

Coaches' experience of critical moments in the coaching

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*This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research study into Coaches' experience of **critical moments** in the coaching relationship. Interviews were completed with a total of 28 experienced coaches. The research highlighted that critical moments are unforeseen and characterised by intense emotions and anxiety within the coaching relationship. These moments were most often seen to be turning points in the work. Coaches reported that they resulted in either insight for their clients or a distancing, or even breakdown, in the coaching relationship. Their accounts indicate that the outcome of these moments is influenced by the coach's containment of both their and their client's emotions. This process of containment involved coaches being aware of their own emotions and the reactions of their client, making a link with what was taking place in the coaching relationship and reflecting on their experience with their client in a manner that led to heightened awareness for the client. In situations where a distancing occurred between coach and client, this was associated with either an aggressive response or an avoidant response by one or both parties. Coaches reported using supervision to help them to make sense of critical moments, to gain reassurance that they responded appropriately and to learn from these moments. These findings demonstrate the importance to the coaching process of personal insight on the part of the coach, reflexivity in the coaching relationship and emotional containment by both the coach and the coaching supervisor.*

IN THE LAST DECADE, research has started to emerge into the effectiveness and impact of coaching in organisations (see Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; De Haan, 2008, Chapter 5, for some overviews). However, there has been less interest in the coaching process itself, namely what happens between the coach and their client that contributes to the development of the client.

Whilst coaching may have grown out of managerial performance improvement and sports coaching, it has much in common with the field of psychotherapy. (Peltier, 2001; De Haan & Burger, 2005; Bluckert 2005b). Bluckert identifies similarities between coaching and therapy including the adoption of a client-centred, collaborative partnership approach, and behavioural change through help in understanding how the client's cognitive and emotional reactions interfere with personal effectiveness, performance and well-being. Nevertheless, coaching does differ from therapy. It focuses

on a client 'system' in which the client participates (Armstrong, 2004). It is more results and action-focused than therapy, which is more focused on an individual's emotions, feelings and difficulties. On a more practical level, there are generally differences of place, duration, frequency and costing. In particular, coaching sessions tend, for many reasons, to be spaced by several weeks rather than taking place weekly or even more frequently, which inevitably affects the nature of the engagement.

Despite the differences between coaching and therapy, theories, skills and research from psychotherapy can potentially be generalised to the field of coaching (e.g. Ashridge Consulting, 2002; DeHaan, 2008a). Meta-analysis of outcome research in psychotherapy (see, for example, Wampold, 2001; Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999; Roth & Fonagy, 1996) and reviews within the field of coaching, such as Wasylyshyn (2003), Bluckert (2005c) and Blackman (2006), indicate that the *relationship* between the

practitioner and the client is one of the most critical factors in both therapy and executive coaching.

Within psychotherapy, considerable research has been undertaken into the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. Contemporary thinking and research argues that the relationship between therapist and client is co-constructed – existing within a shared inter-subjective field (DeYoung, 2003; Orange, Atwood & Stolorow, 1997; Hycner & Jacobs, 1995). In other words, both client and therapist are seen to be active participants in the relationship, responding to the other and shaping each other's experience. Moments of rupture and tension in the relationship can be growth promoting for the client if they do not repeat his or her negative past experiences. The therapist's role in these moments is to help a client to reflect on what is happening between the two of them.

A number of qualitative research studies have been undertaken in recent years into what happens in these important moments. Carlberg (1997) identified 'turning point moments' when the therapist notes something qualitatively new in relation to the client's behaviour or to the relationship between therapist and client. He identified two common threads in these moments. Firstly, the therapist relates turning points to unpredictable and unusual incidents in an otherwise more predictable therapeutic relationship. He reported that after these incidents they need to step outside the system to review the situation. Secondly, the therapists observed that at these 'moments' they always experience a deeper 'emotional meeting'. Stern (2004) has researched the role of, what he calls, 'Now Moments' or 'Moments of Meeting' in the therapeutic relationship. Such moments he found were characterised by a shift in the intensity, form and rhythm of the relationship. They were affectively charged and represented a crisis in the relationship between therapist and client. He argues that these non-linear events in the process of therapy require a break in the client's habitual way of responding in the

relationship. Such moments enable therapeutic change in an individual's 'ways of being with another'. They require a response from the therapist that is authentic and personal and not merely the application of technique.

