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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Working with a Critical Friend: A Self-study of Executive Coaching

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This article examines the learning by a dean of education through the process of executive coaching. In adopting a self-study approach to explore the experience of executive coaching, we draw on the notion of critical friendship as a way of interrogating the experience and the response to that experience in terms of leadership development and professional growth. We used data from audio-recordings of individual coaching sessions to construct vignettes designed to capture the essence of particular themes and issues germane to the learning through the coaching experiences. The major findings pertain to the notion of default behaviours and show how recognition of one's own default behaviours is important in shifting personal practice. The study opens up for scrutiny important aspects of the nature of the personal side of leading a faculty of education and offers insights into what it means to be a learner as a leader and how productive self-study can be in facilitating that learning process.

Keywords: leadership; executive coaching; critical friendship; self-study; dean; administration; teacher education

Trabajando con un amigo crítico: Un self-study de coaching ejecutivo

Este artículo examina lo aprendido por un decano de educación por medio de un proceso de coaching ejecutivo. Al adoptar el abordaje del self-study para explorar la experiencia del coaching ejecutivo, utilizamos la noción de amistad crítica como medio para interrogar la experiencia y la respuesta a ella en términos del desarrollo de liderazgo y crecimiento profesional. Utilizamos datos recogidos de grabaciones en audio de las sesiones de coaching para construir viñetas diseñadas para capturar la esencia de temas y problemas particulares relacionados al aprendizaje por medio del coaching. Los hallazgos principales apuntan a la noción de comportamientos por defecto, y muestran la importancia del reconocimiento de este tipo de actuaciones para el cambio de prácticas personales. El estudio pone de manifiesto importantes aspectos de la naturaleza del ámbito personal en el liderazgo de una facultad de educación y ofrece comprensiones respecto a lo que significa ser un líder como aprendiz, y lo productivo que puede ser el self-study en la facilitación del proceso de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: liderazgo; coaching ejecutivo; amistad crítica; self-study; decano; administración; formación docente

Purpose is a central concern in self-study. As Ham and Kane (2004) have made clear, purpose drives the development of knowledge in self-study and, in so doing, recognizing and articulating one's purpose can push such research to carry meaning beyond the individual. Making purpose clear and articulating purpose explicitly illustrate how the

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process and the product of self-study can be a catalyst for others to research their practice and build on the work and knowledge developed by others (e.g., Hamilton, 2004; Kosnick, Beck, Freese, & Samaras, 2006) – a crucial aspect of the work of academia.

As self-study draws on the traditions of reflection, action research, teacher research and practitioner inquiry (Loughran, 2004), data sources that purposefully offer alternative perspectives on situations and challenge participants to see things differently – to reframe (Schön, 1983) their position and outlook – are central to moving beyond simply justifying one's existing practices and/or behaviours. In self-study, working with a critical friend offers ways of seeking to better understand alternative perspectives on situations so that there is a more explicit alignment of purpose, practice and learning outcomes (Crowe & Berry, 2007; Schuck & Russell, 2005).

Researchers acknowledge additional benefits of critical friendship in self-study. By providing an alternative lens on one's work and advocating for it with fresh eyes (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009), critical friends can be helpful for overcoming prejudice (Solbue, 2011), rethinking one's values and beliefs (Nilsson, 2013), and enabling participants to think more deeply, holistically and honestly about the relationship between what they say and what they do (Foulger, 2010). Doing so, through dialogue, is considered a foundation on which self-study methodology is enacted (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2013), providing an opportunity to reach outcomes otherwise not possible from working independently (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009).

In the tertiary education sector, executive coaching has become increasingly common as a way of supporting senior staff to cope with the demands associated with being a leader. Such demands are often exacerbated by the requirements of ongoing change management in our rapidly shifting educational landscape. The role of the executive coach is not dissimilar to the role (especially in terms of purpose and intent) of a critical friend as typically enacted in self-study. Working from a psychodynamic and systems perspective, Kilburg (2000) described executive coaching as:

a helping relationship formed between a client who has managerial authority and responsibility in an organization and a consultant who uses a wide variety of behavioral techniques and methods to assist the client to achieve a mutually identified set of goals to improve his or her professional performance and personal satisfaction and consequently to improve the effectiveness of the client's organization within a formally defined coaching agreement. (pp. 65, 67)

The essence of executive coaching might well be distilled to issues revolving around the nature of the personal relationship developed by the coach with the client or "coachee." It could well be argued that executive coaching is a personal and specific approach to working as a critical friend in an attempt to offer an opportunity to challenge the coachee to see beyond the current situation and understand different perspectives on episodes, behaviours and events (Hall, Otazo, & Hollenbeck, 2000). As the literature suggests, in many ways and when done well, executive coaching is about a search for data (both confirming and disconfirming) to counter the natural tendency to rationalize existing behaviour (Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001).

