

# Executive Coaching World: A Global Perspective



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## Dissertation Title and Questions:

“A Definition of Executive Coaching and the Linguistic Behaviours of Executive Coaches (in the English language)”

- What is a definition of executive coaching that can be accepted by most English speaking executive coaches?
- Who receives executive coaching?
- What is the relevance and use of different linguistic behaviours by an executive coach practicing executive coaching in the English language?

## Background

- MA Coaching and NLP
- Action learning masters
- Kingston University
- March 2007 - 30<sup>th</sup> April 2009!

### Acknowledgements

Thank you to the amazing people who have inspired me on my journey as a coach, I have learnt so much from you all:

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A big thank-you to Philippe and Aboodi who were fantastic to work with during the trial phase and to the more than 1,800 coaches, including almost 1,200 executive coaches, who took part in this research.

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughters: Rachel, Katherine and Alice; my family and friends, who haven't seen much of me lately; and finally but most especially, and with love, to Alison.

From my first book **Release the star within you** and still my favourite quote, as Thomas Edison said:

*"If we did all the things we are capable of doing, we would literally astound ourselves."*

## Why these subjects?

- Confusion on definition
  - Professional industry
  - How can you research something that cannot be defined?
- Linguistics are important in executive coaching
  - Relatively little written
  - Almost no research

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A new profession has emerged over the last 20 years called executive coaching against a backdrop of massive changes in the way leaders of organisations are expected to lead. Executive coaching has seen rapid growth with an estimated 29,000 executive coaches globally in an industry worth over \$2bn.

Yet executive coaching does not even have a universally accepted definition of what it is, let alone universally accepted standards and as a result, anyone may claim to be an executive coach and deliver any kind of service. There is almost no empirical research of any quality and academics agree that defining and delineating the field is the most urgent task facing the industry as it moves towards professional status.

A definition will answer the fundamental questions “What is it?” and “Who gets it?” However it does not answer “What does an executive coach do?”. The coaching conversation is at the heart of good executive coaching and therefore the effective use of linguistic behaviours is the key skill that an executive coach must possess.

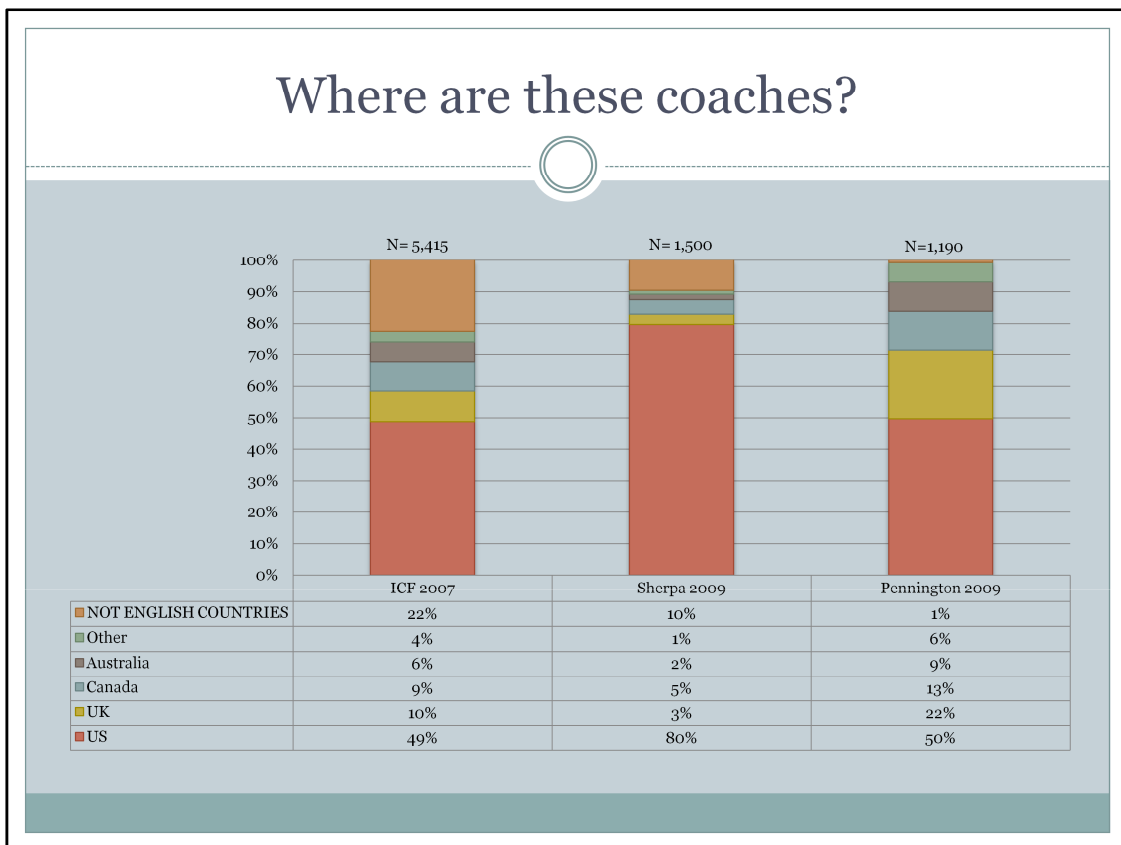
## What did you do?

