

MEETING OF MINDS

Does the end result of a coaching encounter really give the full picture? Do participants even see the outcome in the same way? Erik de Haan and his team get under the skin of the coaching conversation to discover its critical moments

What really makes a difference in the coaching conversation?

Rather than just finding out about classical outcomes – the end result or effectiveness on a linear scale – we, the Ashridge critical moments study group, wanted to learn about more relevant outcomes – those achieved within the sessions as they varied from conversation to conversation.

In this enquiry into executive coaching in action, we looked as closely as possible at these most private and intimate conversations from the perspectives of the two learning partners.

We collected the views of 21 clients and 21 coaches directly after their coaching conversations. We asked them to describe the key moments in those sessions, their own roles in those moments, their partners' roles, and how they viewed the impact of those moments on the future.

We found a lot of overlap in terms of subject matter – clearly, the two partners were reviewing the same conversations. At the same time the stories and emphases of coach and client seemed completely different, reminding us of Akira Kurosawa's famous 1950 Japanese movie *Rashomon*, where four participants retell a single event and come up with

The research team

Erik de Haan (pictured) is programme director of Ashridge's master's in executive coaching. The Ashridge critical moments study group now consists of De Haan, Charlotte Sills and Andrew Day of the Ashridge Centre for Coaching; Colin Bertie, of Cranfield School of Management; and Monica Stroink and Heather Reekie, MSc students in occupational psychology at Birkbeck College. In 2006-07 the team included Eddie Blass of the University of Hertfordshire.



equally plausible but totally different accounts.

Standout moments

For a number of years we have tried to get under the skin of the coaching session. We have examined 327 "moments of coaching" – descriptions of moments experienced as somehow critical or significant – from colleagues and clients.

We started in 2002 by asking less experienced executive coaches about critical and "exciting"¹ moments in their work.

These coaches almost exclusively reported doubts – about being a coach, the coach's contribution, the outcome and the moments they reported. So we turned to more experienced coaches.

In 2005 we asked colleagues with at least eight years' experience what they considered critical or "significant" moments in their practices.²

Interestingly, these coaches came up with very similar themes and stories to less experienced coaches, and sometimes more dramatic ones (as they had been practising longer). There was, however, a different feel to their emotions. We identified "anxiety" rather than "doubt" in their struggles to come to terms with the demands of their practices. Also, there was a lot more confidence and a recognition of



A Zen story

One early morning on opening the temple door, a monk found a new disciple. Without speaking he led him into the main hall, directed him to a cushion, and demonstrated to him the half lotus. He proceeded to teach him to focus on his breathing, then to notice his feelings and longings in the present, and finally to open his eyes to the suffering contained in each fleeting moment.

During the day, the monk regularly came back to the student and listened to his breathing. He noticed the disciple was making rapid progress and that his breathing slowed, expanded and deepened. At the end of the day the disciple bowed and left the temple hall.

The monk crossed the disciple's path near the vestibule and decided to allow him a consultation. "You have made remarkable progress. Tomorrow you may sit longer and I will share one noble truth for you to meditate on."

The disciple gave an unexpected answer. "Master, I do not know how to thank you. I can now safely go back home. Today through careful scrutiny of my thoughts I have realised where I left the keys of my house."

The monk was puzzled by this answer and more so when he met the temple attendant, who said to him, "How wonderful we now have the generous support of Mr Tan: by visiting our temple and sitting with us I am sure he has acknowledged us in his records for charity."

Erik de Haan

“ We noticed in the interview transcripts how loyal coaches and clients were to each other ”

the pressures and challenges that their less experienced colleagues had mentioned.

In 2006 we studied another group of yet more experienced coaches.³ We looked at their critical moments and how they had dealt with them in their supervision or continuous professional development.

Out came a clear process around critical moments, with

various steps straddling potential ruptures in the coach-client relationship. We observed that a critical element precluding serious and potentially irreversible rupture was shared reflection, at or soon after the critical incident.

Last year we finally turned our attention to the discourse that should really matter most for executive coaching: the sense

that clients make of their moments of coaching – in other words, the outcomes that they themselves perceive from session to session.

We asked a great many clients of executive coaching about their critical moments and we noticed a distinct change of gear. Clients spoke less of their doubts and struggles, although they did report emotional experiences and breakthroughs.

What they focused on was the realisations they had in their critical moments about themselves and others, their blind spots, the influence of their own



past experience and their strategies and options as leaders in business.

What stood out from their observations was the sense of revelation, insight, realisation, wonderment and change of focus that a coaching critical moment could bring.

The substantive differences in coaches' and clients' reports of critical, exciting, tense or significant moments in the coaching journey prompted us to consider whether we could compare the perspectives of client and coach in real time, and the perspectives they each independently developed on the same piece of "coaching work" that they undertook together.