Pardini (2003) made the point that executive coaching is based on developing an ongoing professional relationship designed to deepen the coachee's learning and to improve performance. She also distinguishes coaching from mentoring by stating that coaching is designed to produce action by helping a coachee to find practical ways of addressing personal needs. Importantly, however, such action is dependent on the coachee being encouraged and supported to develop actions based on personal experience because, "when you do something just because someone else suggested it, it often has a false quality. If it's not something that makes sense in the course of your own experience, it won't work well" (p. 10).

A coach's expertise, therefore, hinges on the ability to bring alternative views to light and to help reframe and understand situations from different perspectives so that taken-for-granted assumptions of practice might not only be recognized, but also challenged (Brookfield, 1995). Doing so in such a way as to help the coachee see into alternatives (to reframe the situation) and consider different ways of acting as a consequence, is where the strength of the coach-coachee relationship resides and through which success might be apparent. In understanding executive coaching in this way, the congruence with what it means to work with a critical friend becomes more clearly evident.

As Schuck and Russell (2005) acknowledged, a critical friend in self-study is a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides critique, and takes the time to fully understand the context of the work and the outcomes desired by those involved. The task of the critical friend is not so much to convey to others his or her own views, but to work with others concerning how they see their own particular practices. Effectively doing so involves striking an appropriate balance between support and challenge, where helping others see what they have learned not to notice becomes central to the working relationship (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009). According to Nilsson (2013), critical friendship ideally works in two directions, because the critical friend should also benefit from such processes of on-going examination.

Just as there is great pedagogical value in the search for better alignment between intents and actions through self-study of teacher education practices, so too the same applies in relation to considering the work of an educational leader. Manke (2004), for example, noted that she, "identified relationships between [her] teaching practices and [her] administrative practices" (p. 1369), while Mills (2010) made clear how his practice as a dean of education carried more personal meaning when he considered his practice in terms of his pedagogical principles and expectations rather than administrative fiats, rules and compliance regimes. Drawing on the methodological imperatives of self-study (LaBoskey, 2004), this article examines how, through analysis of an executive coaching experience with both the coach and then at a meta level with a colleague who specifically undertook to further extend the work as critical friendship, a dean of education was supported in developing a deeper understanding of his approach to, and practice of, leadership, doing so through a pedagogical lens. The study involved a dual approach, using both executive coaching and subsequent critical friendship. In essence, the study involved two different collaborative partners with different roles in unpacking the phenomena under investigation. Thus there were two different phases that comprised the approach to researching the executive coaching experience, and two approaches to critical friendship that had similarities but also differences.

The literature on educational leadership and change (e.g., Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990; Sergiovanni, 2005; Van Nistelrooij, de Caluwé, & Schouten, 2007) has typically offered advice and ideas about how to promote change from a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches, using collaboration, teamwork, and strong communication to advance shared interests. Our focus in this study, however, was different: employing more of an inside-out approach, where the collaboration was not used so much to advance the leadership agenda by affecting the actions of an entire group, but to more clearly discern the inner world/landscape/contours (Palmer, 1998) of the educational leader. Our focus was on the leader instead of those being led. We were not so much concerned with what needed to happen between the leader and the led, but within the leader as supported through critical friendships to discern more clearly one's own "hang-ups and habits".

Background to the Study

When initially appointed as dean of education in 2010, John (first author) undertook to work with two colleagues who had similar leadership roles (one from the USA and the other from Canada); the aim was to conduct a self-study into the nature of “deaning”. However, the demands of being “the Dean” made it increasingly difficult for each of the colleagues to maintain meaningful communication with one another about the nature of deaning. The focus on the purpose for the deaning study and what data were relevant and how to collect that data became less clear and more diffuse, and commitment faded in light of the pressure created by the dramatic loss of discretionary time (as a consequence of being dean) available to conduct a study together. Despite the best intentions of the three hopeful participants, the deaning project rapidly lost momentum and petered out. For John in particular, however, the desire to pursue a study into the nature of the role persisted as he felt that research into the nature of “deaning,” and particularly the transition from professor to dean, could offer insights and learnings of value that might extend beyond the individual (see, Loughran, 2015).

The idea of working with an executive coach arose because the university made such support available to the university’s senior executive and so John offered a number of senior staff in the faculty an opportunity to work with an executive coach as a form of professional support as they grappled with issues of leadership and change in their specific circumstances. John made the offer of executive coaching to all senior staff who at that time carried management responsibilities, and 6 of the 10 whom he approached took up the offer. In each case the offer was made by John at a personal level following individual discussion about the purpose and perceived value of such coaching for the individual and discussion focused on particular issues that person was grappling with. The intention was that coaching could offer feedback about, and support for, the individual’s specific situation beyond, or independent of, John as the dean. However, despite the intention that executive coaching might be a positive and supportive way of helping participants recognize and respond to issues they were challenged by in their particular situation, it did not take long for John to realize that despite the best efforts of the coach, change for some participants was dependent on their perception of their role/position in the given situation(s), the way they performed in that situation, and recognition of their own behaviours and attitudes regarding intentions, actions and outcomes. It appeared to John that coaching may have been interpreted by some participating staff as a form of remediation. It was possible that, if the coachee did not approach the situation as a learner (or unfortunately, if there was a sense of resentment or imposition associated with being involved in coaching, despite involvement being voluntary), then the prevailing tendency could be to rationalize existing behaviour and to see resolution as something that resided with others, rather than something to be addressed by changes in the coachee’s behaviours, attitudes or particular actions and reactions.

