

ISPSO 2021 Annual Meeting in Berlin

**Roles of the Coach Within the Walls: Trojan Horse, Field Medic, Canary in the Coal Mine**

To be an external organizational consultant or leadership coach is, by definition, to stand outside the client's organizational walls as an "other." This external vantage point has been the place traditionally occupied by many, if not most, consultants and coaches. What about internal coaches, who serve colleagues within the same organizational walls? This paper explores the roles of the coach within walls.

This is a timely topic because organizations are increasingly turning to internal resources to provide organizational consulting and leadership coaching, as evidenced by multiple industry surveys in the past five years (see appendix). The trend in all of these studies is similar: organizations are relying more heavily on internal coaches and an increasing number of coaches work as internal practitioners.

What is behind this trend? Is it a parallel process with what's happening in the world, closing borders, building walls and barring outsiders? While there might be some truth in drawing those parallels -- perhaps an unconscious process at work to protect the corporate body -- a more intentional and openly espoused motive is the aim to extend leadership coaching and organizational consulting beyond top executives, to middle management and front-line leaders. Under pressure to "democratize" coaching and make it available to more people, increased use of internal resources is one way organizations have met rising demand. The Conference Board reported that with a growing focus on developing leaders lower in the organization, "to scale that expansion with external coaches would be cost prohibitive. While continuing to work with external coaches, many organizations are also deploying internal coaches to reach more leaders further levels down."<sup>1</sup>

With the growth in internal coaching driven in large part by rising demand, another question deserves consideration: What accounts for the increased demand to support leaders at lower levels? Whether provided by in-house coaches, external coaches, managers, or artificial intelligence, the total provision of coaching continues to grow, with an estimated market size of \$2.8 billion in 2019, a 21% increase over 2015 estimates<sup>2</sup>. Observing this trend, along with the parallel growth in employers offering meditation, yoga, and similar self-improvement opportunities, some have hypothesized that perhaps "contemporary work life has become so alienating and soul-destroying that we need therapy to endure it" or, alternatively, that these seemingly benevolent offerings are just new methods of organizational control masquerading as perks.<sup>3</sup> Another explanation offered for the increase is a changed perception of coaching from a "fix" for those in trouble to an accelerator of success, and from a luxury for senior leaders to a contributor to everyone's success<sup>4</sup>.

Simon Western sees the rise of coaching in organizations as an outgrowth of what he calls the "Therapist Leadership Discourse", in which leaders assume their role in a people-focused, emotionally-literate way that aims to make the workplace a site for self-development. He notes that coaching

---

<sup>1</sup> The Conference Board, Global Executive Coaching Survey, 2018, p.4

<sup>2</sup> 2020 ICF Global Coaching Study Executive Summary, p. 13

<sup>3</sup> Cederstrom, Carl and Casper Hoedemaekers (eds), *Lacan and Organization*, MayFlyBooks, 2010, p. xv-xvi. A recent New Yorker article about the use of EQ as a means of control could also be cited here as an example. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/04/19/the-repressive-politics-of-emotional-intelligence>

<sup>4</sup> *Financial Times*, January 2, 2020 "New year, New You! The Boom in Executive Coaching"

emerged as the therapist leadership discourse blossomed, becoming a source of support to the leaders themselves as they faced new demands to listen, motivate and relate with colleagues.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past two decades, a number of authors published books and articles exploring basic questions about internal coaching, defining it and describing its attributes (see appendix). With internal coaching firmly established, this paper takes up some of the next logical questions: **What uniquely valuable roles are available to the coach within the walls, and what challenges and opportunities face internal coaches?**

### The Three Metaphors

One way to think about organizational roles is through the lens of metaphor. Three metaphorical roles that internal coaches are uniquely positioned to occupy are Trojan Horse, Field Medic, and Canary in the Coal Mine. Briefly, the three roles are:

Trojan Horse: In the Greek story, a force of hidden troops is unknowingly welcomed inside the walls of Troy and then subverts from within. Internal coaches can likewise be a subversive force, allowed access to leaders who may not have realized their thinking would be challenged, obsolete practices called out, and/or the status quo disrupted. While this role often is among the most generative services a coach or consultant offers, it can also morph into an unconscious persecutory pattern<sup>6</sup>.

