

iCoachNewYork Monograph Series

Coaching Psychology: Consulting Psychology Interventions at the Level of the
Individual
or
Professional Coaching in Organizational Contexts and How We Got to Such a
Complex Label

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Abstract

What we used to confidently refer to as *executive coaching* as an organizationally sponsored activity remains a dynamic, robust, and commercially expanding segment of coaching services. However, we cannot simply call it executive coaching anymore because non-consulting, non-psychological coaches offer similarly labeled services to clients outside of their organizational context and sponsorship. This paper walks through the history of how executive coaching has evolved to be an ambiguous term in the US and how the field of Consulting Psychology provides an excellent backdrop to re-anchor executive coaching in a sub-field called Coaching Psychology. A figure is provided that illustrates graphically these and other points about coaching in organizational contexts.

It is impossible to know whether naming an activity launches its growth or whether that growth was already present and just needed a catchy name to be noticed. In the case of Executive Coaching (EC), that label emerged in the mid 1980s (Manuso, 1983) but simmered under the surface until it took off suddenly in the early 1990s. Of course, since nothing is totally new, EC-like activities were being practiced many years before then but under other labels, some serious, some pejorative (e.g., executive development counseling, managerial retention programs, and executive handholding).

EC in the 1980s was part of a wave of newly defined and expanding *clinical* services being offered to corporations in the US. A sample from the Table of Contents of Manuso's rarely cited book (*Occupational Clinical Psychology*) provides a useful window into those other services at that time: Employee Assistance (alcohol addiction services), broader employee counseling toward corporate behavioral health, career planning, out-placement counseling, stress

management, assertiveness training, and support of *affirmative action* for under-represented minorities in executive roles. Impressively, all these services still exist in one form or another, sometimes as headline contemporary offerings and other times subsumed under broader headings. EC is certainly among those few chapter headings that ended up spawning major domains of HR services provided to organizations.

As mentioned, the 1980s was a time of profound change in many Human Resources programs and processes. I was a new Manager of Management Development (and recent Ph.D.) at PepsiCo headquarters during those years, and HR certainly had a *seat at the table*, although our activities predated the use of that phrase. As Human Resource, not Personnel, professionals, we were initiating a wide range of new concepts and processes. Managerial competencies gave legitimacy to the *soft* or people aspects of what managers did, separate from whatever field they were in (Boyatzis 1982, *The Competent Manager*). Once competencies were identified (so many lists!), we needed to create training programs so managers could improve on those soft skills. This also led to the insight that leadership was different than management, a distinction we take for granted today.

Newly empowered HR professionals were having serious conversations with business leaders about links between business strategy and people: selection, staff planning, promotions, and succession. This required the creation of processes to capture and inventory (the word database was being used, even though desktop computers were barely a dream) managerial talent at all levels. Judgments about individual promotability included developmental recommendations to help candidates be ready for new or future opportunities. Today, these *talent management* processes are absolutely core areas in HR.

Against that heady backdrop, a totally new idea emerged about providing performance feedback to managers, especially in new matrix structures where the manager's boss may not directly observe performance: Let's ask peers, internal customers, and direct reports, as well as the boss, for feedback and then use it to inform that manager's developmental planning. We

now call this multi-rater or, the original term, 360-degree feedback, but in the mid 1980s the process and its assumptions were new. I didn't know it at the time, but while all this was happening, EC had already emerged enough to be noticed, labeled, and written about. If I had known, I would have recognized that when I helped individual PepsiCo managers interpret their 360-degree feedback data to draft a development plan, I was acting as an executive coach, albeit internal, a variation that figures in importantly later (Frisch, 2001).

We also were able to confirm that 360-degree feedback without a *safe*, non-judgmental conversation to process it was a waste of time. We were surprised to find that even very smart, highly educated managers and executives were largely incapable of turning 360-degree feedback into self-insights and learning objectives by themselves. We, as Industrial/Organizational Psychologists, were reaffirming, without knowing it, the primacy of a helping conversation, even in the context of a sophisticated, fast-paced, highly structured organization. Yes, *clinical* interventions were taking root in the increasingly complex interpersonal world of modern organizations. I didn't know what to call those 360-degree feedback conversations in the mid 1980s, but I did know that I was both captivated by the challenge of doing them well and felt inadequately trained.