Having seen the ways in which coaching had been interpreted and used by some of his colleagues, John’s understanding about the nature of coaching was brought into sharp focus. So, when the opportunity arose for him to work with an executive coach, he hoped that beyond the personal support he might gain in his role as dean, it might also speak back to views of coaching as remediation rather than personal learning. Interestingly, by moving into a coaching relationship himself, that which he had observed from the outside as others were coached and which had influenced his perceptions of the nature of participation and possible learning became much more real when taken up in his own work-life. As this article illustrates, choosing to work with an executive coach depends

on a clear need for the coachee to be ready, willing and able to see issues and concerns from alternative perspectives and to view oneself as part of the situation as opposed to just managing the actions and behaviours of others.

In this study, the executive coach was a professional coach who had worked in that role with senior leaders in the university sector for more than a decade. He had substantial experience in the role and had worked with many senior staff at the university level across many institutions in Australia. He was familiar with the nature of the university in which John worked and approached coaching with a view to offering different perspectives on situations (reframing) and to making explicit how he interpreted his coachee's attitudes and behaviours. As a consequence, he sought to help describe and explain the reasons for, and the impact of, a coachee's behaviours in relation to the specific experiences and situations raised in the coaching sessions.

As a colleague with far less experience at the university (only 2 years at the time of the study), albeit with 10 years of experience at universities in the USA and an experienced self-study researcher, Nathan (second author) became interested in the executive coaching approach when it was described by John in a self-study conference presentation. Following a discussion about John's relationship with his executive coach and the tentative views of learning emerging from the coaching experience, and in light of Nathan's view that it would be of broader professional value to examine such issues further, the two decided to collaborate to better develop and articulate the learning derived from the experience; hence this article.

As a colleague and employee of the same institution and faculty (albeit at different campuses), concerns about and issues of confidentiality were paramount. In our discussions, we therefore focused explicitly on the issues at the heart of John's experiences and the overall types of circumstances involved and not on any individuals. Therefore, beyond John's views of his own experiences, all other details of relevant circumstances were addressed in ways that ensured that no individuals were named or identifiable. When all was said and done, Nathan had no idea who was involved in any specific instances on which the coaching experiences were based. Furthermore, who might have been involved was of no interest to Nathan because it was the shared focus on the self-study work and its broad relevance to issues of authority, democracy and collaboration (his own interests as a researcher and teacher educator) that were central to the collaborative examination.

Overall, in exploring the relevance of critical friendship in self-study research to administration and leadership, we sought to illustrate the learning from such collaboration at two levels: (1) that which was apparent through executive coaching, which John experienced with his coach and (2) that which was evident through Nathan's involvement in providing further direction and support as a critical friend committed to further unpacking John's experiences of learning through being coached. As a consequence, there was a dual dimension to the notion of critical friendship, whereby the executive coach was the initial person to raise alternative perspectives on situations and, through their coaching relationship, to push ideas, actions and issues around with John. Then Nathan functioned as a critical friend at a meta-level by pushing more deeply into the data and learnings to further reframe and challenge the initial ideas and findings as the research became more focused, specific and rigorous. The coaching experience was therefore extended in new ways through the dual critical friendship approach as the data on which the research was based, and the interpretations thereof, were rigorously and robustly critiqued and tested.

Methodology

Northfield (1996) noted the value of self-study as a way of seeing more deeply into practice but, in so doing, emphasized the importance of working with a trusted other and of seeking to move beyond the personal in order to pursue the development of new knowledge. He also noted that self-study defines the focus of study (i.e., context and nature of a person's activity) but not the process of studying the situation. Hence Northfield was one of the early self-study scholars to begin to focus on explicating issues surrounding self-study as methodology. Northfield argued that a commitment to checking data and interpretations with others was crucial because a critical friend was more likely to frame an experience in ways not thought of by the person conducting the self-study, due to the inevitable limitations associated with personal involvement in the work. He also drew attention to the fact that self-study created a research-action loop through which results often demanded immediate attention that prompted action, thus creating a dynamic, research-informed personal learning environment in ways much less common in more traditional research.

LaBoskey (2004) took Northfield's ideas further when she set out to describe the epistemological, pedagogical and ethical underpinnings of self-study from which she framed her view of the salient features of self-study. She contended that the salient features of self-study of teacher education practices as being self-initiated and focused, improvement-aimed, interactive, adopting multiple methods, and conceptualizing validation as a process based on trustworthiness in accord with the arguments of Mishler (1990).

Executive coaching defined the focus of the study, which involved the coachee (John) meeting with the coach on a semi-regular basis (approximately once per month) to discuss issues, ideas and concerns that affected John's leadership as dean. Sessions were confidential and the coach's responsibility was solely based on being a critical friend; he did not report to anyone about the nature of the sessions. Involvement was on a finite basis (six sessions initially, but extended when the opportunity to study the relationship and begin to explore the learnings from coaching became a possibility, leading to three additional sessions, for a total of nine sessions). Sessions were open-ended in terms of agenda and generally of 60 minutes duration.

