

The Hedgehog Effect: Executive Coaching and the Secrets of Building High Performance Teams

Shiva Kumar Srinivasan

Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries (2011). *The Hedgehog Effect: Executive Coaching and the Secrets of Building High Performance Teams* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass), Price : Rs. 2773, Pages 289, ISBN 978-1-119-97336-2.

What is the optimal distance between the members of a team? That is the main question which is addressed in this book. The figure of the hedgehog is invoked in the title as a way of thinking through the implications of this question in the form of an experiential analogue. The figure of the hedgehog comes originally from the work of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. The hedgehog effect pertains to a behavioral trait of hedgehogs that prompts them to huddle as close to each other as possible as a gesture of solidarity, but they also move away when their sharp quills begin to hurt each other. This, in turn, leads to loneliness and a craving for company; the hedgehogs then move as close as possible to each other again until through trial-and-error they hit upon the 'optimal distance' to both maximize solidarity and to ensure a sense of individual well-being. Likewise, finding out the optimal distance between team members is a technique to ensure not only the positive team dynamics, but to also ensure high levels of team-based performance. Understanding the hedgehog effect then will be of enormous use to those working in or consulting in areas like Human Resources Management and Organizational Development. The advice that Manfred Kets de Vries of INSEAD shares with his readers is based on a lifetime of consulting, research, and teaching in the field of behavioural sciences. The method of study invoked here is eclectic and comprises a willingness to learn from the psychological insights provided by a range of areas in the behavioral sciences. What all these areas have in common though is the notion of 'psychodynamics'. The methodological assumption here is that it is important to both understand and leverage on the psychodynamics of team formation in order to put together high performance teams (that can withstand the pressures of relentless competition).

In order to do this successfully, Kets de Vries argues that we must begin with an understanding of what in fact constitute the underlying structure of groups and teams and delineate the circumstances in which groups become teams. What is required to make this transition happen seamlessly is 'coaching' since what emerges spontaneously in terms of group formation and group dynamics may not necessarily provide optimal solutions for high performance teams. One of the areas that Kets de Vries has taken the trouble to study, develop, and deploy in his own work in the behavioural sciences is executive coaching. Executive coaching has emerged as not only an area of academic specialization in the behavioural sciences in European business schools, but also as a form of psychodynamic intervention within different forms of executive education. Here then is an account of how the modalities of executive coaching can make a huge difference in making teamwork much more successful than might have otherwise been possible. Coaching is not necessarily a way of correcting inadequacies in individuals, groups, and teams, but is rather a way of thinking through problems of organizational design with the specific requirements of the customer, client, or project in mind. Routine invocation of coaching-based psychodynamic interventions has started to gain a high level of acceptability and traction in the European markets. It is not uncommon to encounter organizational situations where executives and leaders demand access to highly-paid executive coaches as a way of enhancing their own levels of performance and success. This is all the more relevant given the decline in the average tenure of CEOs throughout the world. Coaching is to the corporate sector then what psychoanalysis is to medicine and the psycho-dynamically inclined professions in the past. The locus in which the crucial experiments for these

coaching programs are being conducted is at the leadership laboratory that Kets de Vries has set up at INSEAD. What is unique about these attempts is that unlike previous studies in the academic literature, the goal of these programs is to institutionalize the HR 'deliverables' that emerge as a result of efforts at executive coaching for individual employees, leaders, groups, and teams. Getting these deliverables right requires a simultaneous interest in the meta-psychology of these psychodynamic phenomena along with the ability to translate these insights into transformative encounters for executives and change agents in organizations. Kets de Vries argues that the eventual goal of such transformative attempts is not reducible to individual careers, but must lead to the development of 'authentiziotic organizations'.

