Critical Moments in the Coaching Relationship: Does Supervision Help?

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Abstract

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative research study into 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 heightened emotions and tensions within the coaching relationship. Many of the Participants felt that these Critical Moments provoked significant anxiety and doubts for them. They reported that Critical Moments were either potential opportunities for insight and change in the Coaching relationship or led to some form of deterioration or breakdown in the Coaching relationship. Their accounts indicate that the outcome of these moments is influenced by the Coach’s containment of the Client’s anxiety and the level of reflexivity within the coaching relationship. 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 Supervisor.

1. Introduction

The term ‘Coaching’ is increasingly used to refer to a developmental journey that is undertaken through one-to-one conversations, particularly by senior executives and consulting professionals (Frisch, 2001). Bluckert (2005a) categorises executive Coaches into two main groups: those that focus on learning and development leading to performance improvement, and those located around personal growth and change. He offers a working definition that attempts to combine the two schools as ‘Coaching is the facilitation of learning
and development with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing effective action, goal achievement and personal satisfaction’ (ibid: 172). Other broader definitions include Pemberton’s (2006) whose definition is simply ‘two people engaged together in raising the awareness of one of them, and therefore their ability to act’ and ‘a method of work-related learning which relies primarily on one-to-one conversations’ (De Haan & Burger, 2005).

While personal development through Coaching may have grown out of managerial performance improvement and sports Coaching, it actually has much in common with the older field of psychotherapy. Each of the three main strands in psychotherapy, namely Cognitive and Behavioural, Psychodynamic and Humanistic, have influenced approaches to Executive Coaching within organisations (Peltier, 2001; De Haan & Burger, 2005).

While these different orientations may appear to differ greatly, there is likely to be more agreement in practice than in theoretical outlook (Corsini & Wedding, 1989). In addition, the personal preferences and limitations of each individual Coach will make certain approaches more attractive than others. Bluckert (2005b) 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. Key differences between therapy and Coaching include the fact that executive Coaching focuses on a Client ‘system’ which has the organisation of the Client included (Armstrong, 2004). Coaching is therefore more systems-related than therapy. Coaching may also be more results and action-focused than therapy, which can be more focused on an individual’s emotions, feelings and difficulties. The educational backgrounds, competences and experiences of Coaches and therapists are different. 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. This of course influences the nature of the material that is explored.

Despite the differences between Coaching and therapy, the Coaching relationship is still potentially a very powerful relationship. Indeed, modern outcome research in psychotherapy (see, e.g., Wampold, 2001; Hubble, Duncan and Miller, 1999, and Roth and Fonagy, 1996) and authors within the field of Coaching, such as Wasylyshyn (2003), Bluckert (2005c) and Blackman (2006), indicate that the relationship may be the critical success factor in both
therapy and executive Coaching. For instance, a widely cited article by Lambert and Arnold (1987) summarised the psychotherapy research into therapeutic change. They concluded that 15 percent of change can be attributed to specific factors such as therapist technique and encouragement of risk taking, 40 per cent to extra therapeutic change factors outside of therapy, 15 per cent to placebo effects and, by far the greatest influence within the consulting room, 30 per cent to common factors not linked to the therapist’s orientation such as empathy, warmth, acceptance.

Within the field of psychotherapy, there is a convergence of interest in the importance of the relationship between the Therapist and Client. This has stimulated an interest in theory and research into the specific dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. Much of this work builds on Humanistic theory and research (i.e. Rogers, 1974; Hycner, 1988). Contemporary thinking and research on the therapeutic relationship now argues that the relationship between therapist and Client is co-constructed existing within a shared inter-subjective field (DeYoung, 2003; Orange, Atwood and Stolorow, 1997; Hycner and Jacobs, 1995).

