

**Becoming Simultaneously Thicker and Thinner Skinned:
The inherent conflicts arising in the professional development of coaches**

ABSTRACT

Research Paper

Purpose

There is a hidden paradox inherent in the ideal of continuing professional development (CPD) for executive coaches, stemming from the fact that the coach wishes to retain or preserve the freshness and openness of a 'beginner', whilst also acquiring greater robustness and resilience in the face of difficult assignments. The paradox reminds us of the 'castle and battlefield' metaphor of Roger Harrison (1963): on the one hand a strong container is needed and on the other vulnerability to allow the coach to be affected and even hurt by the coaching experiences. The objective of this paper is to find ways of resolving this paradox, based on what coaches themselves say about critical moments in their practice.

Design/methodology/approach

Sixty-nine critical moments as reported by 60 coaches are content-analysed with the help of grounded research.

Findings

In the analysis a picture emerges of *doubts* (instrumental, relational and existential), which the coaching process opens up for coaches, and which CPD may help them become aware of, explore and lay to rest. The most promising methodology for doing this seems to be coaching *supervision*, conducted in the safest possible environment.

Research limitations/implications

From this qualitative research by a single researcher inter-rater reliabilities cannot (yet) be reported.

Practical implications

It emerges that what coaches need most from their CPD is robustness in the face of their *instrumental* and *existential* doubts, and vulnerability when it comes to their *relational* doubts.

Originality/value

With the growth of the executive coaching profession, there is increasing interest in the value of continuing professional development for coaches. Executive coaches are embarking on CPD in large numbers, and are asking what is most relevant to them in their ongoing development. This paper offers empirical data that may inform CPD.

KEYWORDS

executive coaching, supervision, continuing professional development, adult learning, critical moments, organisational psychology

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1. Introduction

In executive coaching, leaders and managers submit issues from their practice to conversation, to explore and bring those issues forward with the help of an executive coach. Drawing from its roots in sports coaching (first reference in the 1860s, see Garvey, 2006), industrial counselling (first reference in the 1930s, see Baritz, 1960) and remedial action (Frisch, 2001), the coaching intervention is increasingly seen as a developmental journey, particularly by senior executives and consulting professionals. Bluckert (2005a) categorises executive coaches into two main groups: those who focus on learning and development leading to performance improvement, and those who focus on 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'. Other broader definitions include Pemberton's (2006): 'two people engaged together in raising the awareness of one of them, and therefore their ability to act' and our own: '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 remedial action, management education and sports coaching, it actually has much in common with the field of psychotherapy (Peltier, 2001; De Haan & Burger, 2005). Each of the four main currents in therapy has influenced approaches to executive coaching within organisations:

1. *Analytical* (psychodynamic) *coaching* is based on the works of Freud, Jung, Klein, Bion and others. Its emphasis is on primary process thinking, conflicts, transference, understanding and interpretation, as the individual attempts to understand from the inside (Brunning, 2006).
2. Cognitive and behavioural coaching, also known as *directive coaching*, draws on the works of Pavlov, Skinner, Ellis and Beck, and others. Its emphasis is on rational analysis and step-by-step plans, as the individual attempts to improve from the outside (Whitmore, 1992; Skiffington & Zeus, 2003; Greene & Grant, 2003).
3. *Person-centred* (humanistic) *coaching* draws on the works of Rogers, Maslow and others. Its emphasis is on internal evaluation and self-actualisation, as the individual attempts to move the focus inside (Kline, 1999).
4. *Paradoxical coaching* draws on the works of Erickson, Bateson, Watzlawick, Farrelly and others, putting the emphasis on paradoxes and drawing on and mobilising defences, in an attempt to upset, surprise or manipulate the individual from the outside. For examples of paradoxical coaching and of ‘milder’ (ironic) and ‘stronger’ (provocative) related approaches, see De Haan & Burger (2005).

While these varying approaches 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 and differences between coaching and therapy. Similarities include the bringing about of behavioural change and help in understanding how the client’s cognitive and emotional reactions can interfere with personal effectiveness, performance and well-being. Also both may adopt a client-centred, collaborative partnership approach. Key differences identified 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 work-related than therapy. Coaching may also be more results- and action-focused than therapy, and the educational backgrounds, competences and experiences of coaches and therapists are quite different. On a more practical level, there are generally differences of place, duration, frequency and costing.

The coaching profession is undergoing a period of rapid growth, maturation and consolidation, which can be seen in the growth of (self-regulating) professional bodies. In the last five years the European Mentoring & Coaching Council alone has gone from five to a staggering 700 members (Julie Hay, personal communication). With such accelerating growth and competition, more and more coaches and clients are questioning what the characteristics are of a truly 'professional' coach? And, how can professional coaches best continue their own development in order to maintain and improve their level of quality? Continuing professional development (CPD) methodologies such as engaging in supervision, undergoing coaching themselves and embarking on structured reflection, alone or with others, on the basis of recordings or transcripts, are enjoying increasing popularity among coaches. In addition to the professional development agenda of the coach, their clients are also increasingly interested in their coach's quality assurance policy and professional development practices.