The adjective 'authentiziotic' is to organizations what the humanist quest for authenticity is to individuals. Or, to put it another way, there is no point urging individual employees to be authentic unless there is an attempt to simultaneously create organizations that can support such employees in a sustainable way. The actual modalities involved in designing such organizations is the theoretical and practical goal to which Kets de Vries has dedicated his career in the behavioural sciences and the psychoanalysis of organizations. While this is a theme that recurs in his work, it requires a number of theoretical iterations across a range of contexts since Kets de Vries has to start with this organizational ideal, demonstrate that such ideals are indeed worth invoking, and then translate them into actual deliverables (keeping in mind the specific requirements of executives and the levels of the organizational hierarchy to which they belong). The 'clinical' approach to organizational diagnosis, development, and deliverables is based on the assumption that psychodynamic factors cannot be wished away in the attempt to set-up value added processes or routines, and that the analysis of such phenomena must invoke both the tasks that are relevant in a given function. It must also incorporate the locus from which the concerned employees are operating. Delineating the psychodynamics that are relevant to the accomplishment of a given set of tasks then is an important clue to what is at stake in the 'fit' between

the employee and the organization. The higher the level of fit, the easier it is to invoke the ideal of authenticity since it will involve less effort on the part of the employee to discharge his role responsibilities. What is true of individual employees is also true of groups and teams. The development of HR deliverables however depends on translating the existential protocols of fit into actual instances of value-added performance in organizations. That is the basic challenge in executive coaching, leadership laboratories, and management development programs which draw upon psychodynamic approaches in the top business schools in Europe and elsewhere. The work of Kets de Vries provides an interesting point of entry for readers who wonder how - if at all - business academics, consultants, and executive coaches translate the psychodynamics of behavioural theory into interpersonal interventions. These are also the sort of insights that change agents are on the lookout for since any attempt at organizational change invariably opens up the organizational unconscious if sufficient care is not taken to understand the extent to which the leadership can 'contain' and 'work-through' the affects experienced by the employees. It is not enough then to merely invoke employee 'resistance' as an explanation to the challenges of change without understanding that what employees resist in the change process may not be linked to the ideational content of change per se, but the affective dynamics of having to working-through something new and different. Managing the libidinal economy of organizational routines then is a way of 'suturing' the emergence of the organizational unconscious before it leads to an outbreak of anxiety amongst employees. These are a few instances where a psycho-dynamically informed coaching process can help executives to re-invent themselves without losing touch with their inner selves whether they work as individuals or as teams.

While I have not attempted to exhaust or multiply examples of such interventions as an end in itself, the goal here is to acquaint readers with the challenges involved in thinking through the psychodynamic determinants of human behavior in organizations, and share with them the theoretical instruments that behavioral scientists use to measure these phenomena.

Kets de Vries analyzes the role and applications of these instruments in the consulting process in a separate appendix. In addition to these instruments, readers must also remember that Kets de Vries uses the 'live case study' which he innovated at INSEAD as something more appropriate than the traditional case study. In this model of education, executives make presentations before fellow CEOs on their own strengths and weaknesses as human beings and relate their notion of leadership to the story of their lives in the leadership laboratory as an instrument of personal and organizational transformation. This is all the more important because before leaders can change their organizations and the world, 'they have to change themselves'. Only then will they be able to reinvent themselves sufficiently to keep pace with the challenges of the contemporary world. This book will be of relevance to anybody who believes that the psychodynamics of human behavior can be a perennial source of insight into organizational behavior, organizational development, and human resources management. It can also help leaders evaluate whether they need to invoke a formal model of executive coaching to enhance

the effectiveness of their teams, and, if so, on how they should go about doing so. It will also be of help to researchers who wish to study organizational psychology in depth, and who are wondering what the functional implications of doing so are in terms of the continual need to develop new tools, techniques, and instruments in both business academia and the realm of organizational consulting. Since the author is a consultant to several companies in North America, Europe, Africa and Asia, he is able to draw upon his organizational learnings from a varied range of industries. This book will therefore be of use to a number of different sectors and corporate firms though the beneficiaries from these interventions have not been named in the interests of maintaining client-based confidentiality.

Shiva Kumar Srinivasan has a Ph.D. in English and Psychoanalysis from Cardiff University, Wales. He is a professor in the Behavioural Sciences area at the Indian Institute of Planning and Management, Chennai. Prof. Srinivasan has previously served as a faculty at IIT Kanpur, IIT Delhi, IIM Ahmedabad, XLRI Jamshedpur, LIBA Chennai, and IIM Kozhikode.