

# When Shadows Fall: Using Psychodynamic Approaches in Executive Coaching

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*This article makes the major point that events, feelings, thoughts, and patterns of behavior that are outside of the conscious awareness of executives can significantly influence what they decide and how they act. It provides a succinct overview of the conflict and object relations approaches to understanding psychodynamics and embeds the material in recent scientific reviews of unconscious mental and emotional phenomena. The situations in executive coaching in which psychodynamic material may be relevant are described along with the purposes that these concepts and methods may serve in coaching engagements. Conflicts, attachment styles, and methods of using interpretations appropriately are described and discussed. Pitfalls and limitations of using these approaches in coaching engagements are also reviewed.*

“How are you doing?” I asked Ron Jameson, the interim president of the northeast region of a major service company.

“Not well,” he replied.

Ron had been serving in that capacity for nearly a year and had worked hard and successfully to pull together a divided and somewhat fragmented operation that was part of a larger business unit in a major conglomerate. In his mid-forties, tall, balding, and deeply tan, Ron had distinguished himself as the executive vice president in the region for several frustrating years under his previous boss. Despite his efforts at trying to better organize and direct the operations, the organization had continued to underperform and the CEO of the enterprise had removed his boss in a fairly bloodless process earlier that year. Ron had been asked to step in and take over while the organization decided what to do with the unit he was leading. Ron had profit and loss responsibilities for the unit and had

solved a number of problems that had vexed them for years.

“What’s wrong?” I followed up.

“I do not know if I want to continue doing this job.”

“Why?”

“The CEO cannot decide what he wants to do about the region and will not tell me what timeline he has in mind to resolve things. Truthfully, I do not think he knows what he wants to do. I cannot really clean this place up until he does because if I do, there will be too much carnage and I’ll never get the permanent job.”

“These situations do demand patience,” I answered.

“I have patience. I just do not like to be taken advantage of,” he snapped with a real note of irritation.

“How is the organization taking advantage of you?”

“Let me count the ways. I’m responsible for this place and what happens here, but I have to ask permission to do almost everything. I’m working longer hours than ever with more time away from my family, my religion, and the things I like to do. I’m doing all of this for less than a significant salary increase, and these guys cannot even tell me whether they’re going to give me the job. It makes me feel like a patsy. . . just a big jerk.”

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The identities of the client and organization used in the case material in this article have been appropriately modified to protect their privacy.

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The emotion in Ron's voice spilled over as he rocked back in his chair and crossed his arms. At that point so early in the coaching session with this long-term client, I knew I could push our discussion in almost any direction. The choices included: exploring his efforts to influence the CEO and others in the senior leadership of the organization, his strategy to re-create the region into a full-fledged subsidiary of the company, the complete range of other operational problems that I knew were contributing to his frustration, or just sticking with the emotionally charged material he had so deliberately spilled for both of us to see and hear. Going on my intuition and knowledge of Ron, I chose the last course of action.

"Does this situation remind you of anything you have faced before?" I asked, knowing that this is generally a terrific way to invite people to explore the history and components of very difficult situations on their own terms.

Ron looked at me with his most appraising stare. He had always been one of my most sophisticated and reflective clients. Many of our previous sessions had produced some of the most interesting and deep exchanges I have ever had with leaders. He had an excellent working knowledge of psychology, a real commitment to a life of spiritual reflection, and an ability to observe keenly and critically the behavior of others.

Ron smiled just a little and said, "I have two responses to your question."

I gave him a head nod, and he smiled again. "Well, the first one is 'next question.'"

To this we both laughed out loud. Ron's candor, sense of humor, and ability to speak very directly about himself and his experience were truly remarkable in my coaching experience.

"You know that is your choice," I answered.

"Yeah, yeah, I know."

"Then what's the other response?"

"I do not know if I want to tell you," he replied. As he said this, his face and body seemed to gather inward as though marshalling for some sort of ordeal. To his words, I had no reply, so I simply waited in poised silence. After a quiet moment, he made up his mind and began to tell me the following story.

"When I was 6, I was living in a small town with my mom and dad and my brothers and sisters. My mom's dad was dying in the hospital in town, and sometimes I'd get in the car with her and drive over there. At that time, children were not allowed to visit patients and I had to wait in the car, which usually did not take too long. The last trip though was different. That time, she was gone for hours, and when she returned to the car, she was crying.

"She told me that my grandfather had just died and that she had been with him the whole time. I did not have any idea what to do of course because I was only 6. But, I remember what she told me as if it were this morning. Through her tears, she said that her dad had been delirious and that he had kept asking for her brother. She was standing there, comforting him, but he kept asking for her brother. And, you need to know that my uncle was never a nice guy. Through the whole ordeal of my grandfather's death, he never came to visit him once. My mom and dad were there each step along the way.

"Anyway, he was so agitated about wanting to see his son, that when a resident physician came in to see him, my mom asked him to pretend that he was her brother. He agreed to do that and after his examination of my grandfather, he took his hand and said, 'I'm here, Dad.' My mom was crying very hard when she told me what happened next."

"What?" I asked.

"She said that her dad smiled and squeezed the resident's hand. He seemed

very comforted and at peace. Then he died.”

As I listened to the story, I could only imagine the complexity of feelings his mother must have experienced. The fact that she was able to determine what her father needed and create a way for him to receive that gift was a remarkable testament to her empathy and compassion. The fact that she did not just walk out on a man who disrespected and demeaned her right up until the moment of his death was a demonstration of how much she loved him and how tightly the bonds of her commitment tied her to him. The whole story also hinted at deeper and long-standing disturbances in the family’s relationships.

“Incredible story,” I said after some moments.

“It did not end there. Turns out that my grandfather had been worth a considerable sum of money because of the businesses he owned. My mom and dad discovered after his death that my uncle had been bleeding my grandfather so badly for years that there was a mountain of debt to pay where there should have been a substantial inheritance. I later found out that my mom and dad decided that they needed to pay off my grandfather’s debts as a matter of family honor. They could have just walked away from the obligation, but they put their whole financial future aside to make sure that they protected my grandfather’s reputation in town.”

“What about your uncle?” I asked.

“As far as I know, he never contributed a penny. I saw him once, years ago, when I went home to visit my folks. He was in a store, and he avoided me once he saw who it was.”

“What was the impact of that decision on you and your siblings?” I asked.

“It made everything harder. My parents were not wealthy. My dad had to work two jobs at times to make ends meet. It was a constant struggle for them and for us kids. I grew up resenting my uncle and feeling

that my parents, and especially my mom, had been taken advantage of pretty badly.”

Ron sat quietly for a moment at that point. The strength of his feelings was readily evident on his face. I could feel the tension in him and in myself as I imagined what it must have been like growing up under a debt of honor like that one. In an era in which huge numbers of individuals, families, and businesses declare bankruptcy every year, the commitment and dedication of his parents to redeem her father’s reputation was a remarkable story of conscience realized across decades of disciplined decision making.

“How do you think the story applies to your situation in the company?” I prodded Ron a little.

