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Thierry Chavel and Michel Dumont: Termination of a Professional Relationship?

It was late June 2003 and Thierry Chavel, an executive coach and director at ExeCoach, a major Executive Coaching firm, was walking back from a client meeting to his office near the Champs-Élysées. It was a delightful summer evening. But despite his efforts Chavel could not participate in the effervescent mood of the Parisians and tourists admiring the sun setting behind the Arc de Triomphe. His thoughts kept going back to what might well be his last meeting with Michel Dumont, senior executive in charge of operational effectiveness at Groupement Industriel Français (GIF).

Chavel had been an executive coach for several years now, had extensive experience in management consulting, had written numerous articles and three books on coaching, had co-initiated the first French degree in coaching, was teaching coaching at a major French business school, and was a guest as an expert coach in a television program. But nothing had prepared himself for his difficult relationship with the “difficile” (difficult to deal with) Michel Dumont.

Dumont had been extremely curt at the conclusion of their meeting. “If that’s what you think, then our relationship is over,” he had said with a nasty look. He had picked up his briefcase and left the room, leaving his amazed coach alone in an empty room.

Before going to his office, Chavel stopped at a café. Sitting at the “terrasse,” bathed in the orange glow of the setting sun, he pondered over his cup of espresso on his possible course of action. Dumont had always been very difficult to deal with, but the current crisis was probably the worst so far. Was this a point of no-return for the current engagement? Could this endanger future business opportunities with GIF or with Dumont’s extensive network of relationships? Was there still something to do to save the situation? Watching the sweet sugar melt in his coffee, Chavel smiled bitterly.

Executive Coaching

Socrates is often considered the first executive coach in the western world, but not until the early 1980s did this activity develop as a profession in the United States. It gained strength in Europe in the 1990s.

The Role of the Executive Coach

Executive coaches provided personalized support to senior executives, teams, or even organizations, involved in a change process. For example, a coach could help a newly promoted marketing VP interact with the rest of the executive team, help a dysfunctional board of directors become more efficient, or assist the culture building process after a merger. Coaching was principally recommended to improve one's leadership and interpersonal style, or to get development and support for the execution of a challenging task (See **Exhibit 1**). It was not uncommon for star executives to have a coaching support included in their employment package to help them become even more performing. Coachees were typically high potential employees with a successful track record. A survey presented by the International Coaching Federation in August 2001 showed that typical coachees belonged to the Fortune 1000, 50% were in vice president or more senior positions, 57% were in the 40 and 49 years age group, and 33% earned at least \$200,000¹. (See **Exhibit 2** for criteria by which high-potential employees are identified.)

The coaching profession suffered from poor recognition and limited understanding of the value created. However, according to industry observers² the return on investment on a coaching engagement was estimated at 6 times the cost and Coaching yielded several benefits, both for the organisation and the coachee, including higher productivity, decreased customer complaints, and improved working relationships with subordinates, peers, and superiors (See **Exhibit 3 and 4**).

In their relationship with their clients, many professionals behaved as coaches. Beyond the current project they were collaborating on, many managers asked their professional advisors for advice on subjects ranging from team effectiveness, leadership, conflict resolution, or career management. Partners at management consulting, banking, audit, and law firms were routinely asked for personal advice by their clients. Personal counsel was a significant component of a successful professional relationship, and impacted client retention positively. Because consultants often acted as coaches ("I don't see how you can be a consultant and not a coach," observed business author Alan Weiss³), and coaches often supplied management advice, coaches were often confused with and compared to management consultants. Nonetheless, they were operating in different realms. Where consultants focused on the rational aspect of strategy and organizations, coaches concentrated on the human and behavioral aspect of value creation. For example, a merger between two airlines called for the intervention of both a coach and a management consultant. The consultant redefined the strategy, whereas the coach worked with the top management on building a common culture between the two formerly competing organizations. In this case, the coach determined that, since the two companies had been former competitors, it was unlikely that they would reach the level of cooperation asked for by the new strategy proposed by the consultants. In agreement with the top management, she proposed a different course of action.

¹ International Coaching Federation, Survey of the Coaching Profession, 2001 Conference

² Forestier Gilles, Regards croisés sur le coaching, Ed. Organisation, 2002

³ Weiss Alan, in his newsletter "What's working in Consulting", September 2001.

Interestingly, some observers saw the development of coaching as a solution, as well as the symptom, of the crisis experienced by Management Consulting in the early 2000's.

...Another reason for the development of individual coaching is the critics surrounding professional advice in its traditional form. Leaders need now much more than rational models of decision making, as the end of the Andersen House demonstrates. This fact is inscribed in a shift from content to process in professional advice. Strategic information flows now freely from one company to another. The times when an external advisor could create value through strategic benchmarking, or the ability to perform a subtle Taylorism of organizational change are over. To be distinctive, professionals need to listen to, and to develop tailor-made support programs to organizational change processes. Leaders are now going from an external and chirurgical 'sense-making' approach, to a more internal and homeopathic one, symbolically substituting their consulting experts by professional coaches.⁴

The Coaching Profession

Coaching was an emerging profession, struggling for recognition. Anyone could call themselves an executive coach. Attracted by the high margins of the industry, psychologists, outplacers, auditors, management consultants, sports professionals, and even gurus and shamans were entering the profession.