Over the last decade, research has started to point to the importance of ‘ruptures’ or moments of disturbance in the relationship between Therapist and Client. For instance, Carlberg (1997) defines ‘turning point moments’ as those moments when the therapist notes something qualitatively new in relation to the Client’s behaviour or to the relationship between therapist and Client. He has identified two common threads in all of the turning points that he has studied. Firstly, therapists appear to relate turning points to unpredictable and unusual incidents in an otherwise fairly predictable therapeutic relationship. They 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’ in the therapeutic relationship. He identified moments of crisis between therapist and client that are affectively charged. He argues that these non-linear events in the process of therapy enable therapeutic change in an individual’s ‘ways of being with another’.

Given the commonalities between Coaching and Psychotherapy, the questions emerge on the basis of this body of work in Psychotherapy of whether ‘Critical Moments’ exist within the Coaching relationships between Coach and Client and, if they do, what is their significance to the development of the Client. This research study builds on work by one of the authors.
DeHann, 2007a and 2007b) which has highlighted that Critical Moments are present in the Coaching relationship and that these are pivotal in the learning and development of the Client.

The role of Supervision in supporting Coaches to work with Critical Moments

The counselling and therapy literature suggests that ongoing professional development for the practitioner is essential to protect both Client and counsellor, but there does not appear to be any hard evidence that this is indeed the case (compare McLennan, 1999; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989). A similar pattern is emerging in the literature with regard to Coaches (see for example, Mead et al., 1999; or Stevens, 2004). Proponents of Supervision in Coaching argue that Supervision provides a space where Coaches are able to explore their assessment of the Client and their organisation, to explore the dynamics of the Coaching relationship, to help the Coach develop strategies for intervention, to help the Coach work through ethical issues and concerns, and to support the Coach in exploring their own feelings and emotions about their work.

One area where we could hypothesise that the process of Supervision is important in Coaching is in helping Coaches to reflect on and make sense of Critical Moments within the Coaching Process and help a Coach explore how to respond to them. The Authors are not aware of any existing literature that has explored how Coaching Supervision supports Coaches in working with Critical Moments.

The purpose of this research is, therefore, twofold: to investigate the dynamics and impact of critical moments within the Coaching relationship between Coach and Client; and to explore how Coaches use supervision to help them to work with Critical Moments.

2. Methodology

The primary methodology adopted for this study was that of critical incidents technique (Flannagan, 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.
2.1 Participants

Interviews were carried out with 28 very experienced Coaches (mean Coaching experience was 11.3 years), exploring between 1 and 3 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 Coaches who participated in this research for their responses to be used in the study. All the Coaches interviewed had had some form of psychological, organisational development, counselling or psychotherapy training, and ranged in their employment from being predominantly internal Coaches employed by organisations to external Coaches employed 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 6 were in peer consultation groups. Only 3 did not have any form of supervision, however those 3 were planning to go to supervision or had some other form of peer support.

2.2. Analyses

Thematic analysis of the incidents was conducted to explore the form of the Critical Moments, the nature of Coach’s anxieties and emotions in each moment, the temporal pattern of each critical moment and how Coaches used Supervision in response to each incident.

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 anxieties and doubts as they occurred moment by moment. Many moments were found to contain several codes relating to the Coach’s anxieties. This was the same analysis as was used in De Haan (2007b) which investigated 47 experienced Coaches written accounts of 78 critical moments. The categories that emerged from this study mapped directly onto the earlier study (DeHann, 2007b).

The temporal pattern of each moment was investigated by coding each incident into phases of the Coach’s story of the enfolding Coach – Client relationship. The purpose of this analysis was to investigate the temporal process of the unfolding relationship, for each incident. We therefore looked for distinct phases in the stories that were told, and we characterised those
phases in terms of the Coach-Client relationship. The only aspect of the stories that we could not put into relational terms, was the ‘interior dialogue’ of the Coach that comes through, which we have identified as being in a state of ‘unshared reflection’.