Between sessions the two engaged in email communication and other negotiated tasks (dependent on the issues arising in sessions) involving responses to intended actions, readings and/or advice. (Readings tended to be short papers or excerpts from newsletters and magazines intended for senior executives or simplified explanations of psychological constructs to explain behaviours, actions and responses to different situations and scenarios. Advice tended to revolve around possibilities for alternative ways of acting in given situations and of seeing interactions through different lenses across a range of meetings, both formal and informal.)

In this study, the major data source was derived from the last four open-ended sessions, which were recorded and transcribed. The opportunity to turn these sessions into data sets arose following a discussion in the fifth coaching session about the nature of the learning inherent in that particular session in relation to both coach and coachee. That discussion began to focus much more on the nature of learning through the coaching experience rather than only discussing actions, behaviours and varying situations experienced through deaning. As a consequence, the opportunity to pursue that learning in a more methodical and rigorous manner arose as a discussion about the sessions as data sources led both coach and coachee to enthusiastically agree to analyse sessions as data sets. Researching

the experience was new for the coach, and through their professional relationship the resultant collaboration created the opportunity for taking the coaching to a different level, thus framing the coaching experience as a process (not just an event) well positioned to be researched through self-study methodology.

When the decision was jointly made to research the coaching experience, the final four sessions became important data sets that were transcribed. Analysis of the transcriptions involved coach and coachee independently reading the transcripts, determining the themes inherent in those discussions, and then meeting to compare and contrast views and interpretations of the data and to seek agreement on the key triggers or events that appeared to conceptually position the nature of the learning. Therefore, in many ways, the analytic process led to a building up of deeper understandings of rich contexts based on the voice of the participants in a way commensurate with grounded theory (Glasser & Strauss, 1967).

The need to develop trustworthy analytic portrayals of the procedures and to report the learning (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) led to construction of vignettes designed to capture the essence of specific issues central to the coaching as John experienced it. The construction of vignettes was an attempt to illustrate through the use of data, a specific crucial moment (Brubaker, 2015) or critical incident (Tripp, 1993) and how it could be used as a mechanism for highlighting and further refining the nature of the learning through coaching in a form that could be publicly shared and that would concisely reflect specific experiences associated with the nature of coaching.

The approach to analysis, and therefore to vignette construction, was derived from shared understanding between coach and coachee that reading the transcripts entailed a focus on emerging themes. Doing so then formed the basis for deciding on specific situations as vignettes that would be illustrative of consistent recurrent themes across data sets. The vignettes were created from the audio-recordings and are not verbatim segments but are slightly edited and combined to capture particular issues (critical moments and situations) as they were discussed during or across sessions. The vignettes were constructed to create an accurate portrayal of the dialogue while minimising repetition of the theme and, as much as possible, providing sufficient context to help make the theme of the vignette illustrative of the way in which it occurred during the coaching sessions.

Across the transcripts a number of critical incidents were identified, each of which captured in identifiable ways particular behaviours that recurred throughout the transcripts. The essence of these identifiable, recurring incidents led to the themes that framed the vignettes such that clear examples of the incident became the exemplar used to portray the overall behaviour evident in the situation. However, one particular theme stood out that encompassed all others and held the vignettes together conceptually. It was a cohering or overarching theme, encapsulated by the notion of default behaviours (Russell, 2000, explained further below) and offering an analytic frame that was both explained through the vignettes as exemplars of the behaviour in different situations and indicative of the notion of default behaviours as a generalised explanation beyond the specific when all vignettes were viewed holistically. The vignettes thus capture and illustrate the theme of default behaviours and serve as both data and analysis, with the intention that they are able to stand alone as situations that convey meaning and offer insights while also combining to make the overall theme of default behaviours come to life in authentic ways through the data sets.

Vignettes are intended to be short, sharp and situation specific (Northfield & Winter, 1993). The development and subsequent portrayal of the critical incidents through the vignettes focuses on what was being developed through the discussion between the coach

and coachee during the sessions and each draws attention to different default behaviours. The specificity inherent in the vignette approach stands in contrast to more elaborate forms of portrayal through such things as case-study methodology (Stake & Trumbull, 1982; Yin, 2008), to illustrate how recognizing and responding to specific learning about self can be succinctly foregrounded in relation to two aspects of the executive coaching experience: developing a serious focus on leadership behaviours and implications in respect of personal change management.

Importantly, the collaborative approach to recognizing critical incidents and developing them into specific examples of particular behaviours through the construction of vignettes also offered a form of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) that established confidence in the findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As suggested above, working with Nathan in the dual critical-friend relationship was also important in further triangulating the data and interpretations that took on added significance as the coach was part of the study.