“Oh, that is easy now that I’ve remembered the story. I really hate the feeling of being taken advantage of. Cannot stand it at all. The fact that the CEO cannot make up his mind what to do and keeps me in this temporary position is just driving me crazy. I feel like I just want to quit and go elsewhere.”

Ron and I spent the rest of that session talking through his options and how he could address the challenges of discussing the problem with the CEO. Through the rest of the time, he seemed much more able to consider the problems and complexities without personalizing them as much. He readily understood what his boss faced in making the decision to make the region into a full-fledged subsidiary and taking substantial time to move the organization forward to get that done. By the end of the time, he seemed determined to stick with the process and had several additional ideas that he wanted to pursue to try to help his boss get the reorganization accomplished.

When I asked him if it had helped him to tell me that story, he smiled and said, “When I remembered it, I knew immediately what was going on. I did not want to say anything, because it feels so childish in a way. But now that I know that I’m feeling

that old sense of resentment about being taken advantage of, I think I can steer clear of making some bad choices.”

Subsequently, Ron led a strategic planning initiative in the parent company that led to the decision to reorganize the region into an interdependent subsidiary. His boss is in the process of working through the financial and organizational implications, and a search has begun for a CEO of the subsidiary. Ron appears to have earned the true appreciation of his boss and seems to have the inside track on the job.

### Introduction

The case that introduces this article makes the major point that events, feelings, thoughts, and patterns of behavior that are outside of the conscious awareness of executives can significantly influence what they decide and how they act. This has obvious implications for their success or failure and for the futures of the organizations that they lead. In short, unconscious material in the form of past experience, emotional responses, defensive reactions, underlying and unresolved conflicts, and dysfunctional patterns of thinking and behaving can contribute to poor leadership and consequently to decreased organizational effectiveness. Because it is unconscious, I believe this material rarely comes directly to light in the normal course of executive life and leadership activities in organizations. As a result, executives, their colleagues, boards of directors, investors, and others in stakeholder communities are often at a loss to completely explain, let alone change, patterns of decision making and action that may be full of problems for an individual leader and for the enterprise that employs him or her.

In this case example, Ron had such emotional maturity and advanced psychological development that once he told his story out loud, he was able to grasp immediately the implications that his own personal history had for how he was trying to manage a real

leadership and organizational challenge. The work that we did together on strategizing his follow-up activities to incorporate the sensitivities we uncovered enabled him to both conceptualize a full array of options for himself and the organization and to set and execute a successful course of action. It was a remarkable coaching session and an even more remarkable demonstration of his leadership ability and the power that psychodynamic insight and methods can add to situations in which other, more conventional, approaches to understanding and changing behavior might have proved ineffective.

We can begin to understand psychodynamics by reviewing a couple of definitions of the term. The 5th edition of *A Psychiatric Glossary* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 112) defines psychodynamics as

The systematized knowledge and theory of human behavior and its motivation, the study of which depends largely upon the functional significance of emotion. Psychodynamics recognizes the role of unconscious motivation in human behavior. It is a predictive science, based on the assumption that a person's total make-up and probably reactions at any given moment are the product of past interactions between his specific genetic endowment and the environment in which he has lived since conception.

Funk and Wagnall's dictionary (1975) defines psychodynamics as “the study of mental processes in action.” I believe the concept can be broadened somewhat and that it can be defined as unconscious patterns of behavior, thoughts, emotions, conflicts, defenses, and relationships that influence how individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities adapt to the circumstances, predicaments, and environments of their lives.

During the last 15 years, the scientific case for the existence of unconscious mental, emotional, and social processes has been successfully made by a number of

scholars. Up until the latter portion of the last century, psychoanalysts, psychodynamically oriented therapists, and a very small handful of sympathetic researchers and scholars were the only advocates to be found for the contention that the unconscious existed and influenced the conscious behavior and experience of individuals, groups, families, and organizations. This is no longer the case.

Recent reviews of the scientific literature have solidly demonstrated that unconscious mental and emotional processes can be identified and reliably replicated in laboratories. Greenwald (1992), in a sweeping summary of lab research done on a variety of aspects of unconscious cognition, stated that the evidence for such phenomena was irrefutable. In that same issue of the *American Psychologist*, articles by Kihlstrom, Barnhardt, and Tataryn (1992); Bruner (1992); Erdelyi (1992); Loftus and Klinger (1992); and others debated the various aspects and issues involved in the laboratory results, but they all concurred that science has now reliably demonstrated that humans possess at least two information-processing systems that appear to be both dissociated and interlinked, function according to different principles and with different results, and can act simultaneously on the same material.

Even more recently, Westin (1998) summarized the research evidence that has accumulated for five key postulates of psychodynamic theory and the legacy of Sigmund Freud. Those propositions can be summarized as follows:

1. Much of human mental life, including thoughts, emotions, and motives, are unconscious and can produce behavior in people that is inexplicable to them.
2. Conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings operate simultaneously and can be in conflict with each other

in ways that require compromised resolutions.

3. Stable patterns of personality and social behavior are formed in childhood and can significantly impact the types and effectiveness of social relationships in adult life.
4. Stable internal mental representations of the human self are formed gradually in childhood and adolescence and guide both social relationships and how individuals may become psychologically symptomatic.
5. Personality development involves learning how to regulate emotions, thoughts, and social relationships and moves from an immature, dependent state in childhood to a mature and independent state in adulthood.

Westin's (1998, p. 362) summary concluded as follows:

On some of the central postulates of psychodynamic theory, such as the view that much of mental life is unconscious, Freud has left an important—and I believe indelible—mark on human self-understanding. As psychology moves into its 2nd century, we would do well to attend to and integrate some of these disavowed psychodynamic ideas, which need not remain, like classic psychodynamic symptoms, outside the consciousness of the scientific community.

In general, there are two main schools or conceptual approaches incorporated into the psychodynamic perspective: conflict theory and object relations theory. An effort to review both of them in depth is well beyond the intent and scope of this article. However, a short summary of both will be useful as a general backdrop for the discussion that follows about how they may be applied to coaching executives.

Excellent reviews of the core tenants and methods of both approaches are readily available (Auld & Hymen, 1991; Book, 1998; Brenner, 1976; Gray, 1994; Hammer, 1993; Horowitz, 1998; Langs, 1973, 1974;

Safran & Muran, 2000; Levy, 1996; Rubovits-Seitz, 1998). Conflict theory forms the underlying foundation for classical psychoanalytic theory. Its major tenets can be summarized as follows:

1. Human beings have a set of unconscious feelings, thoughts, motives, and experiences that arise during the normal course of development and life and that can have a radically significant impact on how they grow and interact with others.
2. Humans also possess complex internal psychological structures that often have significantly different reactions to the same thoughts, feelings, motives, and experiences. These reactions can oppose each other and create internal psychological conflict for the individual.
3. Internal, unconscious conflict itself produces strong emotional reactions, and because of the discomfort that arises from both the conflicts and the associated reactions, people create and use a set of behaviors and feelings that enable them to keep the material out of conscious awareness. These defensive or self-protective operations can themselves become quite troubling to a person because, while they can keep the conflicts unconscious, they can also produce major symptoms of distress, such as anxiety conditions, depression, chemical dependency, and various other forms of dysfunctional behavior.
4. Efforts to change the dysfunctional behavior that incorporate activities to make the unconscious material consciously available to the person experiencing symptoms are likely to produce more complete and lasting changes for the individual than those that do not.

