Episode 98 What is an executive coach\_

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**SPEAKERS**

Jo Wheatley, Zoe Hawkins

**Zoe Hawkins** 00:03

The Coaching Crowd podcast is for compassionate courageous leaders, HR professionals and high achievers, people who are passionate about helping others to find alignment in their lives through coaching, and do a thinking of training and developing as a coach. Hello, and welcome to the coaching crowd podcast with me, Zoe Hawkins and my friend and co host, Jo Wheatley.

**Jo Wheatley** 00:27

Hi, everybody. Welcome to today's episode. Today, the topic we're going to focus on is the question of what is an executive coach. And the reason that we are debating an episode to this is that when people come and talk to us about training to be a coach, and they look at the different options, quite often that there's an intimidation around this word executive, and what does it mean? And could I do that? So we're going to unpick that for you today?

**Zoe Hawkins** 00:53

Yeah, I suppose starting with what is an executive coach, your classic definition is going to be a coach that works in the corporate sector, with people at a senior leadership and executive position. So these would be CEOs, their team, depending on the size of the organisation, you know, the next team down, so you're looking at the top tier of the organisation, that's your classic executive coach. Yet in reality, it can be many more things like that. So in our qualification, the ILM specifies that when you do the level seven, you need to work with senior and executive clients. But the definition of what that means is actually quite broad. So it talks about having significant responsibility for people, projects, resources. So if you are somebody who's an individual contributor, and you're a programme manager, and you're managing a budget of, I don't know, let's say 60 million pound build, and you are in a matrix team, where you are coordinating the resources, from a coaching qualification perspective, that is a client who may qualify as somebody who is at that senior and executive level. So I think there's like, what does it look like in reality, and we'll talk more about that, and what does it look like, by definition, so by definition, it's quite flexible in terms of it for the qualification, but as a classic executive coach, those are the people who are working in organisations at a senior level,

**Jo Wheatley** 02:21

you'll see people describe themselves as leadership coaches, and, you know, that's often a term that's used interchangeably with executive coaching, on and of course, you could say that everybody is a leader, you know, in some degree or not, but in that case, it'd be looking at people that, you know, again, manage people budgets, or projects. So, you know, our encouragement is to, is to not be intimidated by the use of a word. So often this comes up, if we've got people inquiring about training to be a coach, who haven't occupied a position that they would identify as being an executive level. Yeah, if you take salary and I and our current roles as co founders, or CO CEOs of our business, we don't employ lots of people, but we would still meet that criteria of being at an executive level. So even though we would consider ourselves to be in that, you know, small business category, we would still meet that,

**Zoe Hawkins** 03:25

I think the other thing that puts people off from executive coaching, is this impression that it's somehow different, you know, that executives are a different beast, you know, and require a different thing. And, and I do think that that is fueled by an out of date version of what the working world looks like, I think, when you speak to, depending on which organisations but when you speak to people who hold those positions today, what you will find is, they are human beings, first and foremost, and role second, and coaching for me is always about the person. It's not about the role. You know, I remember working with somebody who'd be appointed to a very senior role in a very large organisation. And all the things we were working on was around confidence, imposter syndrome, you know, wanting to be the very best leader that they could be. And I would say that is classically typical of many other senior leaders, because I think the thing that happens when you reach an executive position is it starts to get really lonely. There are less people looking out for your development, or less people looking out to support you. You sort of need to learn to find a support for yourself and ask for what you need. And and that's not always easy, because that hasn't been the journey today. So coaching tends to be very much person centred at an executive level. It's not about how do I make this strategic decision and create these strategic plans for my board meeting in the next couple of weeks? Yes, there's probably a flavour of that. Certainly the coaching that I do with senior leaders and executives tend to be more about who, who they are, and and what they want to develop both personally and professionally.

**Jo Wheatley** 05:21

Yeah, I think it often triggers that, within coaches, this idea of, you know, of mentoring and the confusion between coaching and mentoring, you're not there to mentor, you're there to coach them. And that's about bringing your coaching expertise, I think the great thing about doing a senior and executive level qualification is it forces you out of your comfort zone, or for a lot of people that would be out of their comfort zone, to coach people that perhaps they don't identify with themselves, or, or maybe they haven't had a great experience of coaching or not coaching, but I've seen your leaders in organisations that they've worked with, or they have been a senior, or executive leader themselves. And actually, they're leaving, because they want to come out and, you know, and coach people and be out of that environment. So the thought of going back into it can be a bit daunting, but you summed it up so well, you know, we coach people, we don't coach the role.

**Zoe Hawkins** 06:17

I think there is however, an acknowledgement of as a, as an executive coach, you do need a significant depth of understanding around coaching and dynamics on that systemic lens. Because these senior leaders and executives they are holding often the culture of organisations in their hands, or the culture of teams in their hands. And there's, there's dynamics with that. So coaching, can often become thinking space, you know, creating spaces for executives, who are largely very, very busy doing the doing and flitting from meeting to meeting, creating a bubble of calm within, you know, the week or the month, or however frequently the coaching is to be able to explore how do I think and feel about these situations? You know, what, what am I not seeing? What do I need to notice? What does that mean for me? And now, what am I going to do about it? So it's not always? Well, it is not about I need to do this presentation helped me prepare, like, it's much more it's deeper rooted, thinking space. So I guess I would describe it as often when you work in that senior leadership and executive space, which for me, is really invigorating, because every session is, you know, as creative and different.