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

2.3 Limitations of the Methodology

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, and this missing comparison is likely to form the basis of the next phase of our research project. Finally, we expect our subjects 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). We realise these shortcomings in doing this type of qualitative research, but as Coaching always takes place within a confidential and exclusive relationship between two people, these shortcomings seem to be impossible to avoid without creating a ‘laboratory environment’, which in turn would have a significant (negative) impact on the outcome of the Coaching relationship (see, for example, Wampold, 2001).

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Key Characteristics of the Critical Moments

We identified five major elements or characteristics that seemed to be present across the different Critical Moments that the participants described. We found elements of all or some of these characteristics, to varying degrees, in each incident.

The five major characteristics of the Critical Moments were:

• **Heightened emotions for the Client.** In the incidents that the participants described, they frequently observed that the Client was in a heightened emotional state.
Common emotional states for the Client in Critical Moments included anger, 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 (6-8 weeks) I directed her life, with very simple strategies. Teaching emotional distance, emotional resilience, to keep things in perspective. I was very directive. It was a decisive period for her, otherwise it would have remained a background phantom in her life. It worked out incredibly well”.

• **Heightened emotions for the Coach.** The Participants in the study (i.e. the Coaches) also reported heightened emotions before and during the Critical Moments. Their emotional states included feelings of anger, fear, sadness and most frequently doubts about how to intervene. A Critical Moment that reflected the presence of heightened emotions for the Coach was:

“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”.

• **A tension in the relationship between the Coach and the Client.** Often the Participants described a tension in the relationship between them and the Client. When present, Participants reported that both they and their Client experienced anxiety and heightened emotions. For instance, one participant commented that:

“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”.

• *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. The dilemmas were around whether the Client required Coaching or psychotherapy, whether the Coaching work was becoming psychotherapy, and the relationship between the Coach and representatives from the organisation. 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, 6 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 & 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”.

• *Unexpected and Unforeseen.* For many of the Participants the Critical Moments were unexpected and unforeseen. Coaches were often taken by surprise when the moment arose. It is also important to note that the moments were not deliberately or consciously created by the Coaches or the Clients. They emerged during the Coaching process in the interaction between the two parties.

All the Critical Moments therefore contained an emotional quality for both parties (on most occasions) or at least one of the parties. The incidents that the Participants described seemed to fit into two broad categories according to whether their emotional quality evolved gradually across a number of sessions or emerged suddenly and abruptly in a specific moment.
3. 2. The Coach’s anxieties and doubts during the Critical Moments

A common thread across the Participants’ stories was their doubts and anxieties about how to respond in these Critical Moments. We were interested in exploring these in detail to understand how they linked with the Coach’s response to the Critical Moment and their use of Supervision. The analysis of the Coach’s anxieties and doubts across the 51 incidents revealed seven distinct, but related, categories. These categories were so similar to the categories in De Haan (2007b) that the same categories were used. The categories are described below.

3.2.1. Anxiety about the boundaries of Coaching (contracting, triangulation, etc.)

In 10 of the incidents the Coach’s anxiety was about the boundaries of the relationship. This included questions of around 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.

3.2.2 Anxiety around satisfying outcomes

In eight of the incidents the Coach’s anxiety was about satisfying an outcome or expectation from their work with a Client. For instance, in three incidents the Coach experienced relief, enthusiasm, or relaxation as the result of cooperation of the Client. Participants also reported feeling pleasantly surprised about the great progress Coachee had made or the Client’s strengths becoming more apparent.

3.2.3. Anxiety about the Coach’s own role

In four of the incidents Participants expressed anxiety about their role in the relationship with the Coachee. 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? For instance one Participant expressed
the following doubt: “Is the Coachee really making the choice himself, or am I pushing the choice?”.

3.2.4. Anxiety about the Coach’s own intuition

In two incidents, Participants expressed doubts about whether they could trust their intuition and feelings about how to respond to a Client. These individuals both took these doubts to supervision.

