



WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE A SENIOR LEADER AT THE RECEIVING END OF EXECUTIVE COACHING?

In an interview with Clive Mann, Simon Thompson talks about his experience of executive coaching.

In September 2009, when this interview was conducted, Simon Thompson was Managing Director, Europe, of lastminute.com, the famous dot com web travel agency and retailer. Simon had profit and loss responsibility for this market-leading business employing in excess of 1,700 people across Europe and out-source partners in many destinations, including India and Argentina.

Simon has been coached by Clive Mann, Managing Director and Founder of Ridler & Co. He speaks here about why he chose executive coaching as his main development tool over this period, how he has used coaching and the return on investment which he and his company have seen on his executive coaching.

Simon is interviewed by Clive Mann.

Clive: What made you choose executive coaching out of the range of possible interventions for your development as a senior business leader?

Simon: I could have gone on a formal training programme but training teaches you theory and it is a linear experience. I have never experienced life that actually matches what they teach you on a training programme. The next option is a mentoring programme but it can be very hard to speak openly about your observations of a corporation to a mentor who has probably been in the company for twenty years and built the business, warts and all, themselves. So the next coaching opportunity is your boss, but what if your boss is the problem, in which case how do you have a truly open discussion with your boss about improving how you interact with them? In essence coaching has the benefit over these three situations because the conversations you have in a coaching environment are probably the only conversations you can have that are one hundred percent confidential. If I had to sum up what coaching is for me, it is about having a personal confidant.

What about confidentiality? Have there been any times when you have felt uncomfortable about sharing stuff because you thought hang on, if the company is paying, is this really confidential?

The answer to that is simply yes, initially, but I think the difference is we have known each other for four years and what you have proved to me is that I don't have to worry about it. You have made it very clear that executive coaching is for my development. Yes, it will bring substantial benefits to the company, but you are not a spy and you have always been very clear about the boundaries of information that are given to the company and in all cases you have given me control of those boundaries.

Would you ever consider being coached by an internal coach in your organisation?

No, I wouldn't (in an emphatic tone). The big difference is that you are coaching me for me. That is paid for by the company but I am not being coached by the company. I'm being coached to make me better which then makes the company better – that is a completely different relationship.

At Ridler & Co we use three-way meetings between the executive being coached, the coach and an organisational representative (most often the boss of the executive being coached) as the central mechanism for involving the organisation in the coaching work. How was it for you to be bringing in your boss into those three way meetings?

I think it worked very well at lastminute.com because my boss and I had a very open relationship so it was a mutually beneficial discussion. I think the three-way meetings gave my employer an insight into what was going on in the coaching work and at the end of the day they are paying so that is pretty reasonable. Secondly, it gave them an opportunity to let you and I know what my actual behaviours are in the organisation because I want to understand better the reaction I am having on others. Without that insight you risk working in isolation – that is no good for anyone.

How did your boss feel about you having executive coaching?

His view is I am as effective as I have ever been, from a commercial perspective, but now I manage to do it without the historical people bruising.

How much of your effectiveness does he attribute to coaching?

Well I think he attributes it all to coaching because he knows that I've been on no training courses and I don't have a mentor, so it's got to be coming from somewhere else.

What have you learned about how to get the best out of an executive coach?

One thing I have done of late is that if I do start having an issue with something I want to discuss I will ring you up between coaching sessions to discuss really practical things like "I am going into this firestorm – what can I do?" I think if you are really working on some tight specifics then that interaction in between sessions becomes extremely useful. As I said earlier, you cannot beat live practice.

How helpful have you found getting tailored 360 feedback as part of the coaching work?

What surprised me was how much more positive people's view of me was than I expected. I think that helped me to relax a bit. I think it's important that you and I have some eyes and ears in the corporation and you can do it through a 360 review and through three-way meetings. They both work well.

What are your feelings about the structure of our work together – like the length of the sessions (two hours) or the monthly frequency?

I think the most important thing is to have a rhythm in the length of sessions and the interval between them. That gives you an opportunity to learn and test in the workplace and then to go back to coaching and say that this worked or this didn't work. Sometimes I do have to be told more than once and it's best if the frequency of being told is closer together. Fundamentally you have got to put the commitment in – coaching is a classic situation of *effort in is a result out*.

How do you translate the ideas and discussions from your coaching into your day-to-day work?

I think you have to pick some real, not theoretical things, and what you want to do about them. It's a very practical matter of identification of the issue and a very practical implementation of the solution.

How do you find coaching helps you with that?

Well, coaching does help because you are actually going to have to come back and answer to someone. I have sat before work meetings where I have written down what you said to me. It's almost having your coach rattling around in your head. Fundamentally, Clive, I would hate to come back in here and let you down because it's not just letting me down, it's actually disrespecting you because you are trying to help me, so I think that if you've got that sort of consciousness of mind and commitment towards it you get a good output.