In spite of attempts at creating diplomas, no particular certification had gained clear recognition in the profession. For example, in France only 38 of the 500 members of the Société Française de Coaching were "licensed," but licensing had very little relation to professional recognition. Clients did not distinguish between licensed and unlicensed coaches. Unable to assess the quality of coaches, clients tended to discount claims of coaches about their own quality and rely more on their reputation with existing clients. Hence, personal reputation and word of mouth were critical to professional success, and it could take years to build a sustainable base of clients.

Most coaches worked as independents, linked with other coaches through networks of referrals, allowing them to preserve independence and flexible cost structures, while serving a wide range of client needs. Coaches usually engaged their colleagues to act as professional advisors and supervisors. In addition, many coaches had other jobs, such as organizational development consultants, and dedicated only 30% to 40% of their time to coaching.

Observers pointed to the analogy between the early days of management consulting and coaching in the early 2000s. Management Consulting had started in the early 1900s as an unregulated and unrecognised profession. The value offered was unclear, and using a consultant was often considered as an admission of management failure. Only after Marvin Bower instilled professional standards through his management precepts for McKinsey & Company did management consulting evolve into a recognized profession. Management consulting brought professional management techniques to managers struggling with the emerging complexity of modern corporations. As management techniques became well-known and widely applied, executives were still struggling with the human side of their

⁴ Chavel, Thierry. About sense-making leaders. Is coaching modern or post-modern? Atelier ANVIE proceedings, May 13th 2003, p. 2

organizations. Coaching partisans argued that in this new managerial reality, coaching could become the next professional service to bloom.

The French Coaching Profession

In 2002, the French coaching profession was a Euro 100 millions market, expected to grow up to Euro 450 million in 2005. Executive coaches, with rates in the 250 to 450 Euros per hour range, were amongst the most highly paid professionals.⁵ Coaching was a fragmented profession, comprised of mostly independent professionals and small shops. There were approximately 3,000 coaches in France, one for 20,000 inhabitants, about half the density of coaches in the United States.

Despite the relative immaturity of the profession, most coaches in France were highly educated. 54% had graduated from one of French's highly selective business or Engineering "Grandes Ecoles" and 46% had a diploma in Human Resource sciences. 76% had at least a college degree, and 31% had a PhD, MBA, or Master's Degree. 75% had taken courses in psychoanalysis, 65% had received formal training in coaching, and 65% had some experience with PNL, transactional analysis, or psychoanalytic techniques⁶.

But education or experience were no substitutes for the specific talent required to be a top executive coach. Nicolas Schilfarth, European director of Learning and Organisation at Danone, a major French Food company, has done a thorough review of the practitioners, in order to better understand the market⁷. "Top managers are like athletes. Both need high-quality coaches. What I see as critical is to understand what exactly does someone who calls herself a coach. I don't want to trick her, but I try to provide an opportunity to present herself in the best possible way, without smoke and mirrors, and to present her true competence", says he. After a year and a half and close to 100 evaluations, only 1 in 10 passed the bar. "It's not a lot", he admits.

Developing this fragmented association of uneven practices into a true profession was a significant challenge. For Joël Burgalières, president of Société Française de Coaching (French Coaching Society) :

As president of the association, I have a major challenge: developing the association while keeping our standards high. The way we deal with this issue is particularly critical, since other associations exist, that could have an interest to sacrifice their standards to boost the size of their membership base, and free-ride our efforts towards quality and recognition. It is critical that I work on having our label recognized and valued by customers. Otherwise, we will see an adverse selection process: if our quality is too variable, customers will be unable to assess what they are paying for and they will cut prices to cover for the risk. This will lead the best coaches to leave, reinforcing the phenomenon. This death spiral would hurt the

⁵ Halary Christine. Devenir Coach pas si simple. Management, January 2003.

⁶ Forestier Gilles, Regards croisés sur le coaching, Ed. Organisation, 2002

⁷ Entreprise et Carrière n°688, October 2003, p.18

profession. I see the role of our association as absolutely critical for the reputation and the economic future of our emerging profession⁸.

Thierry Chavel commented further on the challenges of the coaching industry:

We are an emerging profession. The term “coaching” covers a very broad field, just like consulting encompasses SSII, training and Management Consulting. We just lack the maturity for this segmentation to appear clearly to the customer. It is also important to provide a strong theoretical support to the coaching process, which can sometimes be seen as mysterious by the clients. I dedicate a significant portion of my time to this task. This could help to segment the profession in a way that would be clear and operational for the client.

The Coaching Process

As in management consulting and other professional services, the coaching process was not formalized but there were recognizable patterns. For example, a coaching engagement started with a request, usually from an HR manager or directly by an executive. Coaching engagements were usually paid for by the coachee’s firm, but the ambiguous status of the profession and its personal aspect could lead some executives to seek coaching support in confidence.

The request was usually followed by the coach drafting a proposal for service, including a statement of objectives, duration, and price of the coaching engagement. Before the beginning of the coaching sessions, an assessment might be performed to get a better understanding of the person to be coached and his or her particular challenges. According to The French Coaching Society, 85% of the engagements lasted for 8 to 10 sessions, but some executives could use the services of a coach for an on-going relationship spreading over several years. A typical coaching engagement in continental Europe cost between 7,000 and 15,000 Euros⁹. But this was only an indicative number for a very fragmented market. For example, “gurus” could charge several thousand Euros for a single session, and make a few million Euros per year¹⁰.