- Pragmatic approach using mixed methods
  - Lots of statistics
  - Lots of words (6,000)
- Global survey 1,800+ coaches
- Qualified 1,190 as English speaking executive coaches.

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Utilising the latest thinking in social research methods and a pragmatic approach, a concurrent mixed method strategy was used and an on-line survey instrument selected to collect primary data. A frame of 12,500 coaches was identified that included a random set of the population. This frame was invited to take part and 1,190 qualified English speaking executive coaches were selected as the research sample that equates to a margin of error of less than 3% at 95% level of certainty.

## Where are these coaches?

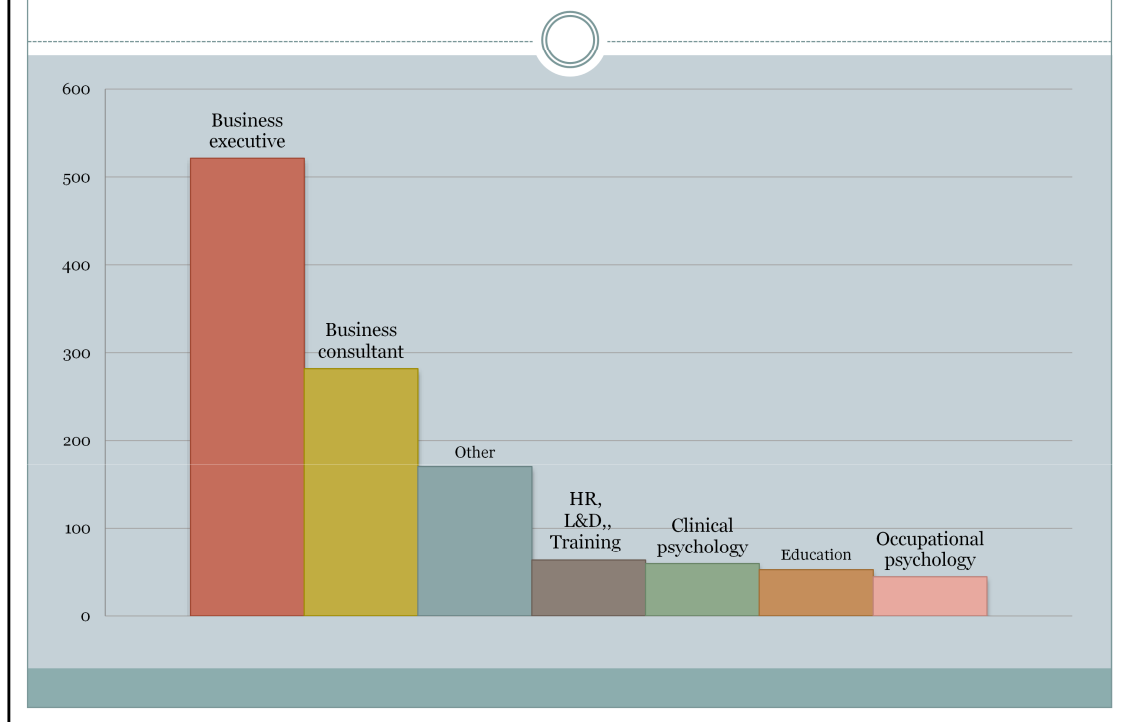


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The Sherpa survey is predominantly US centric research. This research (Pennington 2009) shows a higher UK response than the ICF survey, that may have been caused by high growth in the UK coaching market, but is more likely to be caused by the home country bias of the researcher and the impact of this will be verified in the analysis. (Gray, 2006)

The ICF survey included 58% who listed their coaching speciality as executive coaching but no definition or selection criteria were published. The Sherpa survey included 55% executive coaches and although a definition was published, no selection criteria were indicated. However in an earlier survey the criteria broadly included *executive and business coaches* that if used for the 2009 survey would question the validity of any results claiming to be purely for executive coaching. The sample in this survey was 100% executive coaches as defined in the selection criteria and represents 78% of the global multi-lingual population assuming the ICF demographic profile. (Corbett, 2008)