3.2.5. Anxiety about what the Coach contributes, or does not contribute, himself

In twenty one of the moments the participant expressed anxiety about their contribution in the Coaching process. Interestingly, two codes were found 7 times: Anxiety about saying what I think and feel about the Coachee; and Anxiety about bringing up patterns displayed by the Coachee, here and now with me.

Other critical moments relating to the Coach’s anxiety about their contribution included:

- Being very directive – e.g. when my Coachee is at a very low point, when teaching emotional distance and resilience, when a push is ‘what she really needed’. (three times)
- Reflecting back what the Coachee does, here with me.

3.2.6. Anxiety due to specific behaviour of the Coachee

In nineteen of the moments the Coach expressed anxiety about the behaviour or reaction of the Client towards them. In five, incidents the participant expressed anxieties about the Coachee being angry or critical. Three times, participants described requests by the Client for something the Coach is unable to offer. Other examples of the Client’s behaviour that created anxiety for the Coach were when the Coachee is physically threatening (two occurrences), when the Coachee becomes upset (two occurrences), when the Coachee tells the Coach what to do and when the Coach is concerned about the Coachee’s overall health and behaviour.

3.2.7. Anxiety stemming mainly from the Coach

In six of the moments the Coach identified that aspects of the work provoked anxiety in them because of who they were as a person. For instance, comments included: “How to say this
helpfully, without triggering a defensive response”, the Coach crying and the Coach being anxious about ending the coaching work.

### 3.3. The temporal pattern of each critical moment

In the process of analysing the form of the Critical Moments and the nature of the Coach’s anxiety during the Critical Moments we became aware that the dynamics of the *unfolding relationship* between the Coach and the Client’s responses seems to be significant in the Coaching process.

We therefore devised relational codes on the basis of the stories as reported to analyse the different phases of the Coaching relationship. Nine codes covered all the various occurrences in the 51 stories.

In analysing, the different Critical Moments it was difficult to identify the contributions of either of the parties (or, even, third parties, e.g. within the organisation of the Coachee). In many instances, it was impossible to determine ‘who did what’ in the detailed descriptions: who was responsible for the breakthrough, or whose intervention determined distancing or the final breakdown of the Coaching relationship.

The Nine codes were:

- **AE:** Action, issue, or (raw) emotion. All moments start with some action, emotion or (presenting) issue, so all moments start with AE. This code only occurred at the beginning of each critical moment.

- **CA:** Counteraction, sometimes technically called ‘defense’. This is some action taken as an immediate, unprocessed response to a previous action, or emotion. Client or Coach, or Client and Coach, could be undertaking this counteraction, and the result for the relationship is the same: essentially an ongoing state of action / issue / emotion.

- **ID:** Interior dialogue, or internal (ethical) dilemma. This is something Coaches convey only about themselves. Indeed, we only have this data in the form of thinking-after-the-fact, so we don’t know what state the Coaching relationship was in. However, we
usually found hints of ‘distancing’ or ‘unshared reflection’ in the relationship together with ID.

**DI:** Explicit distancing in the relationship, sometimes expressed as the Coachee not turning up, or the contract being discontinued, or the request for another Coach.

**RE:** Shared reflection, where Coach and Coachee explore the actions, issues, and emotions, and/or the state of their own relationship.

**DE:** Deepening of the relationship between Coachee and Coach, sometimes expressed as ‘new issues were shared’, sometimes as re-contracting, often as more calmness and dissipation of conflict.

**CH:** Satisfactory change for the Coachee, sometimes expressed as new insight, sometimes as a new way of working together, a breakthrough, a promotion, or a decision taken.

**BR:** Breakdown of the relationship, which is also the end of Coaching.

**UF:** Unknown future. We used this sign not to signify any question marks about the relationship (as there are always innumerable question marks for Coachee and Coach, and even more for us as researchers), but rather to indicate a certain type of outcome which is unresolved and ongoing.

In this way we could obtain 51 strings of codes, e.g. “AE – CA – BR” or “AE – CA – RE – DE” or even “AE – RE – CH – AE – RE – UF”, the shortest string containing 3 codes and the longest 6. These strings of codes highlighted patterns of different dynamics in the Coaching relationship. Even though they differed greatly in every case, they proved amenable to investigation.