The object relations school arose after conflict theory had been well established.

Major proponents of this approach include Ainsworth (1969; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978), Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988), M. Klein (1975), Mahler (1968), Safran and Muran (2000), Winnicott (1965), and others. These individuals have demonstrated that one of the most important aspects of human behavior consists of how people form and function inside of relationships. Understanding the developmental processes and history involved in each person's network of relationships brings tremendous insight and useful intervention points for practitioners. The key propositions of the object relationship approach can be summarized as follows:

1. People go through a sequence of stages in their development, from an undifferentiated and dependent infant to a fully functional and interdependent adult. These developmental stages each have their own characteristics and specific challenges. Failure to master these major challenges and dysfunctional patterns of caretaking that can be experienced in childhood can result in significantly disordered patterns of human relationships later in life.
2. These patterns of relating to others remain largely unconscious for most humans and dramatically affect the quality of their lives and the types of successes and failures they experience. These patterns have been reliably demonstrated in the first year or two of life in large numbers of laboratory studies.
3. For people with significant psychological problems, treatment should incorporate efforts that focus at least partly on these patterns of relating if they are to achieve more effective levels of functioning in their lives.

These two broad approaches to understanding the inner mental and emotional lives of people can provide anyone who is

interested in or charged with changing human behavior with a wide variety of conceptual tools and intervention techniques. As demonstrated by the work of Levinson (1981), Kets de Vries (1984), Kets de Vries and Miller (1984), Czander (1993), Stacey (1992, 1996), Kernberg (1998), and Kilburg (2000), the need to understand and work with psychodynamic material also extends to leaders and the consultants who are hired to help them.

The purposes of this article are to review situations in which psychodynamic issues and interventions are relevant for executive coaches to consider, describe the purposes of psychodynamic approaches and interventions in executive coaching engagements, provide a succinct summary of how unconscious psychological conflict can affect executive performance, review some of the major patterns of human attachment

and how they can reveal themselves in work settings, describe a variety of intervention approaches that coaches can use to approach psychodynamic material with their clients, provide a general overview of the uses for and technique of interpretation by coaches with executive clients, and finally, discuss a series of potential pitfalls and problems with the use of these concepts and methods in coaching executives.

### **When Psychodynamic Issues and Methods May Be Useful in Coaching Executives**

Table 1 presents a series of 15 situations and circumstances that consultants may encounter in an engagement involving either systems change or coaching that suggest that they might want to consider the impact that the use of psychodynamic material and

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**Table 1**  
*Situations in Which Psychodynamic Issues and Interventions Are Relevant Considerations*

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Situation in which a client:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Continues to misbehave or underperform, despite the consciously stated intention and desire to improve and do well.</li> <li>2. Suffers from powerful disorganizing and disruptive emotional experiences and reactions for which there are no obvious explanations.</li> <li>3. Faces repeated situations and problems in families, groups, and organizations that are incomprehensible and destructive and for which there are no obvious answers or previous intervention efforts have failed.</li> <li>4. Seeks to understand his or her history, goals, motives, and behaviors with a greater degree of psychological sophistication.</li> </ol>
Or when:
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Things are not happening in the executive's organization that should or should not be happening.</li> <li>6. Conflict, overt or covert, conscious or unconscious, is possible, impending, detected, or explicit.</li> <li>7. Major life course changes are possible, impending, or explicit in the executive, the executive's group, or the executive's family.</li> <li>8. When transitions in human relationships in the organization or the family are possible, impending, detected, or explicit.</li> <li>9. When normal or abnormal crises, regressions, or failures in the group, organization, or markets are possible, impending, detected, or explicit.</li> <li>10. Knowledge, ability, or skill may be insufficient to master a challenge or solve a problem.</li> <li>11. An executive's spouse, key family member, close friend, or significant other is in trouble or experiencing problems.</li> <li>12. Performance problems or an inability to do a job are impeding an executive's career.</li> <li>13. Relationship disturbances are imperiling an executive's career, ability to do a job, or a group or organization's functional capacities.</li> <li>14. A trauma or catastrophe strikes an individual executive, the executive's group, or the executive's organization.</li> <li>15. A coach detects significant emotional, cognitive, or behavioral responses in him- or herself to a client or a client's situation.</li> </ol>

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methods would make in their work. In general terms, I believe it is wise to consider psychodynamic approaches when you see patterns of dysfunctional behavior in individuals, groups, or whole organizations on which more conventional change methodologies fail to have any truly constructive effect. Similarly, when strong emotional states are encountered in clients or when they face major transitions in their personal or organizational lives, unconscious material may well prove useful to consider. Performance problems for individual executives, their groups, or their organizations often have contributing circumstances that are out of the awareness of the people involved. The nuclear families and families of origin of executives can also create major areas of unrevealed tension and conflict for a leader. Finally, the leader may be sufficiently curious and psychologically well-developed that he or she has a natural ability and willingness to explore these dimensions of human experience.

The case with which this article opened demonstrated several of these issues simultaneously. First, Ron was experiencing some ongoing and unresolved problems in relating to the senior leaders of his organization. His coping efforts in trying to manage those challenges were failing by his own estimates, and he was having very strong emotional responses that he was finding difficult to control. Finally, he was sophisticated and curious enough that when encouraged to explore how his past experience might be impacting his current job situation, he rapidly and effectively discovered developmentally relevant conflict and relationship material that proved very helpful to him. Based on his discoveries, he was willing and able to broaden and deepen his awareness of his current situation and then create a much more constructive and creative approach that he implemented successfully.

Table 2 reviews a variety of purposes that psychodynamic concepts and methods

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**Table 2**  
*Purposes of Psychodynamic Approaches and Interventions in Executive Coaching*

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Psychodynamic approaches and interventions when used effectively by coaches promote and improve:

1. Self-awareness, family, group, and organizational awareness and savvy
  2. Emotional containment and management
  3. Executive performance
  4. Behavioral flexibility and creativity
  5. Human resiliency
  6. Psychosocial development
  7. Professional, personal, and social relationships
  8. Mental abilities
  9. Capacity for spiritual growth
  10. Family, marital, and intimate relationships
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can serve in executive coaching engagements. In general terms, these approaches can and will help leaders improve their awareness of a wide variety of relevant ideas and experiences that can help them increase their personal and professional effectiveness. Job performance, work relationships, organizational change initiatives, and family problems can all be helped when individuals improve their knowledge of their motives, feelings, thoughts, and past relevant experiences that contribute to problems or patterns of dysfunctional behavior. The table demonstrates that there are a wide variety of situations in which coaches can profitably use psychodynamic concepts and methods.