**Jo Wheatley** 07:42

When I, when I'm teaching CEOs and senior executive leaders, I find there's a blend of, you know, the deep personal stuff, and also the practical stuff. And we look at how the two sort of intertwine. So do think that there is a need to be to have an agility as a coach, with all clients, and in a different maybe a slightly different way, you know, with people dealing with more complex situations. And I think you'll often find, if you're coaching at that level, that it will be because somebody is in transition, they're either brand new enrol, or fairly new enrol, or they've picked up an additional layer of responsibility. I think when they've been in place for a long time, it's often will come about then as a result of perhaps a team development or leadership development kind of team programme, maybe for the whole senior and executive level team. So think, well, a lot of people find coaching at that level is that the coaches are quite nervous themselves. You know, they might have never had coaching before and be showing up, like, like another Kochi word around being nervous about how do we do this? What do you expect from me? What can I expect from the process? And you know, sharing with you impostor syndrome, like, you know, how have I got here? Am I capable of doing a fulfilling this role and doing things a lot first, for the same time. So, you know, very similar to coaching other clients. So I think it's sometimes when people think about a senior and executive level coach, and you're imagining people have been in these roles for a very long time, you know, that, rather than those people that are new into those roles, and perhaps the individuals have kind of, they didn't even plan to get into those positions. And all of a sudden, they find themselves there, and they're trying to make sense of it and work out, do I want to stay here and, you know, what does this mean for my life? Often it's around balancing work and home, because the responsibilities have increased so much, and is that something they can manage want to how can they do that? What does it mean for other for other relationships? So we've talked in other podcast episodes about the need to challenge because often, when people are working at a senior and executive level, the people around them feel less confident challenged, because is the power that they can wield in those positions. And so, you know, as a coach, coaching them, you know, objectively, outside of their current situation, they may, you may find that your clients at that level want you to bring more challenge than you might be used to bringing or, you know, want you to bring more radical candour to the conversation, they don't want you to fluff it up, be soft and gentle with it, they want you to tell them, you know, maybe exactly how how it is, and you'll need to work out is that is that your style of coaching? Is that something you feel comfortable doing? And maybe it won't, maybe they won't be your clients, I think this is another important thing to say. So sometimes people feel that when they choose that level of coaching, it means that they would need to coach at that level for the rest of their coaching career or life. And of course, it doesn't post qualification you choose to coach whoever you want to, it gives you

**Zoe Hawkins** 10:57

the skills to be able to and the skills that you gain to be able to coach senior executive clients will make you a better coach for whoever you choose to coach because of the psychodynamics that you need to understand. Conflict is something that comes up a lot when working in a senior and executive space. And that can be both inner conflict and also external conflict or managing conflicts within within teams. You know, you were talking there around, you know, the person, right. And it's not just the role. I think what I noticed for many people in executive roles is they don't see themselves as this executive and whatever executive even means, right? They are mom, or father or husband, wife, spouse, partner, brother, sister, daughter, son, like they are not executive, like they have their life happening behind the scenes, like there's a role that they inhabit. And they forget that they could be really intimidating to people, like a couple of teams down from the position they have, because they've grown through their career, and they find themselves in this executive role. And sometimes the work you do as an executive is about identity. It's about actually who Who am I as, as this leader, like, I hold this, this seat at this table, I don't know what that means. For me, I don't know what that means for who I certainly don't know what it means for, you know, the people that some sometimes they identify more with those in the team below them, because that's how they still sort of see themselves, like their professional maturity hasn't necessarily developed in that same pace as what their career has. So when they think and think of themselves that imposter often come through because they haven't fully embraced the shoes that they now sort of step into. It's really interesting and fascinating work. And, of course, everything we're talking about here that you may do with an Executive leader, you could also do with anybody else in any other role. It's, you know, executives aren't like a special breed of people that have unique problems. And there are differences, working with, with executives, that hold these positions, as we talked about having that systemic lens and understanding the full context that these people work within,

**Jo Wheatley** 13:27

shall we talk about ego? Yeah. So sometimes I think coaches can use the term, you know, I'm an executive coach. Because there may be an ego element attached, it's almost like worn as a protective layer, or a way to say, people will assume or they must be a really good coach, then if they're an executive coach. And also, if you're coaching senior and executive leaders, there may be some ego that you need to sort of overcome in order to be able to really make contact with the individual, and really be able to, to do achieve what it is that the individual wants to achieve. So I think it's worth researching around that and considering that in your coaching, and what will that look like? How will you show up? What is it what did these things mean for you?