Findings

In order to explore learning about self through executive coaching the vignettes that follow have been designed to demonstrate how executive coaching can lead to deeper understandings of one's own practice. As noted above, the major theme that coheres the vignettes more generally is that which Russell (2000) described as default behaviours, "styles that come naturally, effortlessly and thoughtlessly, by doing what we have always done" (p. 2). The vignettes therefore explore specific instances of the overall theme of default behaviours in the coachee and are designed to illustrate the learning of, and value in, recognizing and responding to such recognition at a personal level.

Vignette 1: The white knight

Theme: Assuming responsibility for solving others' problems (not helping them devise solutions for themselves).

Context: A coaching session in which the approach to coaching was being discussed with specific attention to the ways in which the coach sought to help John recognize some of his default behaviours with the intent that it would prompt him to think about, and hopefully act, in different ways.

Coach: The key thing out of the process about learning how to be coached is that you give yourself the opportunity to be your own observer and what I'm looking for is the stuff that might derail you and I'm helping you to see some of that. You're a very quick study – you go and you do stuff, so for you, it's not about just talking about it. I think part of this process is to create a safe enough space for you to actually talk about real issues for you.

John: You heard me talk about some of the difficulties I was having and your strategy was to tell me about a way of functioning, to offer me some ways of acting and responding to general situations that you could see that I was being confronted by. I think you tried to focus me on a way of experimenting or trying something out to see what would happen. So what I'm interested in is what did you hear from me that settled you, that gave you confidence to think, "I know enough about this guy to tell him what I think he ought to try to do".

Coach: It's not a model of just listening and just sort of helping you, it's actually about being able to give you some ideas about where to go to and how to handle things, because at the end of the day you internalise that and then it's John's way of doing it. So learning how to be coached, it's about not just standing next to you listening but actually standing behind you and

pushing and standing in front and pulling. The important thing for me is to know when to move in front of you, when to stay behind you and when to just walk next to you.

John: You told me to operate in ways that were not opposed to the way I normally function but they weren't necessarily my normal ways and you were saying, "you might do this and this but in this case you can't afford to be doing it that way because here's what will distract you". So what are the things that you saw or thought that made you come up with that?

Coach: I saw that you need to get things done, you need to close loops and you need to keep things moving. It's the knight in shining armour. You are a protector of the innocent and a defender of the realm. So all of those things get in the way when you're trying to deal with somebody who is obtuse and difficult and that's what I'm looking for, to help you enough to help you influence yourself. I want to give you enough information so that you can sit down and make decisions that are congruent with your values. The clarity of your reasoning is what I'm trying to help you operationalise; if you understand that, then you will know how you respond.

In many ways, Vignette 1 illustrates how coming to recognize what Dewey (1933) described as "the problem" is important in more fully apprehending a situation. As a default behaviour, the coach recognized and described an automatic response that John displayed in many situations that he appeared to frame in a particular way, that is, the ability (or perhaps more so, the need) to solve the problem. From the coaching perspective, understanding the implications of the actions associated with that behaviour (solving the problem) was therefore important for John to make more informed decisions about how to act in the future and why, not just to act in the same way in responding to an issue, need or concern of others. From the coach's perspective, recognizing and naming the particular behaviour was important to encourage action that might lead John to do something about that particular named behaviour.

As this vignette illustrates, the coach characterised John's behaviour using the strong visual metaphor of "the knight in shining armour, protector of the innocent and a defender of the realm". This was done in order to help ensure that the naming carried meaning in ways that would be more fully apprehended. Although metaphors inevitably have their limitations, the point in this case was to make a striking representation that could not easily be ignored and that might usefully act as a reminder when that default behaviour was invoked by John in other situations. In fact, it proved to be a shrewd form of characterisation. As John was led to reflect on how he worked with some colleagues, it became clear to him that, more often than not, when problems were brought to his attention, he tended to assume responsibility for such problems and act to solve them for his colleagues instead of working with them to devise a collective solution or helping them devise a solution for themselves.

Vignette 1 draws attention to a particular default behaviour; the next vignette illustrates how that particular behaviour was implicitly connected to other actions and approaches. (Note: As a consequence of the circumstances described in Vignette 1, John found himself consciously resisting the urge to act in such a default way, so much so that one colleague who often met with him to discuss issues associated with leading and working with other staff commented after one meeting that he was not solving things for her in the way that he usually did. Such an observation led to an engaging discussion between the two about the responsibility for actions and behaviours and how it played out in their leadership relationship.)

Vignette 2: Taking one for the team

Theme: Not addressing accusatory situations that are emotionally loaded.

Context: A coaching session in which the coach attempts to portray how to act in particular situations by drawing parallels with his own work as coach. The discussion points to the value of recognizing particular behaviours and holding back from allowing those behaviours to be the first and most immediate way of responding.

Coach: When I see you being tortured, I've got to hold back from going, 'it's okay, don't worry' because that doesn't help. My defaults are around 'don't worry, it'll be all right', and you have that too – a rescuer.

