

The Executive and the Unexamined Life

By Rashmi Ripley

You work hard and have done well for yourself. Many hold you up as a role model and a success. But, internally, you experience pressure to keep the image of success going. Often you feel like a fraud, thanks to a negative inner voice that's constantly evaluating you and your worth. Perhaps you feel trapped in your current position, and aren't sure whether you should stay or get out? Or, maybe you have a tough time creating a work-life balance, and you're not happy with either area of your life.

If any of these issues sound familiar, have you considered seeking out a life coach or an executive coach?

The False Separation Between Work Problems and Personal Problems

We all spend a lot of time trying to live two lives. We have both a work life and a home life. But, this is a false separation. If you're having problems at home with your significant other, it inevitably bleeds into your work life. If your work life is stressful and unfulfilling, naturally, you bring those problems home with you.

Being an executive doesn't make you immune from the everyday problems that all of us experience. As an adult development coach, one of the first things I help my clients uncover is how work life and personal life are interconnected. They begin to understand that true potential cannot be fully realized until they learn how they may be at the mercy of an antiquated internal guidance system that may not have been upgraded since middle school! The executive who is hungry for coaching is often wrestling with a whole slew of unexamined assumptions and a faulty decision-making apparatus.

Unlocking Your Full Potential by Unblocking Your Path

Many of us have mental blocks that keep us from fully realizing our dreams and goals. For example, consider Jessica's situation:

She is a busy, driven CTO at a startup looking to secure its next round of funding. She is also a single mom of an active five-year old girl. Jessica constantly feels burdened. Jessica believes she isn't giving enough time to either her daughter or her company. She feels guilty when at work with her child in daycare. Yet Jessica also feels guilty when she takes her daughter to the movies on a Friday afternoon, instead of putting in hours at the office. Jessica feels like a failure as a mother, *and* worries that she's falling behind in her ambitious career goals.

Clearly Jessica needs help. She isn't two people—one with work problems and one with personal problems. Jessica is one person — an executive and a mother — and thus the issues associated with *both* of her roles need to be addressed.

As Socrates so wisely said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Adult development coaches walk shoulder to shoulder with their clients, supporting each one as they examine their lives — lives that are filled with assumptions, beliefs, and opinions about self, others and self-worth. Examining assumptions and resulting issues can be a daunting task to take on alone.

In Jessica's case, as she began to clean off her own lens, she was able to observe her inner operating system and decision making apparatus. A few of the assumptions that were leading Jessica by the nose were “I am responsible for other people's feelings and happiness,” and “people have to like me or else it endangers my job security.” Once she broke free of these assumptions, she began to make different decisions about work and life.

Inner development takes time. Transforming our habits and patterns is no small task, but the rewards of doing so are immeasurable. Deciding that you want to work with a coach is a big step in the right direction toward inner development. It's the next step of choosing a coach that will best suit your needs that can sometimes trip you up. Depending on who you talk to, or what you read about various types of coaches, you may wonder which one is really right for me? Much like the fact that both your work life and personal life are intertwined, it can be hard to distinguish between life coaches and executive coaches; there is a great deal of overlap in what they do.

In my experience, the label of personal coach versus executive coach often simply comes down to the arena in which you ask them to assist you. While some coaches clearly differentiate themselves as just one or the other, some designate themselves as an adult development coach. The way I see it, in its simplest form, coaching is about relationships, assumptions and ways of being — with self and others. A good coach is someone who is able to mirror to you your inner subjective world, because that inner world understanding, in turn, drives how you make sense of the outer world. Whether it is in the boardroom or at home, a coach can help a client discover, for example, that their stress comes from a reluctance to ask for help so as not to appear vulnerable. Executive coaches may more easily understand the context of corporate politics or pressures unique to a startup, but what matters most is their skill at helping you map out and navigate your inner world.

To bring it full circle, experienced coaches who understand the value of inner work are all about unlocking your potential through inquiry, discussion, planning, and accountability. Most of the time the emotional and mental blocks that are holding you back in your career are the same ones keeping you from finding joy and fulfillment in your personal life. Working with a skilled coach, whichever type you

choose, will help you in *all areas* of your life — because the division of your work and personal lives is really just a false separation.