed to lifelong development. Van Velsor and Drath (2004, p.414) point out that organisational environments are more developmentally challenging than ever before and 'organisations today need larger communities of managers who are self-authoring people.'

As executive coaches we will be most effective 'if we incorporate an understanding of where our clients are on the curve of adult development' (Axelrod, 2005, p.125). And we can more fully appropriate deeper levels of meaning for our clients using the 'U-process' described here to help elicit 'executive wisdom' (Kilburg, 2006).

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