## What is their background?



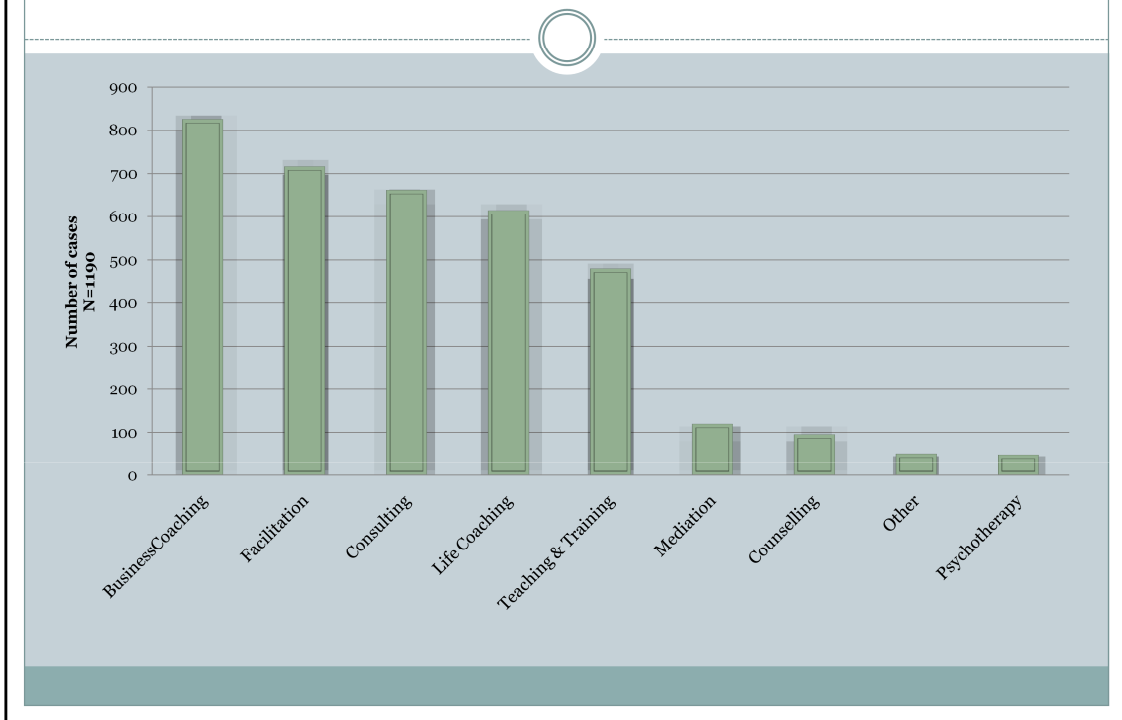
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A significant majority (> 70%) of executive coaches are from a business background: either as an executive, consultant or both; or from HR, L&D or training.

Some former managers do not consider they were senior enough to be called executive, neither rather surprisingly, did some HR Directors but were re-coded that way.