### **Psychodynamic Conflict and Object Relations—Some Uses in Coaching**

Table 3 presents a summary of the six basic types of developmentally oriented conflicts that Wurmser (2000) identified as having major psychodynamic implications for individuals. These major areas include: conflicts over emotions and their management, the desire to see the world clearly and creatively through the exercise of curiosity, basic identity issues, control over oneself and one's environment, competition and triangular relationships, and finally, the complexities involved in addressing vari-



**Table 3**  
*Equivalents of Developmental Conflicts in Executive, Group, Family, and Organizational Life*

Type of developmental conflict	Executive manifestations	Family manifestations	Group manifestations	Organizational manifestations
Emotional management	Emotional overcontrol of the self, unregulated emotional outbursts with others, sexual harassment, self-control, joy, job satisfaction, emotional containment	Unregulated anger, physical abuse, verbal violence, shame–blame dynamics, emotional detachment and isolation, depression, unexpressed fears	Fight–flight dynamics, shame–blame dynamics, fears of retaliation, fears of expression, inhibitions, emotional contagion, joy, curiosity, job satisfaction	Hostile workplaces, pass the buck, covering up, retaliation dynamics, shame–blame dynamics, violence in the workplace, joy, and job satisfaction
Wishes for self-expression and curiosity, conflict with fears of intrusion, control, exposure, empathic misalignment	Creativity, empathic resonance, assertive communications, exhibitionism, risk taking, defensive communications, coldness and lack of emotional resonance, sterility and lack of invention, paranoia	Creative exchanges, encouragements to achieve and explore, empathic resonance, individual differentiation, physical or emotional abuse, soul blindness, soul murder, paranoia	Exploration, new product and service ideas, problem solving, defensiveness, not invented here, not in my backyard, scapegoating, discrimination, paranoiagenesis	Good advertising, clear organizational identities in the market place, good market position, poor customer relations, poor product or service design, scapegoating, discrimination, paranoiagenesis
Maintaining an independent sense of self or identity	Role clarity, good limits, good work habits, self-confidence, security, the reverse of them	Good and respectful boundaries, sense of “family,” good morale, acceptance of diversity within the family, lack of respect for or insufficient boundaries, xenophobia, disrespect, no limits, acting out	Good and respectful boundaries, sense of “group identity,” good morale, acceptance of diversity within the group, inclusion, lack of respect for or insufficient boundaries, xenophobia, disrespect, no limits, acting out	Good brand image and management, name recognition, inclusive workplaces, good morale, respect for individuality, lack of respect for or insufficient boundaries, xenophobia, disrespect, no limits, acting out, discrimination
Wishes for self-control and fears of control or intrusion by others	Acceptance of or difficulties with authority, micromanagement or abandonment, power sensitivity, needs for and respect for autonomy, good or poor delegation skills	Insufficient differentiation from the family, anxious performances, trouble with or respect for boundaries, control fights, acting out, support for independence and differentiation	Constant forming and storming in groups, insufficient or informal and fluid norms, boundary violations and fights, poor coordination and collaboration, lack of communication, power fights	Differentiation and decentralization; fights over resources, control, and direction; influencing and political jungles; grapevines good brands; good development initiatives, respect for the boundaries, roles, and duties of others

**Table 3** (continued)

Type of developmental conflict	Executive manifestations	Family manifestations	Group manifestations	Organizational manifestations
Competitive strivings and triangular relationships	Ambition striving and achieving, political wheeling and dealing, climbing the ladder, triangulated communications and relationships, promotion of the self and others, self-development	Conflicted relationships, pecking orders, competitive strivings and achievement, support for competition or suppression of same, failure, open and under-the-table conflict, triangulated communications and relationships	Triangulated communications and relationships, conflicted relationships, pecking orders, competitive strivings and achievement, support for competition or suppression of same, failures, open and under-the-table conflict, paranoiagenesis, group successes, group failures	Grapevines, end runs, political wheeling and dealing, triangulated communications and relationships, market victories and failures, internal and external intelligence systems, paranoiagenesis
Questions and challenges to loyalty	Work–family conflicts; ethical dilemmas; conflicts of interest; spiritual challenges; self, group, and organizational conflicts of loyalty; power fights at senior levels; policy conflicts, conflicts of conscience; illegal acts	Work–family conflicts, ethical dilemmas, spiritual challenges, illegal acts	Work–family conflicts; ethical dilemmas; conflicts of interest; spiritual challenges; self, group, and organizational conflicts of loyalty; power fights in the group; policy conflicts; conflicts of conscience; illegal acts	Work–family conflicts; ethical dilemmas, conflicts of interest; spiritual challenges; self, group, and organizational conflicts of loyalty; power fights at all levels; policy conflicts; conflicts of conscience; illegal acts

ous loyalties that people have in their lives, especially to important people, values, and moral principles. These six types of conflicts arise in the normal course of human development and are faced by nearly everyone in our society. In accordance with the principles of conflict theory, each of us will have more or less success in dealing with these issues as they first arise in our lives. We will remain more susceptible to reexperiencing conflicts of similar types later in our lives if we have not had the ability to appropriately master them the first time we confronted them. Each of these areas of conflict can become even more problematic through the course of our lives if we have had what could be experienced as a trauma associated with them. For example, exposure to invasive, overcontrolling, and punitive parenting as a toddler, when sensitivity to issues of autonomy, self-esteem, and self-efficacy is extremely high, could establish a dysfunctional pattern consisting of real problems with accepting legitimate authority and inappropriately deviant behavior in the workplace. In another example, difficulties in learning basic moral principles of fairness early in the school years can lead to significant problems in making ethical business decisions later in life. Coaches need to be alert to evidence for such conflicted behavior in their clients.

Table 3 also demonstrates that these core developmental conflicts for individuals can be reflected in their families, executive groups, and whole organizations. As the seniority and authority an executive has in an organization increase, the risks of recapitulating these individual conflicts in broader environments increase. Table 3 presents some suggested patterns of behavior in these larger domains that can reflect these individual conflicts. Thus, an executive who has had difficulty mastering the complexities of emotional management can exhibit a pattern of emotional outbursts, aggressive and injurious episodes of criti-

cism with key subordinates, or even difficulties with controlling sexual impulses. These individual problems can then manifest in dysfunctional and abusive family situations, executive groups that experience core “fight-flight” dynamics (Bion, 1961), and entire organizations that become hostile work environments. Again, coaches are wise to examine such presenting workplace and interpersonal problems from a psychodynamic perspective to determine whether any of these core developmental conflicts are manifesting themselves in this way. Kernberg (1998) has illustrated that groups and organizations can often present these kinds of challenges to their leaders and to the consultants and coaches who work with them. Developing a diagnostic sense for the presence of these core conflict areas and how they can manifest in organizations and groups can greatly enhance a coach’s ability to work with executive clients in very difficult situations that often arise in these larger behavioral settings.