The drive for continuing professional development seems to stem partly from the unique characteristics of coaching, where coaches work alone with their client and have few opportunities for peer support and feedback, and partly from increasing competition and maturation in the marketplace, where coaches have to demonstrate their professionalism and effectiveness. The counselling and therapy literature suggests that ongoing professional development 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 & Shoheit, 1989). A similar pattern is emerging in the literature with regard to coaches (see for example, Mead, Campbell & Milan, 1999; or Stevens, 2004). With the question mark over the value of ongoing professional development, and the definition of CPD possibly being so wide that it could include any conversation, the question arises as to what it is that makes CPD worthy of consideration, and which type of CPD to embark on?

At the same time as ‘coaching’ is maturing into a profession that acquires all the characteristics of transparency and accountable practice, there seems to be a diminishing interest in outcome studies as a means to understand the process of change and the effectiveness of the executive coaching intervention (Blackman, 2006). Outcome studies (see Feldman & Lankau, 2005, for a recent overview) which endeavour to determine the degree of effectiveness from quantitative assessments by clients, therapists and others, and the conditions under which greater effectiveness can be achieved (Wampold, 2001), are the traditional way of measuring effectiveness in psychotherapy and coaching. However, it is not possible with outcome studies to gain any understanding of the complex minute by minute and session by session processes of coaching itself, processes that often extend over months or even years and are influenced by countless factors both internal and external to both the coach and the coaching itself. By only using measures of over-all effectiveness, it is impossible to gain an insight into the exact factors that lead to specific coaching results, even if one leaves aside the multiple causality of any result of coaching.

From the more personal perspective of the coach, their development arguably has a double-edged objective. On the one hand, development promotes the knowledge and skills of the coach, who becomes stronger and more effective as a result, especially in situations that are experienced as difficult. On the other hand, development activities help to make the coach more aware of and sensitive to signals and behaviour on the part of clients. There is an internal contradiction in this: stronger and more robust on the one hand, more sensitive and more vulnerable on the other, i.e. a thicker skin on the one hand and a thinner skin on the other. In the *Conclusion* section I will come back to this paradox and suggest some answers as to how CPD activities might benefit the full development agenda of professional coaches.

This study adopts a method that inquires into the personal side of coaching and focuses on experienced *critical moments* in coaching: ‘turning points’ and ‘dilemmas’ as perceived by coaches themselves. In so doing, I follow the exhortation of Rice and Greenberg, who wrote as long ago as 1984 in their book *Patterns of Change* that “What is needed is a research method that can tap the rich clinical experience of skilled therapists in a way that will also push them to explicate what they know, yielding a rigorous description of the important regularities they have observed”. Over the last decade, we have seen a growing tradition in psychotherapy research investigating these critical moments (Carlberg, 1997; Stern, Sander,

Nahum, Harrison, Lyons-Ruth, Morgan, Bruschwiler-Stern & Tronick, 1998; Stern, 2004). This study applies the same tradition to coaching.

This study was carried out among 60 coaches, and its central research question was

*Describe briefly one **critical moment** (an exciting, tense or significant moment) with one of your coachees. Think about what was critical in the coaching journey, or a moment when you did not quite know what to do.*

Hence the area of interest is coaches' direct experience of coaching and the nature of their response to what happens at critical times. It will be shown that from these experiences of coaches we can infer requirements for sound CPD activities.

2. Methodology

Over the past four years, a study of the *critical* moments experienced by coaches, and how they handle them was carried out at the Sioo business school in Utrecht. Sixty coaches were in the sample, primarily those relatively new to the profession. They were all in their first or second year of coaching practice. Each was asked to describe a critical moment (an exciting, tense or significant moment) with one of their coachees, or a moment when they did not quite know what to do. Some provided more than one critical moment, and a total of 69 real-life critical moments were collected. Permission was obtained from all coaches who participated in this research for their responses to be used in the study.

Content analysis was carried out on the descriptions of the critical moments (see De Haan, 2008), by coding the emotional content in each description: every new internal experience, emotion or thought in every description was coded by a short description, as close as possible to the author's words. This yielded on average 2.7 codes per description, with a lot of overlap: a set of only 58 different codes was sufficient to capture all experiential content of the 69 moments. Most codes therefore reoccurred in other critical moments: on average every code occurred in 3.2 descriptions of critical moments. An unexpected outcome of this analysis was that all the codes turned out to be indicative of doubts. In other words, the key factor that made the moment critical on all occasions was that the coach questioned something about what was going on, or in other words experienced some form of doubt related to the coaching relationship, the client or themselves. Further analysis was then carried out to group the 58 areas of doubt. Those groupings of doubts are presented in the

remainder of this paper, before conclusions are drawn with regard to the continuing professional development of coaches.