Each incident had an opening phase, with Action, issue, or (raw) emotion (AE) and often; then an intermediate phase which could contain Shared reflection (RE) or more Counteraction (CA), and sometimes Explicit distancing in the relationship (DI), and then an ending which could be categorised in only three types: a positive outcome (either Deepening of the relationship between Coachee and Coach (DE) or Satisfactory change for the Coachee (CH)), a negative outcome (either Breakdown of the relationship (BR) or Explicit distancing in the relationship (DI)) or an unknown outcome (UF). Explicit distancing in the relationship (DI) only occurred as an outcome in two cases, as it usually led to a breakdown (BR) or would be ongoing (UF).
When we distinguished the critical incidents which had some reflection (RE) towards the end from those that did not have any reflection (RE) before the end, we noticed that reflection was connected to a fundamental 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: Action, Issue or Emotion followed by Action, Issue or Emotion, 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 actions, issues and emotions that were reflected upon which resulted in a deepening of the relationship and to change.

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

| AE / DI / CA | DI       | 1 critical moment |
| AE / DI / CA | BR       | 10 critical moments |
| AE / DI / CA | DE/CH    | None |
| AE / DI / CA | UF       | 6 critical moments |
| AE / DI / CA | RE       | None |
| AE / DI / CA | RE       | 1 critical moment |
| AE / DI / CA | RE       | DE/CH 28 critical moments |
| AE / DI / CA | RE       | UF 5 critical moments |

There is only one critical moment where reflection leads to breakdown, and even in that 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 in which ongoing AE/DI/CA (presenting of issues, acting out and experiencing emotions) without reflection has led to a breakdown. Moreover, none of the moments that lead up to change and deepening of the relationship can do so without shared reflection preceding that positive outcome.

Our data suggests that in many of the critical moments there was a point of rupture (AE, CA) in the relationship between the Coach and their Client. This took the form of an emotional disturbance in the relationship between the Coach and their Client. At these points, our
Participants reported that they were anxious and full of doubts. 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 to the Client’s emotional reaction paralleled or reversely paralleled the Client’s response. For instance, anger is met with anger or fear, rather than anger being met with interest or curiosity. 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 pattern of interaction:

“A woman came on a course where 2 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 termination of the Coaching session or even relationship. Where the relationship broke down, Coach or Client terminated the relationship and both were left with feelings of frustration or even hostility. 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.
If, however, the Coach was able to reflect on their emotional state and respond in a manner that ‘contained’ (Winnicott, 1971) the Client’s emotion then the result tended to be a deepened of the relationship or evidence of change on the part of the Client (and possibly the Coach). The sequence of events during these critical moments is illustrated in figure 4 below. Regardless of the source of the rupture, analysis of the critical incidents suggests that the key to whether the relationship broke down or was strengthened seems to lie with the Coach and Coachee’s ability to reflect and thereby to manage their relational space. In these Moments, the possibility was created for generative learning, a moment of insight or growth for the Client. The Clients heightened their awareness and/or developed insight into themselves, the Coaching relationship was strengthened and deepened, and there was a shift in the Clients’ behaviour or state of mind.

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: “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”.

Figure 4: A Containing response by the Coach contains the Rupture

Reflection between the Coach and the Client on critical moments is therefore very influential on whether points of heightened emotion are used generatively in the Coaching process or lead to a breakdown or distancing in the Coaching relationship. 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).

3.4. Coaches use of Supervision in response to Critical Moments

When exploring the Participants’ experience of Critical Moments in Coaching we asked them whether they took their experience to Supervision and, if so, what was the form of Supervision.

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.

