

Using critical moments to learn about coaching

Erik de Haan and Eddie Blass examine the critical moments that occur in coaching relationships

Executive coaching is one of the most rapidly growing and changing areas of (organisation) consulting, while remaining one of the least defined and least understood professional development interventions. The working definition we use is of coaching as “a method of work-related learning which relies primarily on one-to-one conversations”¹.

In order to understand this executive coaching intervention better, the Ashridge Business School launched its Centre for Coaching in 2005 to create a centre of excellence for the budding profession. Over the past two years, the Centre has undertaken different lines of research, including an inquiry into virtual consultation and factors influencing coaching effectiveness.

The research

In this article, we would like to report on a key piece of research, still ongoing, into critical moments as they occur in executive coaching. The investigation focuses on ‘best practice’ and ‘effectiveness’ by considering the precise moments in the conversations when real coaching happens,

and the change that occurs during those moments.

We are asking coaches and their clients about moments that they have experienced as critical, exciting or significant, and to tell us more about them. We have taken an open approach that starts from the opposite end compared to the more traditional outcome measurement, where the whole coaching journey is subsumed under one single ‘mark’ on a Likert scale [a way of measuring attitudes by asking a series of questions with which people can strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree etc].

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In our case, rather than taking one number out of a whole relationship, we take a whole story out of one moment of coaching.

Samples of experienced and inexperienced coaches were interviewed, and their stories were ana-

lysed in terms of the nature of the difficulties they experienced during their work. Three studies have been carried out to date:

1. one looking at inexperienced coaches^a and the moments they encounter as they settle into the profession;
2. one looking at experienced coaches and the moments they continue to encounter after more than eight years in the profession; and
3. one looking at experienced coaches and their use of continuous professional development to handle their most critical moments.

Nearly 200 stories were collected in total (69 from inexperienced coaches, 78 from experienced coaches, and 51 from more in-depth interviews with other experienced coaches).

Doubt and questions

The key aspect that we discovered in all critical moments of inexperienced coaches was the fact that the coach was questioning something about their clients, themselves or their approach, so that they experienced some form of doubt².

“Who am I to think I can do this work?” was a common ques-

tion asked by most coaches new to the profession, and it sets up a bit of a Catch 22 situation. A good coach is likely to doubt his ability to coach and hence not market himself as assertively as he could, while a boastful coach is unlikely to doubt his ability and may not be as sensitive to the client as he ought to be.

Once engaged as a coach, the doubt and questioning turns to how to start the client relationship, what is going to happen, and will he be capable of contributing to the relationship once it is in place. Even after resolving all of these, when clients start to talk, the same coaches face doubts about how to respond, if indeed a response is appropriate.

How inexperienced coaches respond to their self-doubt is critical to their development as professionals over time. There should be times when the coach starts to feel, think or act differently as he develops ways of dealing with situations that relieve some of his doubts and answer some of his questions. Additional difficulties arise for internal coaches in organisations as they feel under particular pressure from the coachee or others in the organisation to achieve results or to take action in a particular direction.

The critical moments of inexperienced coaches can be categorised in four ways:

1. Doubts stemming from the nature of a coaching conversation.
2. Doubts stemming from the coaching relationship and transference^b.
3. Doubts stemming from guiding the coaching conversation.
4. Doubts stemming from the boundaries of the coaching relationship.

In view of all these different doubts, the attendant uncertainty and feeling of not knowing appear not to be the obstructive by-products of coaching, but actually a cru-



cial starting point for the coaching itself, with a decisive influence on the quality of the outcome. From analysing the various doubts, we drew the following conclusions:

1. The critical moment says something about both the coach and the coaching relationship.
2. Critical moments are potential breakthrough moments.
3. The more critical moments there are, the better the coaching.
4. Without critical moments coaches cannot continue to learn. There is a need for coaches to become both stronger (thicker

skinned) and more sensitive (thinner skinned) and this is achieved through the process of 'doubting'³. It is through the process of questioning and doubting that inexperienced coaches develop, but it is important that they have support mechanisms in place to help them face and bear their doubts rather than suppress them, for example, or prematurely resolve them.

Tension and anxiety

Moving on to the more experienced coaches, a different picture emerges⁴. What is most apparent in the

stories of experienced coaches is that they are managing and improving their coaching relationships rather than doubting their role in them.

Experienced coaches appear to have fewer doubts than those who are starting out in their coaching careers, and they approach their field of work – the coaching conversation and the coaching relationship – with more confidence. They are aware that they will have to monitor a lot of things closely if they are to achieve a genuine coaching conversation, and also realise that there will be surprises, unsought discoveries, unintended learning effects and unforeseen setbacks.