Field Medic: Co-located with the troops, field medics provide first aid behind the lines, patching up the wounded so they can continue to carry out their duties. While internal coaches can provide an important support for leaders navigating difficult challenges, this role can also represent a form of collusion with the organization and the leader, by allowing both parties to avoid addressing the costs imposed by ever-escalating demands. Coaches and consultants who are prone to “rescuer syndrome” can find themselves unaware of how they harm by “helping.”<sup>7</sup>

Canary in the coal mine: In the days of manual mining, caged canaries, with their sensitivity to toxic gases, would sicken or die before adverse conditions affected humans, thus signaling mine workers to seek safety. When an organization employs a group of internal coaches or consultants who are privy to leaders’ narratives, it can become possible to identify systemic themes and patterns, both toxic and virtuous ones<sup>8</sup>. If there is a large enough population, this can be done without jeopardizing confidentiality. Some organizations want to hear this sort of “birdsong,” while others might prefer to silence it.

Before we delve deeper into these three metaphors, let’s pause briefly to note that the focus here is on people with a distinct formal role as internal coach or internal consultant, and not leaders or managers who use coaching skills in the course of doing their job.

---

<sup>5</sup> Western, Simon, *Leadership: A Critical Text*, 2019, Sage, pp. 213-223.

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Barth, “50 Shades of Coaching – How Tough Does Coaching Have to Be?,” Kets De Vries Research Lab blog, 2017, [https://www.kdvi.com/research\\_items/770](https://www.kdvi.com/research_items/770)

<sup>7</sup> Manfred Kets De Vries, *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*, p. 91

<sup>8</sup> Bill Critchley and Ann Knights, “Thinking Together: The Untapped Potential of Internal Coaches,” *Coaching Today*, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, April 2019, Issue 30. <https://www.bacp.co.uk/bacp-journals/coaching-today/april-2019/thinking-together/>

Another important clarification is the focus on roles that are uniquely available to the internal coach or consultant. Priest, confessor, fool, knave, athletic trainer, or referee are also interesting metaphors that describe positions available to coaches and consultants, and while internal coaches or consultants can occupy these positions, external resources outside the walls of the client can equally do so. Positions exclusively available to those working inside the walls are the focus of this inquiry, hence the attention to Trojan Horse, Field Medic and Canary in the Coal Mine.

Why metaphors as an approach? If we want to understand the structure and dynamics of the internal coach role, we could employ terminology from the sciences to quantitatively measure and make diagrams of parts, processes, inputs and outputs, and the like. Many of the industry surveys previously cited do just that, measuring gender, age, and years of experience of internal coaches or their adherence to particular published processes. But if we want to understand the internal coach psyche, perhaps it is worth noting that the psyche prefers the poetics of imagery, symbol, and metaphor when speaking about itself. Scientific terminology and models are extremely valuable, especially to the outside observer. For a consideration of coaching from the inside, by one who is herself on the inside as an internal coach, metaphor seems to be a form of language more fit to the task in its suggestive, multivalent, and poetic qualities.

This paper aims to contribute new thinking on the psyche of the internal coach as considered through the framework of these three metaphoric roles, and aiming to answer the following questions:

- How does one's position within the walls of the organization affect the boundaries between coach and client and the agendas they address?
- What are the "walls" enabling ethical practice?
- What fuels the successful internal coach?
- What are their hidden desires and motivations?

This paper explores these questions with cases and theoretical texts and with personal experience, considering aspects of the psychodynamics of thriving or struggling as an internal coach or consultant. The observations offered may also apply to external coaches or consultants who work closely and intimately for many years with the same clients.

### **Trojan Horse**

The term "Trojan Horse" has come to signify any means by which a threat hiding in a benign package is invited into a protected place. In an example of modern usage, the term refers to a malicious computer program that tricks users into running it. Contemporary business strategy makes use of the idiom as well, often in reference to sales pitches. If you Google "trojan horse" and "business strategy" you get 1,550,00 results, with an article at the top entitled "How to Get Consulting Clients Using a Trojan Horse."

To briefly revisit the term's origins: it appeared in a legendary episode from ancient Greece that was made famous in Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. The story goes that after a 10-year siege on Troy, the Greeks constructed a huge wooden horse. They hid a military unit inside the horse before pretending to sail away. The Trojans pulled the horse inside the city as a victory trophy. That night, Greek soldiers hidden inside the horse climbed out and opened the gates to the rest of their army, which had sailed back to Troy in the dark. The Greeks sacked the city and ended the war.

This paper proposes a new application for this colorful metaphor to the practice of internal coaching. As an illustration for how the idea of the Trojan Horse aptly describes one of the roles that internal coaches can play, consider the example of executive onboarding. In working with leaders who are joining the organization, an internal executive coach can become an early trusted confidant. Many new joiners want to quickly make a mark, trying to do so in ways that worked for them in other organizations, sometimes without realizing that in striving for a quick win, they are bypassing or even damaging relationships and networks essential for long term success. With knowledge of the organizational culture, an internal coach can challenge the new joiner's thinking by asking about their assumptions, motives, and definition of success. Sometimes these queries lead nowhere, in other cases they might produce insights that lead to a few behavioral tweaks, and sometimes they can uncover a surprising recognition of a repeating pattern - - perhaps even the impetus for leaving one's former organization. The timing for this sort of insight can matter. A coach within the walls may have the immediate access to new joiners that makes this sort of observation, feedback and interpretation possible early in their tenure.