3.4.1 Participant’s motivation for using Supervision

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 (9 incidents); to understand themselves better (6 incidents) and to seek reassurance, guidance and a way forward (7 incidents). The Participants seemed therefore to be using Supervision to work through their anxieties and doubts about their work and to understand their emotional reactions to the Critical Moments. For Critical Moments that had emerged suddenly Supervision took on a role of helping the individual 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 for instance gave the following account of their motivation for using Supervision:

‘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. We were surprised to find that the Participants described many additional forms of support to formal Supervision. These alternative forms of support included action learning, informal consultation with colleagues, talking to partners or colleagues and self-reflection. We found that Coaches used these forms of support to help them make sense of a Critical Moment when practical and timing constraints prevented them from meeting with their Supervisor.

When asked why they had not taken the incident to Supervision, the most frequent response from the Participant was that they were ‘okay with the outcome’ (8 incidents). This reinforces the finding from above that a trigger for a Coach to take an incident to Supervision is their own anxieties and doubts about their work with a Client. 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 by their Supervisor. One individual did not have a Supervisor and could not therefore take the incident to Supervision.

Equally, it appears that Coaches take a lot of issues to supervision when they have had a positive outcome, rather than Coaching situations where the ongoing work is at a critical stage or the Client relationship seems to be in difficulty. For example, the reasons some of the Coaches gave for taking an incident to supervision were:

‘Because of the positive nature of the meeting I was left asking myself “what am I missing?”’

‘I wanted to ‘go round the loop’ and check if what I had done was right. Raised it as an area in my mind which causes me more anxiety than it apparently caused my Client.’

‘It felt extremely risky. Somewhere I felt I had done well, but it still felt risky. I think I looked for affirmation.’

Participant’s motivations for using Supervision to respond to a Critical Moment, therefore, are to help them to deal with their doubts and anxieties that arise from the incident, even
when the outcome, for them, was positive. The findings also highlight that many of the Participants were looking for reassurance from the process of supervision. Supervision may therefore provide important ‘containment’ for the Coach in helping them to contain a Client’s anxiety and heightened emotion.

3.4.2 How Supervision helped Participants to respond to Critical Moments

The importance of receiving reassurance is further highlighted when Coaches describe how Supervision helped them to respond to Critical Moments. The management of the Client relationship was also a common theme that was explored at Supervision. Table 1 below highlights the responses Participants gave to the question of what happened during Supervision.

Table 2: What happened at Supervision (number of participants by theme)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reassurance given</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client relationship management explored</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given direction/given advice</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acquired space for clarification</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New interpretation gained</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised self-awareness</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raised awareness of Client’s situation</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No significant outcome</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The format of what happened at supervision tended to take the sequence of the Coach telling the story and receiving feedback, advice and/or guidance and direction; then they would make sense of what happened and identify the learning they were going to take away from the session; they also felt they were provided with the space to reflect and to become aware of different aspects of the incident that they perhaps had not considered previously; before finally getting the reassurance and support that they were looking for. For example:

‘Supervision helped highlight the role of religion and spirituality – this had a big impact. It really changed our line of inquiry.’
‘My peer provided questions about what happened, reflecting back scenarios, and interpretations. That clarified the dynamic, and made me understand it.’

‘Supervision gave advice about how to attend to her and leave my own opinion out of it.’

‘I presented, others listened, asked questions, went to the roots of things, both internal (therapeutically) and external (organisationally). They gave me confirmation. They carried me through (just like I carried her).’

It is clear therefore that Coaches use supervision for reassurance, confidence building, and benchmarking their practice. Supervision also raises their awareness and adds perspective, whether this is self-awareness, context awareness or process awareness.

### 3.4.3 What did Participants learn from Supervision?

When considering the learning that they had gained through the supervision process, the sample responded:

**Table 3: What was learnt at Supervision from the incident (number of participants by theme)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More about Coaching relationships</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More about themselves</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of re-assurance</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To trust themselves</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical considerations</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal values</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundaries of the Coaching role</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarity in reasoning</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To be more motivated</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, if this is compared with the range of issues that the Coaches take to supervision we can see that learning about Coaching relationships occurs more often than the Coach expects, as they do not always identify the issue as being a relationship management issue when they raise it at supervision. For example:
‘There is a big gulp when you’re going to say something and going to massively reframe something. Unless you have the fearlessness, they will not have it.’