John: Yes, it's a big insight in the transcript, you must have said it half a dozen times about being the white knight and so I understand that, but emotionally I can't help it, it happens without me putting a lot of thought into it. In one sense it helps me feel better if I can salvage something for people when they come to me with a problem. What I find really hard in this job, and it does eat away at me, is this whole thing about 'taking one for the team' and I take too many for the team. I think I rationalise that as a rescuer because I have to take that one for the team because it's the right thing to do, but in fact maybe all I'm doing is allowing myself to continue to operate in a particular way. So why do I absorb it and move on? I think I tell myself, and I think I believe it that, if I'm going to move someone forward, then no amount of trying to push back by me is going to help, they will defend, so I have to let them get out all the things, even if I don't like it, so that eventually I can be at a point where I say, 'well, if all that stuff is behind us now, where to? What happens?' I don't want to keep revisiting the same angst, so at some stage I have to say (even if it is only to myself), 'you know what, I'm telling you I've had enough of that and here's where I'm at'.

Coach: One of the dilemmas that we face is when do you put your foot down? The thing that comes up for me was the situation where you didn't lose it, but it felt to you like you lost it. And part of it is your own identity as the Dean, you are the boss, you're actually here to run the business. So part of the thing is that the hits for the team go with the territory but you need to know when to share the hits around.

John: Yeah, I don't have to absorb them all.

Coach: Absolutely, and the ability to be candid and transparent with things.

"Taking one for the team" is a way of conceptualising those difficult discussions where an individual may vent and place responsibility for particular actions on others; in such instances, the leader (or in this case the dean) does not challenge the views being posited in order to attempt to move on, as opposed to reverting or regressing into defensive or accusatory positions.

As Vignette 2 implies, "taking one for the team" could therefore become a default behaviour that could impede moving on or making progress in a given situation. As the coach suggests, by not invoking the position of authority (Munby & Russell, 1994), such actions could be interpreted as avoiding the reality of a situation and therefore allow the issue to persist by remaining un-named and thus likely to continue unaddressed. From a leadership perspective, continued actions of this sort could lead to emotionally charged circumstances that would not only inflict a personally unsustainable toll, but also detract from one's efforts to achieve the larger organisational mission. They must therefore be tempered by other approaches with clearer boundaries concerning who is required to engage with such dilemmas.

Vignette 3: Bold and forthright

Theme: Learning to clearly state facts in any situation.

Context: Following on in the same coaching session that shaped Vignette 2, the issues around 'taking one for the team,' primarily the concept of giving oneself permission to act in ways contrary to one's own default behaviours, become more explicit.

John: My experiences have taught me that sometimes people know what they're doing or avoiding doing and they need someone to reflect it back to them and say, 'you know what, this is not good enough. I'll give you a chance to prove me wrong, but if you don't prove me wrong, there are consequences for your behaviour' and that's sort of how I look at it. Does that make sense?

Coach: Absolutely, and if I can honestly just take the next step of that so that it integrates into your own operating system, that's actually giving yourself permission to be candid and clear because that way nobody is going to die wondering. Because what can happen is that being nice just wraps it all up to the extent that nobody knows that inside the bubble wrap there's actually a brick.

John: So that idea of giving yourself permission is interesting because it is by having some success with these difficult things and trying to be as open and transparent and candid as possible and then having success that actually helps you persevere and push on. The ones where it's a difficult person is where I do fall into the whole 'take one for the team' but maybe I'm at the point now of having the confidence to deal with that and knowing when to push back.

The notion of giving oneself permission to act in ways contrary to one's default behaviours is powerful when embedded within an acceptance that actions must nonetheless be congruent with one's values and/or expectations of how to act (an issue that first arose in Vignette 1 when framed as operating in ways "not opposed to the way [one] normally functions"). Permission in this case can be seen as a way of acknowledging the need to state how situations might be viewed and interpreted and that interpretations need to be explicit and clear; ambiguity does not help to establish a common understanding of a situation.

Vignette 4: The knock-on effect

Theme: Rescuing and protecting others from having to deal with problems.

Context: This vignette draws attention to the interconnectedness of behaviours and the sometimes unforeseen influence they can have on other situations and outcomes. In respect to occupying a leadership role, allowing or encouraging others to deal with situations rather than assuming responsibility for others is important in helping them to grow and develop in their own right, thereby advancing the interests of both the organisation and those within it.

Coach: The difficult personality ones are slippery and tricky and the next step to those is that it impacts on performance, and not just on their own performance but on the performance of the team. And that's what the issue is. So it's actually giving yourself the clarity around the downstream effect of not doing something.

John: Yep, there's a whole bunch of other things that go with it. But I think I'm at a stage where I know when I've danced for long enough.

Coach: Yes, it's what *will* you do next and one of the things that you've shown is you have a clear brief in the same way that you write an abstract of a paper, it is a brief for yourself in terms of how to handle it.

John: If you're going to deal with a problem, you've got to actually know what the problem is and you can't walk away from it. You've got to put it out there; otherwise, it will just go on. So that's easy to say, it's another thing to do. But that in many ways is a revelation for me. The next part of that revelation is, 'am I always the one who has to deal with that problem?' and that's where my rescuing is a problem, I protect other people from having to deal with problems when sometimes I shouldn't be doing that.