### **Boundaries and ethics**

While access creates some virtuous opportunities, it can also entail risks. Two specific challenges include:

- Heightened potential for confidentiality to be compromised, and
- Greater difficulty perceiving system issues to which both coach and client are subject.

Every text that considers the challenges of internal coaching devotes attention to questions of confidentiality. For any coach, internal or external, it is crucial to communicate explicit boundaries, both verbally and in a written agreement, that make clear what client information, if any, the coach will reveal. This is perhaps even more important for an internal coach, who may encounter more frequent moments where confidentiality is vulnerable. Daily informal conversations at the water cooler, or in the hallway, or on conference calls, or on the margin of Zoom meetings, can expose the internal coach to small talk that includes questions about how the coaching is going with a particular client. In addition to these innocent encounters, internal coaches may also encounter others in the organization who may intentionally attempt to exploit a coach's privileged access. Continuing the example of executive onboarding, recruiters or senior leaders have been known to contact internal coaches working with new joiners to seek insight on a recruit's transition experience or aiming to influence their trajectory. To maintain the confidentiality required to be effective in any coaching relationship, it takes skill and courage to redirect these inquiries.

As an internal coach, I am often asked about confidentiality by both coaching clients and curious colleagues who work as external coaches and consultants. The most common questions are about pressure to contribute to performance evaluations or promotion decisions, and curiosity about what happens when one client discloses information that could affect another client. The written coaching agreement used in my organization covers confidentiality in detail and sets clear boundaries. The content of any particular coaching engagement is confidential, with explicit exceptions for threats of self-harm, harassment situations, or disclosure of unlawful activities. The written agreement also makes clear that the coach may from time to time share themes, unattributed to any individual client, and that the coach may consult with a supervisor or mentor coach, who agrees to keep any case material strictly

confidential. When firmly established and maintained, the assurance of confidentiality is an important enabler to taking up the Trojan Horse position.

Perhaps more insidious than confidentiality leaks from the coaching space into the organization, is the incursion of organizational agendas into the coaching space. The risks of “beautiful ideas that can make us ill” highlighted by Bachkirova and Borrington<sup>9</sup> may be even more important for internal coaches to keep in mind, given their susceptibility to being influenced by organizational agendas. Recognizing the uniquely intimate access of internal coaches, business leaders can view them as a source of influence to accomplish organizational change - - a Trojan Horse ready for deployment. Implementing a “purpose-led” business strategy offers an example: internal coaches were asked, even urged, to offer clients a “find your why” session. While offering to work with clients to articulate a sense of purpose can be a worthwhile coaching practice, doing so as an obligatory assignment could be viewed and experienced as an intrusion on the client’s agenda. The stakes of this scenario might not occur to an internal coach who genuinely supports her organization’s purpose-led business strategy.

“Going native” is a term from anthropology that refers to the risk of becoming too involved in a community under study, losing objectivity through immersion in and identification with the culture. Internal coaches face a version of this risk. It can be difficult to accurately perceive systemic issues to which both coach and client are subject. An example from my own organization is the culture of niceness for which we are known. While on the surface politeness, visible resources devoted to diversity and inclusion, and explicit strategic emphasis on teamwork all convey and contribute to a pleasant culture, under the surface lurks anxiety, lack of accountability, and insufficient candor. A vignette from a few years ago illustrates the challenge: In the context of a coaching session to explore how to deal with constrained resources, a recently hired executive asked me, “When does the murder board meet?” I was taken aback by the language (which was clearly not nice!) and asked what he meant. He was curious to know the cadence of meetings to kill obsolete or failing projects and thus free up resources. No such meeting existed, and he was right that it might be needed, but from within the nice culture, the idea for such an intervention was hard to perceive. The coach in the Trojan Horse position can’t ask questions about issues she doesn’t even see.

### **Motivations, desires and defenses**

Operating as a Trojan Horse takes courage and the desire to be a change agent working as part of a group of change agents. It wasn’t one lone assassin on a personal quest in the mythical Trojan Horse, it was a small group deployed as part of a bigger mission. Internal coaches working successfully in this mode tend to be those willing to put themselves in service to the cause of the organization, and who can see how their role contributes to broad, positive outcomes, such as fostering more inclusive or more humane workplaces.