My story from the late 1980s onward is in some modest ways a microcosm of how original EC interventions became the coaching juggernaut that we see today. Those *clinical* applications in business organizations engaged me, but as an I/O Psychologist, I felt unprepared to deliver them. How does this one-to-one helping thing work? Psychotherapy was well known but the silos in Psychology were strong (and still are, unfortunately), and surprisingly very few consultants saw the now obvious parallels between a therapeutic/helping posture and facilitating what was happening at a more personal level in organizations. (There were a *few* who did operate at that intersection, e.g., counseling psychologists in career services, clinical social workers doing community consultations, the still prominent firm RHR, and of course the prolific psychologist Harry Levinson [Freedman & Brandt, 2009]).

Attracted to expanding my skills in this clinical direction without a clear plan as to where that would take me, I committed to being trained as a psychotherapist, which was largely alien to my education as an I/O Psychologist. As mentioned above and in the Manuso book, there were clinical professionals migrating toward organizational interventions, attracted by sincere fascination with the world of work, as well as the higher fees, but I knew no other organizational psychologist who was going the other way, to intentionally acquire clinical skills. I truly enjoyed and was positively challenged on many levels by the therapist training I received over a four-year period. Through extensive coursework and supervised therapy delivery, it provided me with theories, concepts, and practices about how to support change at the level of the individual, even though in that setting the client's goals were purely personal. At the same time, I had no intention of making my living as a therapist, maintaining unflappable optimism that these skills would be useful back in my organizational world.

Through no initiative on my part, that optimism paid off in 1989, soon after I had completed my clinical training. A consulting colleague invited me to bid on coaching a bank executive at was valued, but problematic in various ways. I still remember the moment when the *penny dropped*, and I saw the connections between this emerging type of service and my organizational background and clinical training. I heartily accepted the assignment and structured it with both of those disciplines, as well as their ethical traditions, in mind to yield a process whose logic and even design can be extrapolated to EC processes we use today. It was new, but it certainly wasn't *rocket science*.

What I didn't know at that time was that my moment of clarity mirrored what was already happening in the wider field by clinical professionals who were offering services to organizations. Before I had become aware of it, EC had already emerged, as described above, as a practice area for professionals with clinical training (psychologists, social workers, etc.) and consultants who already had some momentum offering individual feedback tools and processes, management training, and leadership development. Strangely fortuitous, or proving that the Zeitgeist exists, it was a short step for me to join one of those consulting firms (PDI)

that was figuring out how to scale these rapidly evolving *clinical* offerings in conjunction with longer-standing practice areas, such as assessment, 360-degree feedback, and leadership training. The 1990s was a time of very rapid growth of EC: as a discipline, as an enterprise, as an outgrowth of Psychological theories about individual growth, and as a professional practice in its own right.

In the US in the 1990s, the practice-driven field of Consulting Psychology (Division 13 of the American Psychological Association or APA) actively embraced the emergence of EC and other clinically grounded organizational interventions, publishing the very first professional journal articles in the US on coaching in a special edition of the Consulting Psychology Journal (Kilburg, 1996). Again, silos in Psychology became a factor because Industrial/Organizational, Clinical, or Counseling Psychology, and other helping professions, did not embrace the emerging field of EC. The reasons for these disconnections are many and not germane here, but the reality was that the relatively small field of Consulting Psychology provided a fertile professional home for EC to root itself in the US. Its earlier clinical origins, often tied to problem or deficit views of client challenges, became less prominent as EC tied itself more closely to talent management processes that emphasized growth and promotability. As EC expanded by practitioners, practices, and ideas, it became a hallmark service of the field of Consulting Psychology, operating at the level of the individual in organizational contexts, often in conjunction with other services, such as leadership development, team building, or even organization-wide culture interventions.

