

Executive Coaching | Recording Transcript

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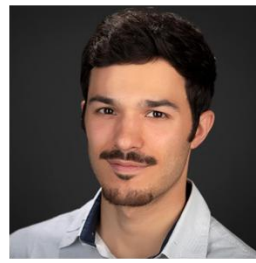
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Brian Underhill



Susan Goldsworthy



Olivier Malafronte



Roland Deiser



Panelists

[Brian Underhill](#) | Founder and CEO, **CoachSource**, the world's largest executive coaching firm

[Susan Goldsworthy](#) | Professor of Leadership and Organizational Change, **IMD**

[Olivier Malafronte](#) | Founder and CEO, **magif.ai**, an AI coaching start-up

Hosted by

[Roland Deiser](#) | Chairman, Center for the Future of Organization, Drucker School of Management

Roland Deiser

Well, I want to welcome everybody. The webinar is on, and I am very excited to have another session of our round tables that we do in association with Developing Leaders Quarterly that I co-publish with a colleague of mine from Scotland. This one is about executive coaching, and it's a topic that I'm particularly interested in.

I'm the chairman of the Center for the Future of Organization, where we look at how leaders and organizations evolve in times that are disruptive and, of course, increasingly characterized now by digital technologies, artificial intelligence, and so on. Just a few thoughts to open the conversation.



Coaching is a real interesting topic for many, many reasons. Many people think about coaching here in the US, that it's about football, sports. And coaching maybe has to do something with how can you get peak performance out of an individual or peak performance out of a team. But coaching in the executive context, is much more than just performance. It's dealing with all the issues from individual to really complex strategic organizational topics, depending on the angle that you bring into a coaching practice. And coaching is a huge industry - estimates reach from 7 to about 70 billion now, depending on what you include. It's an interesting industry also, because it's easy to enter, it's easy to exit, it's not that regulated.

We're going to talk about all these things. I'm glad we have about 250 people who have signed up. I guess a good third of them attend and are in the audience today. And as always, we'll bring in later in the session some people from the audience who might take an open chair. I look forward to that as well. But before we do that, of course, we will have a fireside among the four of us. Fireside means it's not speeches, it's not prepared, it's unstructured. It's horizontal, among the panelists.

So, I want to welcome the three of you. Brian Underhill, who is running one of the world's largest, if not the largest, coaching organization called Coachsource. He was quite instrumental in putting this issue of Developing Leaders Quarterly together, reaching out to his multiple connections. Thank you, Brian for co-editing and being a good friend. Then we have Susan Goldsworthy, who is with IMD. Hi Susan, great that you're here. IMD is one of the world's premier business schools, especially in the field of executive education, where Susan is a professor and teaches coaching and leadership and things like that that you're going to talk about in a minute as well. And then I'm pleased also to have Olivier here, Olivier Malafronte who joins us from Cannes. So, we have the United States, we have Switzerland, and we have France. And that's it for the introduction. Let's open the fireside chat. And again, welcome to all the people in the audience.

Maybe we start with with Brian, because you, you helped us really, to put this together. I usually don't ask a lot of questions because we just have an unstructured conversation, but let me ask you - how did you get into coaching? What fascinates you in this?

Brian Underhill

Greetings, everyone, welcome. I'm in Silicon Valley, here in San Jose, California. I started in coaching nearly 30 years ago. In the 90s, mid to late 90s, I had an internship in Southern California with a company called Kilty Goldsmith and company that was run by a not yet famous Marshall Goldsmith who many might know today, and coaching was just that we were doing 360 feedback debriefs at the time, one hour work with people on their 360 feedback.

Marshall would teach the leadership class, and the rest of us would coach on the one-hour session, and then that just grew from there. That's just really what happened. Clients said they loved the one-hour session. That was their favorite part of the leadership experience, and so they wanted more of that.

We would just do a few sessions, or eventually, six months, 12 months, even I remember the first time Marshall sold a 12-month coaching assignment with executives. We would each work with different executives. We're literally like, what do we do with them for 12 months? I mean, I'm so used to one hour session, what the heck?

I think the ICF had just started, but we hadn't heard of them yet. There was one coach training school. I think we're all here because we know how much the field has grown and expanded ever since then. People wondered, is this a fad that will end at some point? It still hasn't. An ICF study shows coaching in general is a little over \$4 billion industry, which is up from last year. And the number of credential holders by the ICF was just announced a couple of weeks ago at 50,000 - those who've trained to be coaches.

Roland Deiser

You're still having fun doing it, it seems - very cool. Susan, what got you into this topic?

Susan Goldsworthy

Yeah, it's lovely hearing Brian's background and Roland, you mentioned that it started off being sports, and that's how actually got into it. I was a sports person in my youth. I was an Olympic swimmer, and, in order to excel, you need a coach, because you cannot see yourself. And so, from a very, very young age, I was conscious of the difference a coach makes to help you fulfill your potential. You have to do the work, but the coach makes a significant difference as to whether you succeed or not, and the more successful I became as a swimmer, the more you realize that it's less about the physical and it's more about what goes on in here.

This is where a coach makes a significant difference, and the best have coaches. I'm fortunate to live in Switzerland, so we always refer to Roger Federer. Roger arguably one of the best tennis players in the world - has coaches. The best ones have coaches.

I worked for large multinationals for a couple of decades, and in my role, I would be coaching the CEO or the C suite. I then stepped out and started my own business and was coaching various executives around the world. And through IMD, we're now working with coaches on programs and also training people to be coaches. And I'm delighted to see a number of our students are online, so welcome to everybody from our coaching program.

I think this is the core behind it - we are a social species. We cannot see ourselves to fulfill our potential; we need somebody else who has our interests at heart and is willing to stretch and challenge us to help us grow.

Roland Deiser

Excellent. And Olivier, you're based in Cannes. Tell us a little about why you got into what you do. And what your life is about.

Olivier Malafronte

Yeah, thank you for having me. I live in Cannes, South East of France. I basically encountered management and coaching topics when I was kid. My dad and my uncle created their consultancy, and they run that for 30 years. They were doing training in action coaching, and they were bringing psychological tools into organizations to develop competencies. This was the context in which I grew up.