More generally, they experience coaching as something that cannot be taken for granted, that has to be earned and protected, and that, due to a wide range of factors beyond the coach's control, may sometimes have to be abandoned or on other occasions may bear exceptional fruits.

Hence the issues categorised above can be analysed in terms of a tension or anxiety that the coach is expressing, rather than doubts or questions. Seven areas of anxiety emerged from our analysis:

1. Anxiety about the boundaries of coaching (contracting, triangulation etc).
2. Anxiety about satisfactory outcomes.
3. Anxiety about the coach's own role.
4. Anxiety about the coach's own intuition.
5. Anxiety about what the coach contributes, or does not contribute.
6. Anxiety due to specific behaviour of the coachee.
7. Anxiety stemming mainly from inside the coach.

Analysis of these anxieties suggests that there are four key areas that the experienced coaches are grappling with. These are recurrent themes that continually re-emerge throughout the coaches' careers, and hence are referred to here as 'struggles':

1. The struggle to stay 'fresh and receptive'.
2. The struggle to retain and increase the coach's ability to put things into perspective.
3. The struggle to contribute 'containment' to the relationship.
4. The struggle to contribute the coach's own observations.

Positive changes appear to occur through coaching when there is sufficient trust to allow intuition to do its work, and such intuition generates fresh observations that help to put things into perspective. The coaches need to have the courage to reflect their observations back in such a way that the coachees can hear them, and the relationship develops into one that is well defined and, at the same time, provides space to explore.

Comparing the two groups of coaches, inexperienced and experienced, we can see that less experienced coaches appear to have more doubts during the coaching process itself, some of which are about their own suitability in their role as the coach. More experienced coaches still struggle with their critical moments, but do so with more self-confidence. More experienced coaches appear to have a different sort of self-awareness that seems sometimes linked to a desire to show that they are doing things well.

The role of CPD

So is it simply 'years of experience' that helps coaches develop their confidence and self-awareness? Those in search of professional standards in the field are committed to some form of continuous professional development (CPD) for coaches, which can take the form of attending courses, accreditation or supervision. The third study in the Ashridge trilogy looked at the role of CPD in executive coaching and how it contributed to coaches' handling of their critical moments⁵.

In this most recent study, the analysis took the form of investi-

gating the temporal process of the unfolding relationship for each of the stories told. Distinct phases in the stories were identified and characterised, such as explicit distancing, shared reflection and breakdown of the relationship. Analysis of the strings of phases showed that there was always an opening phase, where an emotion or issue was raised, then an intermediate phase, which consisted of some unexpected occurrence or change, a deepening of the relationship or shared reflection, and finally an ending which was positive, negative or unknown because the story was still ongoing.

The key finding from this analysis was that those moments that showed traces of shared reflection towards the end of the moment or incident differed in outcome from those that did not have any reflection before the end. The outcomes were much more positive for the coachees when the coaches reflected in the heat of the moment rather than responded without actively reflecting.

The benefits of supervision

The experienced coaches in this research used many different forms of support: from personal support such as family, friends and reading; to group support such as peer consultation and action learning; to professional support such as supervision, courses and qualifications. Supervision was specifically used to help coaches make sense of their experiences, either in terms of understanding what they could do differently or what they could do next, or what might have happened between their clients and themselves.

When analysing why the coaches took incidents to supervision, their responses indicated that they wanted to examine their response to the challenge that the critical incident posed, they wanted to better understand themselves, and they wanted reassurance. Hence supervision seems mainly used

for reassurance, confidence building and benchmarking executive coaching practice.

Key outcomes or learnings that coaches took from the supervision process included

1. learning more about coaching relationships;
2. learning more about themselves;
3. valuable reassurance;
4. more trusting of their intuition, and
5. learning around ethical and personal considerations.

The fact that ‘reassurance’ featured so strongly was a surprise, as this would link more closely to the ‘doubts’ that the inexperienced coaches held rather than the ‘struggles’ that the experienced coaches recounted, and yet the sample in this supervision study were experienced coaches.

At supervision, the coach will express his anxieties and doubts in terms of questions around what is going on: what do I see; what is going to happen; what is going on in my coachee, and what is *really* going on? There are no right and wrong answers to these questions, and no set formulae or solutions. The coach’s containment of the client’s anxiety at critical moments seems to be critical for the outcome, and it appears that this requires some active point of reflection rather than an immediately-articulated response.

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 to handle them. Most experienced coaches use and value supervision to make sense of these critical moments in their coaching relationships, as it affords them the space and time to work through the moments outside of the coaching conversation itself. CPD in coaching both improves the outcomes of the coaching interventions, and the skills and awareness of the coaches.



