



The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations

ijco

The Future of Executive Coaching and Leadership with Commentary

By Val Williams, M.C.C. and Joan O. Wright, M.C.C.

This article first appeared in the *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 2007, 5(1),58-76. It can only be reprinted and distributed with prior written permission from Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). Email John Lazar at john@ijco.info for such permission.

Journal information:
www.ijco.info

Purchases:
www.pcpionline.com

2007

ISSN 1553-3735

© Copyright 2007 PCPI.
All rights reserved worldwide.



Professional Coaching Publications, Inc.





The Future of Executive Coaching and Leadership

VAL WILLIAMS, M.C.C. AND JOAN WRIGHT, M.C.C.

This article first appeared in the International Journal of Coaching in Organizations, 2005, 3(3), 37-47. Reprinted with permission of IJCO and Professional Coaching Publications, Inc.

This article is an abridged version of a joint interview executed in November of 2004 between senior executive coaches Val Williams and Joan Wright. The interview resulted from a commitment these senior executive coaches made months prior while serving on a seven-member team that organized and led two highly successful panel discussions. With Val Williams in New York and Joan Wright in North Carolina, the coaches entered into a lively “virtual interview discussion” focused on the future. Specifically, they offered viewpoints and shared opinions on how the future will affect both executive coaches and executive leadership in the areas of strategic direction, leadership capacity and work-life balance. We enter their conversation at the beginning.

Val: Our topic is the future of coaching. We have focused on where our client needs and our executive coaching profession intersects. Joan, I can’t help but quote a sign that I used to see every day in the lobby of a building where I worked. It was etched in granite on the wall and it read, “The future belongs to those who prepare for it.”

Joan: What a powerful quote.

Val: It’s perfect for today. We will be talking about how to prepare for the future from two perspectives. Because coaching is a partnership, we are looking at the future from both sides of that partnership. Joan will be reflecting on the future from the perspective of the senior executive leader. Specifically, what will senior leaders have as challenges in the future? What will senior leaders’ needs be in the future? I will be looking at the future from the perspective of the executive coach. To serve senior leaders in the future, what is it that executive coaches are going to have to do to be prepared? Perhaps the bigger question, who will executive coaches need to be in the future? Joan, for the benefit of our readers, let’s give a little summary concerning our respective backgrounds.

THE COACHES’ BACKGROUNDS

Joan: Great. Val Williams is a Master Certified Coach and president of her own company - Professional Coaching and Training. Additionally, she comes to our executive coaching profession from real-world experience as an executive in the healthcare field leading staffs as large as 700. You know, Val, often what makes us credible is not just our experience. Our style also determines our credibility. In my mind, your style stands out because of the clarity and practical approach you create with your clients. You are all about helping leaders achieve their business results, while also developing the leaders that work for them. I believe that executives are drawn to your particular style, and so are coaches, myself included. Lastly, I think people need to know that you are a successful author, having written *Get the Best Out of Your People and Yourself*,¹ *Virtual Leadership*,² and *Executive Think Time*.³ You should know that I have given several copies of one of these books to my clients, because I think clients find it useful to have simple models and tools for building outstanding leadership.

Val: Thank you, Joan. I think everyone would appreciate knowing

that you are also a Master Certified Coach, and president of your own company, O'Sullivan-Wright Consulting, in Charlotte, North Carolina. Joan, what I like about your focus is that you help companies get results by doing one thing really well: attracting, developing, and keeping key leadership talent. I'm certain every senior executive knows how difficult that is today. You are also distinctive in our field because of your real-world experience. You have been a corporate exec with twenty-one years of Human Resources roles in various corporations. I am impressed by the fact that you have also been head of an executive leadership development program and I really appreciate the fact that your approach is to remind organizations that if they want to keep top talent, they have to create a culture that supports retention. I like your view that people don't just leave companies. They leave poor leaders and cultures that don't fit their values. This is an important viewpoint for senior executives.

I believe leaders will need to step up in a bigger, more dramatic way. Some leaders will need to fill the CEO role before they think they have to.

THREE QUESTIONS FROM SENIOR EXECUTIVE CLIENTS

Val: Now that we have shared a bit on our backgrounds, our next requirement should be explaining how we selected the future of executive coaching as a discussion topic. Since the future is such a huge topic I like what we did, Joan. We decided to get our arms around it by addressing three prominent questions that we have received from senior executive clients. These are:

- “In the future how will I, as a senior leader, set strategic direction?”
- “How will I develop leadership capacity to meet the needs that the future presents?”
- “How will I create the work-life balance that I'm going to need in order to be agile and resilient in meeting the demands of changes in the future?”

The first question focuses on strategic direction. The second one involves the development of leadership capacity and the third question addresses creating work-life balance. Before we explore each of these areas, why don't we start by sharing our overall viewpoint on “the future.” Since you are looking at these questions from the perspective of the senior executive leader and I am looking at it from the perspective of the senior executive coach, can you start us off by sharing your observations about what leaders will be facing in the future?

Future Challenges for Senior Executives

Joan: In my mind, the future for leaders will be tougher than it has ever been. I think it is critical to understand several general themes and observations, as they relate to the future and how we, as coaches, must seek to be more relevant. I believe leaders will need to step up in a bigger, more dramatic way. Some leaders will need to fill the CEO role before they think they have to. We see this theme play out in the business headlines today. I don't know whether you have had a chance to track with this, but more CEOs than ever before in our history are leaving at their own wishes or being asked to leave by their Boards. Second, I believe leaders are going to need to lead and manage a much more diverse workforce. The demographics are changing as we speak. Something that gets my clients' attention is when I share the statistic that in the next three to five years, 40% of the workforce will be eligible to retire.⁴ The final theme concerns the ability of a leader to engage both the hearts and minds of the people they lead. I was impressed with the work Gallup did several years ago when it reported that less than 50% of our workforce is engaged.⁵ This is really a compelling statistic, don't you think?

To serve future leaders, we as executive coaches have to become stronger leaders in our own right. We are going to have to be bolder and lead in a much fuller way.