**Zoe Hawkins** 14:20

It's a great challenge. And I guess that ego that we may have within ourselves, calling ourselves an executive coach is maybe a way to feel equal to the clients that we are coaching that I am, I am worthy enough to coach executors because I am an executive coach, you know, on our programmes, we teach you to be amazing coaches, like brilliant at what you do, so that you can apply that to the clients that you feel called to serve. Now, if they happen to be clients within organisations within leadership positions, then you're going to get the skills to do that. And you could as Jay said, You could take the level seven programme to apply everything you learn to be able to be the absolute very best coach that you can be for the clients that you want to serve. It's really about the depth of your skill, the depth of your knowledge, the breadth of your experience as, as a coach that will enable you to grow and develop your, your skills and your experience to work with clients in different areas.

**Jo Wheatley** 15:28

The differences in level five and level seven programme in terms of the content, so level five is you know, it's a qualification and being an effective and effective coach. And then the level seven has the senior and executive title in it, it's really about the psychodynamics that can exist in the relationship between you and your coaching clients, it's about an advanced level of goal setting is being able to draw on more of the somatics, getting more creative in your coaching, getting more agile as a as a coach, and also sharing with you additional supervision kind of reflection models, because if you, you may find yourself more challenged in some of these spaces. And so it's about equipping you to be able to to learn and be agile in that way. So that you can, you know, meet your client where your client is, is that and be able to bring that another dimension into your coaching. So it's we don't have a session on so what is an executive coach, but we do help you to understand what are the different levels of coaching competencies. So when you think about the levels of accreditation that you have, that you have with the coaching bodies, whilst they have the set, competency frameworks, the evidence, so how you demonstrate that and what's required for each of those, those levels, obviously gets more challenging as you go because the more hours you've got that are partnered with additional professional development, so you're developing your knowledge and your skills and your experience as a coach. Yeah, and that level seven is accredited if we take the European mentoring and coaching counsellors accredited at senior practitioner level, so it's the third out of the four tiers. And the level five is accredited at the practitioner level, which is the second tier. And the level three is accredited at foundation level, which is that first level of accreditation, that top level, the fourth level is Master Practitioner level, which is the level that Zoe and I are at, but that takes you can't go in at that level of accreditation. Personally, I

**Zoe Hawkins** 17:38

love working with senior leaders and executives, like it's, it's really fulfilling, I think, because I approached the coaching from a whole person perspective, you also know the sheer impact that they can have on people's lives, you know, so when they step into their brilliance as a leader, and they work on their personal development, the ripple effect is enormous in terms of what that coaching can can achieve for both that person and also the people who work within their space and their organisation. And it's just really fulfilling and exciting work. The challenges that they bring can often be very complex and multifaceted. And in so many layers to to explore, and your organization's are fascinating if you if you have a you know, a learner streak, as you know, Jo and I do part of coaching opens your eyes to all the different cultures of organisations that are out there and the different things that are happening, it's I don't know, for me, I think it's like a way to be connected to the corporate world and not need to be in the corporate world. At the same time, I've always enjoyed, like, the life within like organisations and I have that fascination to, to learn, obviously, you need to stay away from story because it's not about the story, but the clients bring the stories and you catch the impact. And, and that is, for me, it's really fascinating, fulfilling work.

**Jo Wheatley** 19:11

And it's a it's a privilege, isn't it to be able to do that. And also in some cases, it's opening up people's eyes to a coaching approach that they may not be familiar with. And then that can create a kind of a cascade through the organisation and, you know, we care passionately about people's experiences in the workplace because people you we spend so much time at work, whether that's physically in work or sat at your desk, working remotely, you're still working within the kind of the culture of your organisation. And so for us, it's very much about supporting, being able to make that contribution and I love the challenge. I love to be challenged as a coach by my clients, you know, really do and I think there's often a challenge often at coaching at a senior and executive level where they don't really want coaching. You know, they want they want to pull other things from you and there's I enjoy the dance of coaching clients at that level, you know, with the challenge and, and that alignment between their emotional experience and the strategy that they have responsibility for. So that, that the intellectual and emotional challenges that go hand in hand. So yeah, as you say often enables you to still feel connected to that corporate world without the politics, which is a lot. It's a reason a lot of people leave the, you know, leave that space in the first place so that there is a freedom to it. And I love having those little insights into lots of different organisations as well the variety of it, rather than when you work in one organisation, and you just have that insight or from the few organisations that you may have worked with, it's very, I guess, a millennial approach to work, isn't it. And I always changed roles every couple of years in my career when I was working in organisations. And so coaching for me is a continuation of that so exciting when you get to have that little window into a new organisation to understand some of the context in which the individual or the coachee is operating in. So I love to learn as much as we're not there to explore the story context is important too.

**Zoe Hawkins** 21:16

So you don't need to do the level five. To do the level seven, you can embark on the level seven senior executive coaching qualification from the outset, where you have some experience of coaching and leading or guiding and mentoring others. So put it back on the list and if you're still unsure which coaching qualification is right for you either reach out to us and we can set up a call with one of our team to help you decide where you can do our quiz which you can find at my coaching course.com.

**Zoe Hawkins** 21:58

Thank you for listening to the coaching crowd podcast with Zoe Hawkins and Jo Wheatley. We'd love for you to join our inclusive community to learn and grow in the coaching space.

**Jo Wheatley** 22:07

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