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Simon Thompson

What sort of topics have you found most beneficial to bring into coaching?

I would say issues of style – how things are done and generally on a person-to-person basis, like getting the best out of peer relationships. To give you an example I will pick my favourite topic which is selective disclosure of weaknesses (reference: Goffee and Jones, Why Should Anyone Be Led By You, Harvard Business Review, October 2000) – the fact of demonstrating a greater level of humanity at work by making it clear to people that there are things you are not good at. It is an issue of style and completely counter-intuitive and incredibly effective. I would never have believed that to say that you are weaker means you are stronger. Since when has that ever computed in corporate life? Like never, but it works beautifully!

How do you think your organisation has benefited from the coaching you have received?

We have got staff attrition down, the engagement survey is the best it has been since we started tracking it two years ago, the business is making more money, we have better customer satisfaction, we have more customers coming back to the business...the business is doing rather well now. I am not saying it's all down to me, I'm not saying it's all down to my coach but fundamentally I am there as the leader of that organisation, I have got better and the business has got better. What is also interesting for me is that the behaviours I am now manifesting, my leaders are also manifesting – it's having a ripple effect down the line, not just at my direct report level but all the way down. An example of this would be my focus on relationships up, down and across the matrix organisation. My leaders have learned that they need to drive change through influence, not by complaining! It would appear that better leadership behaviour at the top equals better behaviour all the way down.

What return do you think your organisation has had on their investment in your coaching?

Well, if I look at the EBITDA (earnings before interest, tax, depreciation and amortisation) improvement, Clive, I think they have probably had a factor of several thousand of benefit out of it. The better you are at leadership the better the business should perform – I think that's just a simple reality. Great leaders lead great businesses that satisfy customers that make money.

How do you think you benefit from coaching at a personal and professional level?

The benefits on a personal level are that you just become more competent. I would also suggest that you actually become happier and you have a lot less stress around the place as well. I think the fact that you are happier and less stressed and more competent actually means that you are going to perform better and if you are going to perform

better you are going to progress better, earn more money or spend less time at work and more time at home. For me I have enjoyed the benefit in all three of these areas but I think it depends on what your focus is. One of the things about coaching is that you do actually learn what you are good at and what you are not so good at and you become okay with your findings. I now understand why I am bad at certain things, I'm working on improving them and I am happy about that – it removes the stress from the game because you actually understand why you have your levels of incompetence as opposed to just sitting there completely confused. Confusion and not knowing what to do is an incredibly stressful situation.

How would you measure the success of coaching for you as a person and a business leader?

I think I measure it in two ways. First it is about my reputation in the business – whether great people want to work for you, that's my big measurement, so that's probably number one. The second way I measure it is actually how I feel about me. I am much happier now about the way I operate than I was one year ago, two years ago, three years ago or four years ago. Because I am better than I was I have less stress and I feel a lot happier. Growth in profit, engagement surveys etc. are outputs and I would rather measure some of the inputs such as do I feel happier and is my reputation solid? I think those things will then result in the hard business outputs, so my inclination is more to measure the things that are closer to me rather than the things that are on the P&L. The P&L will follow.

Has coaching helped you become clearer about your career path?

What coaching has done is make me realise there is no reason why I cannot achieve what I want to achieve. I think I was always clear I had potential. I just was never sure whether I could actually attain my goal. Now the things that were holding me back, in particular the ones I almost did not want to face, are getting sorted out, suddenly the potential increases again. I have always had a very strong value system but I am now much clearer about the organisations that I should work for and those that I shouldn't.

Has coaching benefited your personal life at all?

Oh absolutely. One thing I have learned is that what happens at home is very reflective of what happens at work and vice versa. I understand now why it is I think the way I think and why it is I feel the way I feel. I can now tag some of my life experiences together and figure out why it is I have got to where I am. The biggest benefit from it all is not me, it's not my work, it's actually my family because of some of the insights I now have about my pluses and minuses. I am now very aware of the effect I can have on my wife and children – both positive and negative. I now have much greater awareness but I am still a student in comparison to my wife!

Is there anything else you would like to say about your experience of executive coaching?

You are only going to get out of executive coaching what you put in. So if you commit yourself to it, if you are very very clear on what it is you are trying to achieve, if you listen well, if you test what it is you learn and if you are open and honest and respect the person sat over from you then I think you will have a fantastic benefit.

Simon, thanks very much for your time and your insights.

Simon Thompson moved to Apple Inc in October 2009, as the most senior leader for Apple's e-commerce business in Europe, Middle East and Africa.