Future Challenges for Executive Coaches

Val: Yes, amazing. When I listen to what you described – the scene that the executive leader is going to be facing in the future – I ask, “What is my general viewpoint about executive coaches, and what are they going to have to do in the future to be ready for such a complex world?” Here is what I’ve decided. To serve future leaders, we as executive coaches have to become stronger leaders in our own right. We are going to have to be bolder and lead in a much fuller way. I believe we will have to work on strengthening our own personal leadership

development. As coaches we use leadership models with senior executives to help them become stronger leaders. I think the same models we use as tools for our clients to prepare for the future should be applied to our own profession.

Here is an example. We all have leadership models. My model and the way I coach senior executives is based on a

simple model that I developed called “The Three Cs of Leadership.”⁶ Simply put, when I look at my most successful clients over the last several years, I’ve observed three things that successful leaders seem to have in common. These Three Cs of Leadership are: Clarity, Courage, and Connection. I believe as executive coaches that we need to develop these three Cs. We need more clarity about how we add value to organizations by looking at outcomes. We need the courage to tell the fuller truth to our clients sooner and more assertively. We are also going to need more courage with each other as fellow coaches as we insist on continually raising the standards of high quality in executive coaching. Finally, there is connection. As executive coaches, we need more connection with each other so we can benefit from collaboration. A perfect example is this dialogue. In the future, we will need to work with each other to develop better solutions with clients. We must develop more connection with the total organization, not just the leader.

QUESTION #1 – STRATEGIC DIRECTION

Val: Now that we have each shared our general viewpoint on this topic, we can address our three questions in detail. Our first question asked by senior leaders was, “In the future, how will I set strategic direction?” Will you start Joan? What are some of your thoughts on what leaders are going to have to think about when it comes to the topic of strategic direction?

Joan: Executives are going to need to do a better job of evaluating their leadership style. Much like they might strategically plan to evaluate a new market, a new product line or a new strategic alliance. They are going to have to ask themselves,

“How good am I at this particular style? Does it really match my unique abilities? How will this unique ability be predictive for the future?”

As we discuss the future for our executive clients, it makes sense to think of our leadership style and unique ability much like our own DNA. It too, can be very predictive. For example, “people-driven” leaders that we might find in the consumer-products industries are focused on people and how they consume. “Idea” leaders, like the leaders in our technology sector, might have an interest in future innovation. Leaders who are “operationally driven,” like those from financial institutions, will base their future on their ability to leverage execution, enabling mergers to be truly profitable. In addition to understanding their style, future executives will also have to be able to capture the outgoing

Executives are going to need to do a better job of evaluating their leadership style. Much like they might strategically plan to evaluate a new market, a new product line or a new strategic alliance.

I think we have evolved as coaches to the point where we realize that we are also “thought-partners.”

wisdom as people retire. At the same time, they must make sure their culture is an inclusive one that ensures they are attracting and retaining the best.

Years ago, someone gave me a great mental picture that I still think about today. The picture was that the true assets of a company literally come and go, up and down the elevator every day. Lastly, there is a need for leaders to engage the hearts and minds of people they lead. Executives must see this as a process. Peter Block, a mentor of mine, talks about it as a three-step process.⁷ The leader initially casts the vision and the values. Then in a second step, he or she enrolls the vision and the values of his or her leadership team. Finally, in the third step, the leader casts a net and pulls the collective visions and values together. Therefore, I believe in really engaging and linking the hearts and minds of the people in the organization.

Val: Well put, Joan. I especially like what you just said about those three steps. I think that gives leaders a simple, clear way to look at it, when we start to think about this whole question of strategic direction. If that is what leaders are going to be up against when it comes to setting strategic direction, what do coaches have to start thinking about and how are we going to help? I believe that we, as coaches, need to be stronger leaders in the future in our own right. Clarity would be one of the places I would start in becoming stronger. We need much more clarity about our own role with our clients. When I hear some of the things you are talking about Joan, I think our role in the future is going to have to expand. I am proud to be an executive coach and proud of our industry as well. We have come to realize that we do more than just help executives achieve their goals. A big part of coaching is about goal setting and goal-achievement and we do that well. However, I think we have evolved as coaches to the point where we realize that we are also “thought-partners.” I like that term: “thought-partners.” I heard it earlier this year. We are helping executives think of things and going well beyond just goal-attainment. We are also experts in executive development and that is working very well. In the future, I think we are going to have to go beyond even that. A colleague and I have been working on the distinction between executive development and executive mastery. Here is what we are thinking. As coaches, we work a lot on executive development, but development has the connotation of progress, getting better. So, for example, on a scale from one to 10, with 10 being the best, if we help an executive improve from a six to an eight that is executive development. That’s good, that’s positive, and we are going to continue to do that.

He is really going to have to step up, because as we all know, running a \$20 million company is not the same as what you have to do to build a company up to \$5 million or \$10 million.

Joan: Feels like success.

Val: Yes, it does feel like success and I think it works well today. However, in the future, I think we will have to get executives into mastery. Mastery implies more than development. Mastery is about being a 10. It is all about having full command of a skill like setting strategic direction. It might also be about people being clear on their leadership style. In either case, executive mastery will require mastery around one’s own leadership style. As executive coaches we are going to have to be very clear that our role includes getting executives to mastery. This again brings up the Clarity part of the “3 Cs”. We will also need the Courage to make a request of an executive that they go all the way to mastery, versus stopping at some lesser level of progress.

Joan: We can really be excited about progress in success. I like the fact that you

are encouraging them to understand the term mastery.

As a coach, and when I think of what coaches must do in the future, this is a perfect example of the courage conversation. I have just started working with this client, but one of the questions I had to ask is, “Why do you want to be a leader?”

Val: I have a perfect example of the courage that is needed to step up as an executive coach. I have a client who is the president of a manufacturing company. His vision is doubling the company’s revenue over the next 10 years. His company is currently a \$10 million organization and he wants to grow to about \$20 million. He has a very clear objective. Now, as his coach I need to deliver the clarity so he understands that my role is going to include helping him develop mastery in certain areas. When he does, he will reach his objective and realize his vision. Because his vision requires a big advancement, my coaching will not be about him doing things a little better. He is really going to have to step up, because as we all know, running a \$20 million company is not the same as what you have to do to build a company up to \$5 million or \$10 million. I’ve been struggling with this and trying to get up the courage to ask him the key questions that will help him identify what is missing in the organization. This will be a discussion about strategic direction. For this particular client, it is going to require huge changes, not just in him, but also in the people around him.