‘Take time to build a relationship. Stay with the process of the relationship and the work gets done.’

Participants also described that reviewing Critical Moments in Supervision helped them to learn something about themselves:

‘To be still more cautious. Don’t take it personally. That is very difficult. My personal confidence was shocked.’

‘That I must be careful not to think everything is my fault.’

‘About holding, containing when someone is in survival mode as opposed to competency mode. You can ask too much when they are in survival mode. Try and trust my intuition on this. I realize I do work more intuitively than I thought.’

The data points to a process of ‘internalisation’ for some of the Coaches in our sample who internalised the responsibility for any tensions or difficulties in the work. This ‘internalisation’ of relationship issues is further supported by the classifications given to the range of issues Coaches take to supervision. More Coaches identified issues as ‘personal’ than as relationship management issues, suggesting that they perhaps internalise their relationship management issues as ‘their problem’ rather than a problem with the management of the relationship as a whole. This goes some way to explaining the high rating of gaining reassurance in terms of outcomes of supervisions, as Coaches might find it reassuring in itself that the problem is not of their ‘doing’.

This research suggests therefore that Supervision is important for two reasons. 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 thereby identifying their contribution to the Coaching relationship.
Coaches that are able to identify their contribution to the process between them and the Client through a process of reflection (whether this is through Supervision or not) are able to make use of the dynamic as a learning experience for the Client (and themselves).

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 maybe more) than the support of a supervisor? When considering that some participants told us that they had chosen not to take an incident to supervision because of their fear of being judged.

4. Discussion of Supervision

The Critical Moments outlined by the participants suggest that the key point in the Coaching relationship that is challenging to them as Coaches is when they arrive at that point of rupture in the Coaching relationship, where there is anxiety and doubt on the part of the Client and/or the Coach. This stems from the recognition that the Client is about to enter new territory, be it seeing something in a different light, interpreting something differently, or coming to a realisation about themselves in the situation they are considering. Usually, it is important that the Coach does not back away from these moments of rupture. In fact, this is essentially what differentiates a Coaching conversation from any other good conversation, albeit uncomfortable for the Coach as well as the Client. Coaches stay with moments of tension and anxiety in the relationship and use them as opportunities for generative moments despite the real or perceived risk of a breakdown of the relationship. The importance of reflective skills and practice (Reason, 1994) on the part of the Coach are also demonstrated by this study.

Our analysis of the 51 critical moments conveyed by our participants, seems to confirm longitudinal analyses of the levels of the working alliance in more and less successful counselling and therapy (e.g., Horvath & Marx, 1991; Safran, Crocker, McMain & Murray, 1990; Safran, Muran & Wallner-Samscode, 1993), which provided evidence for the existence of a rupture-repair cycle in successful counselling and therapy, as predicted by Zetzel (1956). We have to add here that meta-analysis has shown (Martin, Garske & Davis, 2000) that
Clients tend to find the working alliance more stable than therapists and observers, so there is value in exploring critical moments from the perspective of Coachees.

At supervision, the Coach will express their anxieties and doubts in terms of questions around what is going on? what is going on for my Coachee? and how can I help my Coachee? There are no right and wrong answers to these questions, and no set formulae or solutions. Supervision affords the Coach the 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.

This research clearly shows that critical moments in the Coaching relationship are challenging both to Coaches and their Clients, and that Coaches may feel a considerable amount of insecurity regarding the impact they are having on the Client and the relationship. This insecurity is partly overcome through getting the reassurance of friends and colleagues, but may be most effectively addressed through the process of supervision. The fact that one Coach was found to be concerned that their supervisor may disapprove and hence not share an issue with him/her gives an indication of the potential power of the supervision relationship. The richness that is implied by these concerns, which seem to be related to transference and countertransference, is a strong argument for the importance of ‘formal’ supervision rather than an arrangement with peers.