As noted in the introduction to this article, object relations theory constitutes the second major approach to extending psychodynamic knowledge. Table 4 presents a summary of five basic attachment styles and how they manifest in seeking help under stress as a way of demonstrating that this approach to understanding psychodynamics can have significant usefulness to coaches in their engagements. These attachment styles reflect the work of Ainsworth (1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978); Bowlby (1969/1982, 1973, 1980, 1988); Lyons-Ruth, Bronfman, and Atwood (1999); and Solomon and George (1999), among others. The styles are as follows: secure-approaching and supporting, insecure-tenuous, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and insecure-disorganized. Research has demonstrated that these patterns of human relating emerge from the approaches to parenting people experience as infants. The most desirable pattern provides consistent, attentive, and noninvasively re-

**Table 4**  
*Human Patterns of General Attachment and Obtaining Help Under Stress*

Pattern of attachment	Description
1. Secure—approaching and supporting	The person actively seeks contact or closeness and uses parent, superior, or peers as a secure base from which to explore the world, ideas, emotions, or manage stress or trauma. The individual can provide a secure foundation for others and is sensitive and responsive to human needs as they arise and are perceived. As a leader or a follower these people will tend to have, set, and respect boundaries; encourage and support others; delegate but not abandon subordinates; and be thoughtful about working relationships. The person typically received this kind of caretaking as a child.
2. Insecure—tenuous	The person tends to be disorganized in approaching others for support or help. They often display overt signs of distress and longing for contact yet seem oblivious to those that could provide assistance. They appear to recognize that they need connection and can even identify from whom that might come but are often ineffective in making anything happen. As supporters or leaders, they struggle with knowing what to do and how to do it even when they know that something should be done. People come away from interactions with them feeling unfulfilled, frustrated, and not really helped.
3. Insecure—avoidant	The person typically avoids parents, superiors, and peers and does not actively seek support or comfort from others. The individual tends to be a loner and does not usually offer assistance or contact to others. As children, these people were often rebuffed by their own caregivers and learned to fend for themselves. They may avoid positions of responsibility, have troubles with accountability to others, have a tendency to delegate or dump a lot on subordinates and then leave them by themselves, and avoid what they experience as stressful, difficult, or challenging relationships and exchanges.
4. Insecure—ambivalent	The person forms attachments but may have difficulties being steady in them or consistent in how they relate to others. They will experience difficulties with exploration, managing stress and challenges, and may complain about how difficult relationships are to develop and maintain. They often experienced inconsistent and unpredictable patterns of caregiving. As supporters and leaders, they will often be difficult to pin down, get a steady supply of nurturance from, and may seem dismissive and really unavailable despite appearances to the contrary.
5. Insecure—disorganized	The person appears to have no consistent pattern or strategy of relating to others. At their worst, these individuals will be experienced by others as invasive, hostile, and nonsupportively controlling. They will often be impervious to feedback from others about their behavior, which can and often does frighten others. They received similar caregiving, usually from traumatized, grieving, helpless, depressed, or truly hostile parents. As leaders and supporters, they will often drive people without mercy, achieve varying degrees of success, and not be the kinds of people that others would ever approach for help, support, or comfort.

sponsive parental support to infants. It most often results in children and adults who can behave in a similar fashion to others around them even in stressful circumstances.

Table 4 also describes four patterns of less functional attachment, all of which are labeled insecure. Those individuals with tenuous styles usually want to relate to others, approach them consistently, but often do not seem to know what to do or how to do it with any degree of grace or competence. Relationships with these people as

leaders are often difficult and dissatisfactory despite good effort on the part of everyone involved.

The person with an avoidant style tends to be a loner, preferring solitary activities and having difficulties imagining the kinds of support others might need. As leaders, they will be great delegators, especially for equally avoidant subordinates or very well-developed and independent professionals. However, these individuals are often seen as the kind of managers who dump things

on their people with a complete lack of support or sympathy for the difficulties that such abandoning delegation can create for them.

The ambivalent attachment style appears in leaders who both want to form relationships with others and are able to do so. However, the relationships they form are often troubled and full of difficulties as expectations are created and then remain unfulfilled. Subordinates will often complain about how difficult these individuals are to work with and that they struggle to understand what they are supposed to do in their delegated tasks and in managing the relationship because the supervisor often seems to change opinions, directions, and emotional states. They are difficult coaching clients because nothing ever seems to please them for long and they have difficulty in consistently following a course of action.

Finally, individuals with the disorganized style are characterized by a lack of consistency in the ways in which they relate to others. They are extremely difficult people with whom to form working relationships. As the table illustrates, at their worst, these individuals are invasive, overcontrolling, and often very critical. The style is quite typical in individuals who have been traumatized through either abuse or neglect as infants and children. As coaching clients, they often are referred as derailing executives that may have significant knowledge and technical skill that the organization needs. However, they have frequently left a record of broken relationships, interpersonal wounds, and bad feelings wherever they have served in an organization. As they move higher and higher in management, their interpersonal skills are increasingly called upon and the primitive nature of how they relate to others very often gets them into trouble. Whenever coaches confront clients about whom others complain vigorously about how difficult they are to work with, they should seriously

consider that this form of attachment style may be expressing itself in the relationships in the organizational unit.

Thus, we can see that object relations theory as expressed in the complexities of attachment styles and relationship development can have great usefulness in understanding patterns of leadership and followership in organizations. Coaches who have a working knowledge of these patterns can be in an excellent diagnostic position when beginning their work with clients. They can also benefit enormously from understanding these concepts when they encounter difficulties in the working relationship with an individual. Insecure patterns of attachment readily open themselves to exploration with coaching clients in both current and historical terms.

In one sense, the opening case study provides an example of some of the transgenerational relationship (object relations) issues that can manifest in work situations. Ron's struggle to accept his organization's slow-footed response to settling the leadership and organizational issues in his unit reflected the historically ambivalent attachment between his mother and his grandfather and the underlying resentment that was created in his family. Surfacing this pattern and the associated, powerful emotional conflicts produced in him subsequently enabled Ron to manage his emotional states fairly well; consequently, he was able to stay in a difficult situation that otherwise might have forced him to depart from the organization prematurely. This would not have been in either his or the organization's best interests.

### **Working With Psychodynamic Material**

Once a coach becomes aware that psychodynamic material and issues may be influencing a client's behavior or the behavior of the people he or she lives or works with and identifies the general nature of what may be happening, the next issue that coach faces is how to intervene in the

situation to try to be helpful. Table 5 presents a listing of 19 methods that coaches can use to either elicit or work with psychodynamics. Examining each of these in depth is far beyond the scope of this article. However, I want to highlight several of these methods and then spend more time explicitly reviewing some of the complexities in the use of interpretation with coaching clients.

Table 5 begins with perhaps the most simple and most powerful of all of the tools available to coaches: storytelling. Seeking permission to go exploring with the client and asking another human being to tell a part of their personal story starts an enormously complex cognitive and emotional process in motion. I firmly believe that we do most of our best work as coaches when we are able to facilitate the storytelling of our clients. To hear about the struggles and victories of their lives educates us and them and allows us to discover how they might improve either their situations or themselves. Respectfully asking to enter into their lives this way often provides coaches

with most of the information they need to do their work.