Coaches who find satisfaction in influencing powerful others, implementing strategy, and protecting underlings from bad bosses may be well-suited to the Trojan Horse mode of operating. While these satisfactions can be a source of strength and energy, they can also be a risk factor for derailing the coaching relationship. It is worth asking oneself (and one’s super-visor), “Am I attracted to this intervention because I can vicariously influence the strategic moves...Do I resolve one of my own

---

<sup>9</sup> Tatiana Bachkirova and Simon Borrington, “Beautiful Ideas That Can Make Us Ill: Implications for Coaching,” *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 2020, 9-50.

unresolved needs through being engaged in this assignment?<sup>10</sup> If an internal coach recognizes that exercising power is a motive that fuels her, she can take responsibility for this tendency and find ways to manage it. Those who have come up through the ranks of the organization feeling relatively powerless, and now as a coach have an opportunity to influence leaders, may be especially susceptible to this motive.

The cliché that a strength overused can become a weakness aptly characterizes the hazard of the Trojan Horse position. Being inside the walls can provide greater access and intimacy with clients leading to timely positive impact and can also present challenges to confidentiality, objectivity and the ethics of power.

### **Field Medic**

Even before the pandemic, internal coaches were often playing the role of field medic, providing just-in-time support for leaders facing challenges such as conflicts, losses, adverse circumstances, or unfulfilled desires. The internal coach or organizational consultant can play a role akin to a first aider: on the scene, providing help in the moment, sometimes doing all that's needed, and sometimes making referrals for other kinds of help. COVID increased the need for this sort of quick response to immediate needs. I had more former clients asking for a check-in call and I made more referrals to the Employee Assistance Program during the past 18 months than over the prior five years. This pattern was corroborated in the Conference Board's most recent study on human capital responses to the pandemic, where 72% of responding organizations reported increases in the number of employees seeking mental health support and 67% reported increased usage of their Employee Assistance Program since the outbreak began. This study also reported an increase in the number of employees identified as being burned out<sup>11</sup>.

While the field medic role most often manifests in one-on-one coaching engagements, in response to the pandemic, the in-house team that I am part of provided group coaching in a way that exemplifies this metaphor. We hosted group coaching sessions in Zoom, organized by leadership level/rank, and ended up with over 1,000 individuals opting-in to participate. In the early days of COVID, so much was being demanded from leaders at work and at home, and we asked ourselves how to respond in a relevant way as the crisis was unfolding. The answer was these group coaching sessions with the theme of putting on your own oxygen mask first before helping others. The design was very simple, inviting leaders to talk in small groups of peers, facilitated by a coach, about questions such as: What do you need? What are you doing to take care yourself? What are you doing to take care of your team? What are you learning? The discussion was "the medicine," providing an outlet to share challenges of leadership during the pandemic and to receive practical ideas from colleagues.

Even in "normal" times, much internal coaching would fall under the field medic category. The role of executive coaching has been described by Simon Western as a bridge between the perspectives of

---

<sup>10</sup> *Tricky Coaching: Difficult Cases in Leadership Coaching*, edited by Konstantin Korotov, Elizabeth Florent-Treacy, Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries and Andreas Bernhardt, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> The Conference Board, *The Reimagined Workplace a Year Later: Human Capital Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, June 2021, p 7.

“celebrated self” and “wounded self”<sup>12</sup> and in the field medic role, a coach can access both perspectives, reminding clients of strengths as well as addressing “wounds”.

What are these “wounds” that show up in the context of executive coaching? The VUCA<sup>13</sup> world and its demands leaves a mark on many leaders. As Robert Kegan writes, most of us are in over our heads, at least some of the time, facing demands from a rapidly complexifying world that at times exceed our capacity to respond, and we struggle at times to rise to the occasion<sup>14</sup>. Coaching can help people to sort through their reactivity to VUCA challenges in order to make more conscious and creative decisions. Most executives lack other opportunities for this sort of dialogue and reflection. With leaders experiencing so much turbulence and operating at such a fast pace, they value periodic meetings with a coach to step back, stake stock, and then move forward feeling more grounded.

While external coaches provide this service, too, the position of the internal coach behind the lines is particularly helpful in some situations. One example is acquisition integration. Acquisitions are notoriously prone to underperform, with an estimated failure rate as high as 70 to 90%.<sup>15</sup> A more optimistic assessment is that 70% do not meet initial objectives and 24% fail completely. (You can probably think of some high profile examples such as Daimler and Chrysler, or AOL and Time Warner.) Culture clash is often cited as a key factor, if not the number one factor, serving as an obstacle to a successful integration<sup>16</sup>. An internal coach or consultant working with both the acquired and acquiring leadership teams, can provide the response needed from day one - - or even earlier, in the due diligence phase - - to focus on the human dynamics, with great depth and nuance of cultural understanding. The field medic stance, behind the lines and able to access leaders in both the acquired and acquiring organizations, can ease what is often experienced as an exceptionally challenging time due to organizational upheaval.