Yet, the popularity of coaching as a term and a helping activity quickly outgrew the small plot of the Consulting Psychology garden. It could not be contained, defined as the organizationally sponsored intervention where it had started. Since most mainline practice areas of Psychology in the US had ignored it, coaching was free to travel into non-consulting, non-organizational, and non-psychological spaces: personal, life, career, health, parenting, relationships, and anywhere else that people struggled to make positive changes. By the early years of the new millennium, *executive coaching* had been shortened to just *coaching* and was being used to

describe any one-to-one facilitative interaction or process, most often *outside* of organizational contexts. Many people saw it as a new name for therapy or counseling, without the need of an advanced degree and professional license and, therefore, without accepted guidelines and insurance coverage. The point for this paper is that when *executive coaching* became just *coaching*, its roots in organizational interventions and consulting psychology were forgotten or ignored. Ironically, *coaching* increasingly has become the heading and *executive coaching* has been subsumed under it as just another one-to-one helping service that any individual could purchase separate from organizational sponsorship or application. (Note: coaching has also been applied to, or paired with, team building, yielding the term *Team Coaching*. This paper is focused on individual development and so will not address other types of interventions or activities, however helpful, that have appropriated the term *coaching*.)

On a parallel but vastly bigger, global track, coaching proliferated in very impressive ways. Different countries around the world, with more inclusive views of Psychology as a profession, made room for the activity. Especially in the UK and Australia, the term Coaching Psychology was becoming increasingly popular (Palmer & Whybrow, 2007). Here in the US, since only the relatively small field of Consulting Psychology had embraced EC, all of the other forms of coaching (not organizationally anchored, such as personal, life, career, health, etc.) seeking legitimacy and consistency created their own professional homes, which coalesced into the International Coach Federation (ICF). In other countries, other self-appointed professional organizations with clearer foundations in Psychology emerged, evolved, and are now well established in supporting coaching (e.g., European Mentoring and Coaching Council [EMCC]). And because this was, and continues to be, *The Wild West of Coaching* (Sherman & Freas 2004), various coaching models and schools have their own coaching brands, with value and impact in the eye of the beholder. At this point, there is a confusing proliferation of coach-specific organizations supporting the training and certification of coaches, mostly untethered from the history of EC described above and therefore ignoring the context or organization in which the client resides or only acknowledging it in a perfunctory, inconsequential way.

As with all change, something has been gained by throwing the widest possible net around coaching, but something has been lost, too. If every helpful dyadic intervention is *coaching*, many are helped, but we have reasserted the familiar values of the human potential movement of the 1960s: facilitate others' thinking, expand options, and empower choices. We may have newly defined models and concepts that power dyadic coaching conversations, but from the outside, they are indistinguishable from those in clinical and counseling professions, now disconnected from the extrapolated history, research, and theoretical foundations of those fields. The term *executive coaching* has been caught up in these swirling currents and so has lost its original meaning in organizational contexts. As a result, for those of us who teach about and deliver coaching that is contracted by an organization and yields results that benefit both the individual and the organization, *executive coaching* has become an ambiguous term: Who contracted for the service? How is it designed? Who participates beyond the individual client? Given all the changes in coaching, we need to be clearer in our labeling of coaching that is an organizational intervention.

Going back to the reason for the second title of this article, *Professional Coaching in Organizational Contexts*, we need that full phrase in order to bring clarity to what in the past was meant by executive coaching. First, professional coaching is different than coaching that may be done by managers, HR professionals, mentors, or others who may apply broadly useful coaching skills as part of their roles in organizations. Professional coaches, whether internal or external, should have experienced a rigorous professional development experience about individual growth and building a working alliance with clients, plus content areas such as organizational behavior, leadership, management, and the interventions that can be applied at various levels. Second, the organization supports clients and coaches in their special relationship and supports the coach's role legitimacy with stated policy. All parties expect that both the individual client *and* the organization will benefit from coaching, and coaches are trusted and granted latitude in achieving that benefit. In summary, for the type of organizationally sponsored coaching we are focused on, an unusual three-way partnership exists between coach, client, and organization, where all parties strive to fulfill expectations of

their different roles. This unique and gratifying slice of the larger coaching world, with ties back to the earliest days of executive coaching, is best recognized for what it is and what it is not, as shown in second title of this article, *Professional Coaching in Organizational Contexts and How We Got to Such a Complex Label*. Having rigorously clarified these terms, this monograph will, for convenience, use the term EC in the spirit of the second title of this paper.