Once the story is underway, empathic resonance, intuition, pattern recognition, inquiry skills, and listening strengthen and deepen our understanding of what has been happening and how our clients are managing their lives and circumstances. We use these skills to expand our appreciation of the story and to probe for additional levels of meaning and understanding. Once the data come to light, coaches can turn to mental simulations, rational analysis, and creating theories of mind of others (TOMO; G. Klein, 1998) to generate hypotheses and complex models of what is happening. The use of these techniques constitutes what we can think of as the diagnostic process of psychodynamic interventions in coaching.

When a coach reaches an understanding of what may be happening in the psychodynamic realm of an individual, family, group, or organization, he or she will need to decide whether any further intervention is necessary. In our opening case study, the

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**Table 5**  
*Coaching Methods to Elicit and Work With Psychodynamic Material*

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1. Seeking permission
  2. Storytelling
  3. Listening
  4. Empathic resonance
  5. Pattern recognition
  6. Mental simulations
  7. Types of inquiry, questions
  8. Intuition
  9. Creating theories of mind about others
  10. Rational analysis
  11. Identification of and education about emotions, defenses, thoughts, conflicts, life span developmental agendas and issues, compromise formations, and other dynamic issues, such as transference, countertransference, trauma, character traits, interpersonal dynamics, attachment styles, sadomasochism, and repetition compulsion
  12. Invitations, hypotheses, challenges
  13. Silence
  14. Clarifications
  15. Supportive interventions—suggestions, directives, depreciation and devaluation of ineffective, inappropriate, destructive, or other acting out behaviors
  16. Confrontations
  17. Interpretations
  18. Reframing
  19. Reconstructions
-

simple elicitation of the very significant story in Ron's history proved almost completely sufficient to help him understand the origins of his emotional responses to his real organizational situation. Because he understood the historic parallels between the situation he faced at work and what his mother and father had managed through the years of his childhood, he immediately became aware of the differences in the circumstances as well. Independently, he leapt quickly to differentiate his work situation from the family history and came quickly to a more mature emotional response and leadership strategy for handling the succession and reorganization problems in his organization. Such cases, difficulties, and clients are not unique in my experience. Senior leadership clients who are successful often possess very high levels of self-awareness and psychological insight.

But what happens when a client is not like Ron and cannot immediately draw the connections between the discovery of psychodynamic material and the current work situation? The rest of Table 5 consists of methods, mostly developed for and used in psychodynamic psychotherapy, that coaches can use to help a client. Let me say here to be clear, I believe that coaching can have therapeutic value for our executive clients. However, coaching is not, and should not be considered, a form of psychotherapeutic intervention. I keep in mind at all times that the executive client did not contract for psychotherapy, has not presented himself or herself as someone who suffers from a psychological disorder, and does not want to be treated as a patient. Rather, I believe the coaching process is aimed mostly at improving the client's ability to do the work of leadership and management. To be sure, improvements in self-awareness and knowledge of how their minds and emotions work parallel what happens in good therapy. It pays to have a solid, healthy, observing ego at work or in life in general, and I believe that most good coaching

actually strengthens and deepens the effectiveness of this most important psychological structure. However, the improvements in self-reflective and self-management abilities made through coaching are not aimed at the amelioration of diagnosable disorders.

Of the extensive range of interventions available to work with psychodynamic material, I believe that coaches will make the most frequent use of psychoeducational interventions to explain the nature of conflicts, defenses, emotions, and relationship issues to clients. Reframing, clarifications, and silence are used very often as well. Supportive interventions, which can take the form of suggestions, directives, homework, and reading assignments, are also very helpful. When faced with a very challenging situation, coaches can find themselves using certain forms of confrontation and interpretation with clients. However, I think it would be extraordinary for coaches to move into reconstructions. Much more detailed information on psychodynamic interventions can be found in Brenner (1976), Gray (1994), Langs (1973, 1974), and Kilburg (2000).

Interpretations comprise the most complex and challenging of the methods that coaches may choose to use with clients. Again, it is impossible to review a subject in a few short paragraphs about which many books have been written. Extensive discussions are available in Auld and Hyman (1991), Book (1998), Brenner (1976), Hammer (1993), Langs (1973, 1974), Levy (1996), and Rubovits-Seitz (1998). However, I believe it is useful to summarize some of the very basic issues involved in the delicate matter of interpreting the material that the coaching process may uncover.

Table 6 presents 10 types and four foci for interpretations in coaching work. It expands on the basic taxonomy of interpretations offered by Harway, Dittmann, Raush, Bordin, and Rigler (1955) by arraying the

**Table 6***Types and Foci for Interpretations in Executive Coaching (Harway et al., 1955)*

Type of interpretation	Foci for interpretation			
	Individual executive	Executive's current family or family of origin	Executive's work group	Executive's parent organization
1. Restatements of the content/material of the client's present communications				
2. Restatements of content/material of which the client is already aware.				
3. Implied focus on material with which the client may be unaware (thoughts, emotions, defenses, conflicts, compromise formations, transferences)				
4. Connections between two or more aspects of the client's previous and/or current communications				
5. Reformulations of the client's behavior in a coaching session in a way that is new				
6. Comments on aspects of the client's nonverbal or metacommunications that may reflect thoughts, emotions, defenses, conflicts, compromise formations, transferences about which there may be no awareness				
7. Using a client's previous statement to identify or reflect upon a process that has been occurring or gathering momentum in a coaching session				
8. Speculations or hypotheses by the coach about developmental experiences that may relate to the current situation about which there may or may not be awareness				
9. Speculations, hypotheses, explorations of the implications and inferences of material that is completely out of the client's awareness (thoughts, emotions, defenses, conflicts, compromise formations, transferences)				
10. Speculations, hypotheses, explorations of the implications and inferences of material that examines connections between the past or present relationships and the relationship with the coach				

different forms that an interpretation can take against whether it is made about the individual executive, the executive's current family or family of origin, the execu-

tive's immediate work group, or the executive's home organization. At the most basic levels, interpretations consist of merely restating client's communications in the



present or past and increasing attention to those communications. From there, a coach can move to suggesting that there may be thoughts, feelings, or experiences that are implied in current situations or communications but are immediately unavailable to the client without specific work to bring them to light. In the case study involving Ron, I initially worked at these levels and finally asked a question as to whether something else might be working in the situation. This yielded an instantaneous response that was directly applicable to the leadership challenge with which he had been struggling for months.

At the fourth level, one invites a client to be aware that two or more issues, events, people, or situations under discussion may have a previously unrevealed or unexplored type of relationship. This can be thought of as an exercise in creative or out-of-the-box thinking. In this form, a coach can simply invite a client to attend to the matters at hand and suggest a different way of seeing, relating, or investigating them. This is very common in coaching situations when the material being examined is not explicitly psychodynamic in origin or focus. Promoting such a focus definitely steers the dialogue into a deeper exploration of unconscious material.

In levels five through seven, a coach works with the client's behaviors in a session to identify potentially hidden processes, issues, or challenges. Helping individuals look at the metacommunicative aspects of what they say or do, assisting them with looking at how different aspects or components of a session might relate to each other, and helping them to reformulate their understanding of the behaviors displayed in a coaching session are all pretty common activities in coaching sessions, even if coaches not trained clinically do not call what they are doing interpretation.

