

Coaching at Work

“pp20-23 Profile”

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Erik De Haan's ability to work with the organisational unconscious and surface hidden levels in groups has been called 'magical'. The director of Ashridge Business School's Centre for Coaching talks to **Liz Hall** about the 'dark side' of leadership

SENSE MAKER

Magical is how one corporate client described Erik De Haan's ability to work with groups. "I like the complexity and the dynamics between people. I'm quite good at detecting and naming some of those," admits the director of Ashridge Business School's Centre for Coaching.

De Haan has been working with groups in various ways for many years, including as an OD consultant, running action learning and supervision sets, and coaching top teams, in addition to CEOs individually.

Somewhat controversially, he says that team coaching is nothing new: "[It] is advertised as very new, but that's ridiculous. There has been lots of team coaching – known before as OD consultancy – going on for a long time."

Despite enjoying group work, in particular OD consultancy, he doesn't do as much as he used to. "I don't do a lot of sitting in with a

team and observing what's going on, and I miss it."

He has been busy with numerous other projects, including running the Centre, spearheading ambitious large-scale research, such as the *Greatest Coaching Outcome Research Project Ever*, which attracted some 3,900 respondents, and his first foray into the leadership literature. This August sees the launch of *The Leadership Shadow*, co-authored with Anthony Kasozi¹.

"Although I was already helping leaders, I always thought I didn't really understand their profession. I struggled to understand what leadership is and what it is for. It took me three years to come up with definitions," says De Haan.

The book explores how, in today's fast-paced mercilessly competitive business world, executives' drivers 'overshoot' and act out the 'dark side' of leadership.

Exploring the hitherto hidden, though, is familiar territory for De Haan. He specialises in working with the organisational

unconscious and in surfacing hidden levels of the company or group culture. His consulting and his coaching approaches are both informed by his counselling, psycho-analytic and group-dynamics training.

He still finds plenty of opportunities to apply what he describes as "his sensitivity to what moves and motivates people, along with a strong analytical ability" in a number of ways, including executive coaching and therapy. He is nearing the end of his training as a psychodynamic psychotherapist.

Move

De Haan moved to the UK 12 years ago to join Ashridge Business School, after working as an OD consultant for 10 years in Amsterdam, with small traditional network-based OD businesses. He still has strong connections with his native country, the Netherlands, where he is professor of OD and coaching at the VU University, Amsterdam.



Of his time in OD there, he says, “It was huge fun for me, and at first I couldn’t get my head round there being 100 full-time faculty and 150 associates [at Ashridge].”

Coaching

His first impression was that: “With such a large and diversified offering, it really became important for me to develop a speciality within OD. At Ashridge you need to be specific about: ‘I’m doing this; you can call me for that’. I noticed that executive coaching was growing very fast, and almost by coincidence I became a coach.”

He quickly turned into one of the better-known coaches in the UK. In 2006, he created the MSc in Executive Coaching, and in 2009 the Postgraduate Certificate in Advanced Coaching and OD Supervision, both at Ashridge. Yet he remains somewhat ambivalent:

“In some ways, I was pulled into being pigeon-holed. I was a bit ambivalent because I liked organisational consultancy work, and still do.”

The main obstacle to him doing more generalised OD work is that he is so busy. Such consultancy assignments are unpredictable and you need to be able to accommodate what comes your way. “You need space in the diary to do interviews, for example. You can’t do it over two days.” He takes on one or two big OD projects a year, and declines requests to run workshops, for example.

Systems

Before moving into OD, De Haan was a physicist – his MSc was on the Higgs boson particle. He studied Theoretical Physics in Amsterdam and gained his PhD in Utrecht, with research into learning and decision-making processes in perception (1994). This



background informs his approach now, taking a systemic perspective.

“It helps with ‘aggregate levels’...talking about the issue with the client and thinking about whether it’s [really] their issue, exploring how they choose to describe it – at what level do we make a statement of the problem?”

“Perspective matters... I don’t do any role play or practices, but I do try to reflect with them.”