A typical coaching session took place every other week, lasted for 3 hours, and consisted of a one-on-one interaction with the executive in a “neutral” place, often specified in the contract. After the planned number of sessions, a feedback session was conducted, including the originator of the demand, if different from the coachee and deemed appropriate by the coach and the coachee. If needed, the coaching might continue, typically through an on-going, less intensive relationship.

Some coaches defined themselves by the techniques they used, or the schools to which they belonged. Solution-oriented coaching, analytic coaching, systemic coaching, Neuro-Lingusitic Programming were but a few of the tools available to the professional coach. For

⁸ Interviews with Joël Brugalières, September 2003.

⁹ Halary Christine. Devenir Coach pas si simple. Management, January 2003. Etienne Collignon, a corporate user of coaching speaks of 7.000 Euros for a 5 to 6 months coaching with half a day every month or every two weeks (in « Entreprise et Carrière » n°688, p.22)

¹⁰ Confidential interview Alain Minc, the “informal” executive coach of most top executive of large French companies.

others, coaching was not a collection of tools, but the art of being “a sense-making mirror”, i.e. a “neutral and benevolent” approach to the relationship between a professional and an executive¹¹. According to Bernadette Babault, project manager at McKinsey and a researcher of the coaching industry, “Being a coach is, before all, an attitude. The ability to be there and transparent, just listening without judging, creating a dialogue opportunity where there was none. It’s revitalizing the real causes of value creation.”

Thierry Chavel

Thierry Chavel was born in Paris in 1971. After graduating from Lyon’s Business School, one of the French “Grandes Ecoles”, in 1993, he studied Industrial Sociology and Organizational Development in France (Collège de France, CNAM, ...) and Switzerland. An Advanced Studies degree in Human Resources in 1994 gave him the opportunity to analyze management behaviors in non-profit organizations.

Thierry Chavel’s professional life started with Systèmes Ventures & Gestion Méthodes (now part of PwC), where he worked as a management consultant in the banking, energy, entertainment and telecommunications industry. He specialized in the development of operational coaching for managers, working in a wide range of projects such as change management training, high potential assessments, intercultural communication improvements, management by objectives programs, etc. Chavel joined ExeCoach in 1999 as a coach and director in charge of the didactic coaching practice. Among other responsibilities, Thierry had also developed the “management co-coaching” technique, as an original coaching approach to bring coaching skills to all management levels.

ExeCoach was part of a global network of coaching firms and present in 10 countries. It was a small coaching shop, with a dozen of professionals and revenues in the range of 150 to 200.000 Euros per coach. Over the past few years it had experienced double-digit growth. Chavel was relatively young and had never been an operational manager. He was nonetheless a coaching professional, with significant experience and expertise. A prolific author, he had written several articles in business reviews and three management books about coaching, *Le Coaching démystifié: Comment réenchanter le management*¹² (Demystified Coaching); *La conduite humaine du changement*¹³ (Human Change Management) and *Profession coach : De la théorie à la pratique*¹⁴ (Profession: Coach). In 2002 Thierry Chavel was also professor of Organizational Sociology at HEC, one of France’s leading business schools, and professor of Coaching at Paris University, where he had co-founded the first French Coaching degree.

¹¹ Interview with Thierry Chavel, August 2003.

¹² Demos Editions, 1999

¹³ Demos Editions, 2000

¹⁴ Demos Editions, 2001

He was also a guest as expert coach at the TV broadcast “Dans ma boîte” (At my Firm) on the France 5 channel.

Getting the deal

In June 2002, Chavel was contacted by Paul Pujol, GIF’s HR Manager. Chavel quickly realized that GIF was struggling with a major issue, and that they had given a lot of thoughts before calling for outside help.

GIF had recently hired a seasoned operational manager, Michel Dumont, to spearhead its operational effectiveness effort. In spite of not having done the most prestigious “Grandes Ecoles”, Dumont had had a successful career as an engineer and operational manager in small or medium sized industrial companies, where operational excellence and the ability to “get things done” were the dominant cultural traits. He had seemed a perfect recruit to change GIF’s operational practices.

The initiative was strategic and highly visible. It was projected to save GIF half a billion dollars. Dumont was skilled and willing to take on the challenge. Nonetheless, he was a newcomer at GIF and was having a hard time adapting himself to the politics of this traditional French industrial group, and getting legitimacy inside the closely-knit top-management team, all GIF veterans and prestigious “grandes écoles” alumni. As a result, Dumont was perceived by his new colleagues as difficult to deal with and so task-oriented that he could sometimes alienate even his most essential allies. “Dumont has a clear vision,” remarked Pujol. “But sometimes he cannot understand that others don’t see as clearly as he does. This can lead him to act too fast. He needs to learn how to communicate his views and how to sell them to the organization.”

According to Pujol, training in communication techniques and interpersonal skills could help Dumont succeed. He had tried to help Dumont by himself, but without success, and thought that external support might help. He was worried, though, that hiring a professional coach might be perceived by Dumont’s colleagues as an admission of his weakness, affecting Dumont’s internal credibility. Dumont might not also take positively to a suggestion for a coach. He was bright, but sometimes paranoid. On the other hand, if proved effective, coaching may be an interesting support for other “tough cases”. So Pujol had couched the coaching engagement as a pilot for a potential long-term relationship and asked for a significant discount as a sign of goodwill.