I wanted to build tech, I wanted to be an engineer. But I ended up not being an engineer, doing management studies and a psychology diploma instead.

As a young professional, going to the first life and professional challenges, I discovered coaching. I was following the AI topics already, and so for me, when I got into coaching, I had a big light bulb going on. It was visceral evidence that the way AI was working already, or was going to work, was actually going to be a huge opportunity to democratize coaching tools and coaching techniques, and to not just serve me, but serve many. That's basically the huge kind of motivation, vision and mission that got me to create three companies in AI coaching, launch one of the first AI coach on market in 2016, do a PhD in AI coaching and leadership, and become a trainer.

Roland Deiser

Excellent. So, all of you came apparently to coaching through your own experiences and interests. We titled the session *The future of executive coaching*, so let's talk about how this has been emerging.

Before we look into the future, let's also look a little bit into the past, when I personally thought about coaching myself, way back. Most do not know that my early background was in psychotherapy and group dynamics, and in a therapeutic approach to working with people and organizations. That is one element where coaching started for me - behavioral issues, what is the really authentic self of a leader, and things like that.

My work then evolved away from the therapeutical to the other end of the spectrum: the question how to navigate the toxic politics in an organization. And even one step further, towards strategy and the societal contribution of organizations.

So, it's a really big, big scope when we talk about coaching, and maybe interesting to bring it down a little bit by looking at its history and its trajectory. Maybe let's do this for the next part of our of our conversation. Where does it come from? Where is it going, and how AI will play a role in that.

Brian Underhill

Well, history. I mean, we probably all have different angles on it. When I came to the field, coaching had just moved past a negative reputation. One coach used to call herself the *Angel of Death*, meaning that when she showed up, everyone knew whomever it was she was coaching was on their way out when we started to do it.

We didn't really quite see it like that. It started to become something more for the high potential, the high performer. Because it's not inexpensive, so you have to decide who to use it for. And today you see it still in that regard. But as I also wrote in the piece, we did see some coaching go amok, running out of control. You started to see coaches all over the place.

There's one famous organization where the billionaire founder CEO had a coach. Everyone knew it. It was even on that coach's website, her coaching him. And then everyone in that company wanted a coach. This is kind of early 2000s. It got incredibly popular, there had to be some controls put on it, because it's become so popular that in certain places, everyone wanted one.

In other places, no one wanted a coach. It just depends on the industry and the culture of the company. So then you start to see the rise of not just lots of coaches, but the necessity of an organization and

management of coaches. And companies like ours started to do that for a living, just kind of helping to coordinate the number of coaches that are there, and making sure we have a similar framework and structure and process and pricing and measurements and all of that.

And what you also noticed is a coalescence of understanding of what a good coach might look like on paper and in reality. I remember going to a conference in the early 2000s where companies were really lost as to how to figure out who really was a good coach and what kind of coaches they could use. They would compare notes with each other like hey, I'll share my list of who we use, and you share your list. Let's have a little database of coaches that we all think are pretty great. As time went on, I think the industry has gotten much better at deciding and knowing, at least in executive coaching and corporate spaces, what are some of those characteristics, qualities of a great coach.

I used to have to explain what coaching was, and then what might it include for a six-month assignment. I think today, most corporations generally understand what it is and what might be included, and even some sense of pricing, although pricing can be all over the map even still today.

So that probably gets us to alternative forms of coaching that are getting more popular, like team coaching, which is a big one. We have a chapter on that in the in the magazine. There's group coaching, peer coaching, adding coaching to leadership development programs, teaching leaders, coaching skills. These are all thing kind of offshoots of main coaching, if you will, that have gotten much more popular.

Susan Goldsworthy

And if I can add to that, Brian, what we're seeing a lot is the need of leaders to bring coaching skills into organizations, as opposed to being coaches themselves. Instead of the old *power-over* model, the dominant "I'm the boss-I tell you", it's a solution in today's world where there's so much chaos, so much complexity, so much uncertainty. A *power-with* approach is so much more powerful, and so, it's important to build trust.

In fact, Yuval Noah Harari, the author of *Homo Sapiens* and all those books, said thain the past, he'd been in the business of creating anxiety. Now we need to switch to being in the business of rebuilding trust. And I think that's also very much true for leaders in organizations.

We know that high performance comes when people feel trusted and empowered. So how can we create what we call that secure base space, so that people can bring their best selves to work, can step in because they want to belong and be accepted, and they want to achieve. A leader's role becomes increasingly important in a complex world to create those conditions.

Olivier Malafronte

In the PhD thesis I've been doing, what was interesting when we look at the history of coaching - technologies have always been there. Whether it's from transportation, technologies were there, working with a human coach. Then in in sport competitions, tools and technologies were there to help athletes, basically get to the next level of performance, and to help the coach do measurements or trainings, and then psychotherapy and then personal training. Technologies have always been there. It's not new. So we're just kind of renewing the cycle, with new tools and new technologies.

Research tells us that organizations and even employees are looking for these leaders that are more reflective and reflexive and capable of empowering others. I think what's super interesting with AI is actually - if some of you read the article that I wrote in in DLQ, and if we look at some other papers that I'm doing now - we can see AI becoming a catalyst of competency, because technologies like AI are creating spaces and times in which the managers and the leaders can step into a reflexive posture that enables them to make a step aside and position themselves into a more reflexive mode.

And so, working with about 150 mid-level leaders during my PhD with organizations from US and Europe, what we're seeing is when a leader is getting an AI coach, it's creating a space and time where the leader is more efficient or more easily and more quickly, making the step aside because of reflection and reflexivity. Their attitude and behaviors become more constructive, more empathetic, and more empowering to the entire ecosystem that is around them. That's really quite interesting, because AI is coming in a time where leadership is really evolving, and for me, it's like giving the opportunity for these leaders to make this transformation and actually step into the roles that we expect from them.

Roland Deiser

Pasquale Mazzuca, who is in the audience, put into the chat that coaches need to master AI and not the other way around, which I think is an interesting statement. Maybe you want to build on that.