3. Analysis: the patterns found in the critical moments

‘Who am I to think I can do this work?’ is a common question asked by virtually every coach in this study. It suggests that the presumption that an individual is capable of coaching another is presumptuous in itself. A Catch 22 could arise here; some coaches will question the basis of this presumption, and hence not promote themselves as an expert coach – while a more presumptuous coach will have the confidence to take this for granted and sell themselves more widely in the marketplace, but may actually be less competent. The self-doubt and questioning of what a coach can really contribute to a potential new client appears to play a role even before the client relationship has started, and can impact on the start of the relationship¹.

“Gaining the coachee’s confidence so that essential problems can be discussed. She knew me as a member of the management team with a reputation for being demanding and straight-to-the-point. Now I was to be her coach.”

“The fact that the coachee chose me gave me a lot of confidence and room to work. I do experience some pressure because she has a lot of experience of therapy and because she took a personal effectiveness training course recently.”

“I find it difficult to coach senior people, who have so much more work experience than I do.”

Once engaged as a coach, the doubt and questioning appears to turn to how to start the relationship, what is going to happen, and will they be capable of contributing to the relationship once it is in place (i.e., have they overcome their initial doubts).

“I can't describe one critical moment; all of my coaching sessions to date have been very critical. Especially the uncertainty about the course the proceedings will take,

even though feedback shows time and again that the coachees view the sessions positively. They say they find tools they can use to make progress in their work.”

“The first conversation with my client was my most critical moment. How do you prepare for it? How will he react to your approach? Will it all be over inside of half an hour? And so on.”

“I had the first contact with my coachee this week. A first ‘rendezvous’ like that is always critical: what will she look like, how will she come across, what will she think of me?”

Once this phase progresses smoothly, the next critical point appears to be when something critical arises within the relationship and the coach has to respond. Here the doubts appear to be about how to respond and how the response will affect the existing relationship. What should the response be, for example, if the coachee puts the coach on a pedestal, flatters the coach, or keeps telling them ‘they’re learning lots’ when the coach feels they are not?

“A critical moment is when I can tell there is something going on behind all of the information being communicated to me, but I can’t yet put my finger on it. In that case I’m not quite sure what to do. In hindsight I think I should have reflected that fact back, but in the heat of the moment it didn’t occur to me.”

“Critical moments are moments when you have to be very open yourself in order to coax someone out of his shell. You point something out, such as an awkward response, and mention it directly which makes me feel like working on the edge.”

“What I always find critical, time and again, is when emotions get really high. For example, when my coachee is particularly angry or disconsolate over events in his work, such as the actions or behaviour of others. Because you are so close to the root of the other person’s problem at times like these, I am always afraid that I’ll say or do the wrong things, which may ultimately have a considerable effect on my coachee’s

¹ The 22 critical moments cited or partly cited in this section are all from different coaches, just to give an indication of the variety in the reported material.

development. I am keen to help and guide, but not in the wrong direction. So then I doubt if I'm doing the right thing.”

How coaches respond to their self-doubt appears to be critical to their development as a professional coach over time. As coaches develop ways of dealing with situations that relieve some of their doubts and answer some of their questions, there will undoubtedly be times when they start to feel, think or act differently.

Additional difficulties can arise for internal coaches in organisations. They can feel under particular pressure from their leaders and colleagues within the organisation to achieve results or to take action in a particular direction.

“Not knowing what to do: having the manager foist an under-performing colleague on you with the announcement that his performance must improve spectacularly within a given period or he will be dismissed. It was clear that the manager didn't expect anything of the coaching and had in fact already drawn his own conclusions. I just barged right in, not knowing what I was actually supposed to do. I hadn't discussed the conditions for the coaching with the manager, or its scope. The employee was dismissed after six months. I was left with a feeling of failure.”

“The coachee in question was sent by his manager for coaching and for referral to an 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.”

Equally, team coaching adds another complexity as the coach now meets a variety of options and dilemmas for the various people around the table.

“Team coaching: bringing different interests in team conflict on to the table and making them workable.”

Through coding of the 69 critical moments we were able to discern broader categories of doubts, which are outlined below (for the full analysis, see De Haan, 2008).

3.1 Doubts stemming from the nature of a coaching conversation.

These sorts of questions might run through the coach's head in every conversation and stem from them questioning how they can be a good coach. They cover the more general doubts expressed by respondents:

“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?”