“I spent time with Pujol trying to understand the situation, the stated problem, the real needs of the organization, and its implications for the coaching assignment,” recalled Chavel. “I also explained to Pujol what coaching was about, what kind of issues it was most adapted to solve, and why hiring a professional was a sound business decision.” Pujol was convinced that Chavel would be able to contribute positively. “You must help Dumont succeed, he cannot fail,” he told Chavel at the conclusion of the meeting.

After the first meeting, Chavel wrote a letter of proposal summarizing the objectives of the engagement (see **Exhibit 5** for a summary) and granting GIF the asked-for discount. Pujol asked Chavel to meet with Dumont.

Although this meeting was supposed to test “fit” and not be part of a competitive selection process, I could not help but feel that other coaches were also being considered. I thought that

my ability to develop a relationship fast with Dumont would be critical to secure the engagement. At the same time, I felt uneasy about the real demand behind the coaching engagement. According to Pujol, I had to succeed and Dumont could not fail. This was a typical double bind¹⁵. Of course I could fail, and Dumont as well. Therefore, we were at odds with Pujol's demand even before the beginning of the engagement. What would be the consequences if we did fail in the end? Whose abilities would be evaluated in the end, mine's or Dumont's?.

Dumont was 45 minutes late for the meeting. When he finally arrived, he laid a few papers and notes on the table, including an article featuring my latest book. He had obviously done his homework. He then spoke for 40 minutes about his life and his perspective on the situation. He finally paused to ask me what I thought. I replied rather bluntly, "I feel overwhelmed and bored."

Chavel commented on his unusual response to Dumont's question at their first meeting:

At the beginning of a coaching engagement, your client always wants to test you. This is especially true with senior executives, who have an ambiguous relationship to power. The executive is asking for help, which in his or her mind is an admission of weakness. They need to trust you before opening themselves up, and they cannot trust you unless you have proven yourself. It's like two dogs sniffing each other. You need to show that you operate at the same level. I usually do that by being provocative and subversive, highlighting the paradoxes and contradictions. You need to push any potential concerns of capability or rivalry out of the way as fast as you can. It is a prerequisite for a true coaching relationship to begin.

Dumont commented later on Chavel's response: "Chavel's answer was surprising. But he was telling the truth. I was a bit shocked at first, but once I thought about it, I knew we could work together." The coaching assignment had commenced. The two agreed to meet every other week at Dumont's office, for a total of 10 sessions

The Coaching engagement

Chavel commented on the beginning of the engagement:

I started the engagement conscious of what was at stakes. This was a challenging engagement, especially because of Dumont's personality and skepticism towards the coaching process. My help was also critical for the success of both his career and GIF's improvement program. All this made it a difficult engagement, but no more than other that I had previously faced. The main difference could be that the cost of failure could be high.

Failing would mean that the hoped-for business with GIF, one of the most prestigious French companies, would not materialize. I would also have to write-off any recommendation that Dumont could make to potential clients in his extensive Rolodex. Finally, word-of-mouth spreads fast, especially for such high-visibility engagements, and that would be, in one way or another, a cost to my reputation. Pujol's command that "I could not fail" began to have a special meaning for me.

¹⁵ Double binds are paradoxical orders or constraints, that lead the individual to fail whatever he or she does. For example "Stop what you are doing, be yourself" is a good example. Whatever your behavior, it is your own, i.e. you are being yourself. Therefore, if you keep behaving in the same way you don't respect the order, and if you change your behavior, you are not being yourself. Therefore, you will fail whatever you do.

Chavel also reflected on the coaching process :

It is paradoxical to describe something so systemic as a linear process. But roughly speaking, there are four phases to coaching: frame analysis, exploration, confrontation and closure. But this is overly simplified, since coaching is often fractal, and you'll find all those elements within a phase or even within a single meeting.

Phase I: Frame Analysis (One Month)

Chavel quickly realized that Dumont was ambivalent about receiving coaching help. On the one hand, he was an action oriented, proudly self-sufficient executive skeptical of “all the fluff” involved with coaching. At the same time, he was conscious that his behavior might be exacerbating his problems and that his career was at risk unless he found a way out.

Slowly and gingerly, with Chavel's help, Dumont clarified for himself his development objectives:

Achieve better understanding of what he was really supposed to accomplish, between meeting operational objectives and expectations of senior executives

Improve his communication

Develop an internal support network that could assist him in the achieving his mission

Chavel worked with Dumont to help identify his needs. Dumont was an experienced executive in his early-sixties, with a strong operational background and an impressive track record. On paper, he was a perfect match for the operational effectiveness initiative. But he was growing increasingly frustrated in his new role. Dumont commented:

My former job had been with an entrepreneurial company where results counted, not process. But GIF was totally different. Political astuteness and the ability to make nice presentations at the right time to the right people were more important than the actual results achieved. At the time of the beginning of the coaching engagement, I was becoming increasingly convinced that the project I was responsible for was just a management fad, a short-term initiative targeted simply at the financial markets. I felt lonely amongst the executives and I lacked internal support. To make matter worse, I was regarded as inferior by the other executive committee members because of my education and of my operational background. I had no clue on how I could become a true peer, not just the leader of an operational project, however ambitious. In addition, I had had some harsh words with two influential executive committee members, who could prevent my success.