Consulting Psychology has kept faith with that clarified labeling of coaching as applied to individual clients in organizational contexts. However, with the growing confusion of labels about coaching, Consulting Psychology needs to reaffirm the original roots of coaching by clearly bringing the organizational context into our coaching definitions and practice protocols and by contracting with clients, sponsors, and other stakeholders. In so doing, we are bringing executive coaching home again to where it started, as a clinical-type intervention committed to individual growth but with organizational partners who have a stake in, and provide support for, outcomes. It can be a tricky balance and absolutely requires a coach skilled in, and knowledgeable about, both individual and organizational domains of service.

Effective coaches may come to this work from a variety of backgrounds but Consulting Psychology as a profession is the clearest marriage of all the requisite elements for delivering effective coaching engagements in organizational contexts. For those interested in more detail about those requisite elements, Consulting Psychology has sponsored and published research on the competencies required to be an effective executive coach (Vandaveer et al., 2016). This fully fleshed out competency model includes knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics. It goes well beyond the coach competency model recently re-issued by the International Coach Federation (ICF), which emphasizes coaching skills applicable in any coaching situation, but with no knowledge of organizational life required (ICF 2019).

Consulting Psychology has also provided a wider framework in which to embed coaching interventions. As consulting professionals, both internal and external, all of our interventions exist at one or more of the following three levels: organization, team, and individual (Lowman 2016). Most interventions will begin with a goal anchored in one of those levels, but the

process of achieving that goal will in one way or another interact with the other two levels. This idea also echoes the work of Schein (1999) and others, reminding consultants that every step in an organizational engagement is an intervention. Tying this conception of consulting psychology to professional coaching clarifies how the organizational context intersects with each coaching engagement. As such, the term *Coaching Psychology* has been used more recently in the US to designate it as the subset of Consulting Psychology that begins at the individual level of intervention and then intersects the other two levels of the field. (Note: coaching psychology as a term has been used outside of the US for over 20 years and encompasses a wider set of applications there that may not always be contracted in an organizational context.)

A diagram may be the best way to bring coaching concepts and practices together under the Consulting Psychology umbrella (see Figure 1: Coaching Psychology Model). The backdrop for the model is the X/Y axis intersection of coaching phases versus consulting levels. The X axis lists the broad phases of coaching engagements: Contracting, Arc of the coaching engagement, Post engagement implementation, and Follow-up and evaluation. The Y axis shows the levels of Consulting Psychology interventions: Organization, Unit/Group, and Individual. In the bigger picture, each coaching engagement flows forward, but not in a straight line. A coach's point of entry for coaching could be through the client directly, but both the engagement process and the client's behavioral changes will shift upward and intersect with the unit and organizational levels. Even if contracting is directly with a client, the organization must be considered a stakeholder, if only to make sure the coach conforms to its vendor requirements. Furthermore, almost every organization that does engage executive coaches has established policies, or at least guidelines, about clients, coach screening (preferred provider lists, etc.), and the specific coaching practices the organization expects in coaching engagements. Given the multi-decade history of EC, organizations expect consistency and efficiency in coaching engagements, just as they would for other organizational and leadership development initiatives. As Figure 1 illustrates, contracting for a coaching intervention necessarily includes all three levels of intervention in Consulting Psychology before the *arc* of actually delivering EC services begins.