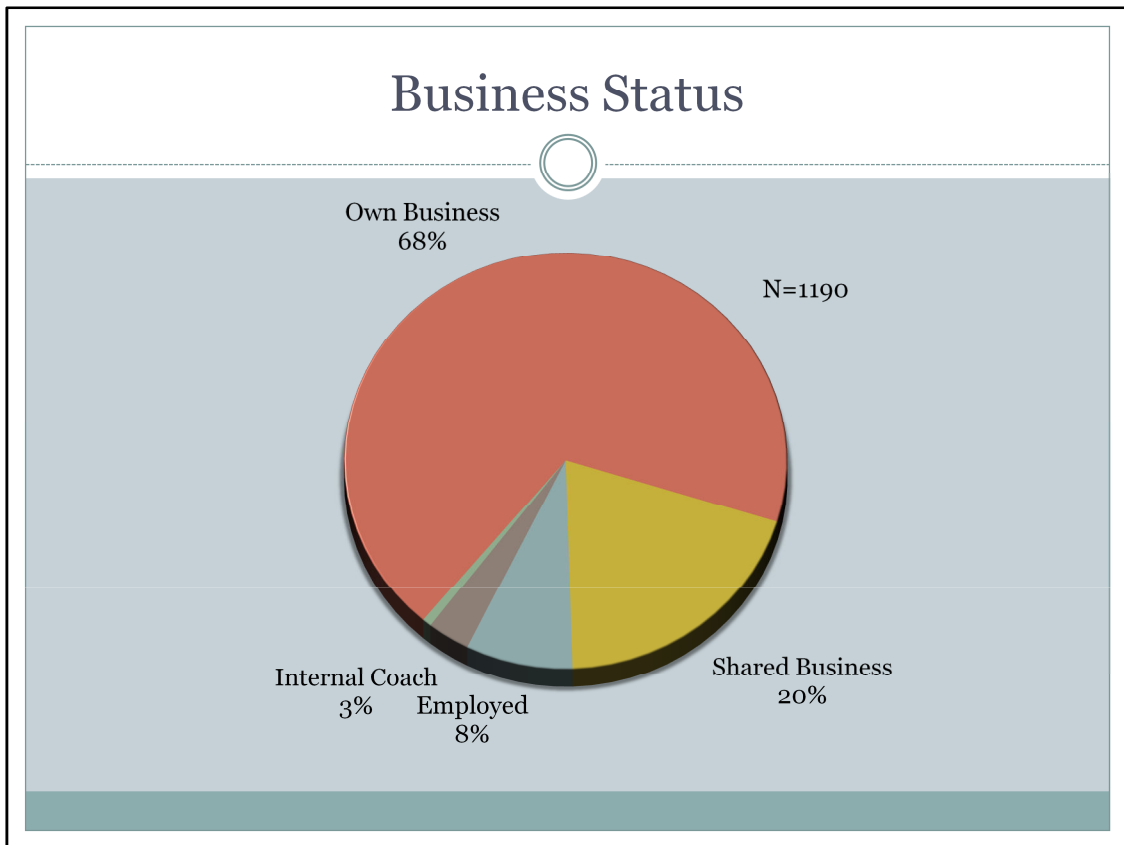
It was noted that the number of executive coaches with either a clinical or occupational psychology background is low (9%). Liljenstrand conducted a survey of 928 US based coaches showing that 18% had occupational psychology, 23% clinical psychology and 50% business **academic** backgrounds. The differences may be caused by coaches following a different career after college, geographic differences, changes in the market since 2003, or that this survey was only a third executive coaches. Further analysis of the survey reveals that a total of 2,361 coaches undertook the survey but most did not meet the criteria for these academic backgrounds. The adjusted results for academic backgrounds are occupational psychology, 7% and clinical psychology, 9%. (Liljenstrand, 2004)

## Executive coaches practice includes ...



Unpublished data

This chart shows what other activities executive coaches take part in. The survey revealed that on average they spend 41% executive coaching and 25% on other coaching (as seen above predominantly Business).