Others recount more specific situations:

“What I always find critical, time and again, is when emotions get really high. For example, when my coachee is particularly angry or disconsolate over events in his work, such as the actions or behaviour of others. Because you are so close to the root of the other person's problem at times like these, I am always afraid that I'll say or do the wrong things, which may ultimately have a considerable effect on my coachee's development.”

Generally here the questions are around whether coaching is the right thing, whether they are the right coach and whether they will be able to maintain the coaching relationship when it comes under pressure.

3.2 Doubts stemming from the coaching relationship and transference.

Transference is the phenomenon whereby relationship patterns from outside the coaching relationship influence the coaching relationship itself. It is hard to overestimate the importance of the relationship between coach and coachee. Here many of the critical incidents refer to situations where emotions came to the surface:

“When my coachee let off steam over a situation we both found very annoying, I was at risk of falling into the trap of joining in and having a good grumble.”

Others are more specifically about establishing the element of trust:

“Gaining the coachee’s confidence so that essential problems can be discussed. She knew me as a member of the management team with a reputation for being demanding and straight-to-the-point. Now I was to be her coach. In the beginning she said her main problem was lack of time. That was true, but it was hiding something more important: the fact that she was facing burn-out and had come to a deadlock in her project and was unable to break through the impasse. So we had to develop a common idiom at the start and I had to discover where she was experiencing problems. The moment when she stated that she had a problem and that she trusted me was indeed a breakthrough in a sense. Now she is very happy with the coaching and gives me too much credit for it.”

Here the questions seem to be around handling coachees whom the coach finds difficult for one reason or another, i.e., they find them irritating, don’t like them, find they are flirting with them, and so forth; or they are around being accepted by the coachee, and being respected and trusted with regard to their role in the coaching relationship.

3.3 Doubts stemming from the boundaries of the coaching relationship.

This area seems to represent the importance of explicit coaching contracts and the codes of conduct to which professional coaches should, in theory, not only refer and adhere to, but remain cognisant of during every coaching conversation. Such ethical guidelines should help coaches resolve these dilemmas relatively easily, but the role of the internal coach in particular appears to throw up some interesting challenges:

“Because I have various roles in my position and have to deal with many different layers of management, I often end up in situations where I have advance knowledge or background information that my coachee doesn’t or shouldn’t have. In many cases it is not my duty to share that knowledge with my coachee. Situations may also arise

where I feel obliged to do something with the information I get from the coachee vis-à-vis senior management, such as give out a signal. At moments like that I really doubt what to do; until now I have been frank about such a dilemma with the coachee. But I think I always run the risk that the coachee will see it as a restriction that I sometimes represent several interests.”

Equally, just being in the same company as the coachee can have its challenges:

“A critical moment was when my coachee had received blunt criticism from a colleague and sought my opinion about it. I agreed with the colleague’s comment in essence, but was nervous about telling him this. I was tense because I was afraid he’d hold it against me.”

Another reflected on the boundary between coaching and therapy:

“A critical moment for me was when we reached a sort of personal core after two sessions. On the one hand I felt we were really getting to the root of her problems and that was great, but on the other hand I found it scary that I was getting into something that I did not know how to handle. And what then? Where does the coach end and the therapist begin?”

Questions here appear to be centralised around the coaching-therapy boundary, the boundary of the coaching relationship becoming too personal, and the organisational boundaries of the internal coach having to respect the coaching relationship within wider organisational expectations.

3.4 Doubts stemming from guiding the coaching conversation.

Here the focus of uncertainty appears to be on whether or not there really is an issue that needs exploring, and how such a matter should be approached. The coaches appear not to want to seem too controlling as they believe this can put the relationship under unnecessary pressure, and yet they also don’t want to appear to passive. In a coaching relationship, it is the coachee who should be central – otherwise it is not really a coaching relationship – so coaches are mindful of the fact that they do not want to over-direct the conversation.

However, they can still be responsible for the direction of the conversation and the balance between different topics during the conversation. Some coaches have issues around identifying the area to focus on:

“A critical moment is when I can tell there is something going on behind all of the information being communicated to me, but I can’t yet put my finger on it. In that case I’m not quite sure what to do. In hindsight I think I should have reflected that fact back, but in the heat of the moment it didn’t occur to me.”

Another reflected on the process of getting people to open up initially:

“Critical moments are moments when you have to be very open yourself in order to coax someone out of his shell. You point something out, such as an awkward response, and mention it directly, which makes me feel like working on the edge.”

“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.”