Olivier Malafronte

Yeah, Pasquale, thank you. I think it's an interesting comment. Yes, they need to master it. They don't necessarily need to master all the things about AI that are super technical, because there can be a lot to learn. But they need to understand what to use, how to use it, what are use cases. How to integrate coaching into their processes. Because that's quite interesting. Today, with AI, we can actually make coaching tools, coaching techniques, coaching knowledge, available and accessible in the hands of leaders as well, so that leaders can actually use technologies, not only for themselves, but also for the people and for the teams.

Some of the work I'm doing with organizations is actually creating coaching cultures, coaching ecosystems, or augmenting leadership cultures and leadership ecosystems. I think it's an interesting time now where more and more coaches actually want to learn how to integrate AI.

At every conference, every training that I do, I work with coaching schools and I train. I've been training 200 coaches for the last 12 months. Every time there's a training, every time there's a conference, coaches say, oh, now that I listen to you, I better understand what I can do with AI that is not going to replace me, and how I'm going to evolve. Basically, they understand how to position with AI. But that's also the same with leaders and managers. When they understand what's possible with AI, they want more and they want to better understand how to use it to augment the ecosystem and the processes and activities that they're running.

Roland Deiser

I think we need to look at this from two angles, because there is obviously the fact - and there's been a lot published about that - that generative AI, especially certain models of ChatGPT, are used as kind of

therapists, or as coaches. Where people get into their own crazy bubble which has, as we know, already led to a lot of really major issues, including suicides, especially with young people. And with people being more and more alienated from direct contacts and being on social media all the time, it's just adding to the thing.

So can AI substitute a Coach, or is it augmenting? Is it something that allows you to really scale? Which is a big issue in coaching.

Olivier Malafronte

I think what's interesting Roland is - according to the latest report from anthropic the number one use or expectations from people using generative AI tools is to get answers and responses. The biggest number is not about effective conversations, which is the kind of conversations that you trigger with a human coach.

There's a complexity in having AI coaching working as expected or adopted because of people's expectations and wants from the technology. A pure coaching model cannot work because people want to have an answer, people want to have a response. People want to have an advice. There's a huge debate now, because we are under deep questioning about, okay, how do we design? How do we deliver AI coaching tools and techniques? Because there are all these products out there. They're actually giving advice in any directions, while we know as leaders or coaches that this is not necessarily the best way to deliver that.

Susan Goldsworthy

I think it's also fascinating, because if you think about the fact that we are a living system, on a living system, which is a planet for our good health and well being. We need interactions with each other, with other living systems. AI is not a living system. There is some research that shows while people are getting a quick dopamine hook from interacting with AI - because often it will tell you what you want to hear it or it gives you strokes - they're feeling a void of human connection.

Roland Deiser

Brian, maybe you can say something to that. I met Brian originally, when one of the companies I have been working with was asking for 300 coaches. It was a large global organization of more than 100,000 people, and they wanted to have a consistent type of approach, so that not everybody does something different. So, I was looking for somebody who can scale a coaching approach across an organization.

There is a question here in the in the chat, about how can I find out who is a great coach or not so great a coach? And you said this before, Brian - you ask around like who's a good doctor, who is a good lawyer? You ask around who is a good coach.

It's word of mouth, reputation building. LinkedIn is full of people who do exactly that, trying to build a reputation, to get recommended. But scalability is an issue in coaching. We saw that on the AI side, what you said, Olivier, where I could create a coaching culture, because I may be able to scale these kinds of experiences with technology.

At the same time, we have the emergence of tons of coaching certification bodies. Tons is maybe exaggerated, but definitely more than one. But it is still an unregulated industry. Despite all those bodies, it's not comparable to a medical doctor or a lawyer who needs to go through very different types of certifications. The certification bodies, typically, decide themselves, what they certify and what their conditions are.

Brian Underhill

Yeah, for sure, I think still the personal referral works very strongly. Just like when all those companies in the early 2000s started comparing who they use, it's like well General Electric uses them, so they must work okay for General Mills. It doesn't always work like that, but at least they come with some form of endorsement. And similarly, maybe a company that has stables of coaches like we do, we've looked at them and screen them, and so we could speak to their capabilities, especially when we have used them and have seen the results and have measured the results.

Another thing I would say to the question that was asked is, we have found that leaders much prefer coaches who have a particular specialty in the area that that leader thinks they're going to be working on. A leader wants to improve, say, their influence skills, and so they would prefer a coach who's got a lot of demonstrated expertise in that content area, and that can be figured out based on their writings, their speaking, what the website says, where they can see if this is this really an expert in influencing skills.

An example I like to use is I know of a coach who's really niche. She only works with female technical leaders who transition from one job into the next job in the executive level. So that's pretty niche. That's what she does. And she's written books on this, and she's doing webinars on this, and that's her specialty area. And so, when I talk to a client and they're describing something like that, I can say, oh my gosh, you must meet this coach. This is what she does. This is this is exactly what she does. And I want you to meet her. Those go incredibly well, because now you have a coach who really has that deep specialty.

Olivier Malafronte

It's quite interesting what you said, Brian. You were basically speaking about use cases. This niche, this specific approach, this is also actually what makes AI more efficient better adopted and better understood. Sometimes, people may say, oh, that topic, or that thing is quite generic. Or we use methods, and then it's, it's very broad. But when we look at specific niche issues or pain points or specific topics, then we can leverage and apply coaching tools and coaching techniques with AI that actually make a much better impact because it's precise, because it goes to a specific use case.

Roland Deiser

Susan, you, are a professor at IMD, so people come to learn coaching? What do you teach?

Susan Goldsworthy

That's a great question, Roland. We talk about three interconnected parts. Of course, there's a technical competence. If you're driving a car, you need to know how to drive a car. There's a technical competence to be a coach. And a lot of people, when they come on our programs, are used to advising or mentoring or giving solutions, and so it's unlearning some of those habits that wouldn't help you pass your driving test.

However, what's fundamental for us is also the transformational capacity, because we're firm believers that the more you work on yourselves and the more aware you are of your own shadows and your own development areas, the more able you are to support and help others through theirs, especially given when we see that between 1/3 to 2/3 of the executives who come through IMD are now reporting that they're primarily operating in survival and burnout zones in today's world. Yeah.