Moreover, as you often say Joan, sometimes you have to look at the entire system, not just the individual. I am going to have to be a leader in my own right, in a much fuller way, going forward. I won’t tell him what to do, but I must lead him to question some of the assumptions that have worked well for him in the past but may not work for him in the future. He has a big goal in a complex world. As executive coaches in the future, we need to look at Clarity about our role. This not only includes developing, it also includes going beyond executive development to executive mastery. We will need the courage to request big actions from clients.

Joan: We also need to conduct conversations like these in the context of mastery with your executive client.

Val: Absolutely, Joan. When we were talking about strategic direction in general, you make an important point. When we talk about strategic direction, we also have to look at meaning, higher purpose, and values.

Joan: I firmly believe in the concept of engaging the hearts and minds. Last week I was talking to a client who really illustrated for me what larger purpose means. He was talking about being grateful for the financial results that he and his executive team were achieving in their organization. During his commentary, I saw this smile emerge on his face and I said, “What else is there for you?” He replied, “You know, I really feel like we are improving the quality of life for the people who work for us.” That is such a strong purpose and one of the primary reasons he set out to establish this company eighteen years ago. It was meaningful for me just to see his facial expressions because I knew that he had gotten there. I know that the partners who support them in getting their products and services out and the community in which they do business can all be connected to that purpose for this leader. He is really making it happen in a purposeful way.

Val: That is so great. You are really onto something Joan when you describe his face lighting up. That translates to a higher purpose for him. I’m glad you mentioned this, because it is an essential part of strategic direction. When I think of what you just said, I ask, “What’s that going to call forth from us as executive coaches?”

When you enroll people in a vision that follows the strategic direction, I think executive leaders will be in touch with their own values and higher purpose. That is how they are going to enroll people in the strategic direction. I can relate this to a client I just started with. We are not heavily into coaching yet, but this client is the head of a department in the pharmaceutical industry. The interesting thing is that he does have a strategic direction for the organization; however, to your point, he has not captured the hearts and minds of his people. He does not have enrollment, because he does not have enough connection with people to make it happen. As a coach, and when I think of what coaches must do in the future, this is a perfect example of the courage conversation. I have just started working with this client, but one of the questions I had to ask is, “Why do you want to be a leader?”

Then I had to proceed with the question, “Why should people work for you?” That question he could not answer.

Joan: What a powerful question, Val.

Val: Yes. I was nervous about asking this question because I could be fired even before I am officially hired. You know one of our colleagues has stated, “You can’t worry about getting fired if you’re really going to go for excellent outcomes for the company.” My client was able to answer my tough question, but then I had to proceed with the question, “Why should people work for you?” That question he could not answer. This is when I felt like I was really coaching because now we have a context in which to work. We need to find an answer to that question of why would people want to work for this leader. Here is where I think courage is required of us as coaches. Believe me, I am still working on my courage to ask such questions. It is still about realizing that if we are going to create an outcome for the company, not just for that leader, we want the company to have a clear vision, clear strategy and alignment of people around that strategy. That is how, as you say, we will keep talent, and hold onto the hearts and minds of people.

Joan: Val, I also think that when you and I go out and shadow with clients (by spending time with them in action) we can see the different ways they are enrolling their people. You know they should be asking questions like, “What do you want to do next?” and “How do you want to use your unique abilities?” rather than giving a direct order like “Mary or John, the organization needs you to do this.” I think that leaders of the future must also be willing to ask, “What’s next and how do you want to use your abilities in your own personal leadership?” As you’re asking powerful questions like, “Why would I want to work for you?” I think it is important to also what questions our clients are asking of the people that work for them.

Val: That is a great build. We must model it, but they have to cascade it down. That brings me to another piece I have been thinking about, Joan. When you talk about the future being so complex and demanding, I think in addition to asking these tough questions we have to demonstrate to senior executive leaders that we are strong enough to be with them. They need to see us as peers. This is very important because in the future whatever answers executives give regarding their strategic direction, they can not be the same old response. It will definitely be something brand new. I expect to be an executive coach who is going to be leading her clients into the unknown. I believe if executives do not feel that we as coaches are strong enough, there are many places they will not go with us. That is why we must have

We have to demonstrate to senior executive leaders that we are strong enough to be with them. They need to see us as peers.

not only courage, but also clarity. In addition, it will require connection. We must be able to connect with senior leaders so they will trust us enough to go deep into the unknown. Only then will they be able to come up with creative new answers for strategic direction.

QUESTION #2 – LEADERSHIP CAPACITY

Val: Let's move on to our second question. We hear senior executive leaders ask us about leadership capacity. The question is, "So how am I, as a senior leader, going to develop the leadership capacity to meet the needs that the future presents?"

What do you think will be the future challenges and the needs of the senior executive?

If you are really going to retain and develop talent, it has to be more than coaching. It has to be a whole coaching culture.

Joan: You know this one is a favorite of mine, Val. I believe executives will need to blend the leadership development we have been talking about so far with the actual function of leadership. There is no doubt that executives today see the importance of their own development. I am not concerned about that at all. They also see the importance of developing people around them. The problem is that they are quick to put it on hold when short-term results are at risk or the inevitable unexpected kicks in. So I ask myself the question, how can executives increase their ability to see this conflict in priorities as an opportunity to be coaches themselves? They constantly need to be work through such challenges and see them as a learning mindset for themselves and for the people they lead. Ideally, we should be coaching through the crisis, helping the executive see herself or himself as a coach with us as a partner. Throughout that process, we should be asking, "What did you learn? What did you do? How have you mentored and modeled what you're trying to create in a mastery type way?"