### **Boundaries and ethics**

“Field medic” is a metaphor that implies a caregiver and a patient. Could this sort of relationship be seen as a contradiction of the premises of coaching that the coach and client are equals and that the client is resourceful? Does the field medic stance blur the boundary between coaching and therapy? Does the internal coach operating as field medic pose the sort of threat outlined almost 20 years ago by Steven Berglas in his HBR article about the dangers that arise when executive coaches lack psychological training?<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Simon Western, “The Bridge Between Two Selves,” Coaching Today, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, April 2016, Issue 18.

<sup>13</sup> VUCA is an acronym that stands for volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous, originally applied in military leadership training to describe geopolitical circumstances, and now adopted in a wide range of settings to describe the state of the world.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Kegan, In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life, Harvard University Press, 1994, p. 335

<sup>15</sup> Roger L. Martin, “M&A: The One Thing You Need to Get Right,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2016

<sup>16</sup> Michele Gelfand, Sarah Gordon, Chengguang Li, Virginia Choi and Piotr Prokopowicz, “One Reason Mergers Fail: The Two Cultures Aren’t Compatible,” *Harvard Business Review*, October 2, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Steve Berglas, “The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching,” *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002

These are important questions, especially given the growing prevalence of mental health issues at work cited in many sources<sup>18</sup>. In recognition of these considerations, the International Coach Federation (ICF) recently issued guidance on therapy referrals.<sup>19</sup> The ICF document also seeks to clarify boundaries around ethical coaching practice and when a referral to a clinician is advisable.

Even when in-house coaches have psychological expertise, another ethical question can arise. The use of methods to help leaders build resilience and cope with their circumstances, versus addressing their causation, can constitute collusion with the systemic issues that give rise to the need for a field medic in the first place. Carol Owens notes, "...the commensurate increase in the presence of the on-site organizational psychologist or counselor, usually schooled in cognitive behavioral therapy, whose methods of intervention of course foreclose any possibility of the analyses of unconscious complexes and drives. At the same time, they mobilize and perpetuate the notion of the 'individual worker,' who can be re-educated in order to 'gain the maximum' from his/her work experience."<sup>20</sup> Bachkirova and Borrington raise similar concerns, exploring whether coaching methods which aim to influence employee well-being, such as positive psychology and mindfulness, are as beneficial as they are often taken to be, and whether there is a shadow side to this sort of coaching<sup>21</sup>. It is essential to raise these questions, and in the context of internal coaching, to consider how these risks can be exacerbated when coaches are within the same system as the client. Those coaches who particularly enjoy being assigned the role of field medic, and who see themselves as helping individuals to soldier on, may be less able to see, less willing to name, and less capable of offering interventions at the level of the organization.

### **Motivations, desires and defenses**

The field medic role can be particularly appealing to internal coaches whose own psychology makes them susceptible to what Manfred Kets de Vries has called "rescuer syndrome" - - a pattern of excessive helping behavior<sup>22</sup>. Coaches and consultants who are prone to this pattern - - both internal and external - - may not realize the harm they can do by over-helping.<sup>23</sup> Karpman's Drama Triangle be a way of viewing these situations, with the client cast as a victim in need of rescue by the coach, and the coach-rescuer who ends up slipping into the role of persecutor. Many of those in the helping professions wrestle with longings to please and to serve, and with the aid of reflection or supervision, are able to maintain effective boundaries.

---

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, CIPD Health and Wellbeing at Work Annual Survey 2021

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/health-well-being-work> or Hannah Ritchie and Max Roser (2018) - "Mental Health". Published online at OurWorldInData.org <https://ourworldindata.org/mental-health>

<sup>19</sup> Hullinger, A. M. and DiGirolamo, J. A. (2018). Referring a client to therapy: A set of guidelines. Retrieved from International Coach Federation website: <https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Whitepaper-Client-Referral.pdf>.

<sup>20</sup> Carol Owens, "Danger! Neurotics at Work!", *Lacan and Organization*, Carl Cederstrom and Casper Hoedemaekers (eds), MayFlyBooks, 2010, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> Tatiana Bachkirova and Simon Borrington, "Beautiful Ideas That Can Make Us Ill: Implications for Coaching," *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1, May 2020, 9-50.

