

The next frontier of leadership development: internal, not external

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Executive Summary

This article addresses the evolving challenge of leadership development, arguing that traditional mentoring models designed for long-tenure corporate careers are insufficient for today's mobile workforce and entrepreneurial leaders. The author contends that executive coaching, while growing rapidly into an estimated \$16 billion U.S. industry, often remains too focused on operational decision-making and business execution. The central argument is that a more psychologically informed, therapeutically grounded form of executive coaching represents a new frontier — one that engages executives with existential questions, emotional resilience, and formative psychological patterns. Key examples include founders who struggle with identity enmeshment with their companies, and co-founders experiencing interpersonal conflict rooted in shifting dynamics rather than strategic disagreement. The article draws implicitly on psychotherapeutic traditions, referencing the 'talking cure' and clinical psychotherapy as models. The conclusion frames this approach as potentially valuable for CHROs seeking to develop high-potential candidates or re-engage stalled senior managers, positioning therapeutic coaching as a complement to, rather than replacement for, conventional leadership development.

Key Insights

1. Traditional corporate mentoring models, exemplified by GE and P&G, were designed for long-tenure workforces and are poorly suited to today's mobile, entrepreneurial leadership landscape.
2. Executive coaching has more than doubled since 2016 and is estimated at \$16 billion in the U.S., yet the author argues it remains predominantly focused on business execution rather than deeper psychological development.
3. A therapeutically informed coaching approach — drawing on clinical psychotherapy — is described as engaging leaders with existential questions, mortality awareness, emotional enmeshment with their companies, and non-work sources of meaning.

Practical Takeaways

- CHROs exploring leadership development options may find psychologically informed coaching relevant for both high-potential candidates and senior managers who feel stuck or disengaged.
- Founders and scaling entrepreneurs who lack traditional corporate mentoring structures represent a distinct population for whom therapeutically grounded executive coaching is positioned as particularly applicable.

Critical Analysis

The article is an opinion piece written from the perspective of someone clearly aligned with the therapeutic coaching model being described, though no author affiliation or credential is disclosed in the provided text. The \$16 billion industry figure and the claim that executive coaching 'has more than doubled since 2016' are presented without citation, limiting verifiability. The argument conflates the limitations of traditional mentoring with the value of therapeutic coaching without presenting comparative outcome data. Historical examples (Welch, Watson Sr.) are used illustratively rather than analytically, and their framing is selective. The piece does not engage with potential risks of therapeutic approaches in executive contexts — such as scope-of-practice concerns, confidentiality in organizational settings, or the distinction between coaching and clinical therapy. The tone is persuasive rather than analytical, and the conclusion explicitly invites CHROs to 'explore' the model, signaling an advocacy orientation. No referenced studies or empirical findings are cited to support the therapeutic coaching claims.

Organizational Practice

The article describes historical leadership development practices at General Electric and Procter & Gamble involving internal talent rotation and succession pipelines, and at IBM involving broad organizational exposure for successor development. It also describes the contemporary practice of executive coaching, including an emerging variant that incorporates clinical psychotherapy techniques to address founders' emotional enmeshment with their companies and co-founder interpersonal conflict.

Strategic Implications

The article reflects a broader observable trend toward individualized, psychologically informed leadership development as organizations move away from standardized cohort-based programs. For PMS design, this signals growing interest in developmental frameworks that account for psychological and identity dimensions of leadership performance, not only behavioral or competency-based metrics. The framing of emotional resilience and non-work meaning as leadership development outcomes suggests a potential expansion of what organizations define as 'performance' at the executive level.

Validation Status: passed