Examples of critical moments, taken from the three phases of our research

1) Critical moments of ‘new’ coaches

“I find getting to know new coachees the most critical part, time after time, because you don’t know how people will react. Perhaps they’re not willing, or not open to coaching and it often turns out that those are the very people who need coaching.”

“The coachee in question was sent by his manager for coaching and for referral to a programme in the area of assertiveness. After a conversation with the coachee, I told him that, on the basis of his story, I had a feeling that something else was the matter. The coachee started to shake all over and burst into tears. Then it all came out about how he had been feeling in recent months. At that moment I didn’t know what to do as the coach, apart from showing concern, and I asked the coachee if he was happy for me to refer him to the company doctor. In hindsight, that was a good decision. At the time, however, I was pretty nervous about it.”

“The moment when you feel you have to start to create structure in the conversation still gives me cause for doubt. What is a good comment or question? And questions arise

such as: what will come out of this conversation? What should I offer, or should I offer nothing at all?”

2) Critical moments of experienced coaches

“I can think of several where I have introduced a ‘right-brain’ approach such as a guided fantasy to explore unwanted ‘baggage’; a flipchart drawing to capture feelings about an issue; walking a time-line to explore difficult options; using each hand to represent opposing drives and to explore potential integration – in all I experienced a moment of breathless waiting: asking a question, seeking their response to the activity and its impact, or just waiting for them to engage with the suggestion. Each time there is a sense of ‘Is this a step too far for now?’; ‘Are they ready to engage with this issue in a deeper, more meaningful way and with this approach?’; ‘Will it leave them worse off or able to move forward?’ Always there is a sense of asking them to move into the unknown to a degree, and of moving into the unknown with them. Often there results a deeper insight, emotional awareness, clarity – which is what I am hoping. People can get upset at times in coaching but in the incidents described they (usually) engage and become intently curious

to explore. My breathless anticipation includes a fear of what may be raised to awareness and a readiness to deal with whatever materialises. The worst seems to be that occasionally the activity fizzles out, the impact seems negligible and we pass on. I don't recall any dreadful consequence. Despite this when it proves very helpful I always experience it as walking on egg shells, on a tight rope, it feels precarious."

"My coachee is a bank director. He is suspecting the head of his investment advisory group, a long-term personal friend, of theft! His question: How do I confront a close friend with such suspicion without clear evidence? We are pondering effective options on how to approach this delicate issue. We hear the ring tones of his mobile phone.

His secretary can hardly speak. Her information: the suspect has committed suicide some minutes ago with a gun in his office. My coachee breaks down and starts crying. I am stunned. I stay silent, leaving him to his emotions of guilt, shame, despair now breaking forth. Haven't we lost the cause? I can feel the void, a nagging vacuum. For a long moment I feel stuck with my habitual role identity as an executive coach: to know better than my coachees how to effectively cope with difficult situations. We have a new situation. And a different question: how to effectively cope with this tragedy? To cope with the unexpected can be challenging."

"I was working with a client who was extremely successful in his career at a relatively young age. He had it all, basically. Asking him the 'miracle question', he realised that he was already living his miracle. I was stumped. Where do we go from here, what is the next step in this coaching relationship? Did he need coaching at all? The coaching session was then taken up with him talking about how limited his view of his potential was. 'Potential' for him he noticed was not about career success (he already had that in spades and had very good prospects too), but it was about realising his true values about life and how

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to live accordingly. I have been seeing this client once a year following monthly then quarterly sessions in 2001 and 2002. He continues to be increasingly influential and highly regarded at a global level in his organisation. Recently he turned down a top job in his organisation because it did not fit in with his view of his future. He reports that that early miracle question is one he often reflects on and helps him make decisions about the direction of his career and lifestyle now."

3) Does supervision help?

"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 – a parallel)."

"I have had been working with a client for about five months. He professes to want to learn. If I respond by giving input or content, he 'yes, but's me. On this occasion, we were working on a problem. I invited him to work it out for himself. He then said: 'Can you tell me how to approach this?' I explained some guidelines and he said: 'That's all very well, but I have something in mind anyway.' I told him that I felt 'set up' in some sense, that I felt uncertain and uncomfortable and

did not like it very much. He responded by saying that no-one else gives him such feedback. He acknowledges that he responds like this in many circumstances. I don't know whether he is doing things differently, but I trust that by bringing it into his awareness he has a choice to do things differently."

"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." ■

^a These coaches were usually in their first or second year of practice. They were much more experienced as leaders and/or consultants and had in common that they were participating in a programme to train as a coach.

^b Transference is the phenomenon whereby relationship patterns from outside the coaching relationship influence the coaching relationship itself.

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