Coach: Yes, it is about giving them the opportunity to grow. Part of their growing in their role is to deal with these thorny issues as well but you don't have to deal with everything. Your rescuing tendency makes that hard for you to do.

Vignette 4 completes the circle of learning that started in Vignette 1. The default behaviour encapsulated in the notion of rescuing may well mean that, in some circumstances, responsibility for action may not always be encouraged or seen to be accepted by others if the leader (in this case the dean) continually solves difficult situations for others. That can play out in different ways depending on the individual. For example, if a staff member is seeking help and advice in how to deal with a difficult situation, moving beyond advice and taking over responsibility for solving the problem does not empower the staff member. At another level, in a situation where the leader may be attempting to confront a staff member's actions or behaviours that are considered inappropriate, simply "taking one for the team" can mean that the staff member's responsibility for poor behaviour is too easily avoided and therefore the problem may well persist. By not naming the problem, the problem may end up being glossed over, ignored, or worse, simply not recognized or acknowledged by the individual.

Recognizing and naming the problem and appropriately placing responsibility for what is needed to address the problem is paramount to changing the situation. Default behaviours can hinder that process, whereas providing oneself permission to act in ways contrary to such default behaviours can help advance the underlying interests at play.

Discussion

In considering the nature of the four vignettes we have discerned the following perspectives on leadership, self-study, and critical friendship as particularly significant aspects of this research. First, regarding leadership, this study helps to offer new insights into the work of educational leaders in ways that demonstrate more of an inside-out approach, where the collaboration is not used so much to advance the leadership agenda by affecting the actions of an entire group, but to more clearly discern the inner world/landscape/contours (see e.g., Palmer, 1998) of the educational leader and the value of articulating that in ways that can be shared and examined by others.

Sergiovanni (2005) speaks to the power of building communities of learners within schools, but without reasoned attention to the inner world of those responsible for leading educational renewal, the leadership efforts are bound to be incomplete and lacking in important ways. Therefore, such efforts may arise from lack of awareness or from repeated enacting of the same old habits, attitudes and patterns. However, as the vignettes illustrate, personal learning about self and individual leadership patterns is important in developing deeper understandings of, and the need to appropriately respond to, difficult situations from a leader's perspective.

Second, regarding self-study, the research described in this article extends the well-established field of self-study into an important but under-researched aspect of teacher education: leadership at an organisational level. In this respect, the knock-on effects are important because it is easy to discern how the actions of a single leader can create a chain-reaction of varied responses, to various degrees of magnitude, throughout an organisation. Existing literature does not offer much insight into the inner world of educational leaders. Such matters have not been sufficiently documented from a self-study perspective. This study uses the attributes of a particular leader to help illuminate how institutional leadership could benefit from more disciplined and systematic inquiry into the purposes and practices of educational leaders. In that respect, the issue of purpose noted at the outset of the article is central to each of the issues raised for consideration. Being able to articulate more explicitly one's purpose is important for extending beyond individuals and making self-study a catalyst for building on the body of knowledge concerning teaching

and teacher education. Along with that comes the importance and value of relationship; again, the vignettes illustrate that by moving the coaching from a process into a more formalized study, an educational leader was supported in seeing into his own actions and therefore became more informed about being a change manager.

Finally, the study provides new perspectives on the role of critical friendship by making explicit the link to executive coaching. In so doing, we hope that the outcomes of this study are informative not only to senior leaders responsible for managing development and change at an organisational level (in this case a faculty of education), but also to teacher educators who inevitably are influenced by the decisions, actions and processes initiated by their respective leaders. As we have demonstrated in this article, working with a critical friend means questioning, challenging, offering alternative perspectives and pushing beyond one's comfort zone, while also offering support, suggestions, comfort, and advocacy for one's work. In earlier discussions about the study and this article, for example, John had felt that an earlier draft was not worth further developing on the basis that it was not saying enough of relevance to the profession and so did not and could not constitute a contribution to the field. Nathan's feedback and suggestions, however, led to a reworking and development of the central ideas of the article. Perceiving that John had not yet fully come to terms with the circumstances described in his experiences as he seemed defensive about making his reflections public, Nathan sensed that John could benefit from further examination of the underlying issues in his experiences as dean. Through further questioning, critique, and guidance, he was able to help John deal more directly with the circumstances in question, in a manner that was personally useful but also relevant to the broader institutional and professional contexts to which he was contributing.

As educational leaders are ultimately people with the same (or perhaps more) pressures impinging on them regularly and from multiple directions, managing such pressures is complex. Yet few colleagues are available to authentically debrief such experiences due to imbalances in institutional positionality and authority. Nathan was hardly in a position of equal stature to partake in such debriefing, but as a critical friend he was able to redirect John's focus to the task at hand and unpack the experiences in non-threatening yet constructive ways. Nathan's approach as critical friend reflects the actions of the executive coach, who maintained a steadfast focus on John's actions and assumptions as a means of striking an appropriate balance between affirmation and challenge. The focus was not so much on telling John how to do his job or just letting John figure it out on his own. Rather, it was about working together to explore alternative perspectives and uncover challenging terrain concerning default actions and behaviours that could equally have led to a more threatening or confronting experience of coaching.