<sup>22</sup> Manfred Kets de Vries, *Leadership Coaching and The Rescuer Syndrome: How to Manage Both Sides of the Couch*, INSEAD Working Paper collection

<sup>23</sup> Manfred Kets De Vries, *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*, p. 91



The limit to time and/or effort in a monetary contract for external coaching is another factor that can mitigate against rescuer syndrome. The lack of monetary exchange for service is one defining attribute of internal coaching that the literature seems to have overlooked, and which can contribute to field medics evolving from first-aiders to long-term providers. While external coaches are generally contracted to be paid for each hour of service or for a package of services, internal coaches are generally salaried employees. While some organizations do have systems to allocate or chargeback costs, they are rarely tied to a specific coaching engagement, and they don't affect the take-home pay of the coach. It is possible that avoidance of monetary matters is part of the appeal for those who take up an internal coaching role. Without the monetary exchange constraining the duration of engagements, the short-term assistance of a field medic can turn into an enduring relationship. While long-term coaching relationships over the arc of a career can be fruitful and rewarding, they can also be questioned as a sign of dependency or an indicator of over-coziness.

### **Canary in the Coal Mine**

Canaries were placed in coal mines as an early warning system. A bird's sudden sickness or death signaled that the atmosphere was becoming toxic, and this reaction provided life-saving information to evacuate swiftly, even before miners had detected fumes. The health and/or life of the canary was unfortunately sacrificed in the process.

The canary in the coal mine is arguably the most valuable and unique metaphorical position of the internal coach or consultant. In a large organization with many layers, a complex matrix, or a dispersed geographic footprint, it is difficult to gain a real-time sense of the organizational atmosphere. Periodic climate surveys can be useful, but are often a lagging indicator. In their daily work, internal coaches or consultants are intimately familiar with the immediate narratives of the leaders and teams they serve. Aggregating this intimate insight to identify themes and patterns can be a valuable way for internal coaches to bring a systemic perspective to their organizations. If a large enough population is being served, this can be done without jeopardizing confidentiality. In my organization, with a team of 22 full-time coaches working with over 1,200 leaders at any one time, this sort of sensemaking is built into our regular practice. While nobody has yet been sacrificed for this sort of upward feedback, it can sometimes feel risky.

Continuing with another executive onboarding example, the value of internal coaches' organizational listening, sensemaking and upward and outward communication becomes clear. In my own organization, about 250 executives are recruited and hired each year. Every one of them is offered the opportunity to work with an executive coach for a year, and 90% of the newly hired executives take up the offer. The nine coaches working with this population are privy to narratives of new joiners' onboarding experiences as they occur. This team of coaches meets periodically to discuss themes and patterns and to prepare a summary that is shared with leaders in the talent management function. Observations in the areas of recruitment, onboarding and integration have led to several notable changes, such as modifications to the format and content of formal orientation/assimilation classes, and the assignment and accountabilities of peer advisors.

### **Boundaries and ethics**

Is the practice of reporting themes and patterns ethical? In the example cited, themes and patterns across more than 200 clients were aggregated. A sample size this large protects against findings being

traced to any individual, thus preserving confidentiality. Moreover, in this example, the reporting of non-attributed themes and patterns is specifically included in the confidentiality agreement that every client signs, providing informed consent.

While coachees' identities might be protected, coaches who choose to bring troubling findings to light can become visible in a way that is unfamiliar and can feel risky. Inviting an organizational system to see and hear itself through the observations of its internal coaches can put an uncomfortable spotlight on coaches who are more accustomed to working "backstage." A report that highlights troubling problems can feel like dangerous exposure not only for the coaches delivering the message, but also for the leaders receiving it, who might feel threatened by implications or possible consequences. In my personal experience, no metaphorical canaries have been harmed or sacrificed because of sharing insights, but the risk of being rejected, discounted or ignored can feel very real.

The canary position highlights the ever-present coaching question of who the client is. Both internal and external executive coaches face the challenge of working one-on-one with individual clients within the context of an organizational system that is also a client. Executive coaches thus have a dual accountability to the individual leaders with whom they work and also to the enterprises that employ both those leaders and the coaches themselves. The complexity of these relationships is a distinctive aspect of executive coaching that differentiates it from other sorts of interventions. In the case of internal coaches taking the canary position, one might ask how, and whether, sharing observations about the atmosphere "in the mine" serves the miners and the mine-owners. Internal coaches can be at risk of identifying too closely with individual clients (miners), seeing them as colleagues experiencing shared organizational faults, or at the opposite extreme, over-identifying with the power structure that employs them (mine owners) and thus being blind to or reluctant to name problematic patterns. There is no single solution to these difficulties. Super-vision of internal coaches by an external mentor coach can be one way to mitigate these risks.

### **Motivations, desires and defenses**

What motivates an internal coach to take up the canary position? The pleasure in speaking truth to power is certainly a factor for some. Enjoying real or imagined influence over powerful others is one motive for becoming an executive coach, and the canary position extends the possibility of influence beyond the individual client to the system.