Roland Deiser

In your article, you talk about creating a coaching culture, of leaders becoming coaches and things like that. There is also peer coaching, where you would bring together people on the same level. Henry Mintzberg did a lot of that, for instance, with the coaching ourselves approach; he says the ones who really know what's going on are those who experience it, so let's just have them in a room, share their experiences, and advise each other, and then they learn from each other. That is a coaching element, but it builds also an organizational culture of communication across boundaries, enhances collaboration and what not.

Susan Goldsworthy

Yeah, I think it's both. The benefits that you get from peer coaching, and of course, using the turned chair or switched off zoom screen so that people can't see you and they're talking about you. Very, very powerful. Our participants report that that's one of the most powerful parts, because they're creating a secure base amongst themselves where they're able to respect each other and stretch and challenge each other, whether in a coaching capacity or a leadership capacity, and that doesn't replace coaching, per se. I think there's multiple aspects that play out that enable some of the organizations we work with to bring in a coaching culture.

Brian Underhill

Yeah, a number of years ago I started to hear that term coaching culture. And of course, it sounds great, because it's alliterative. I started to think about that. There are several models out there now to address what is a coaching culture. I wrote one at one point, and then the ICF just came out with one as well. They actually have a model now looking at what is a coaching culture.

Very often a corporation might say, we want a coaching culture, so we're going to teach coaching skills to our leaders. And now we have a coaching culture, or so they think. I think we would all agree that just giving people a training does not give you a culture, really, of anything. The model I looked at is, what is the whole universe of activities that could be done to reinforce more of a coaching approach, in many ways, shapes and forms.

What I noticed about the ICF model was pretty fascinating is they actually survey everyone in a company to see if they're noticing coach-like behaviors within the culture of that company, which is pretty, pretty interesting. I think that's sort of the hope, that there'll be more coaching conversations and so forth.

The late, great David Peterson, I remember him saying a couple of years ago he hated the term coaching culture. He actually preferred development culture, an organization that really focuses on people development. It's a much more than just, oh, they're coaching each other; it's more of a larger scale view of development culture.

Roland Deiser

When we started this session, I said that the sports of metaphor of coaching is to enhance performance. Is coaching just about performance, of making an organization to perform better, or is it more than that? I mean for the leader to perform better and then the company performs better?

Brian Underhill

It's a powerful question. Roland, I think it's a very powerful question. I mean, on one level, yes, of course, that's what it's there for. I guess a lot of us as coaches might say it's a lot more than that. It's a lot more personal transformation, personal growth as well. It's more than oh, let's just help this company do better.

I'm sure my colleagues would agree with me. I see nodding heads, it feels like it's a lot more about the overall growth of the leader and of those around them. When you think about it, a leader getting better makes a huge difference. Just slightly better makes a huge difference to sometimes hundreds, sometimes 1000s thereafter.

Susan Goldsworthy

I'd love to build on what you said, Brian. Because what is the definition of performance? What we see is a focus on outer growth, which isn't working for us as a species. We're living on a planet of which we're exhausting the resources, so continued growth from that perspective is not sustainable.

Now there's been the launch of the inner development goals. Is an inner development guide, that asks how do we develop ourselves in order to thrive better on this planet, on this one and only planet that we have to live on? And so it's about the inner growth, focusing on on how we can grow, both individually and collectively, in order to co-create the conditions where we can all continue to thrive.

Olivier Malafronte

For me, it goes beyond performance. Performance can be a very punctual moment of achieving a specific outcome. But it doesn't mean that it's sustainable. Because someone who shows specific performance, for instance today in this meeting, could not have the same performance tomorrow or the day after.

For me, coaching is actually enabling something more sustainable. You talked about growth, about development. I speak about competence. At the center of my PhD thesis was a notion of competence that was touching the inner human regulation mechanisms that are more built towards regularity, the repetition of specific behaviors that are actually making leaders competent over time.

Coaching is definitely a tool for learning and development, a way to access that and to enable it. Because through competence, you have all these regulation mechanisms. If you don't have the performance you fail. Basically, this is learning. If you integrate that into lessons, in the long term, even the midterm, you become much more competent, because you can learn from everything you've been doing. I think that the true value of having a coach or having coaching tools - with or without AI - is to give the opportunity to managers and leaders to develop their competence over time and then to be sustainable. That's where I see the biggest value, and not just to focus on performance.

Roland Deiser

We just decided to add a new Fellow to our Center, who is Steven de Souza. I don't know if anybody knows him. He's currently a senior Partner with Korn Ferry and based in Saudi Arabia, but he's about to change his job. He just wrote a book about called *Shadows at Work*, where he talks about the dark side and working through the dark side of yourself in order to embrace what he calls negative capabilities, which I find it quite interesting term.

Competences are also our sides that we may be not really recognize, or we suppress them, we don't admit them, but they somehow guide a lot of our anxieties, our behaviors and things like that. I hope we're not getting too psychological now, but coaching is also about getting through the toxic sides of behavior, to the toxic sides of organizational dynamics, of organizational culture, and toxic sides obviously, also, Susan, as you say, of how society deals with this planet?

It's all about being toxic, being actually dark, creating unintended consequences that bite us back. And understanding those makes us more authentic, obviously. In terms of an epistemology of that we go back almost into psychoanalysis, where you say there is something unconscious, there is something dark we got to work through to be able to actively and consciously then deal with that, and have the ethics and the moral background to do that.

Is it then about a more psychoanalytic, psychological, psychotherapeutic paradigm that we need, mixed in with systemic thinking?

Susan Goldsworthy

Yeah, I would say Roland, it's the holistic, systemic. I'm fortunate to work with a lot of CEOs and C suite executives, and I'm yet to work with one that says to me, Susan, my goal is to create a toxic culture. And yet, often they can. So it's the understanding - where does this come from?

It's a systemic issue, and it comes from a fear-based approach. And so how do we acknowledge the fear base, embrace it rather than suppress it - because then it just feeds it - and then consciously choose the sort of love approach, the sort of possibility, curiosity, playfulness, openness. And that's a conscious choice.

There's a very famous expression, I'm okay, you're okay. I like to say, I'm not okay. You're not okay. And that's okay, because, by virtue of being human, we've all got stuff. I also think, one of Marshall's famous expressions was, what got you here won't get you there. And what I like to say is, what got you here won't keep you here.