Val: This is a great observation, Joan. I'm sure many executive coaches have experienced exactly what you're talking about. When a crisis surfaces, you get the phone call stating, "I can't make the appointment today." Effective responses to this situation will be required in the future for executive coaches. I will go back to my model of Clarity, Courage, and Connection. We must know that having crises is part of coaching. When they occur we can't stop, we must continue. The coach

will have to have the courage to make the firm request that coaching continues to occur.

I think sometimes we get concerned as executive coaches about being perceived as self-serving. We don't want to ask for more business because it seems like we are being too aggressive or selfish.

Joan: By having it as a part of the contracting discussion, we can expect that to happen.

Val: You know, I had not thought about that until you said it, Joan, but yes, why not talk about it right up front.

We know it is going to happen. My other observation for executive coaches is that in addition to us making the request that coaching keeps going all the time, I think executive coaches in the future will request that we expand the coaching assignment. We are going to have to play much bigger and have the courage to ask the organization to create an entire coaching culture. If you are really going to retain and develop talent, it has to be more than coaching. It has to be a whole coaching culture. You know, sometimes the leaders of an organization will see that. They will come to the table with this broader perspective. However in the future we as executive coaches need to make this request for a coaching culture. Looking at the different crises a leader has may also reveal that there is something larger in the system that needs attention.

Joan: Exactly. Val, for a minute I would like to go back to your three Cs. In a coaching process, when our clients are clear about what it is they are developing or trying to master, it is at this specific point that a crisis usually kicks in. After the crisis, there must be clarity so our client knows (and we as coaches know) where to refocus our attention. When execs get off track, we need to see some patterns in the organization. You used the word culture, but what are some of the master issues that the whole organization is trying to achieve? In knowing them, we will have the clarity to partner, walk through the crisis and help them get back on track.

Val: That's a good point.

Joan: You know if we are connected, they are going to get it. They are going to say, "Well of course, join with us. We are not going to cancel this meeting. In fact, we are going to invite you to join us and help troubleshoot how we are going to get back on our master track."

Val: Exactly. Once again, this is where coaches need to be leaders in their own right. You know, I think sometimes we get concerned as executive coaches about being perceived as self-serving. We don't want to ask for more business because it seems like we are being too aggressive or selfish. In the future we are going to have to step up. I have a good example— a client who is the Senior VP of a business unit. She pretty much functions as the CEO of that unit and she has a great vision. Her vision includes wanting to hold onto talent. She wants to raise the performance of her total team. She started with some coach-training classes. Then she added some training to train the managers on coaching. Now I wish I could say this was an example where I stepped up and said, "No, no, you need a much bigger training." However, the client saw she needed more. Therefore, this Senior V.P. expanded the whole thing so it wasn't just training for the managers. She was also personally coached. Lucky for me I was able to coach her. She also expanded coaching to her team.

I really believe that executives in the future will need to fold in succession planning and talent-management as an ongoing process - something that is much more fluid.

This is a good example of someone who has made an impact on the entire culture to build leadership capacity. She did want a partner—with me as coach. You are talking about this kind of partnership. It has been a great outcome for the company so far. They are not finished yet, but her performance evaluation was the highest that it has ever been. She did attribute that to my coaching but it is not about that. It's about the outcome for the company. She attributed that to the fact that the senior team members are coaching themselves.

Joan: They are seeing themselves as leaders, as coaches along the way.

Val: Right. So that's where I think we as executive coaches can be excellent catalysts to get that going. In the future, I think we've also got to see that we have a bigger role than we probably had in the past. If the job gets big then we need to bring in collaborators so there is a "Connection" piece with executive coaches. Maybe with this client, as things expand, I will need to bring in two, three, or four more other coaches to help.

Joan: There are things that happen for the client and the client organization simultaneously.

Val: Yes, exactly. I think in the future we will be moving to more total solutions. In Information Technology (IT) they call it end-to-end solutions. We are going to have solutions for the individual leader and solutions for the company. I agree with you that the Senior Leader will be struggling a little with this concept. So in the future I will respond by stating that executive coaches simply have to play much bigger role because we're responsible.

Joan: Val, I have another observation. Executives must see that it is their role, their personal responsibility, to create. This is a major theme for me: target successors and high potential talent. Right now, I am seeing almost two extremes.

Both leaders and organizations are far too formal with a succession-planning process in place or the process is non-existent. I really believe that executives in the future will need to fold in succession planning and talent-management as an ongoing process - something that is much more fluid. They are going to have to learn how to have both conversations. I call these the "performance conversation" and the "development conversation." They

need to be able to distinguish between the two, so that when they are sitting down with their people they have the ability to frame it. They will need to talk openly about development and share when they see people who are able to move in this direction. They will also have to ask themselves how this all fits with their own personal aspirations and how it lines up with the needs of their organization. Executives in the future will need to be able to separate the performance feedback. As we know, the higher up in the organization, the less feedback or less truth you get.

Val: Right, the less truth.

Joan: I really want to see clients in the future be able to have these two kinds of conversations and move forward in a seamless way around the issue of succession planning. They need a process that blends formal and informal, but ultimately creates targeted successors and truly moves potential talent into key positions.

Val: That is right on target, Joan. I wonder how I am going to have those types of conversations in the future— where we as Executive Coaches can really be helpful to senior leaders. It will require "Clarity" and clarity is an important aspect of our role. We are talking about expanding our role but it requires expansion that includes educating senior leaders much more on coaching skills. We cannot become consultants or just trainers on coaching skills. We must actually help the leader by modeling. The way we model is to coach the leader and then have the leader coach the people. We should help the leader become familiar with these every day skills so they are used daily in a fluid way - not just when we have a performance evaluation.

An example of what I am talking about occurred the other day. I had dinner with a client who talked about his biggest challenge. His particular organization is not going to grow in the future as much as it has grown in the

past, even though the organization is very successful. He worries about the lack of upward growth in the organization. He knows not every director is going to become a vice president and that not every vice president will get to the C level. He worries about stagnation and losing talent because his organization contains highly trained and educated people. If he is going to keep people challenged, he

We cannot become consultants or just trainers on coaching skills. We must actually help the leader by modeling. The way we model is to coach the leader and then have the leader coach the people.