A need or pressure to prove the value of coaching can be another motive. Coaches who are fueled by the desire to feel relevant, visible, and valued by leadership could be prone to over-share. Coaches at risk for over-stepping the canary stance are also likely to be those who decry being the "best kept secret in the organization." There is a sensitive balance in being known and valued and having a low enough profile for clients to feel comfortable working with an internal coach.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has explored some of the dynamics of the internal coach or consultant using the metaphors of Trojan horse, field medic and canary in the coal mine, positions that are uniquely available to those who work internally, within the same organizational walls as the clients they serve. All of these roles are problematic in various ways, challenging boundaries, ethics and motives. With the

continuing growth of internal coaching, it is important to face these challenges, understand them more deeply, and find ways to manage through them.

Taking a wide-angle view, one could say that any coach on planet Earth is an internal coach, working within the ecosystem in which we live. Perhaps the next great work for all coaches is to serve as trojan horses, field medics and canaries in the coal mine, striving to be part of the global systemic solution to the challenges we face: tending, with humility and compassion, to the needs of the planet.

## APPENDIX – INTERNAL COACHING TRENDS

### Recent studies (past five years):

2016 - Sherpa Coaching Study noted a 40% rise in internal coaching over four years, representing 10% of all executive coaching delivered among responding organizations. The Sherpa authors also noted a doubling of internal coach respondents participating in their annual study<sup>24</sup>.

2018 - Conference Board Global Executive Coaching Survey, 61% of respondents indicated they expect to rely more heavily on internal coaches in the future<sup>25</sup>.

2020 - One of the most recent large scale surveys, the 2020 ICF Global Coaching Study, found approximately 71,000 coach practitioners globally in 2019 and that nearly one-fifth (17%) of coaches work as internal practitioners<sup>26</sup>.

### Past twenty years:

- 2001, Michael Frisch published an article in the *Consulting Psychology Journal* entitled, “The Emerging Role of the Internal Coach<sup>27</sup>,” which identified in-house coaching and differentiated it from coaching provided by external resources.
- 2002, Catherine Fitzgerald and Jennifer Garvey Berger included a chapter entitled “Coaching from the Inside” in their collection, *Executive Coaching: Practices and Perspectives*<sup>28</sup>.
- 2005, the International Coach Federation (ICF) launched the Prism Award to honor organization’s coaching programs and has been issuing the award every year.
- 2012, Michael Frisch and his co-authors continued to develop insights on internal coaching, devoting a chapter in their 2012 book to “The Role of the Internal Coach<sup>29</sup>.”
- 2014 book by Erik de Haan and Yvonne Bugar, *Coaching with Colleagues*, addresses the advantages and limitations of internal coaches<sup>30</sup>.
- 2014, Anne Power published *Internal Coaching: Stories of Success in Organizations*, with case study examples from the U.S. and Eastern Europe along with essays on the application of contracting, psychometric assessments, and 360s inside organizations.
- 2014, Katharine St. John-Brooks published *Internal Coaching: The Inside Story*, in which one of half of the book proposes what coaches need to know, primarily about roles and ethics, and the other half covers what organizations need to know, primarily about the strategic and operational aspects of deploying internal coaches.

---

<sup>24</sup> Sherpa Coaching USA, 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Executive Coaching Survey, 2016, public report, p 14

<sup>25</sup> The Conference Board, Global Executive Coaching Survey, 2018, p.10

<sup>26</sup> 2020 ICF Global Coaching Study Executive Summary, p. 7 and p.16

[https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2020/09/FINAL\\_ICF\\_GCS2020\\_ExecutiveSummary.pdf](https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2020/09/FINAL_ICF_GCS2020_ExecutiveSummary.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Michael H. Frisch, “The Emerging Role of the Internal Coach.” *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, Vol. 53, No. 4, 240-250.

<sup>28</sup> Fitzgerald, Catherine and Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Executive Coaching: Practices & Perspectives*, Davies-Black Publishing, 2002, pp. 225-242

<sup>29</sup> Frisch, Michael H. et al, *Becoming an Exceptional Executive Coach*, AMACOM (American Management Association), 2012, pp. 208-217.

<sup>30</sup> De Haan, Erik and Yvonne Burger, *Coaching with Colleagues: An Action Guide for One-to-One Learning*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014

- 2015, The Center for Creative Leadership’s 2015 *Handbook of Coaching in Organizations* included a lengthy discussion on internal coaching along with case studies.<sup>31</sup>
- 2019, *Mastering Executive Coaching*, featured a chapter on “Internally Resourced Coaching.”<sup>32</sup>

These examples are just a partial list of publications; as internal coaching has become a bigger part of the professional landscape it has also become a feature of many coaching reference books.