So, it's this curiosity, this groundedness in ones' self, through working with, for example, the inner development goals or with yourself, so that you're grounded, you're a secure base for self and others, that no matter what's going on, you're not derailed by it. And that becomes increasingly important in a fractured world.

Olivier Malafronte

In some of the fascinating research about why leaders do what they do, we speak about cognitive schemas, the mental models and effective schemas with the way they they feel. What this research helps us to understand is that some situations trigger leaders if they don't have practice of looking where this comes from. How they react to specific situations. If they don't have these reflective activities and tools, it's hard for them to change. It's hard for them to to build the awareness and then enough understanding and motivation to actually move towards change.

That's why the researchers recommend coaching as one of the tools so people can be there in the flow of work, which is actually one of the big benefits and interesting things with AI, because it's hard to have a human coaching in the pocket at every moment. When situations are triggering people, that's where there is a super interesting opportunity for people to look at this even, even 10 or 15 minutes and act on it. I think that this is super interesting, for leaders to understand that, because if they don't, then any kind of reactions or responses that they are going to generate, with people or out of a situation that is going to have an impact.

Brian Underhill

I'm actually realizing that all of us might be getting wonderfully distracted by the incredible comments. Yes, because I keep seeing each of us reading, there's some great comments here, if you're not following along, I keep reading those and then having thoughts

Roland Deiser

A side fireside chat going on parallel to our fireside.

Brian Underhill

Yes, it's a chat within the chat or something like that. There are some comments here about toxic leaders and dark personality traits and so forth. This is not to be underestimated. And there's nothing that says a coach 100% cures those, not at all, not at all. Maybe we can help with certain behavioral matters.

And, it's interesting too, because I had a client recently, just last week, they described their CEO as sort of toxic, with ADHD and maybe on the spectrum, and all the problems that that creates. Then I asked a little more about all of that like has it been diagnosed by somebody, and how do you guys know that and

so forth. - No, no, we just decided that that's what they are. And maybe, maybe true. It's, of course not a coach's job to diagnose any of that. But, especially in certain industries, you might have leaders that are like I think Peter writes in the chat, because you can sometimes find people in leadership because they like leadership, because they can be more powerful and be more narcissistic and so on. We know some, maybe a few of us in the States, maybe. And it's a little sad, because we see it now just so blatant in front of us here in the States. I mean what do you do with that? Unfortunately, I'm not sure a coach necessarily is going to just solve that at all.

You need the person, the leader, to really want to make fundamental changes to how they operate. And in any case when a leader is not showing much interest in coaching and only does it because HR told them to do it, we nearly never have success. I hate it when those calls come in, and they still come in.

I mean, no, I don't hate it. I welcome any call, just to clarify, that comes in. But those are the tough ones. You talk to someone who really hopes that there could be change with this particular leader, and if we don't have any signs or indications that the leader really has interest in making the changes and really wants to, I don't know that leadership coaching is going to help and fix those situations at all. Maybe, maybe ease some of the behaviors.

Roland Deiser

We are about, 52 minutes into the into our conversation. And as I have announced, we like to bring in some, some guests into an open chair just to join the conversation a little bit. So I'd like to bring in Bob, Bob Pickard, who is also one of our Fellows, by the way, at the Center. It's best you introduce yourself really quick.

His background is in public relations, he was president of Edelman Asia and does a lot of work with CEOs. Bob, I promote you now to panelists which should allow you to turn on your video and to talk to us. I hope it works. Yeah, Bob, welcome. Thank you. Thanks for joining us. And tell us what made you raise your hand and join the panel.

Bob Pickard

I'm a leadership Communication Consultant, really though I'm a Communication Coach for CEOs, and for 35 years, that's how I focused my career across Asia, Pacific and North America. When I listen to some of these very interesting conversations that you're having today, I guess I have a question for the panel here, which is this: In my work, I normally start coaching an executive on their communication. Often, it's around a speech, how to kill that speech, or how to do a great TV interview. Or during the pandemic, all of our employees are scared. How do I reassure them? How do I strike the emotional chord in the now of their sentiment?

So that's the beginning of things. But then I end up going not just from communication tactically, but communication psychologically, where they come to regard communication as more and more important, because there's this personification of the leader now, where what they say, what they do, how they do it, every, every flinch, every emotion - they are far more magnified in terms of their impact on people, shareholders, media, their own employees, than ever before.

I don't personally think that leadership and communication are synonymous, but I think communication has become more important, and of course, every leader has to communicate effectively as part of their job. I just wonder if you have any observations in this area.

Susan Goldsworthy

Yeah, thank you, Bob. I love it. You've touched on one of my passion areas, which is the language of business, and how the language of business is not fit for purpose, if that purpose is the continued thriving of our species on the planet. If we look at the language of business, it is primarily mechanistic, machine based, or war metaphors. So, in a system where people are increasingly anxious and stressed using language which is like, for example, *deadlines*. When someone is about to give birth, to give life to something, we call it a *due date*. In business, we call it a *deadline*. We're going to *kill it*. We're going to *execute* the strategy. *Bullet* points even. And so without even realizing it, a lot of our language in business is either war based - must win battles - or mechanistic - engines of growth, key performance indicators.

But human beings are not machines. We are living systems. And so if we can evolve our language to help people thrive, unleashing potential. Instead of human resources it's now a lot about people. This is really important, because our words create our world, and it's hardly surprising that people are so stressed, if the language is almost creating a kind of PTSD environment within the work.

Bob Pickard

Definitely. Yeah.

Olivier Malafronte

I am very much in agreement. One big passion that actually pushed me into AI and coaching is actually the passion for language. Because, for instance, AI bring this great opportunity: if you use the right technique or the right process, the tool, you basically can frame your AI tool so that people can become more aware and start using different language. Here I definitely see a point.

To what you were, commenting on and asking Bob - I do have agreements with what, you said and what Susan said. I'm just thinking about some of the executive clients that I have now as a human coach as well. It's more on their leadership transition, and communication is a second dimension that we touch. The first one that I touch with them is actually their change of identity. They're in a transition, and they need to shift the perspective. They need to identify some of their resources or shift some perspective to build these new identity parts that enables then a new attitude, a new behavior, and eventually a change in communication.