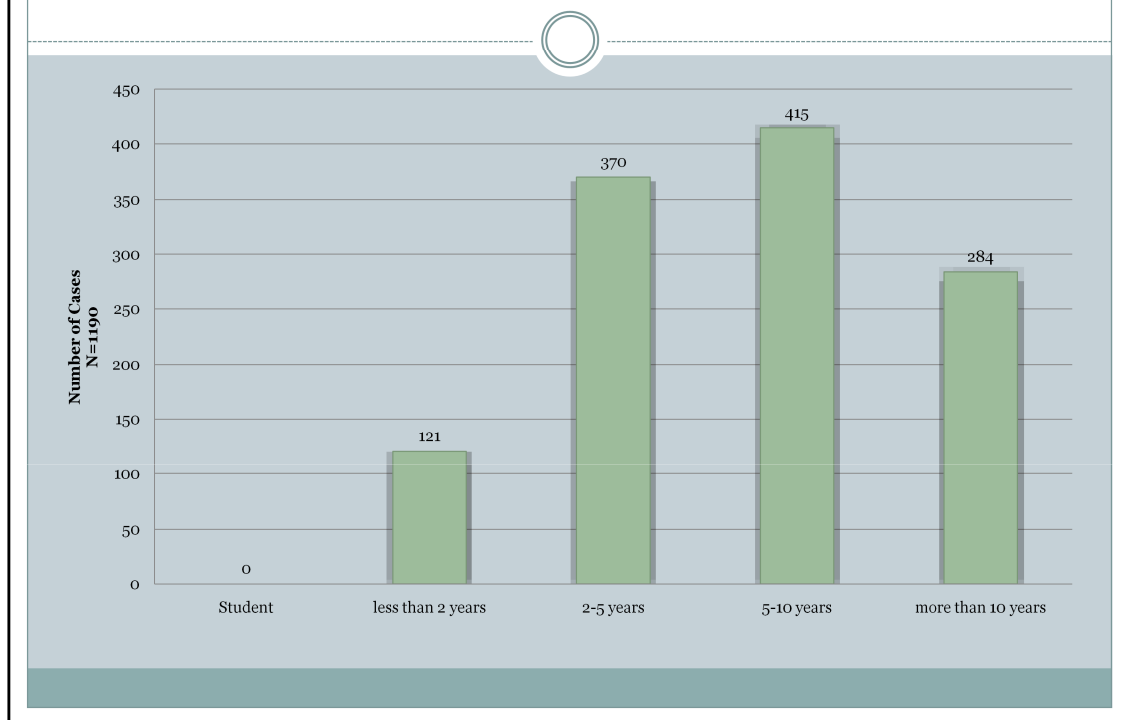


Unpublished data

It was interesting to note that over 80% of this sample ran their own business either singularly or in partnership. I was particularly struck by how few internal coaches there were although maybe not surprised given the “executive context”.



## What is their experience?



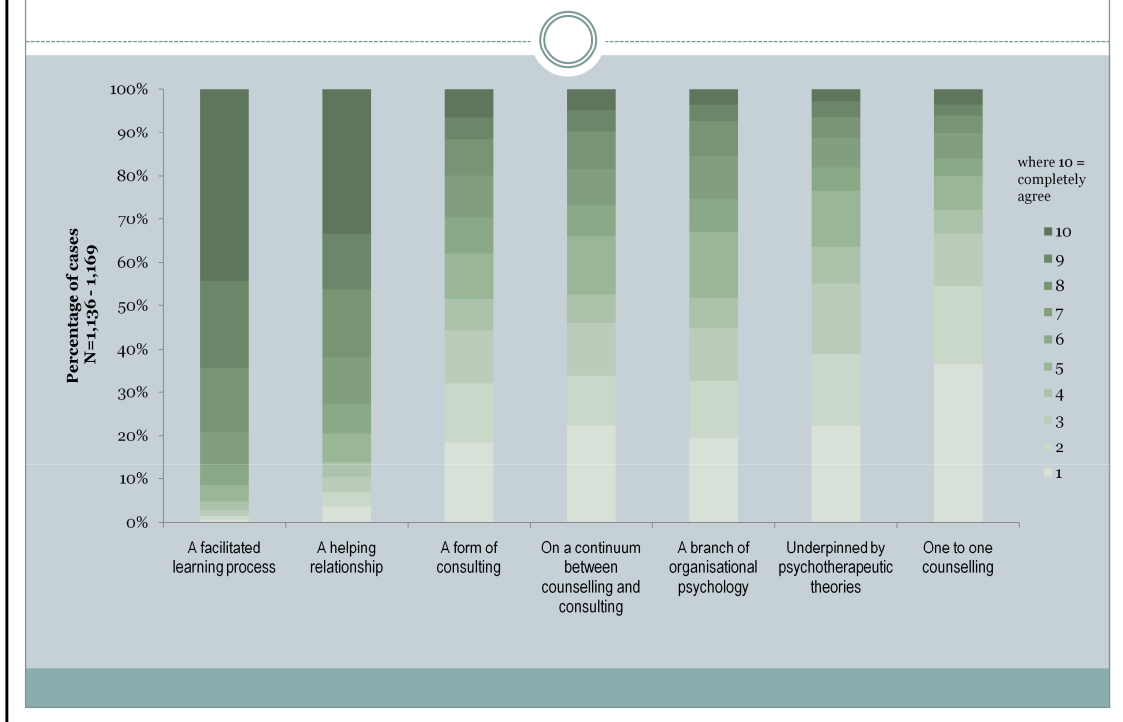
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It is noted from Figure 4-5 that the sample confirms that executive coaching is a growing profession. Using the midpoints of the ranges (and 12.5 years for 10+) the total experience represented in this survey is over 8,000 years.

# A Definition



## What is executive coaching?



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Each shade of colour represents the number of executive coaches that scored each category (i.e. a specific definition) with a particular score; for example around 43% of the cases gave a *facilitated learning process* a score of 10. Overall the chart may be interpreted by looking at the depth of colour; the greater the area of darker colour the more agreement there is with a particular definition; conversely the more lighter the colour the less agreement.

## Facilitated learning process

- Facilitating an executive to
  - to define themselves
  - what they want
  - who they are
  - what they do
  - to realise their own potential
- Facilitating
  - the answers and solutions

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The qualitative analysis shows that most executive coaches are adamant that there should be clear distinction between executive coaching and therapy, counselling and consulting, with clear, very distinct and important differentials between them. Executive coaching is its own discipline with a unique process, different focus and expected outcomes.

Executive coaches are also clear that if therapy or counselling is required, they would refer a client to a professional in those areas.