In addition to validating the rising trend of coaching delivered by internal resources, the literature has also:

- Proposed definitions of internal coaching
- Defined pros and cons of internal coaching (as compared to external coaching)

### **Definition of internal coaching**

The Center for Creative Leadership’s *Handbook of Coaching in Organizations* offers this definition of internal coaching: “Internal coaching is a one-on-one developmental intervention supported by the organization and provided by a colleague within the organization who is trusted to shape and deliver a program yielding individual professional growth.” The other sources propose a similar scope.

### **Pros and Cons of internal coaching**

The accumulating literature confirms a set of similar insights about the practical advantages of and limitations on the coach within the walls:

- **Advantages:** familiarity with organizational culture and access to stakeholders, lower cost compared to traditional external coaches (although the cost differential is disappearing with the latest technology-enabled coaching platforms)
- **Limitations:** challenges to boundaries and confidentiality, potential bias or “sharing the same blind spots”

---

<sup>31</sup> Riddle, Douglas, D. et al, *The Center for Creative Leadership Handbook of Coaching in Organizations*, Jossey-Bass, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Passmore, Jonathan, Brian O. Underhill and Marshall Goldsmith, editors, *Mastering Executive Coaching*, Routledge, 2019.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bachkirova, Tatiana & Borrington, Simon, (2020). Beautiful Ideas That Can Make Us Ill: Implications for Coaching, *Philosophy of Coaching: An International Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 1.

Barth, Manfred, "50 Shades of Coaching – How Tough Does Coaching Have to Be?," Kets De Vries Research Lab blog, 2017, [https://www.kdvi.com/research\\_items/770](https://www.kdvi.com/research_items/770)

Berglas, Steven (2002) "The Very Real Dangers of Executive Coaching," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2002

Cederstrom, Carl and Casper Hoedemaekers (eds). (2010). *Lacan and Organization*, MayFlyBooks.

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

de Haan, Erik & Burger, Yvonne. (2014) *Coaching with Colleagues: An Action Guide for One-to-One Learning*. Londong: Palgrave Macmillan

Gelfand, Michele, Sarah Gordon, Chengguang Li, Virginia Choi and Piotr Prokopowicz, (2018) "One Reason Mergers Fail: The Two Cultures Aren't Compatible," *Harvard Business Review*, October 2, 2018.

Hullinger, A. M. and DiGirolamo, J. A. (2018). Referring a client to therapy: A set of guidelines. Retrieved from International Coach Federation website:  
<https://coachfederation.org/app/uploads/2018/05/Whitepaper-Client-Referral.pdf>.

International Coach Federation, 2020 ICF Global Coaching Study Executive Summary

Kegan, Robert (1994), *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Cambridge: Harvard Business School Press

Kets De Vries, Manfred. (2014) *Mindful Leadership Coaching: Journeys into the Interior*. London: Palgrave Macmillan

Kets De Vries, Manfred (year?), *Leadership Coaching and The Rescuer Syndrome: How to Manage Both Sides of the Couch*, INSEAD Working Paper collection

Korotov, Konstantin, Elizabeth Florent-Treacy, Manfred F.R. Kets de Vries and Andreas Bernhardt, *Tricky Coaching: Difficult Cases in Leadership Coaching*, edited by, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

Long, Susan (2019). *The Unconscious Won't Go Away -- Especially in Organizations*. *Organizational and Social Dynamics*, Volume 19, Number 2, London: Phoenix Publishing

Martin, Roger L. (2016) "M&A: The One Thing You Need to Get Right," *Harvard Business Review*, June 2016

Owens, Carol (2010) "Danger! Neurotics at Work!", *Lacan and Organization*, Carl Cederstrom and Casper Hoedemaekers (eds), MayFlyBooks, 2010, p. 191.

Senarclens de Grancy, M. & Rook, C. (2020). Working with the symptom – a new perspective on dealing with low well-being in organizations. *Organizational and Social Dynamics*, Volume 20, Number 1, London: Phoenix Publishing.

The Conference Board, *The Reimagined Workplace a Year Later: Human Capital Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic*, June 2021

The Conference Board, *Global Executive Coaching Survey*, 2018

Western, Simon. (2019) *Leadership: A Critical Text*. London: Sage Publications

Western, Simon, (2016) "The Bridge Between Two Selves," *Coaching Today*, British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, April 2016, Issue 18.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the participants in the September 2019 Advanced Coach Retreat with Peter Hawkins, where the idea for this paper first appeared to me; special thanks to Frances White.

I thank my former colleague Paul Wyman and supervisor Pam McLean who provided formative comments on an early version of this paper.

I thank Christopher Meyer and Annie Rogers for helping me find words for the work I am trying to bring to the world.