Chavel recalls his reactions during the first meeting:

As Dumont explained the issues, I could not help but think that he was unable to recognize that he was part of the problem. In addition, he seemed unable to make an appropriate use of his diagnostic of GIF's weaknesses. An obvious perfectionist and a curmudgeon, Dumont believed he needed to point out the inefficiencies to drive progress,, and that GIF's managers' reactions to his criticisms reflected complacency and an inability to change. But doing so, he was obviously going too far and alienating his colleagues. This was putting him at odds with GIF's culture, and positioning himself as a close-minded and limited operational manager. To be recognized as a big-picture senior vice president and executive committee member, he would have to develop a different perspective on his role, and totally new leadership style. This would be the critical driver of success for the coaching engagement.

I started to raise the issue of molding a new leadership style, with the objective of making this need clearer as our relationship developed. But I had to proceed with caution. At the beginning, Dumont made me think of a savage beast that I had to domesticate. I had to keep attracting him with promises of short-term improvements, crumbs in my open hands, trying to bring the beast closer. But over time, I came to recognize that he employed cynicism and apparent brutality to hide his fragility and weakness.

After the first three sessions, Chavel was pleased with the way the relationship had developed in spite of a difficult beginning. He was starting to know Dumont better and to understand the context in which he was working. In addition, he felt that he was gaining Dumont's trust:

Benevolent and non-judgmental listening, demonstrating a genuine willingness to understand his problems, showing that I was an ally and not a competitor, that I was here to help and not to blame, were critical to develop a trusting relationship. I decided to test the strength of our relationship by sending Dumont an e-mail wishing him a happy birthday. It was both the expression of genuine affection and a strategic move, as is often the case in professional relationships. It was a risky move. The attempt to intimacy could have backfired. But I felt it was the time to anchor our relationship in a trusting, confident mode. In retrospect, the move was successful. Dumont wrote back saying that he was touched by my message. He added that he had implemented successfully some of my recommendations. At the end of his email, he even admitted that he valued my help. After that, I knew we could go deeper.

Phase II: Exploration (Three Months)

During the next few sessions, Chavel started exploring with Dumont how he was experiencing his reality. Building on the frame analysis phase, he tried to understand why Dumont was feeling cornered and how he could help him. At the same time, he kept working on building Dumont's confidence by giving him positive feedback and highlighting his success and progress.

Chavel described his coaching approach as that of being the "sense-making mirror" for the coachee :

Advice does not help. What really matters is changing behavior. Only the person really knows their own situation and what they are ready to do. Rather than tell my clients what to do, I reflect back to them their situations, confronting perception with reality, highlighting potential contradictions and offering alternative perspectives. As a coach, my job is not to give advice, but to help the executive identify a course of action and commit to it.

To do so, I often share with my clients archetypal situations from history or mythology to help them step back from the specifics of their situations, recognize patterns, and find for themselves the right actions. For example, I had Dumont reflect on his position as a "Promethean scapegoat," stigmatized by the organization because he was bringing to it a new truth, just as in Greek mythology Prometheus was punished for bringing fire to humankind. Another part of my job was more concrete, like exploring with Dumont new ways to manage his time and his relationships within GIF.

While skeptical at first, Dumont admitted during the sixth session: "I don't know what you are doing, but it seems to be working."

I felt that the members of the executive committee were recognizing me better than before. I also felt less stressed, which translated into better working relationships with my colleagues

and subordinates. I had also made some changes in my personal organization. For example, I had asked for and recruited an assistant. I was feeling more in control, more confident, and less isolated within the company.

But for Chavel, this short-term professional improvement meant a worsening of their relationship:

He began to take some distance. He started rescheduling meetings at the last moment. It is usually the sign that something is not working. But he was sending mixed messages, because when he did come, he seemed pleased during the meetings and would offer positive comments on the progress made. I think this ambivalent behavior reflected his internal confusion about our relationship. He was in need of help, and he was grateful for the one I was providing. But at the same time, he was resenting my support as an admission of weakness.

I was personally worried. He had made significant progress, but he was still in a difficult position. The short-term progress had to be continued and transformed into a long-term, sustainable development path – and it was not easy. When you take antibiotics, the worst thing you can do is stopping before the infection is really over. I kept noticing warning signs that our work together was not over. For example, although Dumont was more polished in communicating with his colleagues, privately he was still extremely critical of them. He could come back anytime into his old aggressive mode. He was still uncomfortable about his relationship with the board. Finally, he was having trouble envisioning his own long-term future in the organization, which preventing him to be fully effective. Stopping the engagement at this stage could have dramatic consequences for Dumont, the organization, and the perception of my work.

For the 8th coaching session, Dumont missed two appointments. I called Pujol and let him know that he was not attending his coaching sessions, which quickly solved the problem as he came to the remaining sessions. But I noticed he was becoming increasingly more distant.