As coaches, we must have the courage to request that leaders hang in and continue coaching until the point when they have a sustainable outcome.

has to have the kind of conversations you just spoke about. As an executive coach, I am going to have to deliver more Clarity to help senior leaders. In addition, I will need to deliver more Connection with not only the leader but also the entire organization so that coaching becomes just a fluid part of doing business-just as you said.

Joan: I had an interesting situation occur about a month ago. I was in a meeting with my client and his boss. We were going over the action plan that this executive was committing to and validating with the boss. Quite surprising to me, this boss took the opportunity to acknowledge this leader in the organization. He said, “Do you know that not only are you a high potential, but we truly value you in this company. And you are on the formal high-potential list.”

When the plane came down the Blackberries came out. I could feel the stress level rising.

As you know, this information can sometimes remain a mystery. People wonder if they are on the list or off it. It was great to see the boss use that opportunity to acknowledge my client in the moment. He additionally said, “You are really valued here and you really need to know that we’re going to be talking about you in the next couple weeks, and what do you want to do next?” He really seized the moment and took the time to acknowledge this leader in front of me.

Val: That is so great, Joan. That executive acknowledgement sounds a lot like coaching, doesn’t it?

Joan: Yes, it really does. As you were talking to your client at dinner the other night, you were able to give your client ideas about how he can acknowledge the people who work for him. This is vitally important because the shape of our organization charts are much flatter these days and career-mobility is not what it used to be. Down at the core level there is a need for feedback regarding how employees are making a difference in the company.

Val: Exactly. When I look at what that means for executive coaches in the future it points again to Courage. As coaches, we must have the courage to request that leaders hang in and continue coaching until the point when they have a sustainable outcome like the one you described. The ability to have the executive turn around and coach others is a sustainable outcome. That is going to benefit the team and the entire organization for a long time. I think that is where we need to go as coaches. It is not just that the executive achieved his or her goals. We must be leaders in our own right and have the courage to request that executives stay in the coaching process until we can say that what they have is sustainable. It is like you were saying, Joan—you can see it demonstrated in the way executives interact with their people.

As coaches we have to have the strength to say balance is non-negotiable. If you are not balanced, you are not going to be in the game. It has to be that strong of a message.

Joan: That is getting at the mastery you talk about, Val.

Val: Yes, that is mastery.

QUESTION #3 – WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Val: On to our third and final question Joan. In the future, how will executive leaders and executive coaches create work-life balance so that they can be agile and resilient in meeting demands for future changes? What do you think will be

some of the needs and challenges of senior executives around this question of work-life balance?

He said when he rides a bike for ten or fifteen miles...he hits some kind of a wall. Nevertheless, he has trained himself to respond when he hits the wall by deciding in advance that he will not respond to it.

Joan: One of my favorites in the field, Tony Schwartz, talks about how the demand in organizational life has outstripped capacity.⁸ I think that says it all. The demand in organizational life has outstripped capacity. That really hits home with work-life balance. I really believe this creates a lot of fear, extreme fatigue, frustration and conflict. Our leaders may never feel they can unplug. This new personal technology tool, the Blackberry, is quite a phenomenon. I was on an airplane going to an executive retreat in Las Vegas. When the plane came down the Blackberries came out. I could feel the stress level rising. One of the mental pictures that Tony describes is quite vivid: in the future, executives will need to lead like corporate athletes and run throughout their lives. Instead of marathons, day after day, they will need to live their lives in short sprints. As a frustrated athlete myself, playing golf and running, I understand this. Taking short sprints is something that works well for my clients. I've brought Tony in to work with some of my clients before and they grasp the powerful difference between sprints and marathons.

Val: That is such a great concept.

Joan: This can be a hard sell, when you ask clients to look at where they stand on work-life balance. They typically respond that they don't have time to spare. One of the responses I'll often come back with concerns Monday morning. How well are you going to be able to problem-solve or deal with the unexpected if you don't give yourself, as Tony would put it, some renewal, some recovery time?

Val: Great question, Joan. Especially since you relate it to something employers care about: performance on Monday morning. You make it practical. I love this analogy of comparing work-life balance to sports. I have also noted that executives say they don't have time. That is probably one of the greatest concerns I hear from my clients.

Joan: And what do you say to that?

Val: Well, I firmly believe that executive coaches must continually deal with this statement in the future. This is really about exercising Courage. I think if executives are going to get to work-life balance, coaches are going to have to remind executives and tell them the facts just as they are. I have a colleague, Jan Austin, who says, "There's no such thing as time management, there's only self-management." I think that says it all. As coaches, we are going to have to help leaders understand how they are going to perform in the future. Things are going to be going even faster, be even more complex and be even more demanding.

As you have stated Joan, it is not going to be about marathons, it is going to be about short sprints and that balance is actually non-negotiable. As coaches we have to have the strength to say balance is non-negotiable. If you are not balanced, you are not going to be in the game. It has to be that strong of a message. I can think of several clients right now where the pushback I get as an Executive Coach requires me to stand firm. The executive will say, "You don't understand, I don't have time" or "You really don't understand, I am under enormous pressure with this operation." Now this is why, as executive coaches, it is important to have

strong business experience. You and I can respond to a client, when they say, “You don’t understand.” We can respond by stating that we do understand because we were executives. We know the kind of pressure they are experiencing. We simply have to know that to which we can and cannot say “no.”

Executives think they cannot push back on certain things. In fact, they could push back on many things. The thing I like to ask, to go to the heart of it, is why are you really overdoing it? What is going on? Are you trying to prove something? As the coach, I think we have to have Courage and enough Connection with the executive so we can ask tough questions and then be quiet while they look for the answer. You have to tell it like it is. I think that is what will help us with work-life balance.

Joan: You make a strong point about coaches needing the Courage to be able to ask tough questions and then, as you say, be willing to remain quiet afterward.

Val: We must have Clarity about simple tools that we can give leaders to help them with balance. That is my passion. Giving leaders simple, short models that they can remember and execute is also a best practice. We have talked about this Joan on several occasions. Many of our leaders are asking us for best practices. I think in the case of work-life balance, executive coaches can collect best practices from our clients. I see this as part of our job in maintaining the need to be connected.