Or specifically on the approach they chose:

“My most critical moment was when I followed my coachee entirely in what she was saying in a coaching conversation, and kept playing back her words. In the end, this left little scope for a solution to her problem. I always had the feeling, up to and including the next conversation, that I had forced something. And so I was afraid that my approach had disrupted the coaching process towards her longer-term goal. My ‘not quite knowing what to do’ left me at a crossroads: giving back what she said or bringing the conversation back to her original question. The latter didn’t seem like something a coach should do – I was afraid the conversation would get bogged down. This example shows that, even if I don’t know what to do, I often decide just to do something. But perhaps I can still change that during the conversation and then ask for feedback about my approach.”

The nature of the questions and areas of doubt here are the ‘how to’ questions. How to handle a breakthrough and the subsequent feeling of satisfaction? How to voice their own opinion? How to find a balance between objectivity and joint responsibility? And so forth. Coaches may ask what aim or result the coachee has in mind, but even this does not remove the uncertainty of what will happen next.

4. Discussion: what these critical moments may be saying about ‘good enough coaching’

As stated before, content analysis of the descriptions of these critical moments shows that it is primarily the doubts of the coach that come to the fore in moments of tension. As such, the attendant uncertainty and feeling of not knowing appear not to be the obstructive by-products of coaching, but actually more like the starting point for coaching, having a decisive influence on the quality of the outcome. These doubts, tensions and questions cannot be answered or resolved in advance of the incident, so it is crucial for the coach to be receptive to as many signals as possible, and to explore how their doubts can be responded to productively. From further analysis which is reported in De Haan (2008), four patterns seem to emerge in these critical moments:

4.1 The critical moment says something about both the coach and the coaching relationship

The amount and type of tension that the coach experiences at any point in the coaching process seems to say something about how difficult and/or significant he or she finds that particular moment and about sensitive points that may occur in the developing relationship with the coachee. The tensions are arising partly from the sensitivity or suspicion on the part of the coach, and partly from what the coachee does in the same conversation. A good coach tries to distinguish carefully between the transference brought in by the client and the transference that the coach contributes to the coaching situation. By continually asking “What comes from whom?”, the coach can use his or her own counter-transference as an antenna alerting them to what the coachee triggers in themselves (see Heimann, 1950, and De Haan & Burger, 2005).

This study finds the same imbalance recurring time and again with the various participants in the study: on the one hand, a critical moment is a difficult, awkward moment that hinders the

coach and puts him/her off balance, while on the other hand it is precisely in and as a result of such moments that the coach can learn something about him or herself, about the coaching relationship and ultimately about the coachee.

4.2 Critical moments are potential breakthrough moments

More than half of the critical moments raised in this study coincided with a significant change in the coaching relationship, in two respects:

1. Either external factors intervening such as it being the first meeting, or there being an intervention by management in the coaching, or the completion of the course.
2. Or it being times when there was an important new breakthrough in understanding, for example the coaches report explicitly that ‘the penny dropped’ or that a breakthrough was achieved.

Other critical moments had the potential to be breakthrough moments, but at the time it appears that the tension had not been made explicit in an acceptable manner. For example, where there was an extraverted coach struggling with an introverted coachee, or where the coach doesn’t really have confidence that the coachee wants to or is able to change, the coaches kept their insights to themselves but reported that the coaching remained difficult and unproductive.

Hence such incidents in retrospect could either be described as ‘breakthrough moments’ or as ‘missed opportunities’ according to the response of the coach. This suggests that critical moments could be more of a blessing for the coaching process than a distraction, disruption or deterioration. They are moments when the coach has the opportunity to find deeper layers and new ways of looking at things.

4.3. The more critical moments, the better the coaching

While critical moments can be potential breakthrough moments, this does not mean that all the coach needs to do is to create as many critical moments as possible in order to generate an equal number of breakthroughs. The only coaches who might well subscribe to this assertion are those who work provocatively (see, for example, Farrelly & Brandsma, 1974). They use

their coaching conversations to 'deliver' critical moments to the coachee, although this means that the critical moments can remain more those of the coach than those of the coachee. The analysis in this study tentatively suggests that the more critical moments the better, but only if they can come from the coachee. Coaching is about getting coachees to share and (re)experience their own critical moments. For the coach, this means being available, asking questions, listening, exploring, and building up a relationship in which critical things can be expressed and critical transitions can be felt. In particular, it means not avoiding or repressing critical moments when they occur, as coachees appear to be well able at doing that themselves. The art of coaching appears to be rather being able to use those moments in the coaching process itself, by contemplating them and asking questions about them, together with the coachee.

This requires the coach to have a unique combination of warmth and daring, sensitivity and awareness of boundaries, or, in Mary-Beth O'Neill's words (2000), 'coaching with backbone and heart', if they are to do a good job. Strength, daring and containment (*backbone*) to examine the critical moment, and acceptance, readiness and warmth (*heart*) to welcome and support it. This leads us to the vital relational aspects in coaching, which have been shown to account for as much as 30 % of the outcome in psychotherapy (Asay & Lambert, 1999; Wampold, 2001). Basic relational conditions were first studied by Rogers (1961) who hypothesised that they consist primarily of empathy, acceptance, warmth and authenticity – the thinner rather than the thicker skin of the coach.