A few acknowledge that these fields are related and that there may be techniques and skills that can be leveraged between them, although there are mixed views on how useful therapy or psychological frameworks might be in an executive coaching context. One coach suggests that it is much more than psychology and that an executive coach even requires solid knowledge of business, law, regulation and real world economics.

There are also a few coaches who propose that some consulting practices may be used in executive coaching, providing the practice is managed so that the executive coach is explicit when they take on a mentoring role and use their expertise to provide answers.

Some expanded on the concept of the facilitated learning process suggesting that executive coaching is facilitating an executive to define themselves: what they want, who they are and what they do; to realise their own potential and facilitating the answers and solutions.

## A Definition of Executive Coaching



“Executive coaching is a facilitated learning process within a triadic relationship between a professional executive coach (coach), an executive (client) and their organisation (sponsor).

The coach acts as a facilitative change agent, sounding board and challenger primarily working one-to-one with and in support of the client in a collaborative equal partnership within a confidential creative space.

The goal of executive coaching is to create sustained change in the client’s behaviour, skills, beliefs, values, identity, purpose and performance for the benefit of the client and ultimately the triple bottom line of the sponsor.“

(Pennington 2009)

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The first change from the definition proposed in the research question is to use ICF terminology from their code of ethics to make the roles of each party in the triadic relationship; and the connection between this definition and ethics clearer. It also has the benefit of making the definition easier to read. The second change was to add confidential into the description of the coach-client partnership differentiating that relationship further from the others in the triad. Then changes in the flow of the definition make it clearer that the benefit of executive coaching flows from coach to client to sponsor. The addition of extra roles for the coach, concepts such as creative space and a broader benefit statement make the definition richer and more universally acceptable. Finally *purpose* was replaced by *goal* to remove duplicate words. (ICF, 2008)

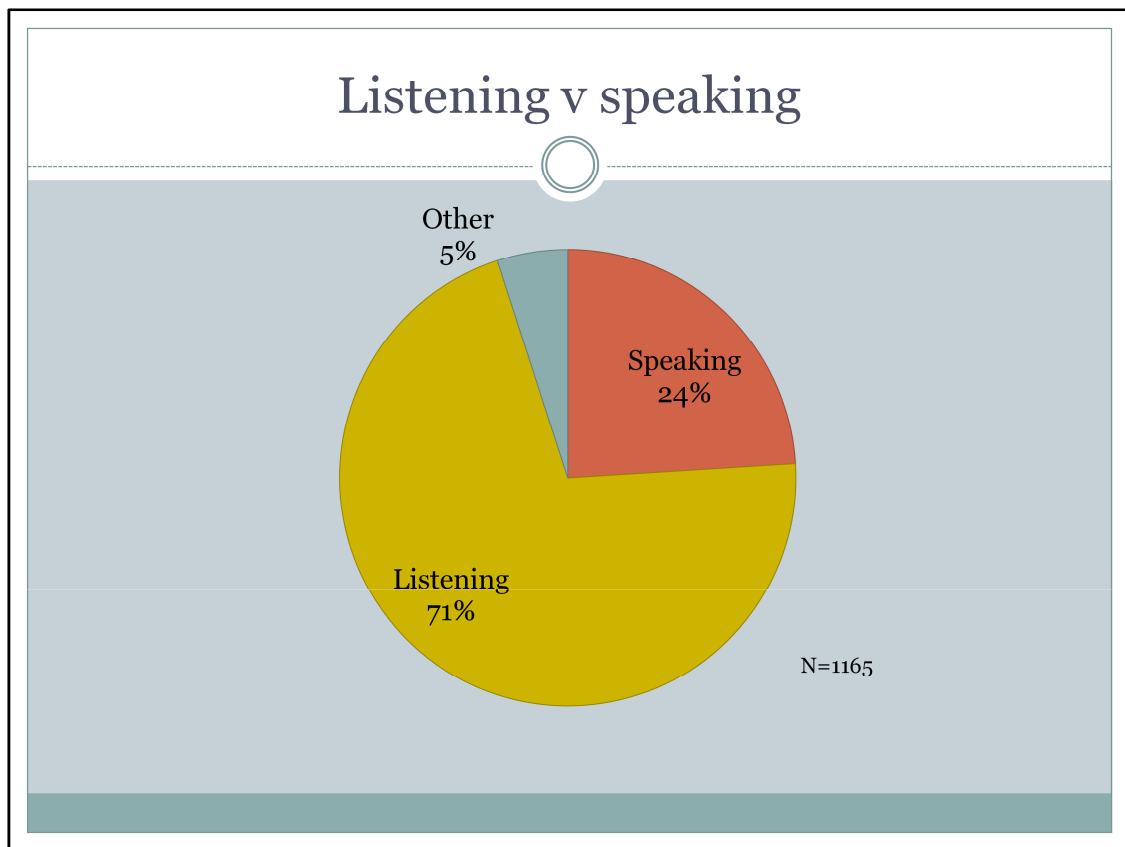
The inclusion of the *triple bottom line* as the ultimate benefit for the sponsor of executive coaching encapsulates the current times. In the introduction, the importance of executive coaching is discussed, its role in ensuring that executives rise to the modern challenge and don’t just say the right words but that they take the right action.