I heard one best practice the other day. It is interesting because the client is a cyclist. He was talking about how he gets balance himself. This is a little thing, but it’s a great best practice. He said when he rides a bike for ten or fifteen miles, invariably, just like runners, he hits some kind of a wall. Nevertheless, he has trained himself to respond when he hits the wall by deciding in advance that he will not respond to it. Joan, when I heard that it struck me as a very useful perspective to share with my other clients at a time when they are at a meeting or facing an uncomfortable conflict. Just use that paradigm and say I’m in a big meeting, people are trying to sell their respective viewpoints. Remember the cyclist who said that even though he was going to get a lot of stimuli, he would decide in advance not to respond to it. I don’t have to overreact in a stressful situation. That is just one tool that I learned from a client which I can put to good use as an executive coach. I do think that assisting in achieving balance is part of our role. We have to have Clarity in executing this part of our role so we can effectively share best practices with others.

Joan: You know, Val, I didn’t realize it, but that is a tool I want to take away for myself. I can relate to this concept when I look at my daily “to do” list or when I get distracted knowing I’ve got to clear my mind so I can be focused. I’m going to remember the idea of hitting the wall but finding a way to avoid reacting to the stimuli that show up.

Val: His approach is brilliant. You simply work at eliminating overreacting to the stimuli. I want to remind everyone that this lesson came from a client.

Joan: You know there is another issue I want to mention here. I believe executives, as we look at the future, will need to be a lot more self-aware of the risks of isolation. You just mentioned a best-practices strategy. I think of our Executive

The concept of isolation came up. He said, “You know, I don’t have anybody to talk to and I can’t really talk to the other partners here, the other attorneys.”

We are so much more in balance when we are part of a community of people who are in similar situations and we are feeling that connection...

Coaching Summit group [a collaborative group of senior executive coaches from around the world that comes together once a year to share best practices among themselves.] We did a survey of our clients a couple months before our Summit in Quebec City. The number one client request of us as executive coaches was for us to bring them best-practice strategies. I think this is coming from our clients because they are isolated.

Val: That is a great observation.

It's great to be bold. But if I am going to be bold, it has to be of value to the people being served.

Joan: A core need for them is to be part of a community. Just this morning I was talking to a managing director of a law firm in Charlotte, North Carolina. He and I were interviewing each other for potential work and the concept of isolation came up. He said, "You know, I don't have anybody to talk to and I can't really talk to the other partners here, the other attorneys." I think he knows, inside, that this whole thing is affecting the balance he needs to have. I learned from another mentor and colleague of mine,

Julie Johnson in New York City, to set up peer networks with clients working on similar development needs and put them in touch. I say: "You people have a lot in common and could share some of your best practice strategies, especially around this work-life balance." Recently I was introduced to a woman with a client organization who was new to the community. I got her plugged into an executive women's group. She was able to be part of a group of very successful women who were talking about what it is like and how they as women can manage this work-life pace and really support each other.

Val: It's so great that you were able to do that!

Joan: I think she was quite surprised when I offered the networking opportunity as part of what I do as her coach. I told her I would share my network and introduce her to a group. I told her I thought the group would be valuable for her.

Val: Joan, that is an example of you, as the executive coach, being a leader in your own right. That is what leaders do. They connect with and network with each other. Here you are demonstrating exactly what we all need to do in the future. It is to have Clarity around our role and expand parts of our role, where appropriate, so we are leaders as well as their peers. Many senior executives have no natural peers in their organization, so they must seek outside contacts.

Joan: Right. They don't.

Val: You helped her establish an external link. That is adding tremendous value.

Joan: We are so much more in balance when we are part of a community of people who are in similar situations and we are feeling that connection... Ideas that we can access save us time and frustrations. Peers really help us think through difficult situations. We are not the only source of contact for the client, so helping establish a peer network is part of a larger piece. It reminds me of one of my client organizations with the credo that it takes a village to develop leaders.

Val: I like the strategy you just identified because it helps us expand and look at other ways to add value. We are not becoming consultants. We are still being coaches in everything we do, even if we bring best practices to the client, since we

remain focused on what the client is going to do with the best practice information we have delivered. Furthermore, we can urge the client to develop her or his own best practices. This is what coaching is all about.

Joan: Yes, absolutely.

Val: It sounds like we are agreeing here that balance is a decision a leader must make. In addition, as a coach, we have to request that the leader make the decision. Balance is non-negotiable.

Joan: Yes.

SUMMARY AND DEBRIEFING

Val: Well, Joan we are already coming to the end of our conversation. In summary, we have talked about the future in terms of three different questions: “How do leaders set strategic direction?” “How do leaders develop leadership capacity?” We just finished this piece on “How do leaders develop balance?” In typical coaching style, at the end of coaching sessions we normally debrief with clients. Why don’t we debrief with each other and ask what we got from this dialogue as two senior executive coaches sharing our views? What did we find valuable?

Joan: Val, your three Cs, Clarity, Courage, and Connection are useful for both sides of the equation. As coaches, we need to be clear in where we are taking our clients, since it often is an unknown place. We must provide the strategic direction for our clients to be clear about where they want to go.. Then we have to have courage so that we both can speak up together. We discussed ways in which we can help our clients be more courageous and ways in which we can be more courageous in service to our clients. In terms of Connection, we came up with some neat strategies. We have talked about how we can help our leaders find more Connection and how we as coaches can do the same thing. We have referenced several ways in which our panel group has connected as a team. We find ourselves working together and making a difference in our field as well as a difference in our client’s world. That is my take away. I am taking your three Cs, “Clarity, Courage, and Connection.”

Val: Thank you, Joan. I’m walking away with feeling as if I’ve been coached. Your comments have helped deepen the development of some of my own viewpoints. You have done for me what I am sure you do for your clients and that is helping me think about things more fully. One of the biggest things I learned from you today is about relevancy. Before I entered into this conversation, I had some ideas about what executive coaches need to do in the future. However, you reminded me that our work needs to be relevant to each individual client. We should know what is going on with our clients. I don’t believe before this conversation I connected so clearly to the points you made. You did a great job of explaining what Senior Executives are going to need in the future. You pushed me to think, “Okay, so how do I meet these needs as a coach? What does the coaching need to be around?” Relevancy is the big theme that I got out of this. In addition, it’s great to be bold. But if I am going to be bold, it has to be of value to the people being served. So thank you for that.