Phase III: Confrontation (Four Months)

The original agreement included only the first two phases. But because of Dumont's lack of attendance – missed sessions were contractually paid in full – an additional contract had to be signed. This was discussed between Chavel and Pujol, with Dumont's apparent agreement. It was decided that the additional engagement would include the missed sessions and a few additional meetings to wrap-up what had been done, do the follow-up, and put together a development plan

Once that contract was signed, Chavel started the next phase of the engagement.

To achieve the goals defined during this phase, I had to help Dumont envision himself as a true member of the executive committee. At some point, you need to confront the executive with the gap between his perception and the reality. The key is to help the person grow from moaning to an understanding of what could be achieved and how to reach it. We had spent three months working on Dumont improving his leadership style. He was getting positive results. We apparently had a strong relationship. I felt it was the right time to push him.

Working with Chavel, Dumont grew more confident that his project was an initiative truly critical to the firm, not just a short-term fad. Despite having a major clash with one of the two executives with whom he had had a fractious relationship, Dumont came to realize that they could work together and learn from each other. During his visits to the factories, he was

increasingly behaving as an ambassador of the executive board, taking a step back from detailed operational minutiae to focus on the big picture. He had also developed a high-level perspective that allowed him to become a true thought-partner of the CEO on operational issues, and to gain his trust. Recalls Chavel :

Progressively, Dumont came to complain less and less about the politics of the organization. He came to see it not as a sign of inefficiencies, but as a powerful force that had to be domesticated. After the end of the four months of the confrontation phase, I felt that he had successfully developed as a true executive committee member. I was relieved. This engagement was coming to an end, and, for what I knew, it seemed it would be a great personal and professional success.

Phase IV: Closure (Six Months Planned, Three Months Done)

The last phase of the coaching engagement was supposed to be a six months long follow-up. Like during phase III, the frequency of the sessions would be only monthly, compared to bi-monthly in phase I and II. The objective of this phase was to help Dumont design action plans to fulfill his future goals in the organization. Explained Chavel:

This phase is designed to help the executive go from introspection and analysis to the reality and implementation. You want to solidify new behaviors and draw a road-map for the medium-term. You want the person to become more autonomous.

The relationship takes on a character not unlike that of a relationship between an old couple. It becomes less focused on achieving short-term objectives. You know each other well; you can take more risks and be more blunt. At the same time, you become less careful and more likely to make mistakes.

The first few sessions of this phase built on the previous one. Step by step, Dumont had solved his main problems with the executive committee, had gained the trust of several colleagues, was on track with regards to his mission, felt less stressed and more effective. Even his personal life had improved. Chavel also spent some time exploring alternative long-term scenarios with Dumont, such as aiming to become GIF's COO or becoming CEO in another organization. "I could not have made it without you," he told Chavel. "You have been a solid support." But in the middle of this last phase an unfortunate event occurred. Chavel recollected:

During our previous session, Dumont had referred to a journal article in which I was featured. Incidentally, the reporter who had interviewed me had also interviewed Dumont a few weeks earlier for another article in a different publication. He had given me a cutting of the article and said somewhat bitterly: "So now, you too are a star."

That day, he started as usual, telling me how the previous month had gone by and how helpful he had found our sessions. Then, abruptly, he asked me what I was doing with the notes of our sessions. I replied matter-of-factly that they were confidential notes. When he asked what I meant by confidential, I replied, "Your question could be perceived as paranoid." Immediately, he stood up, red-faced and tight-lipped, and said "Paranoid, huh. . . . if that's what you think of me, then our relationship is over." He picked up his briefcase and rushed out of the room, banging the door. I was totally stunned.

The Decision

Sipping espresso in a café on his way back to his office, Chavel reflected on the situation:

The journal article may have changed his perspective. He might have realized that although I was dedicated to helping him, I also had a life outside of our relationship. This may have broken the trust between us. He may have been worried about what use I might make of the confidences he had shared with me. He had always had an ambiguous feeling towards publicity.

At the same time, I wondered if he had just been waiting for a pretext to terminate our relationship. As planned in the contract, my bill had been settled a few days ago although I still had a few sessions to go, and he knew it. Maybe his storming out was not a coincidence but a set-up.

Ending a coaching relationship can be very traumatic, like a symbolic euthanasia. I knew Dumont was uncomfortable with the impending conclusion of our engagement. Maybe breaking the engagement abruptly was his very personal way of claiming back his autonomy and of terminating our relationship without a slow degradation.

In addition, when someone has used external help, they often have a conflicting perception of the helper. On the one hand, there is gratitude; on the other hand, that person has seen you weak. Getting rid of the person is a way to protect the image of the self and to minimize the importance of the help received.

But maybe I was the one to blame for having pushed him too far. I was so involved in his problems that I may have forgotten to maintain appropriate distance between us. We had been working together for months, but we were not friends. He was the client and I was the professional.

My main problem was that I was not sure whether this was a failure or not. Most of the objectives of the coaching had been attained, including giving his autonomy back to the executive, and the bills being paid in full. At the same time, how could the relationship end so abruptly and the engagement still be a success? How should I consider this event on the personal and professional level? Was my professional responsibility to do the remaining sessions, or should I walk away? Was there any additional way to help him, or would my efforts just make matter worse?

Finally, I was wondering about the impact of this unfortunate event on future business. What could Dumont's perception be? What feed-back would he give to Pujol, to his colleagues and to his relationships? For example, I was supposed to have a meeting with Pujol at the end of the engagement. What should I expect from it? Was there any hope of future business with GIF? Was there anything else I should do to make the best out of the situation?

