



As a brave new world emerges out of recession coaching must become much more than a cosy conversation

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

### ANTON FRANCKEISS

The past couple of years have challenged every industry and sector. And what is needed of an executive coach is changing too.

Executive coaching is a child of the boom years. While certifying organisations and professional bodies have evolved rapidly, they are still young: the International Coaching Federation was established in 1995; the Association for Coaching in 2002. Their mission statements speak of raising standards, advancing the profession and developing credible methods: as bodies charged with assuring the future of their profession they recognise the hardening of objectives, of approach and of organisations' expectations of them.

The youth of the profession and the economic and business culture of its adolescence has been telling in terms of its development. In a seemingly flourishing economy coaching was often geared to the individual, rather than related closely to sponsoring organisations' business objectives. Having a coach was as much a badge of honour as an executive developmental option.

The situation has not been helped by the profession itself: while the young bodies have striven to build coaching skills and establish qualifications and development programmes, coaching has too often been seen as a stand-alone skill: the coach's credibility resting on the acquisition of these qualifications, regardless of other experience.

It's a scenario John Blakey and Ian Day discuss in their book *Where Were all the Coaches When the Banks Went Down?* (Reviews, page 53). They emphasise that coaching needs to be more than a cosy conversation that leaves clients to "find the answers within themselves". To resolve real issues a coach must balance building rapport with delivering results so that challenges can be issued.

In 2010, however, there's another important scenario. To establish credibility at the highest

level within limited contact coaches must not only be prepared to challenge and be engaged with the organisation and key stakeholders to clarify and review progress. They must also have the credibility of a detailed appreciation and grasp – or experience – of the demands of operating at the client's level.

There is nothing wrong *per se* with allowing the client to find answers within themselves, but their ability to locate (and accept) them may sometimes prove inadequate. When this occurs the coach should not be afraid to be directive.

The more extreme the conditions their business is operating under the more likely clients will find themselves under pressure to provide answers to business challenges. Even those highly attuned to the stresses and trials of working at a senior level will tend to retreat to the safety of known behaviours. But, as daily pressures mount, the client is less likely to remain open to exploring new options. Self-

discovery is a voyage we are most inclined to make when we feel the pressure is off, not on.

But if the client is to explore new thinking and behaviours or discover alternative approaches to their situation they will need to undertake some form of journey – and a coach will highlight the inappropriateness of standing still.

The message has to be that coaching must deliver outcomes that provide practical solutions to both business and people issues. The coach should not simply soothe and sympathise, but challenge and provide signposts and options.

In this new world both business and the coaching industry need coaches with the credibility, acumen, experience and business focus who, when faced with the emperor's new clothes, can make an informed and timely decision as to whether the emperor's old backside needs covering – or constructively but firmly kicking. ■

“In this new world we need coaches with credibility, acumen, experience and business focus”

**Anton Franckeiss** is practice director UK at behavioural consultancy ASK Europe. He is a fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development