Joan: Val, I think this is a good point to conclude.

Val: It’s been great, Joan.

Joan: Good bye.

Val: Bye.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Val Williams. *Get the Best Out of Your People and Yourself*. Edison, NJ: Shadowbrook Publishing, 2002.
 - 2 Val Williams. *Virtual Leadership*. Edison, NJ: Shadowbrook Publishing, 2002.
 - 3 Val Williams and Ellen Fredericks. *Executive Think Time*. Edison, NJ: Shadowbrook Publishing, 2003. See also Val Williams and Ellen Fredericks. *Executive Foundation*. Edison, NJ: Shadowbrook Publishing, 2004.
 - 4 *Strategic Workforce Planning, Recruiting and Retaining a Skilled and Diverse Workforce*, City of Charlotte, North Carolina, 2003, p. 7.
 - 5 The Gallup Organization. *Employee Engagement Research*, www.Gallup.com, 2001.
 - 6 Val Williams. www.valwilliams.com
 - 7 Peter Block. *The Empowered Manager*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990, Chapter 4.
 - 8 Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz. *The Power of Full Engagement*. New York: The Free Press, 2003, p. 13.
-

Commentary On **The Future of Executive Coaching and Leadership**

VAL WILLIAMS, M.C.C. AND JOAN WRIGHT, M.C.C.

OUR BELIEFS ABOUT WHY THIS ARTICLE WAS SELECTED

Val: I believe that our article, “The Future of Coaching,” was selected because it framed three burning issues that are as relevant to senior executive leaders (and executive coaches) today as they were when the article was originally published. These are the real life practical concerns of leaders, not academic leadership theory or philosophy. We uncovered them by coaching hundreds of clients, and reframed them as the following questions: 1. In the future, how will I as a senior leader set strategic direction? 2. How will I develop leadership capacity to meet the needs that the future presents? and 3. How will I create the work-life balance that I will need to be agile and resilient in meeting the demands of the future? Our experience and feedback suggests that these questions are in some ways “timeless.” The three areas seem to reflect core skills that are needed for successful leadership across a

variety of situations, business functions, organizational life cycles and industries. We went on to offer “practical, take away ideas” that leaders can use to address these questions in their daily work.

Joan: We also made it easy for the readers to toggle between the two sides of the coaching partnership, to compare the insights we gained for the executive leader and the executive coach. In order for the partnership to work *both* must prepare to meet the future head on.

I find myself coaching leaders much more aggressively on their personal “Executive Presence.”

SECOND THOUGHTS ON WHAT WE WROTE

Strategic Direction Setting

Val: In our article we speak about the importance of a leader’s ability to enroll others in a strategic direction. Now, in my daily coaching, I find myself coaching leaders much more aggressively on their personal “Executive Presence.” I still agree that a large part of enrolling people in a vision and strategy has to do with capturing their hearts and minds. What I have learned more about is “how,” exactly, a leader can successfully do that. A leader’s personal “Executive Presence” is key, in addition to a clear strategy. So my coaching has evolved to include a specific model for how to develop an “Executive Presence” that enrolls people.

Joan: We all know how exciting and challenging implementing a new strategic direction can be. I find that once a client organization is ready to start, there is a lot of new energy and activity, yet the biggest challenges are often to stay focused on the change and to track real results. The more we can help our clients identify the success criteria, the clearer their focus can be and the easier it is for them to notice traction and sustainability. There is a behavior of discipline that can be overlooked.

Building Leadership Capacity

Val: I spoke about how we need to help leaders develop coaching skills and asserted that we are coaches, not consultants. I have since expanded my view dramatically and now present myself as a consultant who adds value in many ways, one of which is executive coaching. This is a huge change for me, but I have realized through working with several companies that I need to coach the entire organization, not just the leader, even if that leader is the CEO. There are many times when broader consulting is needed to ensure that the coaching has a greater impact. Sometimes that consulting is done by me, the executive coach. At other times I bring in other consultants. My colleague, Dr. Jeannine Sandstrom, says that “sometimes coaching is not enough.” I now believe that as executive coaches, we need to expand even further to look at and respond to the larger organizational picture. In that way coaching becomes a true strategic intervention and not just an individual development project.

There are many times when broader consulting is needed to ensure that the coaching has a greater impact. Sometimes that consulting is done by me, the executive coach. At other times I bring in other consultants.

Joan: I emphasized the importance of building leadership capacity. As executive coaches, we have a key opportunity to offer our clients a secret weapon. Most companies have a growth strategy, a financial plan, a new product development approach, etc., but do they have a “people plan” that enables them to align strategy and talent to achieve the future results they desire? Additionally, are the personal aspirations of the high potential leaders aligned with what the organization needs and wants of them? Now, I find that question real fuel for discussion. Along those lines, the author of *A Whole New Mind*, Dan Pink, points

In my experience, leaders may even be a flight risk if they don't find satisfaction in their organizations.

out that since 1950, we have tripled our financial prosperity. Today we are in an abundance economy, but we are no more satisfied. I concur with Dan's trend spotlight: leaders and the people they lead want to self actualize. They are searching for purpose and meaning to close the gap between satisfaction and abundance. In my experience, leaders may even be a flight risk if they don't find satisfaction in their organizations. On a practical note, I often challenge my executive clients to select two high potential leaders to mentor every few years. They partner with those individuals and invest in formal training, effective feedback and job assignments that challenge and grow them. The art in the mentoring is to include their personal aspirations.