Bob Pickard

That's a great point, because every executive has all these different things about them. They have a personality, they've got a character, they've got competence. So - which of those things about them do they share with other people, when they frame something, or when they prime their people? What is it about them? What have they decided they will share? Which three or four or five things will they align with their constituencies in a way that adds value and motivates and inspires?

Brian Underhill

Yeah, I'm sure, Bob, you do this in your work. We all see this with leaders who need to be better communicators. Sometimes they have those blockages inside them. Oh, I'll never be like that person. Or I'm too introverted... I'm sure you help them work through that, as we all would, perhaps in a way that you use it to your strength, or you use it to your advantage, or, you work around it if that's something that really gets in your way.

Some people may think, oh, I say um too much when I speak in public, and that's terrible. And it helps them to see well, you're overjudging yourself on that one. I don't think most people even care what kind of ums you say. Bob maybe can fix me on this one now.

They're judging themselves unnecessarily on something that doesn't need to be worried about, per se. So, it's a lot of taking what that person is and who they are and then using that for their advantage actually and breaking out some of those thoughts that get in their way to say, oh, I can't do this, or I'm not suitable for this.

Olivier Malafronte

Like, I'm going to take this great topic here as an opportunity to tell you a short story about how I've been using AI with one of my exec clients for that kind of thing. It was a team manager who needed to be speaking up more, become able to think faster, to be able to communicate things in high stake meetings. To get to that outcome we've been working on two or three sessions; first actually just one or two sessions with human coaching to go into the identity and identify what that person, who that person, needed to be and wanted to be.

I then understood the wall that my client was hitting, and I wasn't going to be there the week after and the week after as a human coach. I created an AI coach for that person actually use the term that Brian just used, I call that the strength playbook.

I had created that AI coach that my client was able to use after our session, so that he was able to activate again that identity shift and self perception to trigger the capability to communicate and speak up in a high-stake meeting; to touch a specific, punctual performance, because then he became able to do that, to enact that behavior of speaking up, or making the communication in high stake meetings, and then replicated, and over time through regularity, this became a competency.

To achieve that need of communication, we've been working on that inner connection and the emergence of an augmented perception of identity for that new role that my client was taking. The story is also a way to tell people how I'm using AI coaching to augment my coaching processes and to augment my client's competencies. It's an interesting loop to talk about communication, identity and leadership development with AI.

Roland Deiser

May I throw in here what communication really means? What you guys are talking about seems to me very much like this one way - giving a speech or appearing, in a large-scale event, being a competent communicator. But communication, the Latin word communis, it also means to create something together.

And then - identity is also something which is constructed through interaction. It is not something which exists independent from communication. Identity is an interplay between self-image and the perception of others. The act of communication creates actually always, hopefully, new insights and new reality. Listening is as important a part of communication as talking.

The question is that when it comes to identity - and I agree 100% with what you said, Oliver, that it's about identity and then understanding how your identity evolves - I don't think you can change identity. You can eventually develop into a broader, more conscious more comprehensive, more systemic, aware kind of identity. Starting from your birth, you make your experiences through interactions, through communications, through work, through the context you're in, and they shape your identity while we go on. So, there's an interplay. I just wanted to say it's not a one-way street.

Olivier Malafronte

Yeah, that person, that client, in the first session and second session with me was actually seeing the boss as a great example of communication - a fast communicator, a high-stake communicator. But by setting an intention and working on identity, the communication style, the leadership style of my client, actually was very different from that exemplar that he was seeing at the beginning, and he communicated from a very personal identity, kind of, anchored way.

And the AI coaching tool was actually here to supplement, augment, expanding my presence in a way to keep connecting my clients to that intention and work on identity. That's the real interesting aspect of integrating AI into the coaching process or leadership development processes. Because without that tool it would have been very difficult for my clients to reproduce or work in a very personally interactive way on that intention and identity shift.

That's where I'm seeing the great opportunity for connecting clients to this. There is an intention, but sometimes connecting back to that intention, and bringing that intention and that identity into the flow of work and into that tension moment is quite challenging. So, with an AI tool, that always contextualizes and personalizes and activates you back, that is really interesting for moving from performance to actual competence and repeated action, repeated behaviors.

Susan Goldsworthy

That brings to mind a story of Satya Nadella at Microsoft, when he became CEO. Previously, Microsoft had been described as very aggressive, combative culture, with fixed mindsets, and he wanted to bring in a growth mind shift, or growth mindset, so people were to become curious and learn-it-all, versus know-it-all.

And one of the first things he did was he went to a conference, a small conference with a few hundred people, and he answered a question about gender pay gap. He was asked, should women ask for a pay rise? And he said, no, no, just trust the system. And then he got a backlash from people. What he then did was write an email to the whole organization, saying, I was at this event, I was asked this question, and I answered it completely wrong. I don't know enough about this. He was modeling the behavior that he wants others to do.

This ability to be vulnerable, to say, hey, I don't have all the answers, because nobody does in today's world, connects. This links to how are we congruent in the day-to-day, versus the old model of the pillar, the hard rock, who's not going to show any emotion, but then no one can connect with it. It's not realistic. It's not human.

Olivier Malafronte

Sometimes I hear AI doesn't have empathy. But even without empathy, without the human empathy, AI can actually trigger and augment or improve the empathy within a human in a specific moments where empathy is needed, which is what I've seen in some of my PhD participants.

When using AI, they think from a different position. They start, then they add a little bit more empathy when they speak with others, or when they need to deal with attention. I think this is super interesting and super important. It's just what I see in my research, what I'm convinced about. I see that a good AI coaching tool or assistance or technique can actually trigger in one person more empathy or human skills in a specific moment for a specific person, and potentially change the whole process forwards. This is really what I'm passionate about, and I'm excited to continue my work on AI coaching. Because you mentioned human – so I think it's important to understand, that even AI is not a human coach, AI can trigger, augment, and support some of the key human skills we need to see within people at work.

Roland Deiser

Susan, you're nodding a lot. So, before I bring in somebody else, maybe a comment on this.