The night had fallen and Chavel looked at his notes pensively. He had generated four possible options and was wondering which one to choose.

- Not doing anything and considering the engagement as “case closed”.
- Calling Pujol as soon as possible to discuss the situation with him. What he should tell him was still unclear, though.

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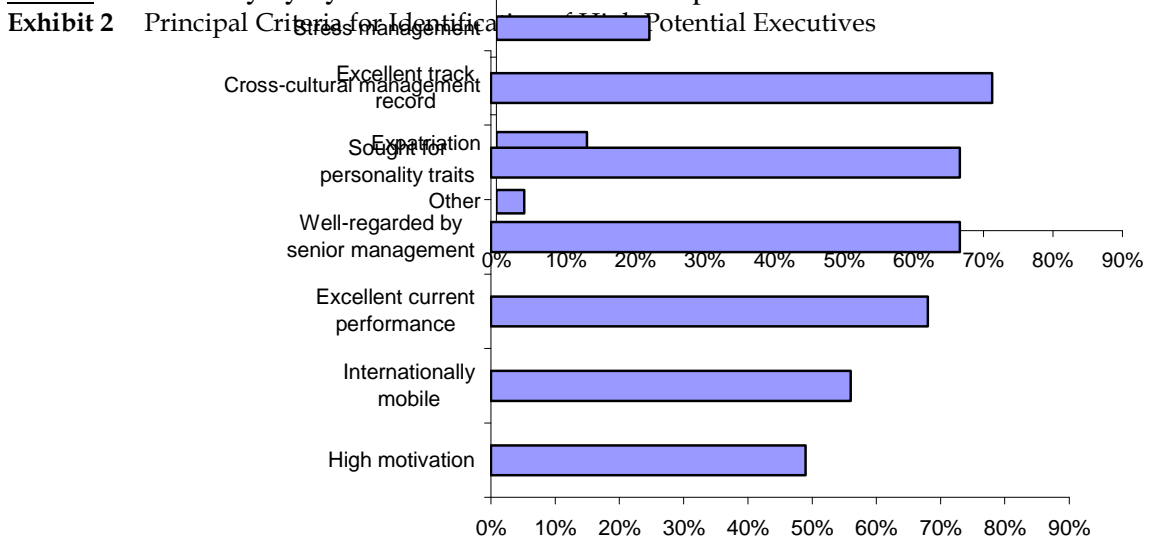
- Sending an email to Dumont apologizing for the situation and asking for a phone explanation the next day. Chavel had even prepared a draft, but was still wondering whether it would be a good idea to send it. (See exhibit 6)
- Calling his supervisor for advice, which would probably delay any action for a few days

Chavel was still under the shock of the meeting and slightly confused about what to do. The only thing he was sure about was that he had to take a decision fast.

Exhibit 1 Situations in Which Coaching Tends to be Conducted

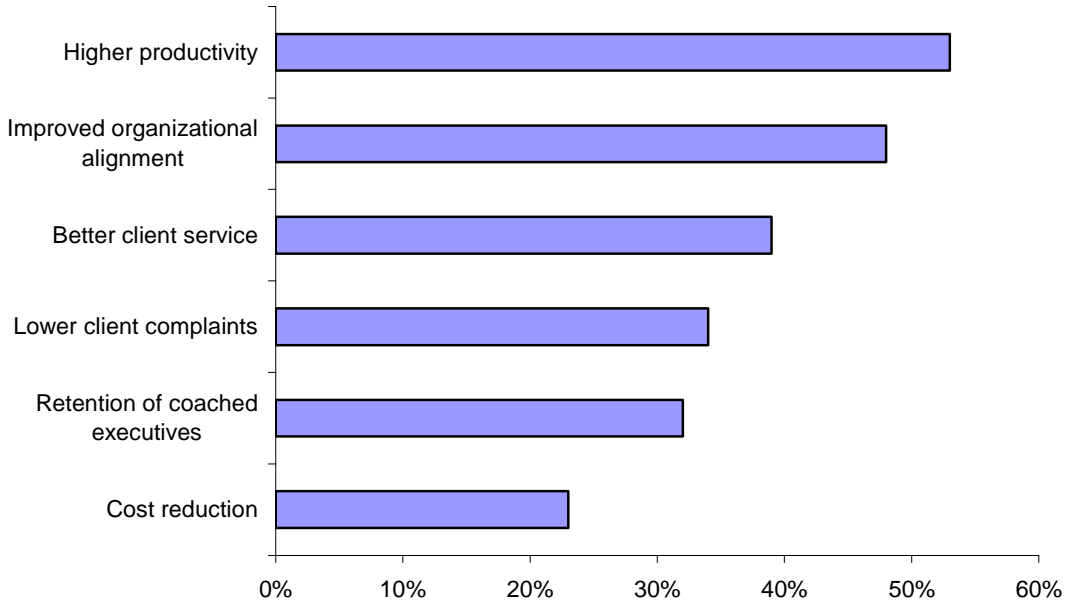


Exhibit 2 Principal Criteria for Identification of Potential Executives



Source: Lettre des Etats Majors n°57. Christian Falcoz, Université Lyon III.