Given the commonalities between coaching and psychotherapy, questions emerge as to whether 'critical moments' occur in coaching and, if they do, what is their significance. This research study builds on work by one of the authors De Haan (2008b, 2008c) which signalled that critical moments are present in the coaching relationship and that these are pivotal in the learning and development of the client.

In addition to exploring how coaches experience critical moments, this research investigated how they responded to critical moments. This included their use of support systems, particularly supervision, in making sense of and responding to such moments. The counselling and therapy literature suggests that ongoing supervision is an important form of support for practitioners (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). Similar arguments are put forward in the coaching literature (see, for example, Mead et al., 1999; or Stevens, 2004). We anticipated that supervision would be likely to be used by coaches to reflect on and make sense of critical moments within their work.

The purpose of this research was, therefore, two-fold: to investigate coaches' experience of critical moments in their work and to explore how they respond, including whether and how they make use of supervision.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative design, the purpose of which was to develop a rich and thick description of coaches' experience of critical moments. The primary methodology adopted for this study was a critical-incidents technique (Flanagan, 1954). For each incident, the interviewer asked the participant to describe the context, what happened, what they did at the time, and their perspective on the outcome. They were then asked whether

they took the incident to supervision, and if so, what happened at supervision.

It could be argued that the limitations of this methodology stem from the fact that these are self-reported critical incidents given from the view of the coaches themselves, which inevitably creates biases. We do not know what clients would have said. Furthermore, participants are likely to have suffered the limitations of 'everyday memory' which tends to yield distorted reports of critical events in ways which are well documented (see, for example, Goodman et al., 2006).

Participants

Interviews were carried out with 28 very experienced coaches (mean years of practice as a professional coach was 11.3 years) exploring between one and three critical moments that they had experienced in their coaching work during the previous 12 months. A total of 51 critical incidents were produced.

Permission was obtained from all participants for their responses to be used in the study. The majority of participants were qualified up to master's level in a school of psychology, consulting, counselling or psychotherapy. Most of them had also completed formal training in coaching. Participants worked as either internal coaches in an organisation or as external coaches working on a consulting basis. The gender split was equal male to female. 25 of 28 had regular supervision, of whom 19 were with a paid supervisor and six were in peer consultation groups. Only three did not have any form of supervision; however, those three were planning to go to supervision or had some other form of peer support.

Analyses

Thematic analysis of the incidents was conducted to explore: (i) the form of the critical moments; (ii) the nature of coach's anxieties and emotions in each moment; (iii) the temporal pattern of each critical moment; and (iv) how coaches responded to

the moment, including their use of supervision in this process.

The form of the critical moments was completed by identifying common themes from each of the incidents described by the participants. For each incident we also coded the coach's emotional responses. Many moments were found to contain several codes relating to the coach's anxieties.

The temporal pattern of each moment was investigated by coding each incident into phases of the coach's account of the relationship. The purpose of this analysis was to investigate the *temporal process* of the *unfolding relationship*, for each moment. We looked for distinct phases across the different accounts. The purpose of the analysis was to understand the interaction between the coach and their client. We were interested in understanding how coaches responded in these moments.

The use of supervision was analysed by coding the forms of support that coaches used, why they chose to take an incident to supervision, their experience of working through the incident in supervision and what happened as a result of supervision.

Findings and discussion

The form of the critical moments

We identified six major elements or characteristics that seemed to be present across the 51 critical moments. These were present to varying degrees in each incident.

The six common characteristics of the critical moments were:

1. **Intense emotions for the client.** In most of the critical moments coaches experienced the client to be in a heightened emotional state. Common emotional states included anger, sadness, aggression, sadness or fear. For instance, one participant commented that:
'My Client had taken just taken on her first managerial role. It was not going well and others were ostracizing her. At the lowest point, she cried. I've had enough. I can't take any more. I have to leave' I said: 'Don't. Stay with

me on this. You can see this through. If you leave now, it will be such a journey back.' Then for a little while (six to eight weeks) I directed her life, with very simple strategies. Teaching emotional distance, emotional resilience, to keep things in perspective'.