It also makes him sceptical: “I think because I’ve studied physics, I feel a bit sceptical of things like The Tao of Physics, and how brain science is sometimes used in coaching. You can read into brain science any points you’d argue.”

Therapy

Increasingly, as he’s delved further into psychodynamics, he’s come to believe that there are ‘no hard boundaries’ between therapy and coaching: “I think that’s an illusion. If you see a therapy client, you may talk about work, or at least the work domain won’t be absent, and similarly in coaching, emotions will be there, and you will speak about the emotional [side of things]. All of us have to deal with emotions in the room, some of us will define ourselves as coaches and a number will try to ignore emotions, or even worse, will try to delve into emotions without knowing what they’re doing – some coaches are ill-equipped.

“ Team coaching is advertised as very new, but that’s ridiculous. There has been lots of team coaching – known before as OD consultancy – going on for a long time ”

“I think coaches do need some psychological training – we could also argue that they need some business training. But sometimes people give a very black and white answer [to the question of whether coaches need psychotherapeutic training]. Are all chartered psychologists or psychotherapists really that good, even if they have had lots of supervision, for example? They might be in the middle of, say, a divorce themselves, or they may struggle to understand business realities...”

De Haan believes, as helping professionals, we should all be engaged in ongoing learning. He points out that psychotherapists will be specialised in certain areas, and won’t have come across every single condition.

Neither will have coaches. During one telephone coaching session, the client mentioned he had a medical condition De Haan was unfamiliar with, so he quickly looked it up online while coaching the client.

What has this psychodynamic perspective offered De Haan’s coaching? “My own journey means I am able to hold the space for more vulnerable people more and more, which is an important learning. [When it comes to helping people] when clients are suspicious or criticise me, I take it less personally and can say ‘let’s think about that’. I think I’ve grown in that regard.”

Perspectives

One core element of psychodynamic work is the offering of a hypothesis to the client. This might feel overly

directive, but De Haan believes it can be immensely powerful for the client. I can personally vouch for that, having been on the receiving end of coaching from De Haan some six years ago, at a time when other approaches, including a solution-focused one, failed to help me tackle a specific dilemma.

De Haan says, “I think understanding and insight are very important in our field. Lots of people under-value that. Lots of my colleagues value the warmth and partnering, the being there for the client as a resource, which I value also, but in addition, I value the reflective journey, the stumbling upon a hypothesis for them. For that, you need business understanding and psychological sense-making. I think the sense-making is very helpful. To come up with a usable hypothesis, you have to be experienced, cultured and psychologically minded.”

It also helps to be outspoken: “I can be very blunt – very Dutch!” he says. His mother tongue is Dutch, but he is fluent in English, German, French and Italian, and speaks basic Spanish.

His bluntness is not everyone’s cup of tea – De Haan recalls a

perceived obtrusive connection he made to one client’s private life. “I used a very private, sensitive detail to say that it could be a metaphor in work. This was terrible for the client... [they said] ‘Who are you to tell me that? How can you disrespect me like that?’”

In fact, they courageously stayed with the coaching and benefited from this intrusive hypothesis.

De Haan makes his approach explicit when contracting with clients. He takes ethics very seriously, noting that, as helping professionals “we carry a great responsibility and duty of care”.

Personally, running and mindfulness are important to him. He has been on retreats and says *vipassana* meditation has been important to his self-development. He enjoys theatre too, including Ibsen. “I bring that [interest] in [to my work].”

In 1997, he first published a book on King Lear, *The Consulting Process as Drama* (Karnac Books, 2003), in which he suggests that having an eye for the dramatic with a client can be an advantage.

He has written more than 100 research articles and seven books, including: *Supervision in Action* (McGraw-Hill/OUP, 2012). He has also edited two books with his Ashridge colleagues: *Coaching Relationships* (2012) and *Behind Closed Doors: Stories from the Coaching Room* (2013). ■

1 E De Haan and A Kasozi, *The Leadership Shadow: How to Recognise and Avoid Derailment, Hubris and Overdrive*, Kogan Page, August 2014