Supervision would appear to be most useful to the Coach if it occurs within the time frame of a critical moment or rupture in the working alliance. It is at this point that the Coach benefits the most as they explore their possible responses, be they to find a way of containing the intervention, avoiding a defensive response, changing the boundaries of the relationship, or avoiding the issue and returning to a more stable position. Their response will contribute towards the Client either gaining insight and learning, or alternatively, towards their Client relationship breaking down. Once this point has passed, if the Client’s reaction is positive, then the Coach is likely to be happy with the outcome and not feel the need to take the experience to supervision. If the Client’s reaction leads to a breakdown in the relationship, then the Coach may still feel the benefit of taking the incident to supervision.

Supervision can help the Coach explore their management of the Coaching relationship, and to understand themselves within the context of that relationship, their own needs and wants
within that relationship, and their own motivations. Coaches also gain reassurance through supervision that their intuition and feelings are helpful and genuine, and that they can trust and respond on this basis. In addition supervision can help identify those situations which are not suitable for further Coaching interventions where the Coach should refer the Client on, and can help resolve and give guidance on ethical dilemmas that may be troubling the Coach. Supervision is therefore a mechanism for providing ‘containment’ for the Coach thereby supporting them, in turn, to provide ‘containment’ for the Client.

8. Conclusions

Critical moments, leading to ruptures in the Coach – Coachee relationship are potential opportunities for insight and change in the Coaching relationship (De Haan, 2007a and 2007b). These ruptures can either be generative or lead to a breakdown in the Coaching relationship itself. The Coach’s containment of the Client’s anxiety at these moments seems to be critical for the outcome. By definition, these moments are difficult, emotionally laden and high-risk for the Coaches to manage, as well as for the Client, and hence Coaches and Clients may use many different forms of support in dealing with these moments. It may be reassuring for less experienced Coaches to know that even very experienced Coaches still feel anxiety and doubt in these situations, and they still struggle with how they can be resolved.

The heightened emotion in the ‘here and now’ of the Coaching relationship at the point when a Critical Moments arises seems to be important for facilitating the learning of the Client. We can argue therefore that learning is as much an emotional process as a cognitive process (Maroda, 1998). When the Coaching relationship is able to ‘contain’ these heightened emotions (i.e. anger, fear, sadness etc.) then the moment can be reflected upon by Coach and Coachee raising the possibility for the Coach to explore new possibilities in their work and way of being with others. This finding demonstrates that it is critical for Coaches to be aware of their own ‘internal script’ (Berne, 1972; Lapworth , Sills, and Fish, 2001) so that they are able to contain a Client’s emotional material.

Supervision affords Coaches the space to work through moments that they find difficult in their Coaching work. By doing this it should enable them to provide containment for Clients
in the future, thus helping more rupture moments result in generative outcomes, and less resulting in break-downs in the relationship. The fact that so many of the incidents taken to supervision were ruptures that had resulted in generative moments, and the Coaches still felt they needed reassurance suggests that there is a need for professional affirmation and a desire to feel competent and seek praise. It also suggests that the management of these moments, albeit successful, calls on skills or qualities that are not a part of the Coach’s everyday repertoire; they require a trust in the process of staying with the unknown and uncomfortable and a willingness to engage at a level for which there is no immediate language or understanding. This necessitates a space for reflection and recognition within another relationship. Finally, on the basis of this research it would seems that personal insight and reflexivity is the quality that allows Coaches to sit more comfortably with the discomfort of strong feelings and the anxiety of uncertainty. We would argue therefore that this behoves Coaches to look to their own process and development.
REFERENCES


CIPD (2005) Coaching @ [http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev/Coachmntor/](http://www.cipd.co.uk/subjects/lrnanddev/Coachmntor/)