2. **Intense emotions for the coach.** Coaches reported heightened emotions before, during and after the critical moments. Their emotional states mirrored those of their clients and included anger, guilt, feeling overwhelmed, fear, feeling scared, feeling threatened, worry, sadness, shock and doubts about how to intervene. One coach described the following experience:

'My client had experienced a very traumatic incident outside of organisation. This had significantly affected her and the organisation. She didn't express emotions in the session, but I cried. Only when I cried did the client cry. I was angry with myself for crying in the session in front of the client'.

3. **A tension in the relationship between the coach and the client.** Often the participants described an emotional tension in their relationship with the client at the point when the moment arose. All the critical moments contained an emotional quality for both parties in the relationship. One coach described this tension in the following way:

'My Client saw me as a 'wicked step mother'. He saw me as critical. He would come back to sessions and without doing the work he had committed to do. I discussed with him I was feeling uncomfortable and did not know what was going on. He said he was intellectually feeling a failure. The breakthrough came when he said he said he felt unable to take the steps agreed in the action plan. He realised on reflection that he didn't know how to say what he now knew he had to say, if he was to lead his organisation well. He was actually very critical of himself'.

4. **A tension around the boundary of the coaching relationship.** In a number of incidents, participants reported that the incident contained a dilemma or ethical concern in managing the boundary of the coaching relationship. In most cases, the dilemma related to the content of the moment. They included questions of confidentiality, whether the client should be referred to a psychotherapist, the coach's relationship with the client's manager and other third parties, doubts about whether the work was becoming psychotherapy rather than coaching and requests from clients or other parties for the coach's case notes. For instance, one participant commented that:

'I was working with a client in private practice undertaking career coaching. It started to become more psychotherapeutic than career-oriented. I wondered what was required – a tighter coaching contract – or psychotherapeutic contract? We decided for the latter, but then, six weeks into the psychotherapeutic work, the client became uncomfortable and wanted to go back. It was a difficult review session. The client became defensive, questioning the contract, blaming me. I could not work with the client's resistance, precisely because he was requesting a shift back. He wanted solutions, outcomes and change. We got stuck. I felt uncomfortable when I had to ask him several times to leave. I felt physically threatened. I had a strong internal reaction'.

5. **Unexpected and unforeseen.** Most of the moments were unexpected and unforeseen. Coaches were often taken by surprise when the moment arose. The moments emerged during the coaching process in the interaction between the two parties. Whilst the incidents were unforeseen or unexpected, they did differ with respect to whether they evolved gradually across a number of sessions or emerged abruptly in a specific moment. With incidents in the former category coaches were able to identify a pattern when looking back on the relationship.

6. **A qualitative change in the nature of the coaching relationship.** As in Stern's (2004) and Carlberg's (1997) research, a qualitative change in the form of the relationship between the coach and their client occurred during the critical moment. In some cases, the critical moment led to a shared insight into the relationship for the client which resulted in a deepening of the relationship. Whilst, in nine of the moments, a distancing occurring between the coach and client. In a small number of cases, this resulted in a complete breakdown of the relationship. A participant gave the following account of how a critical moment had changed her relationship with a client in a way that helped to achieve insight for her client.

'A senior manager asked for help because she had received feedback that she was authoritarian and aggressive. She disagreed with the feedback and experienced herself a 'bit of a lamb'. In our third session she attacked my competence. I felt shocked and scared. I tried to use my feelings to understand what was happening. I fed back to the client my experience but she denied that she had been aggressive. We ended the session uncomfortably so I asked her to reflect on what happened. She then sent me an email saying that she had understood what had happened and requested an earlier session than the one scheduled. When we met we explored her pattern and she started to realise how most people withdrew from her or became defensive'.