Overall, then, we contend that critical friendship is ultimately an informed approach to negotiation: discerning underlying interests, joining perspectives, seeking mutually satisfactory options, establishing shared standards of legitimacy and fostering communication and relationships congruent with such aims. The ultimate endpoint of such negotiation is complex. In the case of deaning, it is both a destination and process, a matter of keeping the ship upright while continuing to advance the aims of the larger institution and protecting what is important at the faculty level. Being able to support what is important not only to individuals but also to the larger group, while maintaining an atmosphere of civility among the multitude of competing pressures of the job, is a constant challenge in the organisational context.

Situating the individual within the collective, while searching for unity within diversity, means learning how to set a course of purposes and commitments to which all

are collectively committed. Both deans and teacher educators face issues of authority and institutional positionality that, if left unaddressed, will invariably fester and surface in both direct and indirect manifestations. The interactions with both are consequential, with deans as managers responsible for overseeing budgetary and material resources, and with teacher educators responsible for overseeing assessment regimes, grades, certification processes, and the like. The dean is an executive for the faculty at large, whereas the teacher educator is an executive of sorts for the profession at large. Both have great micro-political significance. Both help shape and inform the efforts to traverse the informal networks of power and control within the organisation. Both are consequential for shaping learning, engagement, cultural support and academic achievement.

Understanding executive coaching through the lens of pedagogy is important in terms of personal professional learning and development. With regard to the nature of critical friendship in the parallel processes of both deaning and teaching, it seems that the relational aspect of authority is particularly relevant. For example, Barnard (1966) outlined in his text, *The Functions of the Executive*, that the ability to accomplish much of anything in institutional and relational contexts hinges less on the executive him/herself and more on the uptake of the executive's ideas by those affected and involved in such circumstances. "Authority rests upon the acceptance or consent of individuals" (p. 164), with four conditions of assent: understanding the communication; believing that decisions are not inconsistent with the purpose of the organisation; believing that decisions are compatible with his/her personal interest as a whole; and the ability to comply with such decisions (p. 165). Occupying a position of authority is not sufficient; the ability to gain the assent of those implicated in such authority is key.

We argue that self-study and critical friendship are two ways of cultivating such assent, ways of doing the difficult inner work of shaping and influencing one's own participation in laying the groundwork for mutual cooperation and action and cultivating an authority of leadership through effective and meaningful interaction, communication, and relationship with relevant others to build a community of learners, leaders and scholars committed to similar goals.

In teacher education classrooms, parallels can be drawn between deans and teacher educators insofar as both are concerned with constructing relationships that are consequential for the community at large. There are challenges associated with seeking mutually satisfactory agreement, deriving legitimacy from mutually recognized sources, and constructing relations of mutual interdependence in which we collectively navigate the tension between our experiences in the immediate environment and other professional contexts. Working from purposes that are jointly constructed, understood and shared is an on-going challenge, yet it is central to constructing more democratic and collaborative leadership approaches in both settings (Brubaker, 2012).

Of perhaps greatest relevance, however, is the essence of being a critical friend. Purpose is key: constructing purposes to which we are collectively committed and building purposeful partnerships from common goals matters, despite being difficult to achieve. Making both purpose and relationship explicit is central to benefiting from a constructive critical friendship. Nevertheless, the imperative is to offer both: confirming and disconfirming data; on-going and continued challenge and support; and, critique and friendship, in order for the research enterprise to genuinely be of value. Critical friendship must be rigorous, systematic and based on evidence. It must contain a combination of both support and challenge or else it will, more likely than not, simply bolster that which has always been the case.

Conclusion

Like teaching, deaning is heavily dilemma-laden. Both learning to be coached and working with a critical friend are ways of becoming better informed about managing those dilemmas by becoming more conscious of one's own behaviours and their impact on decision-making and subsequent actions. Such learning resembles the process of creating opportunities for what Argyris and Schön (1978) described as double-loop learning, where engaging with practice at the big picture level and working and reworking the assumptions that underpin that practice (hence the focus on default behaviours) can lead to meaningful insights into behaviour and therefore new ways of conceptualizing the "why of one's practice".

Coaching and critical friendship can make a difference not just in recognizing and responding to default behaviours, but also in perceiving the impact those behaviours have on others. Doing so matters, particularly for leaders, because "self-study cannot simply be about our lives, our practices, our histories. It must also understand these in relation to and through the lived realities, experiences, and perspectives of those with whom we are involved" (Kuzmic, 2002, p. 233). As Nilsson (2013) suggested, the critical friendship in this study worked in two directions, benefitting the critical friend as well as the self-study researcher. Nathan's questioning and support not only helped John in his deaning, but also gave him, as a teacher educator, greater awareness of the complexity of being a dean and the relevance of executive coaching for being successful in an isolating role.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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