Most published definitions of EC focus on a coach's particular approach or session dynamics between coach and client (Frisch et. al. 2012). Of course, these dynamics are essential and the *common factors* research (both clinical and coaching psychology) established key criteria for a productive *working alliance* between coach and client (McKenna & Davis, 2009; Norcross & Goldfried, 2003). Extending essential session dynamics across the multiple sessions, events, and milestones that occur in a typical EC engagement allows us to describe an *arc* for EC engagements that shows important events and milestones as the engagement unfolds. However, for Consulting Psychologists, an exclusive focus on session dynamics leaves lots of value on the table. Unlike fish, Consulting Psychologists recognize that we and clients are constantly surrounded by the "water" of the organization. As with all contexts, this has a big impact on our client's behavior and developmental goals, and therefore on EC itself. The Coaching Psychology Model describes important aspects of EC that go well beyond what happens within coaching sessions.

In the vast majority of EC engagements, the coach is entering a system that anticipates his/her entry. For some engagements, this may be a perfunctory vendor set up with little oversight of the process. However, organizational sponsors increasingly seek to establish much closer partnerships with the coaches who are working in the organization. The term *Enterprise Coaching Manager* has been used in the EC marketplace to represent the point-person for those partnerships. There are many compelling reasons for this. To name a few: aligning coaching expenditures with strategic use of coaching services, vetting coaches for the experience and credentials that the organization seeks, and maintaining quality control over coaching processes. A very important, but often overlooked, reason is that if the organization doesn't know what coaching is happening, then results cannot be systematically evaluated and there can be no organization-wide learning about which coaches and coaching processes are effective in producing observable results.

The Coaching Psychology Model illustrates that most organizations will have established expectations for EC before a coach is on the scene, or for internal coaching, as the role is being

defined. Again, a coach may be entering an engagement through the direct sponsorship of an executive client, but organizational procurement, governance, and structure will impinge on the engagement. From both individual client and organizational sponsorship perspectives, it is much better to open that dialogue early, rather than awkwardly trying to retrofit an already-started coaching engagement to organizational standards.

The term *contracting* can have multiple meanings but most frequently it is used to discuss the steps that define a process (Frisch et. al. 2012). With the realities above in mind, the three levels of Consulting Psychology interventions illustrate that EC has contracting elements at each level. Although these points of contact will vary across EC engagements, there is likely to be contracting about coaching from the perspective of the organization as a whole, as outlined above. More compelling is the contracting that needs to occur at the group, department, or unit level where the coaching client works. Again, the coach may or may not have already met the client, but with EC the coach will definitely meet the client's manager and maybe others (e.g., HR Business Partner) near the beginning of the coaching engagement. In many organizations, the organizational level of contracting would already have been communicated to the manager and so general coaching process expectations already exist. Figure 1 envisions early contact between coach and the client's manager as a contracting exchange, at a minimum. The client's manager needs to confirm steps in the coaching process, her/his role in that process, confidentiality considerations, and when in the process the coach will be interacting with the manager. How this contracting process cascades from organizational to unit/group levels will vary across organizations, but the main point is that coaches need to anticipate, or even initiate, these contracting steps before or as early in the engagement as possible. To not do so risks getting ahead of what the organizational and department sponsors envision in a coaching process and leaves both coach and client vulnerable to criticism.

With that backdrop in place, the contracting cascades naturally to the client. Coaches should assume nothing has been communicated to clients and confirm all aspects of the coaching process that's about to begin. Coaching isn't secret or *done to* anyone, whether triggered by a

pressing need for behavior change (sometimes labeled *remedial coaching*) or by an aspirational stretch toward a future role (sometimes labeled *high-potential coaching*). It is a collaborative process with confidentiality of content, but the process is openly contracted with sponsors and clients. In fact, in most organizations, the contracted coaching process is described in writing (e.g., Statement of Work or SOW) so that all levels have the same information. Some details of contracting may be revisited during the actual arc of the engagement (e.g., who participates in the client's 360, changes in leadership above the client, or other specific adjustments), but that's always easier when the overall process has earlier been made clear to everyone. This *clearing the field* is essential to getting off to a well-founded start to coaching.