The nature of coach's anxieties and emotions in each moment

Most of the coaches expressed doubts and anxieties about how to respond in these moments. The analysis of the coach's anxieties and doubts revealed seven related themes. These anxieties and doubts are very similar to those identified in a previous study by one of the authors (De Haan, 2008c). They arose partly as a result of the abruptness of the moment but also because of the heightened emotions associated with the

moment and the coach's awareness that the moment was likely to be a 'turning point' in their relationship with the client. The seven forms of anxiety and doubt for the coach were:

1. Anxiety about the boundaries of coaching (see above). Many of the participants expressed concerns about whether exploring a client's intense emotional responses would lead them into the domain of psychotherapy, and if it did whether this was legitimate.
2. Anxiety about their role – what did the client want from them? What were they prepared to offer? And what is the role of a Coach in this specific situation?
3. Anxiety around satisfying outcomes including feelings of relief, enthusiasm, or relaxation as the result of cooperation of the client or their progress following the moment;
4. Anxiety about whether to trust their intuition and feelings;
5. Anxiety about their own contribution to the moment, particularly doubts about whether to say what they observe or experience in the relationship;
6. Anxiety due to specific behaviour of the client – in nearly a quarter of the moments coaches expressed anxiety about the behaviour or reaction of the client towards them. These reactions included anger or criticism directed towards the coach, unrealistic requests, physical threats (two occurrences), emotional distress (two occurrences) and unhealthy behaviour.
7. Anxiety stemming mainly from the coach – including 'how to say this helpfully, without triggering a defensive response', the coach crying because of what is evoked by the client's material and being anxious about ending the coaching work.

The temporal pattern of each critical moment

The unfolding nature of relationship between the coach and their client emerged as an important theme. We therefore undertook a detailed analysis of each moment by

identifying common events and the extent to which these were present or absence within each moment. We identified nine codes which covered all the key events across the 51 moments:

1. **A Trigger Event (TE).** All moments start with some action, emotion or (presenting) issue. This event denoted the starting point of each moment.
2. **An Initial Response (IR).** This denotes an action taken as an immediate, unprocessed response to a previous action, or emotion. client or coach could be undertaking this counteraction.
3. **Internal Dialogue (ID).** Coaches frequently reported their own inner dialogue which tended to focus on what to do or 'unshared reflections' about the relationship.
4. **Distancing in the Relationship (DR).** This involved a movement away from the other, including the coachee not turning up, the contract being discontinued, or the request for another coach.
5. **Shared Reflection (SR).** This reflects moments where coach and coachee explore the actions, issues, and emotions, and/or the state of their own relationship.
6. **Deepening of the relationship (DE).** This reflected a deepening of rapport between coachee and coach, sometimes expressed as 'new issues were shared', sometimes as re-contracting, often as more calmness and dissipation of conflict.
7. **Change for the Client (CH).** This included new insight, a new way of working together, a breakthrough or a decision taken.
8. **Breakdown of the Relationship (BR).** In some instances, the relationship was terminated.
9. **Unknown Future (UF).** A significant proportion of participants reported that they were still experiencing their moment and consequently did not know the outcome or they were uncertain about what was the outcome for the client.

In this way we could examine which activities occurred and in which order (e.g. 'TE – IR – BR' or 'TE – IR – SR – DE' or even 'TE – SR – CH – TE – SR – UF'). These strings of codes highlighted patterns of different interactions and events in the relationship. The intention of the analysis was to uncover what coaches and clients did during these interactions.

Each incident started with a Trigger Event (TE) and often; then an intermediate phase which could contain an Initial Response (IR) or Shared Reflection (SR), and in a small number of instances Distancing in the relationship (DI). The moments ended in positive, negative or unknown outcomes. The positive outcomes involved either deepening of the relationship (DE) or Change for the client (CH). The negative outcomes consisted of a Distancing in the relationship (DI) or its Breakdown (BR). Where distancing occurred it resulted in a breakdown in all but two cases. In approximately a third of the moments, the outcome of the incident was unknown to the coach, usually because the moment was still on going (UF).