The activities involved in Items 8 through 10 are those more routinely thought of as the interpretations done in

psychodynamic psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. In these activities, coaches would be stretching awareness much more deeply into unconscious material. Efforts are made in these interventions to speculate, create hypotheses, and draw attention to connections that are developmental in nature, that are completely outside the individual's awareness, or that involve present or past relationships, including the relationship with the coach. It is in these types of interventions that coaching might most closely resemble psychotherapy. Yet there are circumstances in which these types of depth interpretations are definitely usable in coaching. For example, if a client is acting in an invasive, demanding, demeaning, and controlling way with you as a coach during a session, it could be perfectly appropriate to invite that person to be aware of how you are experiencing the behavior and to speculate on who might have treated him or her in a similar fashion. Similarly, a coach in that situation could profitably draw the client's attention to parallels between what was happening between them and how subordinates or existing family members might experience such behavior. Again, I do not think that any of these types of interpretive interventions are completely out of bounds in coaching, but I do believe that coaches must be careful to be clear about why they choose a particular intervention and how they think it contributes to the goals jointly established with the client.

Table 7 highlights 11 identifiable stages or components of a behavioral or interpretive intervention in coaching. The process begins with the knowledge bases of the coach and client about the organization, group, family, leadership, current adaptive situation, client history, strengths, and developmental edges and the underlying conceptual frameworks available to both of them. In most situations, it would be useful for the coach to do some education with the client about the nature of unconscious mental, emotional, and social processes and

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**Table 7***Stages of a Behavioral or Psychodynamic Interpretation in Executive Coaching*

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1. Coach and client possess substantial knowledge, skill, and abilities about (a) the work of leaders; (b) the process of changing human behavior; (c) individual, family, group, and organizational dynamics; and (d) the current challenges in their lives.
  2. The coach possesses a solid set of concepts that guide his or her work with executive clients.
  3. Client and coach generate a diverse and extensive base of information and experience related to both the current and past relevant situations.
  4. Coach and/or client become aware that there may be a thought, feeling, defense, conflict, compromise formation, or past or present relationship that is having an adverse impact on performance and about which there is limited information about how it is working in the client's mind.
  5. Coach constructs tentative hypotheses based on the data collected, the analysis undertaken of the data, and the explicit or implicit underlying models, theories, and concepts he or she uses in this work.
  6. Coach requests permission to intervene and invites the client to a mutual exploration of aspects of the data that have accumulated.
  7. Coach selects the type and foci of the interpretation (see Table 6).
  8. Coach delivers the interpretation in an astringent and tender fashion and invites the client's response and participation in making it relevant, meaningful, and helpful.
  9. Client responds immediately or through time, consciously and unconsciously, verbally and nonverbally, providing data to validate or invalidate the content, structure, and timing of the interpretation.
  10. Coach and client mutually explore, collaboratively reformulate, and modify the interpretation to make it more meaningful and useful in the client's life.
  11. Coach and client reflect individually and collaboratively on the interpretation and its effectiveness in helping the client in his or her work and use the information to further refine and define the coaching work they are doing together or, if necessary, the coaching agreement.
- 

how they can impact on executive work and life.

Next, the client and/or the coach becomes aware that there may be something going on in the realms of thoughts, feelings, motives, relationships, or experience that may be relevant to the situation currently being confronted. Hypotheses are formulated in tentative form (there may be some connections, hidden meanings, or previous history that are relevant to the life and work circumstances of the client), and then the coach, or much more rarely, the client, issues an invitation to go exploring together. This is one of the most critical and easiest ways to increase the likelihood that these types of interventions will be successful. Creating a sense of partnership, a joint will toward exploration in the interests of growth, and providing support and shared courage in the work are crucial to helping clients who want to do this kind of self-development.

The coach then has to select the level and focus for the interpretation. The choices arrayed in Table 6 are a good place to start to consider what will be addressed.

Having chosen what to target, the coach states the interpretation, as Hammer (1993) says in a way that is "astringent in content and tender in manner" (p. 34). This involves telling the client tactfully what one thinks without sugarcoating it while simultaneously resonating to and helping the individual incorporate and cope with the emotional impact that the intervention creates. As we discussed above, at the minimal levels, these interventions can consist of simple restatements of a client's words or helping him or her put several pieces of a coaching session together in a more meaningful fashion. In their deepest form, they can invite a client to open doors into their thoughts, feelings, conflicts, or relationships that they may never have known existed before the interpretation was made.

From that point forward, the coach and client engage in a mutual process of exploration, determining if the interpretation has validity in the client's life, extending and deepening the meanings that might be involved, broadening the range and extent to which what was observed and experienced might be useful especially in the client's

work. At its best, this effort is extremely collaborative even though the client ultimately must own it. In the end, the client and coach must develop a mutual way of understanding and explaining what is going on so they can use it to help improve the client's performance and life. Finally, in the best circumstances, the coach and client are able to step back and look at the work that they are doing together and gain additional levels of perspective and insight into what has been happening. This will usually involve Schon's (1987) second and third levels of reflection. It requires the ability to examine what has been learned and how the client and coach have accomplished the learning. It may lead to subsequent changes in how they work together and, in some circumstances, even to modifications in the coaching agreement. I want to make it clear that not every interpretation follows this precise sequence or works exactly as planned. However, the stage model outlined here is presented as a template of sorts to help coaches understand the complexities that are involved and some of the issues to which they should attend when they try to interpret behavior and psychodynamic material.

Table 8 presents a set of more concrete principles that can guide the formation and execution of interpretations. They roughly follow the guidance provided by Hammer (1993), who tried to succinctly summarize how to use interpretations in psychotherapy. I think most of these principles do apply if one keeps in mind the caveats mentioned above about goals and limits. In general terms, if a coach finds him- or herself working far more on client reactions to early trauma events, relationship issues outside of work, defensive and emotional reactions not specific to the goals of the coaching agreement, or unconscious conflicts that seem only tangentially related to work, then I think the activity has in all probability slid inadvertently into therapy.

In this situation, referrals for treatment are definitely in order.

Table 8 makes several other major points I would like to highlight. First, I believe that psychodynamic issues are present in coaching work from the time of the initial contact. However, I do not think it is safe or appropriate for this material to be directly accessed or worked with until the coach and client establish a solid alliance in the service of the goals they establish. Examining these types of issues can be very taxing on both the coach and client, and a good deal of trust and empathy should be built between the parties before moving into areas that may well be threatening or difficult in some other way. To be sure, there may be emergency situations that represent exceptions to this recommendation, but they will be few and far between for the average coach.

I also think it is very important for coaches to retain a sense of humility about this work. It is all too easy to see the flaws in someone else and to come to believe that you know what is best for others. Our abilities to collect data, to use our experience and knowledge, and to see others clearly when they find it difficult to see themselves are open invitations to pride, hubris, and narcissism for us as practitioners. We must remember that the true expert in any coaching engagement is the client. He or she has most of the knowledge about the organization, the challenges, and the experiences and abilities that led to their executive appointment. Always remembering that coaching is a helping activity and that fundamentally, all helping activities are partnerships, can help to avoid situations that lead to blown assignments, damaged professional reputations, and reduced incomes.