We wanted to have the coaches' and clients' accounts of critical moments in their coaching conversations as soon as possible after the event.

As it happens

In setting up our research into critical moments in coaching

conversations as perceived by both client and coach, we encountered some methodological challenges.

First, we realised we couldn't use our own coaching conversations, as our own developed thinking about critical moments would give us biases. For the same reason, the data collection (interviews) could not be done by members of our team.

Second, as we began approaching colleagues to contribute to the research, we noticed interesting patterns. The response rate was not high. Once invited, our colleagues often started to ponder their various clients, "perhaps this one... or that one...", judging very few clients "suitable" for this research.

There was a clear sensitivity about us enquiring into these most private and intimate encounters. We later noticed in

the interview transcripts how loyal coaches and clients were to each other.

We were also struck by unexpected logistical difficulties. For every pair of interviews we had to arrange for two different researchers to come to, or phone, the same location. We regularly had to hire a second consulting room, and our researchers had to manage interviews with individuals who had just come out of intensive and exhausting encounters. Nevertheless, we managed to hold 42 interviews with clients and coaches, which generated 70 descriptions of key moments of interest.

In the end we believe that, because of self-selection, we generally explored effective and productive coaching conversations. All sessions were well into the coaching relationship – fourth session onwards.

Talking the talk

What clients said:

- "The great thing that coaching has helped me to do is often you're in the quagmire of everything, and you've got various issues that need dealing with and you just struggle to find how to do it. And what coaching helps you to do is come outside of that and look at things from a different perspective"
- "The coach seemed to take some pleasure in the report. This somehow altered my view of this aspect of the work. It made me feel I'd achieved something because he was pleased with it"
- "I describe it as opening my eyes to a blind spot. It's easy with hindsight to say that's a good way of approaching it, but prior to the conversation or prior to today I would not have thought of trying to take the project in that direction. So it's a change in direction to what I would have done otherwise"

What coaches said:

- "It was a bit odd the way we started off because he thought he'd sent me some information, so we had a 20-minute forage around trying to find it. It felt like a weird start to the session. I was searching my BlackBerry thinking, this is bizarre because we don't need it. It linked into how he wanted to get things done and get things right and look good to other people. That's really important to him"
- "So that was another defining moment. He sat back and thought about it rather than being accused by it"
- "He kind of changed the shape of his hands. He smiled and said, 'I can't believe I didn't see that'"



“Coaches wrote extensively about their relationships with their clients – relationships the clients hardly touched on”

Overall, we encountered only one really "dramatic" moment, described by both client and coach, where in previous phases of the research most data could be called dramatic or significant. Most of these key moment descriptions struck us by comparison as rather ordinary and matter-of-fact.

Contrasting reports

Despite the fact that we have generally gathered "ordinary" key moments from "positive" coaching conversations, rather than "extraordinarily" critical moments

that had stood out from hundreds of hours of coaching, we found substantive overlap with the earlier data.

While the subject matter seemed to overlap with previous research, we noticed again a difference of perspective between clients and coaches. Unsurprisingly, coaches tended to use slightly more jargon and psychological terms to describe their moments. They also wrote extensively about their relationships with their clients – relationships their clients hardly touched on. Also, in line with our

previous enquiries, coaches devoted a lot of attention to the coaching process and to their own or their clients' anxieties, emotions and physiological changes through that process.

Clients, while answering exactly the same questions about the conversations, seemed to have a different perspective. They talked much more about realisations and thoughts they could take home from the coaching ("I came out with something I wasn't expecting"), and about new actions to take, questions to ask, or decisions to prepare.

Another striking feature of the research was that although we replicated a clear difference in language and perspectives between coaches and their clients, we also received a lot of descriptions that were about the same experience. We found that 30 of the 57 moments selected as important by clients and coaches were essentially the same event or topic – these coaches and clients, when asked independently, found themselves in agreement on more than half of the "important moments".

References

- 1 For a summary of this research see E de Haan, "I doubt therefore I coach – critical moments in coaching practice", in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 60(1), pp91-105, 2008.
 - 2 This research is summarised in E de Haan, "I struggle and emerge – critical moments of experienced coaches", in *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 60(1), pp106-131, 2008.
 - 3 Research reported in E de Haan, A Day, E Blass, C Sills and C Bertie, "Coaches have their say: how to handle critical moments", in *Relational Coaching*, chapter 8, Wiley, 2008.
- See also in previous issues of *Coaching at Work*: "Magic moments", vol 1, issue 7; "Point of impact", vol 2, issue 3; and "Second thoughts", vol 2, issue 6.