When we compared the critical incidents which contain reflection (RE) with those that did not have any reflection (RE), we noticed a marked difference in the outcome of the critical moment (see Table1). The completed trajectories (i.e. those that did not end in UF) on the whole fell into two categories. The first category contained a pattern of responses that contained no reflection. These patterns of interaction followed the following pattern: Trigger Event followed by Initial Response, heightened emotions and then a distancing in the relationship or a breakdown in the relationship. The second category contained a point of reflection in the relationship initiated by either the coach or client. Here the pattern consisted of Trigger Event and Initial Response were reflected upon which resulted in a deepening of the relationship and to change.

Table 1: Outcome patterns found in the 51 critical moments.

TE / DR / IR	DI	1 critical moment
TE / DR / IR	BR	10 critical moments
TE / DR / IR	DE/CH	None
TE / DR / IR	UF	6 critical moments
TE / DR / IR	SR DI	None
TE / DR / IR	SR BR	1 critical moment
TE / DR / IR	SR DE/CH	28 critical moments
TE / DR / IR	SR UF	5 critical moments

There is only one critical moment where reflection leads to breakdown. In this case the breakdown is a consensual process of referral to another coach, with whom work is now proceeding very well. On the other hand there are as many as 11 moments, which contained no reflection, in which the trigger event and initial response results in a distancing in the relationship and ultimately its breakdown. Moreover, none of the moments resulted in change and/or deepening of the relationship involved no shared reflection.

How coaches responded to the moment, including their use of supervision in this process

The coaches' accounts demonstrated that reflection on what was happening between the coach and the client, therefore, plays a significant role in determining what happens in critical moments in coaching. When heightened emotions are triggered in the relationship and no reflection takes place on what is happening then either or both parties responded with an aggressive or avoidant response.

The data clearly demonstrates a point of rupture (TE, IR), an emotional disturbance, in the relationship in most of the moments. At these points, our participants reported that they were anxious and full of doubts about how to respond to the 'rupture'. If they responded to the client's emotional state by being aggressive or avoiding the 'here-and-now' emotional reality then this

resulted in distancing or breakdown in the relationship. In these moments the coach's response was either complementary or symmetrical to the client's emotional reaction (Bateson, 1972). For instance, anger is met with anger or fear, rather than anger being met with interest or curiosity (i.e. responses that encourage reflection). In a number of incidents, for example, the coach reported that they responded to the client's anger by becoming angry themselves or by blaming the client. This pattern of responses in the relationship seemed to amplify the levels of emotion in the relationship. The following incident describes this form of interaction:

'A woman came on a course where two sessions of coaching are included – one at end of course – one follow-up. At the end of course session, she was very emotional – the course has stirred up a lot for her. She is positive about her coaching session with me – 'it is very useful'. At the follow-up, she arrives closed up. When I push, she says she wasn't herself at the last session and is scathing about psychology. I push again and she gets very angry. I also get upset. I said 'there's no point in going on'. The woman seems disappointed and still angry. She leaves after 45 minutes and her post-session written feedback is dreadful'.

In these instances, we observed that the coaches' and the clients' responses amplified the levels of emotion in the relationship which resulted in a loss of trust and/or termination of the session or even relation-

ship. Where the relationship broke down, coach or client terminated the relationship and both were left with feelings of frustration or hostility regarding the other. We can speculate that in these moments the level of emotion and anxiety becomes too overwhelming for both the coach and client to contain within their relationship.

In moments where the coach was able to reflect on their emotional state and respond in a manner that 'contained' (Bion, 1965) the client's emotion then the result tended to be a deepening of the relationship or evidence of change by the client. Containing interventions of the coaches in the reports, that led to generative outcomes, included confronting or challenging the client with interest and acceptance; providing feedback to the client in the 'here and now' about what they are noticing or observing; sharing their own feelings with the client and reflecting on the possible link to the client's issues and feelings; helping the client to clarify their thinking; and providing direction. An example of a containing response from a coach is given below:

I started working with an executive client who was quite resistant and aggressive. Almost belligerently, he asked 'So what are your qualifications?' I knew this would be a key moment and my response mattered. I said something like: 'it must be quite frightening to be here. I'm not even sure if you want to be here. Let's spend a bit of time to look at why it seems to be difficult'. He kept on repeating his challenge, until he said 'I really don't want to be here'. I think giving those professional qualifications would have been missing the point, really. We had 10 successful sessions. He was actually quite depressed. He told me later he didn't like this at all, it shocked him (he used the word 'frightening'). It was important for me to hold my own. It was critical in terms of the way we related'.