The challenge for executive coaching is to move towards a professional status. It’s perhaps with some synchronicity that at the same time executive coaching was born so was the *triple bottom line*; coined in the early 1990s it too is reaching its adult phase. Just recently a company has announced the world’s first model to measure corporate sustainability called the True Sustainability Index™ that can assess the full *triple bottom line* performance of organisations. (Elkington, 2009; McElroy, 2009)

This delineation and definition of the executive coaching industry must be a key step towards its professional status, and it is proposed that this survey, the largest global executive coaching survey undertaken so far, represents a significant step towards that.

# Linguistic landscape





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Executive coaches do spend considerably more of their time listening to their clients. Other than speaking, silence is also a factor in the linguistic makeup of executive coaching. Within speaking, it is the least directive activities that get the highest ratings for both relevance and use. These behaviours neatly fall into a number of sets that together with the qualitative feedback on what other speaking behaviours may be relevant in executive coaching suggest a new model of linguistic behaviour.

## What is other

- **Silence**
  - the centre of power in conversation
  - holding the space for awareness
- **Laughter!**
  - natural exclamations

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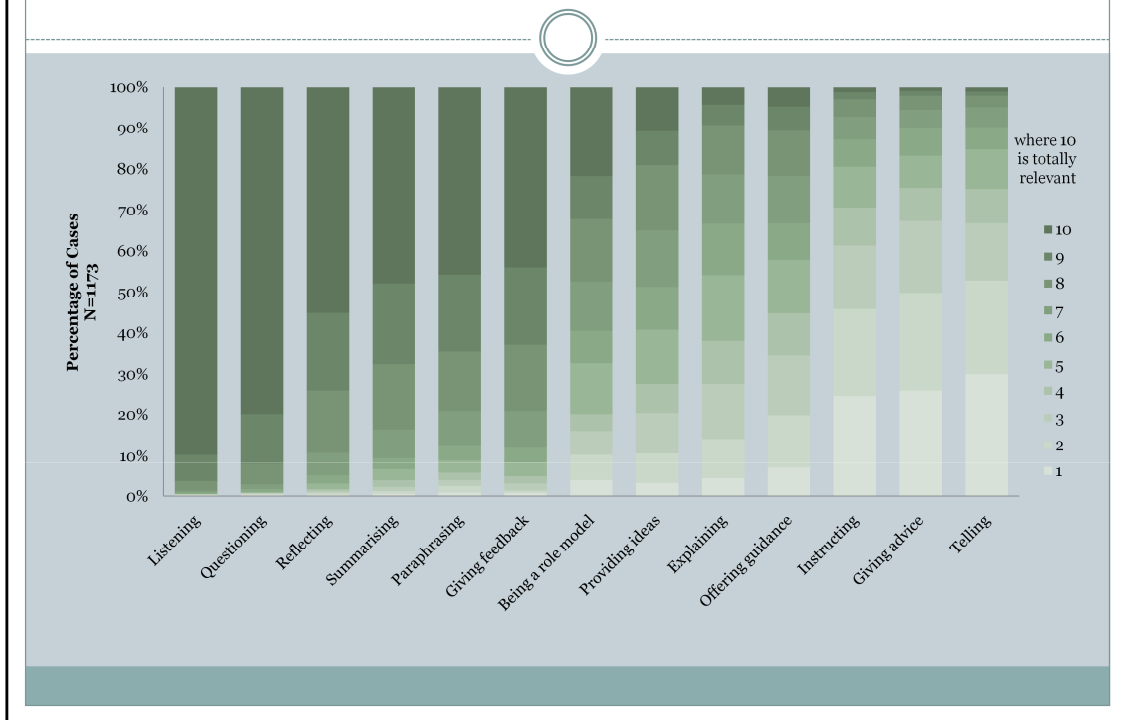
The qualitative data received from 604 cases showed that many executive coaches were eager to provide further distinctions within the category of speaking; in particular to separate questioning from speaking. A number of cases described *other* as non-linguistic behaviours such as thinking, observing, note taking and using somatic processes. The most frequently occurring descriptive that could be considered a linguistic behaviour was *silence*.

