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# PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT OF EXECUTIVE COACHES

We know, from practice and academic research, that executive coaches are highly successful in helping their clients grow into their role at work and to develop in demanding, complex and changing work contexts [1]. In a conversation based, one-on-one, dyadic relationship, developing trust and achieving a deep level of psychological reflection and understanding between a coach and their client are the criteria for success. The effectiveness of coaching is strongly related to the strength of the working alliance between a coach and their client. It is also related to the personality of the coach and common factors such as honesty, authenticity, empathy, warmth, respect, and trustworthiness [2].

To make coaching work, executive coaches have, on the one hand, the freedom and autonomy to do their complex work in their own way. On the other hand, similar to other professionals, they want to do good work and deliver quality to systems of clients and their organisations. Further, they want to also contribute to other systems by being critical to the development of their professional communities and society in general. In other words, 'noblesse oblige' or choosing to contribute to all those systems with different relationships and interests at stake, brings forth the responsibility of remaining professional by continuously reflecting on one's own being in one's specific role [3].

The concept of professional identity can provide guidance [4]. Although the coaching industry is professionalising [5], the concept of professional identity is not very explicit in the research on executive coaching and the coaching profession is absent in the research on professional identity. Little is known about the journeys of executive coaches in terms of their professional identity development. Reviewing the existing literature on professional identity in other 'helping professions' shows an agreement that identity in the context of work, can be seen in (at least) three dimensions: the personal, the relational in interaction with others and the collective in terms of sharing a common purpose, meaning, joint action and belonging to the same group. Professional identity development has been researched in, for instance, medical and teaching professions that are characterised by uniform schooling, training and career paths; however, the coaching profession is characterised by more diversity. We discovered four different, but connected, perspectives related to professional identity development that will be helpful in introducing systematic research to the field of executive coaching.

*Occupational or vocational identity* refers to the question of what it means to be an executive coach. This relates to the aforementioned collective dimension of identity, in which reflection on the profession in general—its background, origin and history, the dos and don'ts, the shared beliefs and values and the common body of knowledge are central. Informed by this collective identity, an individual executive coach might ask himself, 'What does it mean for me to be a coach and what stance do I take?' This brings the second perspective, *Professional identity*, to the fore. This perspective is used to refer to a set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences, or a mental

'mini-theory' based on the knowledge and practical experiences that affect the attitudes, affect and behaviour in work that makes an individual coach recognisable, despite changes in circumstances and time. Instead of a state of being, the third perspective, *Identity Work*, represents a dynamic or process view by referring to the cognitive, discursive, physical and behavioural activities that professionals undertake with the goal of forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, revising, or rejecting collective, role and personal self-meanings within boundaries of their social contexts [6]. An interesting question in this respect is, 'What is at stake for me as a person in my role and how do I (re-)act?'. The fourth perspective, *Identity Workspaces*, can best be illuminated by asking the question, 'What do I need, as an executive coach, to ensure a safe setting for identity work?' [7]. A holding environment for identity work might be offered through either the form of trusted supervision

or safe spaces provided during training programs; however, other possibilities remain to be explored [8]. Since the coach-client relationship is the main contributor of success in their work, the question of how executive coaches make use of this relationship as a workspace for their professional identity development is a challenge to explore.

As a test, we analysed the recent work of Burger [9], reflecting on her practice of coaching and concluded that these four perspectives are notably different, but related ways to continuously develop her professional identity. Those four perspectives will guide empirical research on how executive coaches develop their professional identity. Apart from contributing to academic research in the field of professional identity development and executive coaching, this research is helpful for practitioners to gain more insight in how to engage and develop professional identity, in how to continuously develop as a professional and in how to maintain quality of service in an ever-changing world. Educational institutions and professional bodies will gain more insight in how to further facilitate executive coaches in their continuous growth and professional development, as well as how to further profile the profession of executive coaching to their clients.

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