Reflection between the coach and the client on moments of emotional tension in the relationship is, therefore, very influential on whether they can be used to facilitate learning or become problematic for the

work. This seems to confirm Bion's (1965) general idea that what clients try to achieve is to transform their emotional experience through thinking into new opportunities for action, so in the coaching relationship they may move from raw 'Emotion' (including, raising an issue, or 'acting out'), through 'Thinking' (helpful reflection), to 'Change' (a new way of seeing things, or, developing new, better-considered actions). The degree to which the coach's response is experienced to be empathic (Rogers, 1980) by the client appears to be central to this process.

The role of supervision in supporting coaches

Of the 51 incidents described by the sample, 47 were recounted by coaches who had supervisors and 34 of those incidents were taken to supervision. The majority of the sample undertook supervision at least once a month.

When asked why they chose to take the incidents to supervision, the most common responses from participants were to examine their response to the challenge (nine incidents); to understand themselves better (six incidents) and to seek reassurance, guidance and a way forward (seven incidents). They seemed to be using supervision to work through their anxieties, concerns, fears and doubts about their work and to understand their emotional reactions. The coaches expressed anxieties about the impact of the interaction for them, their ethical concerns and fears about what might happen. For instance, one coach was concerned about whether their client might be thinking about committing suicide.

For moments that had emerged suddenly supervision helped them to make sense of their experience and their reaction, perhaps to gain reassurance that they had handled the incident competently. For those incidents that had evolved over a longer period of time (i.e. a number of sessions) supervision provided an opportunity for coaches to plan a strategy for working with the client. One participant gave the following account:

'I was at a loss about what to do. We explored my need to be more assertive about his engagement in the coaching process. His attitude and approach was not personal towards me but was part of a pattern or phenomenon for the client.'

Fifteen incidents, which could have been taken to supervision, were not taken. Participants described many additional forms of support to formal supervision, which included action learning, informal consultation with colleagues, talking to partners or colleagues and self-reflection. They used these forms of support when practical and timing constraints prevented them from meeting with their Supervisor.

The findings highlight that many of the participants were looking for reassurance from the process of supervision. Interestingly, supervision appeared to provide a form of parallel 'containment' for the coach in helping them to process a client's anxieties and emotions. Participants that expressed doubts and anxieties reported that supervision did give them reassurance. They also reported they received advice or direction and insight what had taken place with their client.

When coaches did not take an incident to supervision, they reported that they were 'okay with the outcome' (eight incidents). This reinforces the finding from above that a trigger for a coach to take an incident to supervision is their anxieties and doubts. However, some participants (a minority) did acknowledge that they had avoided taking an incident to supervision because they were not good at asking for help or were concerned about being criticised or judged by their supervisor. One individual did not have a supervisor and could not, therefore, take the incident to supervision.

This research suggests, therefore, that supervision is important for two reasons in supporting coaches to work with critical moments. Firstly, the process maintains the psychological health of the coach in the context of difficult emotional material; and, secondly it helps the coach to identify what

'material' belongs to them and what belongs to the client. Coaches that are able to identify their contribution to the process through a process of reflection (whether this is through supervision or not) were able to make use of the interaction with the client as a learning experience in the coaching process.

The question remains whether formal supervision differs in effectiveness and quality from other forms of support, i.e. is it simply a matter of convenience that coaches use other forms of support, or do they offer as much, or more, than the support of a supervisor?

Summary and conclusion

This research demonstrates that moments emerge in coaching that are turning points in the process (De Haan, 2008b, 2008c). These moments are affectively charged. They can be opportunities for insight and change or result in a deterioration of the coaching relationship. All of these findings are consistent with the findings from research (Stern, 2004; Carlberg, 1997) into critical moments in Psychotherapy suggesting that similar relational dynamics surround critical moments in both coaching and psychotherapy.