Work-Life Balance

Val: I believe that work-life balance is even more relevant today. Leaders are really struggling with this one. I talked about the importance of having leaders make work-life balance a priority. However, we did not talk much about how exactly to coach leaders to make this shift. In my coaching work now, I help leaders develop very specific action plans that are tailored to their own lives to create this balance. Where this goal was once a "nice to have" for my senior executive clients, it is now a priority. One of my most popular coaching conversations these days is taking a leader through the four steps of over-reacting. Starting with "react mode" we look at how the leader can stop the reaction and create a new response. So the coaching work has become much more directive about how to get and stay balanced.

When the work-life balance hits a breaking point, there is a need to rework what I call "white space time."

Joan: I do a fair amount of shadow coaching, working on-site with an executive and seeing them in action. I also investigate how they are spending their time on three levels; daily, weekly and monthly. When the work-life balance hits a breaking point, there is a need to rework what I call "white space time." In his book, *How the Best Get Better*, Dan Sullivan offers a time system which I find really benefits clients. A Free Day is for rejuvenation and enjoyment of physical, mental, psychological and emotional capabilities. He also suggests freedom from work demands, email, and voicemail disruption. A Focus Day is to maximize concentration of a leader's efforts towards their most important activities, relationships and opportunities. A Buffer Day, my personal favorite, is for preparation both for the rejuvenation that will occur during future Free Days and the productivity that will occur during future Focus Days. Since many of my clients work in large organizations, the notion of an entire day is sometimes unrealistic. However, creating that "white space" is possible and requesting the involvement of support players, like the executive assistant, can reset the leader's work-life balance for better results, personal satisfaction and sustainability.

WHAT RELATED WORK HAS BEEN DONE SUBSEQUENTLY?

Val & Joan: Given what we had learned about executives' time and focus challenges, we decided to reproduce our article as the audio CD, *Creating Your Leadership Future*. It's a convenient format for executives and coaches, as they can listen while commuting, during travel and down time. The CD includes a companion booklet to help listeners stay focused on the key questions and challenges, and a moderator paces them through the key questions, challenges and strategies, so it's easy for them to stay on track if they have to pause, stop, and restart.

OTHERS' COMMENTS

Val & Joan: Here's what our executive clients who read the article and listened to the CD say:

“As the challenges and demands facing executive leaders continue to grow, it is important that we gain ideas and insights from confidants with relevant real world experience. Joan Wright and Val Williams have captured this in “Creating Your Leadership Future.” As I set strategic direction, develop my leadership team and continue to strive for appropriate work-life balance, it’s critical to have solid executive coaching in my corner providing clarity and guidance.”

Jeffrey G. Tennyson
Chairman & CEO, Equifirst Corporation

“As an executive within a top financial services company, growing as a leader comes hand in hand with finding the right balance to be a top performer, as well as ensuring time for home and family. Joan and Val not only show you how to do it far better, but how to shape your team to be future leaders. In the end, I know that my future is stronger wherever I choose to go and I can maintain the right balance between my professional and personal goals.”

Kris Knopf, Vice President
Sales and Marketing, Trans America Reinsurance

“The issues that Val and Joan raise are vital for leaders today. The management environment is continually shifting, requiring flexibility in every aspect. Maintaining sustained balance in these areas is a tremendous challenge because the ‘shelf life of solutions’ decreases rapidly.”

Cheryl Ross
VP Compliance Manager, Washington Mutual Bank

“Val and Joan are on target with the importance of strategic direction. Strategy is what is required to transform a vision into reality. It is the road map that motivates people in ways that allow them to perform at their best by keeping them focused on the end game.”

Keith Rauschenbach
Director, Affiliated Businesses Sales and Service, TIAA-CREF



Val Williams, M.C.C.

Phone: 732-632-9647

Email: val@valwilliams.com

Val Williams is owner of Professional Coaching and Training, Inc. Her company has specialized for the last 10 years in Executive Coaching for senior corporate executives and their teams. Val works with senior leaders on vision development, team development, strategic planning and people development strategies. Val is an experienced health care executive having worked 13 years at Prudential including positions as Executive Director of Prucare, the HMO of New Jersey, and Director of Customer Services Operations for the northeast. Val has managed staffs of over 700 people in multiple locations. A frequent speaker at corporate management retreats and industry conferences, Val is credentialed by the International Coach Federation as a Master Certified Coach. Val has authored several executive coaching books and audiotapes including *Get the Best Out of Your People and Yourself*, *Virtual Leadership*, *Executive Think Time*, and *Executive Foundation*.

Joan O. Wright, M.C.C.

Phone: 704-442-7363

Email: joan@osullivanwright.com

Joan is President of O'Sullivan Wright Consulting, Inc, a firm specializing in Executive Coaching, Leadership Development and Talent Management Strategies. Her business helps companies achieve targeted business results by attracting, developing and retaining key leadership talent. Prior to starting her own coaching and consulting business, Joan acquired 21 years of corporate experience in Human Resources Management roles with Philip Morris, Citicorp, GE Capital and most recently at First Union National Bank where she was head of executive leadership development. She has a tremendous passion and talent for building the capacity of leaders and companies with transformational change. Joan is an active speaker at major global leadership development and executive coaching conferences such as Linkage and the International Coach Federation. Joan holds a B.A. Honors Degree from Rollins College and a MSW- Masters Degree in clinical social work from Boston College. Additionally, she holds the distinction of MCC-Master Certified Coach.

Resource Center for Professional Coaching in Organizations

The International Journal of Coaching in Organizations (IJCO) is the signature publication of Professional Coaching Publications, Inc. (PCPI). In addition to this internationally acclaimed journal, PCPI publishes books on topics of interest to those in the coaching community, whether practitioner, decision maker, or end user. You can count on PCPI, Inc. to provide content that pushes the envelope — bringing theory, research and application together in ways that inform, engage and provoke. Visit the PCPI website, www.pcpionline.com, to view and purchase our growing line of products.

If you have administrative questions, please refer them to our IJCO Office Manager, at officemanager@ijco.info. For advertising, marketing and operations inquiries, please refer them to John Lazar, IJCO Co-Executive Editor, at john@ijco.info. Please submit unsolicited manuscripts for peer review consideration to the IJCO office manager at officemanager@ijco.info.

Visit Both Our Sites at Your Convenience

Journal information:
www.ijco.info

Purchases:
www.pcpionline.com