The arc of a coaching engagement could be shorter or longer but the steps and key milestones in a typical 3- to 6-month engagement are shown in the arc in Figure 1. The arc begins with a clear focus on the individual coaching client as the level of intervention. Forming the well-known *working alliance* that is described in the *common factors* research (McKenna & Davis, 2009) is foundational to an effective coaching process. While this paper does not include a deep dive on each step in the engagement arc (see Frisch et. al. 2012), skillful coaches can, and should, facilitate client self-insight during the early meetings, before any data is on the table from outside their dyad. New research using neuroscience measurements emphasizes the criticality of these early coaching meetings in fostering openness and curiosity rather than triggering defensiveness (Boyatzis & Jack 2018).

Building on that foundation, the arc indicates an increasing intention to extend beyond the perspective of the coach and client. Leadership coaching clients are curious about their impact on others. At the same time, they may be nervous and feel the need to understand how others view them. So, the arc moves the coaching both forward and up towards the client's unit or department level of intervention. This is where coach and client can collaborate on obtaining feedback about the client from colleagues and stakeholders. Other assessments may also be considered at this time to enrich the client's self-insight. Many clients describe gaining self-insight as the high point of their coaching engagement, and it literally is depicted in Figure 1 as

the high point in the arc of the engagement. (Note: the arc may actually extend higher into the organization if the client is a senior leader or *C-Level* (e.g., Chief Learning Officer) executive.

The coach's facilitation of feedback and other assessment results toward a well-founded draft development plan is essential in moving the process along the arc, defining needed change that resonates with the client, and also addresses the organization's view. This draft plan is shared, or socialized, with sponsors, as the arc moves forward and also descends back toward coach-client assimilation of change. Confident that they have done a thorough exploration of strengths and needs, and now aligned with sponsors, coach and client identify opportunities to *experiment* with behavioral changes, with support and further feedback from sponsors. All change is difficult, and coaches support client *resilience* to setbacks and ongoing learning. Again, as *closure* is anticipated, coach and client remain in the realm of the individual to reflect on the overall developmental process, highlight learning and future challenges, and anticipate more extensive implementation of change, with support shifting away from the coach and toward the client's manager and others invested in the client's growth.

Either before or just after the formal arc of the engagement comes to closure, most coaches provide follow-up supportive steps that may occur less frequently than the active coaching steps shown in the arc. This is a particularly important phase as the client continues to operationalize the development plan, apply new behavior, seek feedback, and adjust accordingly. Those closest to the client within the immediate work group support these efforts as active partners or just in the normal course of organizational interactions. A wider or higher-level constituent group can also be involved, depending on the client's organizational level and the breadth of the development plan. Adjustments are made based on reflection, feedback, and coaching conversations. Ideally, the client experiences self-reinforcing positive change. Coaching normalizes this iterative process of learning-by-doing with feedback and adjustment as the coach recedes from the engagement.

Coaches vary in how they officially exit a coaching engagement, but exit they must, even if they are internal to the organization or doing other work there. Lack of clear closure interferes with the client's independence and capacity to self-observe to learn about learning, often called *double-loop learning* (Argyris & Schon, 1974). It also muddies an organization-level view of coaching engagements. As illustrated in Figure 1, the organizational stake in the effectiveness of coaching brings the intervention into focus at the level of the organization. Increasingly, organizations that have formalized a consistent approach to coaching also want to systematically capture how engagements went. This requires accumulation of outcome data from as many coaching engagements as possible, and in some ways links back to the original process owners, and as mentioned earlier, the enterprise coaching manager's responsibility for quality control. Again, it is not the focus of this paper to explore the topic of coaching program evaluation, but Figure 1 shows how it conceptually fits into the Consulting Psychology levels of intervention. Not shown in Figure 1, but in some ways more important to the field of coaching, research on coaching requires that at least some organizations are gathering outcome data and contributing to the growing literature on coaching psychology.

Just like clients, coaches also need feedback about outcomes in order to learn and improve, but they don't have the leverage to engineer that follow-up on their own. Coaches depend on an organization-wide commitment to an evaluation process, as should be done with any intervention. As can be seen in Figure 1, the Model continues after the coaching is concluded so that the organization learns about how to maximize coaching outcomes. Not shown on the diagram is the natural feedback loop that would connect those conclusions back to the beginning of how the organization contracts and sets up coaching for success from the start, and also feedback to the coach. All of these benefits depend on capturing individual engagement outcomes at the organizational level of intervention.