4.4 Without critical moments coaches cannot continue to learn

It is an all too human, and ultimately biological, reaction to want initially to eliminate tension, doubt and ambivalence by fighting or fleeing. Our coachees seem to display such 'flight' impulses when they avoid addressing the issue being offered. They can skirt around issues, or ignore their tensions, or even pin them down with a firm interpretation. The more an individual practises coaching, the more they build up long-term defences against their areas of tension and existential doubt without realising it. This is perhaps the main reason why inexperienced therapists often appear to perform better than experienced ones (Dumont, 1991). They have fewer long-term defences and can therefore set to work with more enthusiasm, involvement, vulnerability and naivety, allowing more of their own doubts to enter their deliberations. This study focused on relatively inexperienced coaches, and their

range of critical moments covered a vast range of issues within the coaching field. Two potential conflicts might arise as the coaches gain more experience:

1. It could be expected that more experienced coaches become both calmer and more sensitive as a result of training and recurrence of moments that considered critical the first time they occur. However, they may also become more jaded and lose their edge.
2. Experienced coaches may sense critical moments sooner, and develop a ‘suspicious’ antenna that alerts them to such moments. However, critical moments are always most critical for those encountering them for the first time, and hence may cease to be critical.

This could have implications for the profession. Perhaps a process of self-selection will take place where by those coaches who remain receptive and continue to ask questions about their coachees and themselves will stay in the profession, while others will seek a change of career as they no longer derive personal benefit from the process. Alternatively, it may be those very people who are susceptible to flattery or suffer from a ‘helper’s syndrome’ (Miller, 1979), who stay in the profession rather than leave it.

The value of experience in the coaching profession may therefore turn out to be ambiguous. It is experiential learning, possibly through a process of ongoing supervision that can help coaches translate experience into more effective action or even retain their initial involvement and naivety. From the critical moments described in this study, it would appear that a number of subtle forms of transference may remain implicit or lacking, forms that more experienced coaches would hopefully identify more explicitly, such as the coachee working hard for the coach, the coachee being in competition with the coach, or the coachee ‘using’ the coach for non-learning purposes (for a more detailed exposition of these phenomena, see De Haan & Burger, 2005). New data is currently being collected from experienced coaches, to check these hypotheses.

5. Conclusion: what these critical moments may be saying about continuing professional development

The conflict surrounding the coaches’ own development, i.e. the question “How do I become both stronger (thicker skinned) and more sensitive (thinner skinned)?”, appears to recur in the

coaching process itself, in the offering of both challenge and support, or in O'Neill's (2000) words, both 'backbone' and 'heart'. The same conflict appears in different guises throughout the coaching process, from minute-by-minute coaching (very short-term) all the way to career development (long-term). Some critical moments in this research that show a rupture in the coach-coachee relationship (De Haan, 2008) tell us that this conflict is sometimes resolved in a way that leads to a deterioration in the coaching, i.e., by the coach becoming less perceptive and less sensitive and often at the same time less robust and less self-confident. Likewise, Dumont (1991) has demonstrated that deterioration in therapeutic effectiveness often occurs in the course of a therapist's career. Ideally, one would want to see coaches do the opposite: become both thicker and thinner skinned with time, thereby developing both their 'hearts' and their 'backbones'. The question remains, how can this be achieved, how can the paradox of 'castle' and 'battlefield' (Harrison, 1963) be resolved?

One way of looking at the doubts that arise in the critical moments, is through a 'Johari-type' window (Luft, 1969). Although in this research we can only surface conscious doubts of coaches, because we are hearing them through their own reports of critical situations, it is probably safe to assume that there are also many doubts that coaches are not aware of, or that are temporarily outside their awareness (so-called 'pre-conscious' doubts). Another important distinction to make is between doubts that are open to exploration, (doubts that the coach can explore, reflect on and learn from) and doubts that stand in the way of exploration, because they lead to overly high levels of anxiety and arousal. These two distinctions (between conscious and unconscious, and between open to or not open to exploration) span a two-by-two window on doubts similar to Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham's (Luft, 1969) 'Johari' window on feedback (see Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

At the same time there is an important *hierarchy* of the many doubts expressed in the 69 critical moments:

1. *Existential doubts*, in which the professionalism of the coach and the nature of the coaching intervention are called into question by the coach (see section 3.1 above). Among the 69 critical moments, 17 clearly raised existential doubts, and they are essentially 'Who' questions (Who am I to do the coaching? Who is it this coachee needs?).