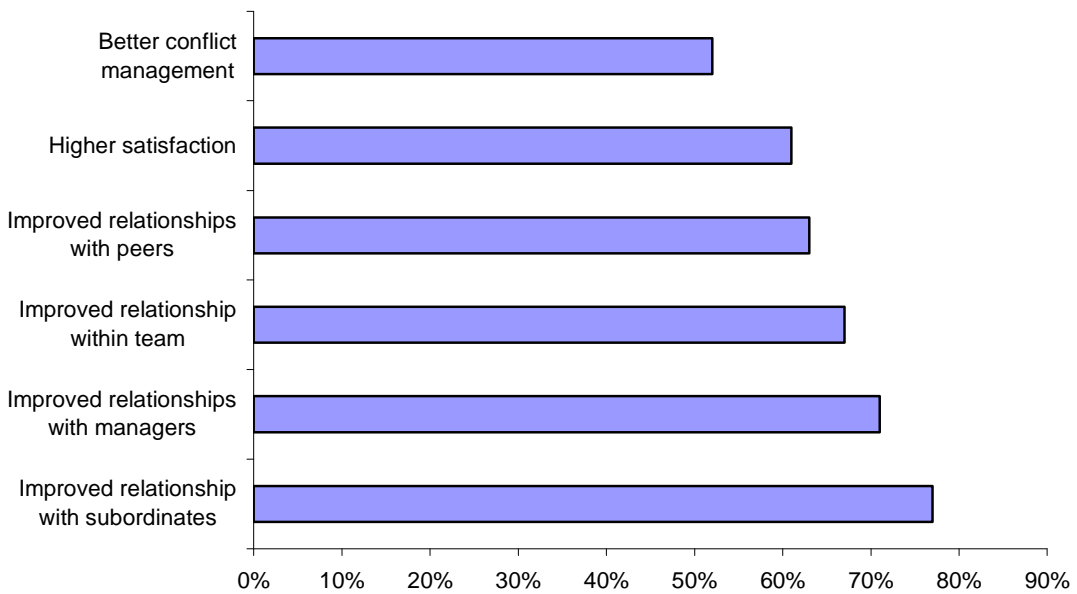
Exhibit 3 Organizational Impact of a Coaching Engagement



So

Source: International Coaching Federation, 2001 Conference

Exhibit 4 Impact of Coaching Engagement on Personal Effectiveness



So

Source: International Coaching Federation, 2001 Conference

Exhibit 5 Summary of the Proposal Letter

1. The Coaching approach of ExeCoach
 - a. Help executives succeed in the accomplishment of their professional mission
 - b. In the specific case of Paul Dumont, help him:
 - i. Integrate better the expectations of the key managers
 - ii. Learn to communicate better the challenges and objectives of his missions, taking into account the relational impact and the power network into his communication strategy
 - iii. Improve his ability to create and influence networks of operational and HR managers
2. What you can expect from the coach
 - a. The coach strives to make the manager and his company successful
 - b. To do so, the coach:
 - i. Helps the executive take a step back and challenge his usual assumptions and behaviors to develop a new understanding of the factors of success
 - ii. Supports the executive in taking decisions thanks to his expertise in power and collaboration networks, decision making processes, team management techniques, strategic analysis, development dynamics and delegation
 - iii. Assists the executive in clarifying operational situations and defining priorities and factors of development, by highlighting the executive's behavior and impact
 - iv. Helps the executive better understand his strengths and development needs; the coach is totally committed to a successful professional and personal development
3. The different phases of the engagement
 - a. Initialization (2 half days per months for 2 months)
 - i. Clarify the engagement's objective and context
 - ii. Understand Michel Dumont's needs, perceptions and desired outcomes
 - iii. Identify current issues and challenges and their perception
 - iv. Analyze Dumont's potential based on his leadership style and its consequences in terms of chances of success or failure
 - b. Coaching (2 half days per months for 3 months)
 - i. Help Dumont take a step back, develop new behaviors and strategies and understand the full implications of his actions
 - ii. Improve ineffective or counter-productive behaviors
 - iii. Analysis of the consequences of the new behaviors
4. Ethical Principles of coaching at ExeCoach
 - a. The engagement must be clear and accepted
 - b. The coach's only objective is to make the executive successful within his organization
 - c. The engagement's main focus is a physical person or team
 - d. The engagement is based on concrete actions and behaviors

- e. Confidentiality is an overarching principle
 - f. The coach is committed to the success of his engagement
 - g. Developing the executive's potential and strengths is an integral part of the engagement
 - h. The coach cannot substitute himself to the executive for decision making and actions
 - i. The engagement is billed to the company
 - j. The executives must be able to use the tools used by the coach
5. Budget
- a. For this engagement, our base-rate is 2,500 USD per day

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Exhibit 6 Chavell's Draft Message to Dumont

From : Thierry Chavel

To : Michel Dumont

Dear Michel,

First of all, I would like to apologize for our meeting. I realize my words may have gone too far. It was nonetheless done in good spirit, like during many of our discussions. I was therefore surprised to see you leave so abruptly. In any case, I did not mean to offend you.

We have accomplished a lot over the past few months, and I don't believe this could be the end of our relationship. I would be happy to call you tomorrow or to see you in the next few days to talk about this event.

Sincerely,

Thierry