

Abstract

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Working Title: **Roles of the Coach Within the Walls: Trojan Horse, Field Medic, Canary**

Core exploration of the paper: To be an external organizational consultant or leadership coach is, by definition, to be an “other,” with a vantage point outside the client’s organizational walls. What about internal consultants or coaches? How much “otherness” do we represent, and how “other” do our clients seem to us? What unique roles are available to the coach within the walls and how does the internal coach position herself moment-to-moment? This paper proposes to explore, with cases and theoretical texts:

- 1) How internal coaches can deploy three roles represented by the metaphors of Trojan Horse (subversive force), Field Medic (collusion), and Canary (warning system),
- 2) Practical considerations for succeeding as an internal resource, which may also apply for externals who might be prone to “go native”

This inquiry is relevant and timely because according to recent surveys, internal coaching is on the rise. In 2016, the Sherpa Coaching Study noted a 40% rise in internal coaching over four years, representing 10% of all executive coaching. The authors also noted a doubling of internal coach respondents participating in their annual study¹. In the 2018 Conference Board Global Executive Coaching Survey, 61% of respondents indicated they expect to rely more heavily on internal coaches in the future². What is behind this trend? The Conference Board cites the extension of coaching beyond top executives, to middle management and front-line leaders, driving the shift.

How does this trend affect the boundaries between coach and client and the agendas they address? How are internal coaches inside and outside the same psychic walls as their clients? Considering these questions through the three metaphorical roles of Trojan Horse (subversive force), Field Medic (collusion), and Canary (warning system), this paper will contribute new thinking on the ethic of the internal coach. Briefly, the three roles are:

Trojan Horse: In the Greek story, a force of hidden troops is unknowingly welcomed inside the walls of Troy and then subverts from within. Internal coaches can likewise be a subversive force, allowed access to leaders who may not have realized their thinking would be challenged, obsolete practices called out, and/or the status quo disrupted. While this role often is among the most generative services a coach or consultant offers, it can also morph into an unconscious persecutory pattern³.

¹ Sherpa Coaching USA, 11th Annual Executive Coaching Survey, 2016, public report, p 14

² The Conference Board, Global Executive Coaching Survey, 2018, p.10

³ Manfred Barth, “50 Shades of Coaching – How Tough Does Coaching Have to Be?,” Kets De Vries Research Lab blog, 2017, https://www.kdvi.com/research_items/770

Field Medic: Co-located with the troops, field medics provide first aid behind the lines, patching up the wounded so they can continue to carry out their duties. Internal coaches represent an important support for leaders navigating difficult challenges. This role can represent a form of collusion with the organization and or the client, allowing both parties to avoid addressing the costs imposed by ever-escalating demands. Coaches and consultants who are prone to “rescuer syndrome” can find themselves unaware of the harm they are doing by “helping.”⁴

Canary: In the days of manual mining, caged canaries, with their sensitivity to toxic gases, would sicken or die before adverse conditions affected humans, thus signaling mine workers to seek safety. When an organization employs a group of internal coaches or consultants who are privy to leaders’ narratives, it can become possible to identify systemic themes and patterns, both toxic and virtuous ones⁵. If there is a large enough population, this can be done without jeopardizing confidentiality. Some organizations want to hear this sort of birdsong, while others might prefer to silence it.

This paper will explore the psychodynamics of thriving or struggling as an internal coach or consultant, considering questions such as: What fuels the successful internal coach? Why do internal coaches stay internal/choose this setting versus other settings in which they could work? What are their hidden desires and defenses (e.g., the rescuer and persecutor phenomena mentioned above, or alternatively, the need for affiliation/belonging that can lead to merging with the culture rather than observing it). What are the practical aspects of coaching many people in the same organization? What are the “walls” enabling ethical practice where clients feel appropriately contained? These considerations may apply equally to internal resources and to external coaches or consultants who are prone to “going native” by virtue of psychology or circumstance (e.g., longstanding relationships with clients).

⁴ Manfred Kets De Vries, Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior, p. 91

⁵ Bill Critchley and Ann Knights, “Thinking Together: The Untapped Potential of Internal Coaches,” Coaching Today, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, April 2019, Issue 30. <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/coaching-today/april-2019/thinking-together/>

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Leslie Goldenberg is an in-house analytic coach at EY specializing in leadership transitions. Over the past several years, her work has increasingly come to address the unconscious at work in organizational life. Her coaching applies theories of adult development and team development together with ideas from psychoanalysis, psychodrama and process-oriented psychology. She holds an M.A. from UCLA and a B.A. from UC Berkeley and is currently in formation at the San Francisco Lacanian School of Psychoanalysis. She is also an award-winning ceramic artist and a sometimes-obsessive knitter.

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