2. *Relational doubts*, in which the nature of the relationship with the client and the boundaries of the coaching are called into question by the coach (see sections 3.2 and 3.3 above). Among the 69 critical moments, 24 clearly raised relational doubts, and they are essentially ‘What’ questions (What is going on between us? What is being addressed here?).
3. *Instrumental doubts*, in which the guidance and process of the coaching conversations are called into question by the coach (see section 3.4 above). Among the 69 critical moments, 28 raised mainly instrumental doubts, and they are essentially ‘How’ questions (How do I respond here? How do I structure this conversation? How do I intervene?).

This simple taxonomy is essentially a hierarchy: if the earlier, more profound doubts have not been resolved to satisfaction, the more instrumental doubts cannot yet be addressed. Conversely, if the coach is experiencing less profound doubts, then we can assume that the deeper ones have, at least partly, been resolved – even if only temporarily and unsatisfactorily.

Many doubts have their origin with the coachee as it is (s)he who comes to the coaching with an array of doubts and queries, or ‘issues’, in the first place. Again, these can be of a relatively superficial, instrumental nature, but also of a deeper, relational nature, and finally more personal, of an existential nature. Coaches work with their clients’ doubts on several levels *while* being exposed to their own doubts as well.

The conflicts within the coach around a thicker or thinner skin exist on all these levels, but over time one would expect a way of resolving those conflicts in a hierarchical way. A ‘well-functioning’ coach has acquired a reasonable self-confidence with respect to existential doubts, and some self-confidence with respect to the relational and instrumental doubts, whilst being at the same time open and even vulnerable in these latter areas. Figure 2 illustrates how the two-by-two windows on the three levels of doubt might look for a coach who is both thicker and thinner skinned in the right places: most of the existential doubts have been laid to rest, many of the instrumental doubts are open to exploration, and the main focus of doubting is in the relational arena.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Continuing professional development (CPD) should help executive coaches with these doubts, moving them generally towards the quadrant of conscious exploration (upper-left in Figure 1). The images of a ‘thicker’ and ‘thinner’ skin, or of the development of more ‘backbone’ and ‘heart’ (O’Neill, 2000) are relevant here. It seems coaches would do well to develop a thicker skin (or, more backbone) when it comes to their instrumental doubts, and perhaps their existential doubts, whilst developing a thinner skin (or, more heart) when it comes to their relational doubts. CPD should help them in creating a well-defended ‘castle’ (Harrison, 1963) for their instrumental and existential doubts, whilst at the same time creating a more exposed ‘battlefield’ (again, Harrison, 1963) for their relational doubts.

Of the three methods of CPD for coaches mentioned in the introduction (undergoing supervision, undergoing coaching and engaging in structured reflection), the first one, undergoing supervision, seems to be the most promising to resolve or lay to rest certain more existential doubts and anxieties, while opening up and exploring relational and instrumental ones. This is because coaching supervision remains focused on the present coaching experience and offers a fresh way of interpreting that experience. Undergoing coaching widens the conversational space to incidents and issues outside of professional coaching, whereas personal structured reflection on coaching experience, or internal supervision as it is sometimes called (Casement, 1985), runs the risk of becoming an immersion into the doubts rather than finding space to reflect and review those doubts with an aim of resolving some, and opening up others.

The data suggests that developing into a ‘well-functioning’ or ‘good enough’ coach means acquiring the ability to use one’s own doubts and questions, and to greet what comes next with sensitivity. Like Descartes in his famous *Meditations*, coaches experience a significant turning point when they shift their attention away from the many doubts, uncertainties and anxieties that assail them during the coaching, towards the activity of doubting itself, which can be regarded as both a starting point and a *raison d’être* of their professional activity. Descartes’ famous saying can therefore be rephrased for coaches as “I doubt therefore I coach”. This sense of doubt leads to coaches developing both their thick skin (‘existential and relational grounding’) and thinner skin (‘relational and instrumental openness’), simultaneously.