Susan Goldsworthy

Yeah, I like the fact that it's augmentation and support, so not much replacement. I think that's the key part here. Like any tool, a tool is a tool, and it can help and support and nudge versus replace. And so I love the way you frame this, Olivier.

Olivier Malafronte

It's replacing the human coach at a specific moment for a specific purpose. But, that's a debate that we can have another night.

Susan Goldsworthy

And also, just to say, Olivier, I think no coach should be available. 24/7, it's not healthy. We are a living system. But if my coach wakes up at 3am in the morning and they want support, I can be there.

Olivier Malafronte

And just to reassure all the people that are listening - when we see that AI brings the opportunity to be shared with more people, it also means that more people start or engage in coaching processes and

discoveries, which, in the end, down the line, this is creating more coaching opportunities for human coaches. AI can definitely replace the human coach and do the job at a specific moment for a specific issue. Even if this is a replacement, it means that coaching is brought to more people, which means more coaching opportunities. So it's balanced. We have to understand that.

Roland Deiser

Let me welcome Rolf here. We know each other actually relatively short only, Rolf, but you've been working with my buddy Roddy Miller, who is my co-publisher on Developing Leaders Quarterly. He's actually also an author of one of the articles in this issue, and he has been writing a whole book about these things. Maybe you introduce yourself quickly, Rolf, and you certainly have a statement or question or contribution you would like to share with this audience here, and the panel.

Rolf Pfeiffer

Thank you very much, Roland for bringing me into the conversation, and great to be with you all. So, I took 11 years after graduating from a university, moving through different roles in consumer goods and the consulting world and the pharmaceutical world, until I found what I really wanted to do, and that is executive development. And in March of next year, I'm going to blow the 20 candles on my professional cake for having been in this space for a while.

There's one thing that I'd like to bring into the conversation and see how you react to. Earlier this year, I worked with a colleague with an executive team of a big pharmaceutical company, one of the top 10 in the world. We were speaking about the sales force, and the CEO said, I've been in the pharmaceutical industry for 30 years, and for 30 years I've heard people say that the sales force will be replaced, that we will not need a sales force. And he said, this has been wrong for 30 years. It will be wrong for the next 30 years, because the last jobs that will go are the ones that are empathy-led.

And why do I bring this into the conversation? Because Olivier made this point that if AI is used properly, it can augment something. And I believe that for those of us who've been in this space for a number of years, the idea of wanting to continue to work in the way that we've done is probably attractive. So - how can we use empathy, which at this point in time, only human beings are able to bring to the conversation in a way that we are able to relate with - how can we use that and then find a good cooperation between the human empathy and the ability of the machine?

Brian Underhill

Yeah, I hear a lot about this in all these conferences I've been to the last few years. It was hilarious; in New York, they started to use the term the human coach, and we are all laughing, wow, that's a new term, the human coach. And a lot of talk about what makes us uniquely human, and what humans are best at, over any machine, and the fact that we're wired, naturally, of course, to be in relationship with each other.

None of us live completely by ourself in Alaska with no other human connection. Most people live at least somewhat in relationship with others. That human connection is still going to be absolutely positively necessary at all times. And just like Olivier is saying - and someone had asked in one of the

question panels here if AI would replace humans altogether - I think most of us probably here would say, No, it's a supplement. It's an enhancement. That's the way I'm looking at it in executive coaching - how could we use AI to enhance what the human coach is doing because it can be available 24/7, and there's various tasks it can perform quite well.

But again, that human relationship piece can't be replaced, although it probably will be somehow, some way. Some will attempt, just like the famous movie we all saw, with the guy who falls in love with his operating system? I'm told that that may be actually happening in real life.

Olivier Malafronte

What you just said, Brian, made me think about an interview with a nationally renowned coach, a human coach, who was using the AI platform that I've created, and that he was telling me something interesting. He created like 10 or 15 AI coaches for his practice. He told me, I test these AI coaches, and sometimes, or even most of the time, they, do not reply the way I would reply. But what they reply is actually good. It's actually something that I could consider, and it brings another opportunity, another, perspective.

So he's been building his AI tools based on his knowledge, using his documentation, his knowledge, his framework. He's basically shaping the scope or, let's say, structuring his own AI tools. I think that was quite interesting, because I'm sometimes also the observer my weaknesses. We, coaches, I think, have also the mission to be reflexive, and we have to look at how we practice and how we do things. If we know how to introspect and look at ourselves with honesty, I think this is a good progress.

And so, when you do that exercise, you become aware that you do not know everything, and you do not know is actually a lot more than what you know. You become aware that sometimes you may be biased in some situations. You become aware of your weaknesses, all that. So, what does that mean? It means that we human do not have super powers. We're fallible. We have, weak points, blind spots. I think this is just also very important and interesting to bring in a conversation, because that's also where AI is actually quite interesting - through its techniques, methods, and frameworks to come in and potentially help us, the coaches, or help our clients to have another perspective. Sometimes the mechanistic approach is not bad.

Sometimes it's just about removing the human emotional bias that potentially can be bothering the clients. I'm going to close my my blah blah here, just thinking about what I'm using in some of the presentations that I do. One of the mid level leaders was actually reporting the benefit that she was seeing when using the AI coach. She said what I liked was actually the absence of the human emotion. I was not polluted by the other emotion. And so I was able to have a better qualified situation or qualified reflection, and my need, my decision was more adequate. That's just interesting. I'm not saying that it should be this all the time. I think becoming aware of all the bias and that we are not always the best ones, AI can bring a different response that is also good...

Roland Deiser

That was a very long statement, Olivier. We don't have too much time left, so let's spread it equally between the six of us.

Susan Goldsworthy

If I could add a sort of left wing one in, which is also that we do have to be conscious that the way we are progressing on this planet means that water is going to be an extremely valuable resource in the future. Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, said that by 2030 half the population of Africa will be climate refugees. And if you think about the amount of energy and water that's required to run the data centers, it may get to a point where we have to choose - are we providing water for people to live, or are we providing it for systems?