Silence is “the centre of power in conversation” and “holding the space for awareness”; being silent isn’t a passive act but a critical, albeit small, piece of the linguistic makeup. Although just over half of the sample answered zero for *other time*, about 5% may also have included silent time as listening. Practitioners have recently begun to suggest that silence could be an important linguistic behaviour for an executive coach. (Angus, 2008; Leedham, 2008)

Two executive coaches identified “laughing” as a distinct behaviour. It would be interesting to see if there are other linguistic but non-verbal behaviours that play an important yet unconscious role in executive coaching.



## Relevance of linguistic behaviour



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The chart is interpreted by looking at the depth of colour; the greater the area of dark colour, the greater the relevance of the linguistic behaviour. In order to make the chart easy to read it has also been sorted in order of most relevance from left to right (based on the mean score).

## In more depth ...

- listening
  - “non negotiable key to success”
- questioning
  - what coaching is all about
- other behaviours suggested
  - Acknowledging
  - Challenging
  - Brainstorming
  - Silence
  - Non verbal language
  - Sharing Stories

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Confirming the quantitative analysis, executive coaches say *listening* is the “non-negotiable key to success” and together with *questioning* is what coaching is all about. There is also a distinction between listening for what is said and listening for what is not said, i.e. being aware of non-verbal clues, moods and the big picture.

*Questioning* is such a versatile linguistic behaviour, one coach even suggests that ideas and advice can be evoked from the client using them, which as Carey & Mullan observe is a very Socratic approach. However most coaches prefer to use clean, powerful and open questions, some referring to them as inquiring, requesting, asking, enquiring, wondering or simply being curious. (Carey & Mullan, 2007)

*Questioning* is a very powerful tool and some coaches may not even realise the extent to which they use it. One executive coach provided the new descriptions of clarifying, challenging and sourcing; then proceeded to give three examples that were all questions: “What does that really mean?”, “Do you really believe that?” and “What’s behind that statement?” In conclusion questioning and listening are indeed the core linguistic behaviours of executive coaching.

### **From the conclusion:**

What are the most relevant and used linguistic behaviours for an executive coach? The simplest answer is *listening* and *questioning*. This research confirms that they are indeed the core behaviours. Goldberg suggests that coaching is 85% questioning. (Goldberg, 1999) This research provides evidence that linguistically executive coaching is 70% listening but that the rest is predominantly questioning.

## Relevance of linguistic behaviour by location



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This chart shows that executive coaches living in the US (shown in black) give higher average ratings to the more directive linguistic behaviours of *being a role model*, *providing ideas*, *explaining*, *offering guidance*, *instructing*, *giving advice* and *telling*.

Kruskal-Wallis tests confirm that the differences seen are statistically significant. Further analysis using Mann Whitney tests show that executive coaches living in the US rate the relevance of certain linguistic behaviours higher than the ratings from certain other countries.

Specifically executive coaches living in the US rate the relevance of *telling* and *instructing* in executive coaching statistically significantly higher than all other countries; *giving advice* and *providing ideas* higher than all other countries except Canada; *offering guidance* higher than all other countries except Australia; and *explaining* higher than Canada.

### From the conclusion:

The final conclusion is that on average there is global universal agreement on the hierarchy of the relevance and use of linguistic behaviours in the practice of executive coaching in the English language, regardless of location. However there are some executive coaches who have very different views on the relevance and use of linguistic behaviours that were at odds with the vast majority.

It might be concluded that what they are delivering is more akin to consulting or mentoring. As was discovered in the literature review there are some that do not delineate between coaches and consultants. The 50 Top Executive Coaches “are world class advisors ... who could be called both coaches and consultants” (Morgan et al., 2005)

Alternatively it has been suggested that those with the most experience by mastering the art of executive coaching find an effective way to use directional activities in their practice. Or could it be that the industry has changed and has left behind its roots of directional activity. Ives confirms this but also suggests that the industry is again becoming more directional, this research has found no evidence to support that theory. The answer to his question “may a coach also tell?” is yes but only when s/he stops coaching. (Ives, 2008)

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# Thank you



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The conclusions are that a new definition of executive coaching based on this research that delineates and defines the profession will be universally acceptable; that there is universal agreement on the hierarchy of the relevance and use of linguistic behaviours in the practice of executive coaching; the most relevant and used linguistic behaviours for an executive coach are *listening* and *questioning*; and that a new model called *The Linguistic Landscape Of Executive Coaching* will be a valuable asset to practitioners, academics and teachers of executive coaching.