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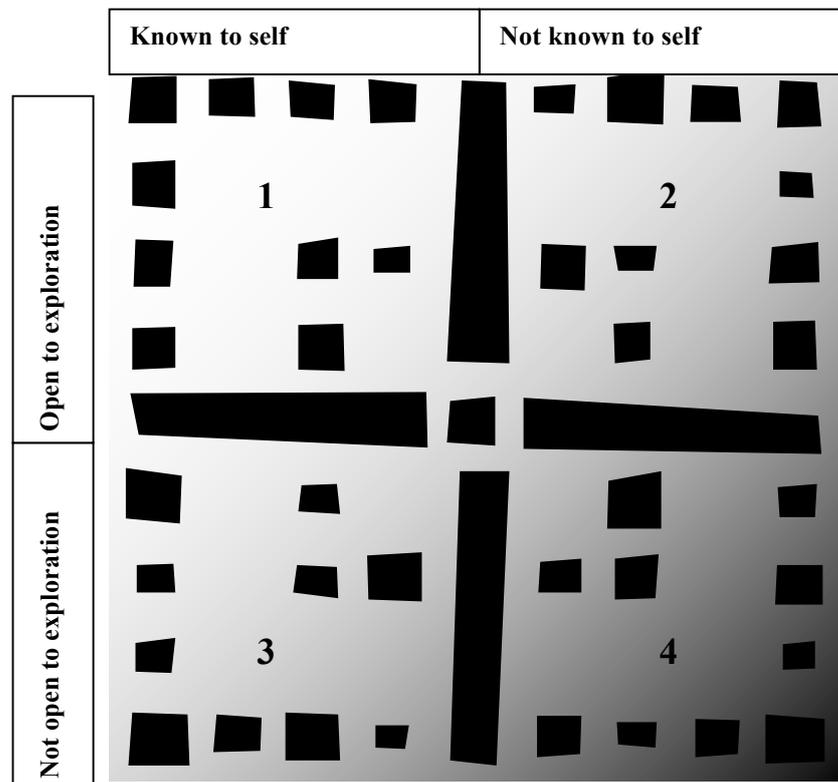
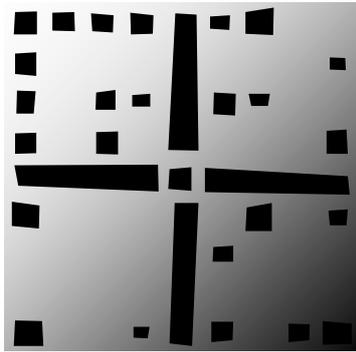


FIGURE 1

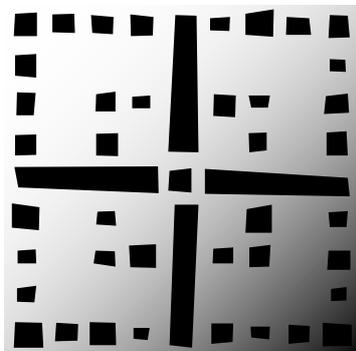
A ‘Johari’ window (Luft, 1969) on the doubts of coaches, showing four different types or ‘strengths’ of doubts that a coach may have. The shading in the window gives an indication as to how much grip the coach has on these doubts, with lighter areas showing more grip and darker ones less grip.

This study has uncovered many doubts of coaches, stemming from their critical moments. Naturally, because these are self-reported doubts, they are all on the left side of the window: ‘known to self’. However, we can safely assume that there are also doubts which are less known to the coach, and therefore belong to the right side of the window. The window distinguishes between the following doubts:

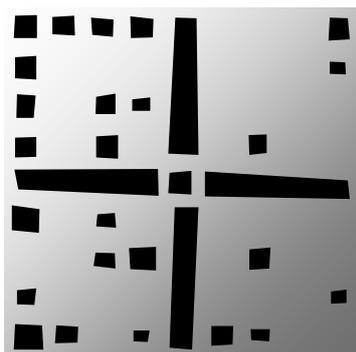
1. Known and open to exploration. These are doubts that the coach feels sufficiently comfortable with, so that they can be looked at and explored, so that new insight can be derived from them. When the coaching is proceeding well, the doubts and issues of the coachee should be in this part of the window – so that the coach is not unaware of them or overwhelmed by them.
2. Not known but open to exploration. These are doubts that have not yet surfaced consciously, but that the coach can handle well. Examples are doubts of the coachee not yet intuited by the coach, or own doubts that have been laid to rest (‘pre-conscious’ doubts).
3. Known but not open to exploration. These are the doubts that overwhelm the coach, that make the situation critical, and that the coach does not quite know how to handle. Many of the doubts reported in this study are in this field (which is unsurprising, given that critical moments were reported).
4. Not known and not open to exploration. These may be a vast array of doubts: doubts that have been suppressed, artificially resolved, avoided, or those that are going by unnoticed.



Existential doubts



Relational doubts



Instrumental doubts

FIGURE 2

Figure 2 illustrates a full picture of the doubts of a coach, on three levels: existential, relational and instrumental. I argue that a 'well-functioning' coach will have laid to rest most of the existential doubts, which is indicated by the lighter shading and by the emptier fields of 'not known to self' and 'not open to exploration'. The instrumental doubts will have been largely resolved, which is indicated again by lighter shading and emptier fields. For the instrumental doubts, particularly, there are very few remaining dots in the 'not known to self' areas: a well-functioning coach will have explored most ways of working and styles. Most of the interest – and tension! – for this coach is in the *relational* area, where the coach struggles to relate to this particular coachee at this particular moment in time.