We need to remember that this research reflects the coach's experience of these moments. We can expect the experience of clients to differ. Research (Llewelyn, 1988) comparing psychotherapists and clients experience of critical moments in psychotherapy has found that clients seem to be more concerned with solutions to their problems, and that they value advice and solutions more, provided they feel free to reject them. Therapists, on the other hand, seem more concerned with the aetiology of the problems and potential transformation through the patient's insight.

Coaches experience these moments as anxiety provoking and challenging. The experienced coaches in this study frequently experienced doubts about how to respond and intense emotional reactions. The

coaches' emotional reactions were usually in response to their client's emotional reaction. They also reflect the uncertain, ethical dilemmas and potential risk that surrounds the coach's response to their client in these moments. The data suggests that the client's response was because they were confronted with a challenge in their work which touched on their vulnerabilities and insecurities. Stern (2004) argues that in psychotherapy, what he called, 'Now Moments' threaten to break the habitual framework or rules for how therapist and client work together. In a similar way, the anxiety of coaches in this study appears to reflect their uncertain of whether to respond in a way which breaks or maintains the existing rules for their interaction with their client.

In this study, heightened emotions were linked to the learning process. We can argue therefore when learning occurs in coaching, it is as much an emotional process as a cognitive process (Kolb, 1984). When the coaching relationship is able to 'contain' these heightened emotions (i.e. anger, fear, sadness, etc.) and stay with the client's experience then the moment can be reflected upon, raising the possibility for the client to explore new possibilities in their work and way of being with others.

The extent to which the coach is able to contain the emotions of the client without acting on their immediate emotional reaction and, the extent to which they can find a way to initiate reflection by the themselves and the client are critical to whether these moments are generative turning points or problematic for either or both parties. The importance of reflective skills and practice (Reason, 1994) on the part of the coach is also demonstrated by this study. Our analysis of the 51 critical moments is consistent with the research that has taken place in psychotherapy on the importance of the working alliance and the rupture-repair cycle in therapy (e.g. Horvath & Marx, 1991; Safran et al., 1990; Safran, Muran & Wallner Samstag, 1993). Safran et al. (1990), for example, argued that: 'the successful resolu-

tion of an alliance rupture can be a powerful means of disconfirming the client's dysfunctional interpersonal schema.' The relational field created between the coach and client is therefore central to the process of working through momentary ruptures in the relationship because it creates a relationship which does not confirm the client's relational pattern with another but provides the opportunity for a creative disruption to the pattern.

Coaches do appear to experience insecurities about their practice in response to their moments of 'crises' in their work. They use supervision in an attempt to understand the relational dynamics of these moments and to obtain reassurance from another experienced practitioner. Supervision does provide the coach with a reflective space to explore these doubts and anxieties. If supervision is not available, alternative support mechanisms are sought by coaches including trusted colleagues, action learning sets, and partners. In some, instances, we observed that coaches made use of these processes to obtain reassurance and possibly to avoid being confronted with their contribution to a difficult interaction with their client.

The intensity of the relational dynamics of the moments investigated in this study demonstrates the presence of transference and countertransference dynamics in the coaching relationship. The impact of these intense relational processes has received considerable attention in psychotherapy (see, for example, Maroda, 1998) and organisation consulting (see, for example, Obholzer & Zagier Roberts, 1994). They have, however, received limited or no research attention in the field of coaching.

The research highlights that the person of the coach and their use of their own feelings and emotions are central to the process of coaching. In these intense and challenging moments, coaches were required to demonstrate insight into complex and emotional interactions which went beyond the mere application of a model or technique. When the critical moments resulted

in insight for the client, coaches were able to contain a client's emotions, demonstrate insight into their emotional reaction and the emotions of their clients and make use of these insights to maintain a reflective space. This finding demonstrates the importance of coaches having a deep understanding of the psychology of intimate helping relationships and having insight into their own vulnerabilities and insecurities. It also demonstrates the importance of coaches undertaking regular supervision of their work.

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