There are many *models* of coaching. As mentioned above, most are really models for how sessions can be managed or insight fostered and do not overtly include the flow of sessions or the client's organizational context. Coaching psychology, embedded in the wider frame of

consulting psychology, attempts to describe the full scope of an EC engagement, including individual, group, and organizational context. This confirms not only the importance of including the organizational context for successful EC engagements, but also illustrates the many benefits to clients of leveraging the context for feedback, development planning, application, ongoing learning, and colleague support for growth. The context as viewed by consulting psychologists is not something to *work around* but instead to be partnered with for the ultimate benefit of the client. Coaching psychology embraces all of this richness even as it makes processes and terminology more complex. In the end, coaching in an organizational context is synonymous with coaching psychology. This paper is an attempt to both explain and promote that equivalence.

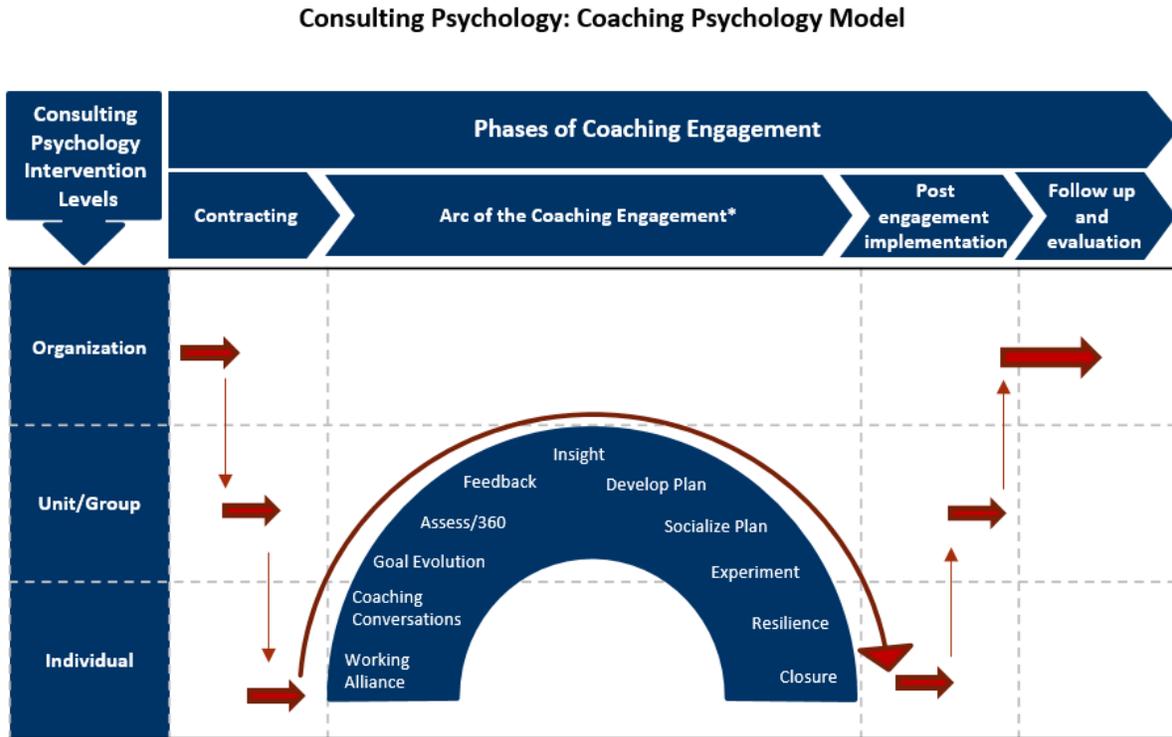
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Figure 1

Consulting Psychology: Coaching Psychology Model



* The arc of the coaching engagement may extend upward to the Organization intervention level if the coaching client has an organization-wide leadership role.

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