I think there is a responsibility around this area and a governance that's missing. It's a little bit like the sorcerer's apprentice. The sorcerer has left the room, and Mickey Mouse is kind of playing. Somebody showed me a dog video the other day, and it was really funny. And I'm like, oh, send that to me. And then I took it and my son, who's 34, saw it and he said, That's AI generated. That's not real. So there's an enormous amount of energy, water and everything going into creating cat videos and dog videos - where is our responsibility as a human race to ensure not only our species, but the other species on the planet have a sustainable planet on which to survive?

Rolf Pfeiffer

Well, just to build upon that Susan, that would mean that for any query that any of us put into any system that has any relationship to an AI system somewhere, there would need to be some sign saying this has used that much energy, that much water. That's the carbon footprint of your query. I'm not sure whether we can do that or not, technically. I look at one of our children who is an avid Tiktok user. I have never understood Tiktok - sorry for all those who like Tiktok, but I never understood it, and I save a lot of energy because I don't use it. And are we aware? It's an awareness that we're lacking. I don't know whether that's connected to the future of executive coaching, but it's an important point anyway.

Susan Goldsworthy

And I think, yeah, absolutely. And as Peter says, we're exploiting people in third world countries where we're actually clearing forests to create data centers and displacing tribes and populations. There's a lot of ethical stuff going on around this, which is kind of largely ignored in the day-to-day. I think it's something that we do need to bring and talk about.

Roland Deiser

Well, let's alter the direction of our chat a bit. Awareness of sustainable goals and things like that - how does it relate to the future of coaching? The question is - is there some ethical kind of mission that coaches should have? Peter Drucker famously said, business should contribute positive society. And we see a lot of toxic environments, not only in terms of personalities, but also the way organizations act as toxic actors on this planet.

If you coach, would you also work on the ethical position of a company, would you challenge what they do, their business model, all these kinds of things that just came out here? Or do coaches stay away? Are they just about maximizing performance, as we said before.? Any thoughts on that? The responsibility of coaches to also coach towards ethical organizations.

Bob – you've been actually in that field a lot, as I know. Few know that, maybe, but Bob, for a while, was chief communication officer of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, and you famously left that position because of ethical reasons.

Bob Pickard

It was an ethical consideration that led me to depart the bank in a high-profile manner. But in terms of the ethics of coaching the leader, it's very important that when the leader communicates something they never deliberately transmit information that they know to be false or untrue.

Now there could be exaggeration sometimes, or misunderstandings, inadvertent mistakes, but the intentionality is very important. Do you believe that the ends justify the means? You think that lying is a way to get what you want, like taking candy from a baby, from these suckers? There are you an extractive personality? That is very important.

That's a very important ethical boundary that many executives cross all the time, unfortunately, and the fish rots from the head down. Because of what's going on in the United States now, there's a crisis at Global Corporate Communication, because everyone's doing it. All of these CEOs, all of these leaders, are under pressure to lie and to be just like the President of the United States, because, if he's doing it, why can't I? And besides – it seems to work!

Rolf Pfeiffer

This is a tough one, and there is no simple answer. I mean, how could there be a simple answer for this type of question? My sense is that there is a personal perspective we can take as individuals. Can I justify to myself and to important people around me that I work with this organization or with this individual?

That's one thing, and the other is that we also need to be aware of the fact that working with us is always a choice. There is no obligation for anyone to work with any of us. So we may have limited opportunity of actually having an influence. That limited opportunity that we have, I would declare, I must use. But let's be clear, it's limited, because they can walk away at any point in time and say, not interested.

It's a very careful conversation that I'm deeply convinced we should have, but we will have limited impact just based on the nature of the interaction that we normally have.

Roland Deiser

We are reaching almost the end of our allotted time, and we're going to wrap this up in a couple of minutes. But we're touching also a conversation, which I think is really very, very important and maybe deserves more research. I once did way, way back, almost 30 years ago, an article on the postconventional consciousness of organizations.

Back then, the question was - is there a way to put ethical behavior into the DNA of an organization and transform it in a way that ethics depend not just on the people in charge, but that it is structurally embedded. Because if you're lucky, you get a great leader, but next time, you're not so lucky, and then this leader destroys everything again. Is there a way to put the resilience of ethical behavior into an organization, in its structures and its principles, into how it works - I find this still a fascinating question.

And so coaching, if we look at it on one hand from working with the individual towards whatever this individual may become, in its capability, in its potential, and including not only performance, but also ethical and other questions, and we do this towards teams, towards whole departments, business units, the whole organization, and eventually, with Susan, probably on the planet - is there a role?

Because I think that most coaches - and we have a lot of them in the audience today and also the readership of Developing Leaders Quarterly - I believe most coaches have that kind of ethical of impetus. They want to do good. They are people who want to work with people so that they do better. It's kind of a population which is quite interesting in that respect. And as you rightly say, Rolf, you're only there as long as you're hired and they can force you out.

But same goes also for CEOs. They have expiring contracts, and sometimes it's good that they have. I think that becomes really interesting if you also consider ownership structures. Publicly listed on the stock market versus family ownership. In privately owned family businesses, you may find that kind of responsibility, of intergenerational anchored ethics, which is an interesting question. But as I said, we're reaching the end. Maybe a very quick flashlight at the end of the session. How did you feel at the end of this hour and a half? Just very quick, because we only have got a couple of minutes left.

Susan Goldsworthy

Thank you, Roland. Well, I feel stimulated and inspired by my fellow panelists, but also all the fantastic comments in the in the chat. I think this just shows how people inspire people.

Olivier Malafronte

I feel hopeful we can bring these, these questions and topics, to a broader audience, the ones that potentially do not have this under their eyes on a daily basis.

Brian Underhill

I'd say similar, I didn't think we'd be here 30 years later talking about this, John. Talking about coaching in the first place, let alone the impact that coaching could have on organizations and on the world, but here we are doing so. So I'm just glad to be part of this ride.

Roland Deiser

Thank you, guys, and also thank you Rolf and Bob for jumping in and bringing your perspective. A big, big thank you, of course, to the audience who held out. We're still 55 here or 56 and I think it has been a great conversation. Yeah, people say, follow us on LinkedIn. Follow each other on LinkedIn. The Center has an account, too.

As always, we going to share a transcript of this. We're going to share this chat summary, because there was interesting stuff in there, and I look forward to the next installment of our series. Have a nice evening, day, morning, wherever you are.