

**Executive Coaching in Practice:  
A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis**

**By**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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## CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Susan Lynn Hanley, declare that this thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This research is supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program.

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*14 November 2019*

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## **Abstract: Executive Coaching in Practice - A Descriptive Phenomenological Analysis**

Executive coaching is a practice used in organisations to facilitate the learning and development of individual leaders and managers or those preparing for leadership roles. It has been identified as among the top five of leadership development practices in organisations. However, executive coaching lacks definitional clarity and there are calls for more contextually relevant research. My study responded by posing the research question ‘what is executive coaching’ and seeking an answer through a working philosophy of phenomenological descriptive analysis, an approach which is consistent with the philosophy of its founder, Edmund Husserl, rather than those popular approaches which solicit accounts of the experiences of individual research subjects. Three coaching conversations facilitated by experienced executive coaches were recorded. These conversations occurred mid-cycle in a sequence of authentic paid coaching conversations. Lifeworld descriptions of these conversations were constructed and three themes identified in each case. The themes were explored in the Husserlian method of zigzagging between the empirical world and use of a reasoning process which identifies phenomenological essences. The themes identified were relationality (between coach and client), teleology and conation, narrative identity, sensemaking, laughter, mindfulness, habit, emotions and values. In respect to identifying essence as that which identifies something as the very kind of thing it is, I was unable to justify laughter and mindfulness as essences of executive coaching, while the other themes were confirmed.

In concluding the study, I employed the practical reasoning of phenomenology in incorporating both reason and ethics in making a judgement of what executive coaching is and ought to be, oriented to the achievement of the highest practical good.

I have found executive coaching to be an integrated learning and development process connected to performance in the workplace. It is enacted in a dialogic relationship of high challenge and high support to which clients bring their whole selves in order to achieve self-identified goals or purposes. It is an experiential, reflexive sensemaking activity that generates personal awareness and insight while supporting behavioural



change in the will to voluntary action that is oriented to the 'good', the best that is available and is ethical at the personal, relational and organizational levels of the workplace and beyond.