### **Limitations of Using Psychodynamic Approaches in Coaching**

For all of their power and usefulness, I do not believe that the more extensive as-

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**Table 8***Some Principles Underlying Interpretation (Hammer, 1993)*

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1. Provide interpretations when the client is nearly ready to understand the material or issues by him- or herself.
  2. When in doubt, interpret in this order: emotions, defenses/resistances, conflicts, transference.
    - What are these feelings? What are they about, directed toward, arising from?
    - Are you trying or do you need to protect yourself in this situation? Against what? How does it work?
    - Might there be a conflict here? What is involved? How does it work? Work against or for the client?
    - Is this behavior, feeling, pattern that has appeared in our relationship like or unlike what you may have experienced in the past that has been troubling to you?
  3. Be sparing in the use of interpretations and insofar as possible, make them a collaborative process.
  4. Develop and use your own style in constructing and delivering interpretations—what you say, how you say it, the meaning of what and how. The manner of it can radically affect the matter and effectiveness of it (concise, clear, simple, “astringent in content and tender in manner” [Hammer, 1993, p. 34]).
  5. Convey the material in a working partnership and allow for possibilities (Could it be? Perhaps it is? There are several options or ways of thinking about this.)
  6. Use the client’s words when possible, except when the client is blurring, avoiding, or ducking a point; then try to be tactfully direct.
  7. Minimize the use of technical words. This should be a conversation between two long-time friends who understand each other.
  8. Don’t be afraid to use stories, metaphors, aphorisms, proverbs, examples, etc. to make the point immediate and more accessible.
  9. If possible, point out the timing or sequence of events, reactions, emotions, thoughts, defenses, conflicts, behaviors, transferences.
  10. Don’t interpret until a reliable and effective relationship is established.
  11. When coaching, interpret transference cautiously when resistance to change increases, when the client does not seem free to express him- or herself, and by asking about feelings the person might be having toward the coach.
  12. Stick close to the data, be humble, and be very careful about telling clients what they should do.
  13. Clients should be encouraged and enabled to take the credit for their own discoveries, changes, and improvements. Coaches need to regulate their desires to be seen and experienced as:
    - Wizards, sages, oracles, wise old people, detectives
    - Friendly advisors, God, omnipotent observers, scientists or physicians studying an interesting specimen or case
    - Secretly discovering the hidden flaws in people
    - Inflating oneself or feeding one’s self-esteem or narcissism at the expense of a client by taking credit for the work
    - Basking in the positive transference and appreciation of the client
    - Being threatened by the negative emotional reactions of clients toward themselves, the work of change, the coaching process
    - Maintaining client dependencies
    - Being the benevolent, omnipotent, perfect parent
    - Being the insecure, impotent, invasive, controlling, abusive, soul blind, or soul murdering parent
- 

pects of psychodynamic methodologies should be commonly used in coaching engagements. Table 9 presents a series of pitfalls and limitations to using these approaches. To begin with, many successful coaches are completely unprepared to work in these ways. The vast majority of people who are trained in these concepts and skills are psychotherapists. Although I personally am often kidded by clients for being their “shrink,” both they and I discuss and know that there are radical differences between coaching and psychotherapy. For those of

us therapeutically trained, it is all too easy to work with material with which we are familiar and comfortable. If we find ourselves pushing clients to talk more about families of origin, intrapsychic conflict and defensive operations, and transference issues in our coaching relationships, I think we are most likely avoiding the much more important and relevant examination of the work of the executive and how it is or is not being done. If we do discover that this is the case in a given situation, shadow consultation should be sought to get some help

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**Table 9***Pitfalls and Limitations in Using Psychodynamic Approaches in Coaching Executives*

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1. Insufficient data and inability to confirm observations, intuitions, and hypotheses
  2. Lack of interest in the information by clients
  3. Lack of knowledge, skill, or ability in the coach to identify or work with psychodynamic material
  4. Improper execution of methods and concepts
  5. Lack of motivation to do psychological work by clients
  6. Conflicts of interest between the needs of the individual to do long-term self-development or remediation work and the needs of the organization for rapid improvement in executive performance
  7. Intensification of potentially destructive transference and countertransference issues in the client and coach.
  8. Increased defensiveness in the client to the work of personal or organizational change
  9. Increased defensiveness in the client's executive team or organization to the work of personal, group, or organizational change.
  10. Increased mental and emotional disequilibrium in the executive, the executive's team, the executive's family, or the parent organization
  11. Incomplete, ineffective, or incorrect psychodynamic interventions leading to injuries, disruptions, decreased performance, and rejection of coaching or consulting services.
- 

with unraveling just why the more relevant work-centered material is being avoided.

In addition, when the client has no real interest in doing such work, when there is insufficient data to confirm that psychodynamic processes are interfering with the executive's performance or the work of coaching, and where there may be conflicts of interest between the need to do long-term development as opposed to quickly solving behavioral, performance, or organizational problems related directly to work, I believe that psychodynamic material and work must be put aside. Furthermore, there are circumstances in which the examination of these kinds of issues can, in fact, make situations much worse, especially in the short run, for individual executives, their families, work groups, or organizations. This is especially true in coaching engagements that are of the time-limited variety. The strong feelings that can be elicited and expressed can produce wounds that are difficult to manage, particularly in the heat of the supercharged and lightning fast business organizations in which many coaches work. If such reactions are thought to be likely, and if the coach cannot reasonably anticipate that he or she will be around or have the time to help work through the aftermath of such interventions, then, I believe they are best avoided completely.

## Conclusions

In summary, I think several points can be made about working in the shadows of organizations and individuals. First, and most important, the research and practice evidence for the existence of unconscious mental, emotional, and social processes and for their ability to influence conscious behavior has been well established. The nature and complexity of these structures, processes, and contents have been widely explored both clinically and scientifically. I think that professionals who work with executives in organizations are foolhardy in the extreme to approach their work as if such forces did not exist and did not affect the people with whom they work. Second, both the conflict and object relations approaches to understanding psychodynamics have high degrees of relevance for working with executives. Knowing what happens to people when they are in conflict and how they are likely to form and struggle in human relationships is of central importance in being able to help leaders do their work better, because they are always in conflicted situations and always accomplishing their tasks through other people. Third, many methods developed largely for use in psychotherapy are transferable to coaching situations. Knowing which ones to use and

why you are choosing to use them at a particular time are crucial competencies for coaches to have if they are going to try to work at these levels and in this way with clients. Fourth, many coaches are not able to do this type of work competently, and many coaching engagements do not call for these approaches to be used. Diagnostic acumen and professional judgment are central to determining whether the shadow realm of psychodynamics should be entered. Finally, it is very possible to make a situation worse by using these concepts and methods. This is especially true in the short term. For the most part, coaches are not hired to make things worse for their clients. Above all else, in this work with very responsible people who are typically very demanding of themselves and those whom they hire, we must try to be helpful and retain a dignified humility about what it is that we can truly accomplish in any given assignment. If we can do that, then I believe it is safe and effective to use psychodynamic concepts and methods in our work with many clients.

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