

“I struggle and emerge”

Critical moments of experienced coaches

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The author thanks all of the colleagues who contributed to this study for their exceptional frankness.

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Abstract

A recent study of critical moments of relatively inexperienced coaches in their first year of formal coaching activities yielded new perspectives on the doubts and dilemmas faced by coaches during their coaching conversations (De Haan, 2007). This led the researcher to question whether these same doubts and dilemmas would remain as coaches gained experience, or whether new issues would emerge. Experienced coaches were defined as coaches who have at least eight years' coaching practice behind them after completing their formal training or accreditation. The sample size was 110 and 47 coaches responded communicating a total of 78 critical moments. Analysis of the moments revealed explicit evidence of both unpredictability and a deeper emotional meeting, either positive or negative. This appears to support Carlberg's (1997) conclusions that 'unpredictability' and 'deeper emotional meeting' always go hand-in-hand. It would seem that the quality of an experienced coach's work is determined primarily by their ability to tolerate tension and deliberately inquire into tensions within coaching relationships; else they are in danger of simply becoming good conversation partners.

Keywords

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

Introduction

In the wake of my recent study of critical moments of relatively inexperienced coaches, a study which was carried out among 49 coaches, the majority of whom were in their first year of formal coaching activities (De Haan, 2007), and which yielded new perspectives on the doubts and dilemmas faced by coaches during their coaching conversations, it seemed a worthwhile exercise to embark upon a similar study among more experienced coaches.

The central research question appears to be suitable for repeating with more experienced coaches, and for an approach using email, which would lower the barrier to participation as much as possible and make sending out a reminder less of a nuisance to the recipient. The question asked in the first study (De Haan, 2007) 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.

This question was posed to 110 experienced coaches from my own network (61 women, 49 men), that of the Ashridge Business School and that of my colleague Yvonne Burger. The criterion stipulated in the email was that coaches should have at least eight years' coaching practice behind them after completing their formal training or accreditation. Many of them were not formally accredited, however, because such accreditation was not common practice a decade or more ago. The reminder email was sent out three weeks later. Five respondents replied that they did not meet the criteria and 47 coaches responded (43 %), communicating a total of 78 moments. The coaches who responded are among the best and most experienced coaches I know. To be precise, the group of 47 experienced coaches consists predominantly of external coaches. More than 30 of these are independent coaches, the next largest cohort consists of seven coaches accredited and working at Ashridge, and two are internal coaches. 25 of the 47 coaches are based in the Netherlands, 18 in the United Kingdom, two in Germany, one in the United States, and one in South Africa. 28 women and 19 men responded; 26 replied in Dutch and 21 in English. Even though the email left open the possibility of asking others ("If you know anyone else who might be interested..."), only one of the 47 respondents was not contacted by myself directly. I myself therefore contacted 109 experienced coaches.

The aim of the study was to obtain a greater understanding of the processes that lead to change as a result of coaching. Change through coaching is usually investigated by means of outcome studies (for a summary of most of the outcome studies before 2005, see Feldman & Lankau, 2005), which make it possible to determine the degree of effectiveness, and sometimes – in very balanced and well thought-out meta-studies; see Wampold, 2001 – the conditions under which greater effectiveness can be achieved. What is not possible with outcome studies, however, is to gain any understanding of the complex processes of coaching that often extend over several sessions and are influenced by countless factors both internal and external to the coaching itself. As a result it seems impossible, using these measurements of effectiveness, ever to gain an insight into the exact factors that lead to specific coaching results, in other words, into the (multiple) causality of coaching. This is why I opted in this case for a method that, rather than collating large numbers of very general and discrete comments on coaching (usually consisting of ratings on a Likert scale), studies the personal side of coaching and focuses on critical moments in coaching: 'turning points' and

‘dilemmas’ as perceived by the coach himself. In so doing, I followed the exhortation of Rice and Greenberg (1984), who wrote 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” (page 7).

The type of study to which this article belongs is *narrative* and *qualitative* in nature (see Smith, 2003), so what I was primarily looking for here is *meaning*, in an *inductive* manner. The researcher is not an objective observer in such research, but participates as a subjective ‘colleague’ in the material (in this case the critical moments), by imposing a sequence, identifying patterns, and inferring interpretations. Indeed, the very choice of moments as the study material stems from my personal experience of coaching: they are the moments that most leave an impression with me, that make a difference to me, and that I refer to many times subsequently. By asking respondents to describe a moment, one is determining the ‘unit’ of coaching to be studied: the moment, the event, the ultra-short time period. However, the descriptions given by the participants in the study clearly show that those moments are always linked to a whole conversation, to a coaching relationship, and sometimes to many years of personal coaching journey. The contributions differ in many respects, though: some cite the most critical moment of their career, dating back ten years or more, while others simply mention the ‘critical moment that happened yesterday, and another one from today’.

All of the coaches gave consent for the anonymous use of their critical moment, and took steps themselves to ensure that their incidents were untraceable. I did not select further, so all of the moments contributed are reported here. The only (minor) changes I made were to edit every moment into a single paragraph, to remove spelling and stylistic errors and to translate the Dutch contributions into English as literally as possible. In some cases I also deleted some of the background information which was not directly relevant to the moment but related to the background of the coach or to my study, for example. I did not contribute a ‘critical moment’ myself because I did not wish to influence the study material.

The participants wouldn’t be experienced coaches if they didn’t offer the researcher unsolicited advice, such as:

- “Are you sure you get the ‘tough cases’ as well, this way?”
- “Taking stock of the results of critical moments for the person being coached can also yield interesting information. As a coach, you are keen to record the positive effect of a critical moment, but what is ultimately important is whether the person being coached experiences it.”

Before moving on to the overview and analysis of all 78 critical moments, I would like to start with some more of the valuable comments made by the participants in their email responses:

- “Even though I've been doing this work for years and notice I'm becoming more and more skilful at handling these moments.... I still find it exciting.”
- “I certainly do know moments like that, and I have to say I like them.”
- “A critical moment can occur at any stage.”
- “Apparently I find difficult situations hard to think about or remember! I've never had a situation where I broke out in a sweat or was completely stumped. No-one ever says anything aggressive, no-one ever walks out, there are never any awkward silences or a total energy drain.”
- “My impression is that there must have been more critical moments, but I think they often occur in your first few years as a coach; as time goes by you find yourself at a loss for words less and less often.”
- “I don't usually experience much excitement in the coaching although, as a teacher of other coaches, I admit to saying: if it's not exciting, there's nothing happening.”
- “I realize of course that it's not about breakthroughs on the part of the coach, but nevertheless...”.

Overview of 78 real-life critical moments

The following is a random selection of 51 of the 78 critical moments, to which I have made only minor changes in terms of style and spelling. The moments fall naturally under the headings that describe aspects of the coaching process, but they could also have been classified differently, and many critical moments can be categorized under a number of different headings in principle. The headings have been chosen in such a way that more than one moment comes under each heading. I have already carried out an initial *interpretation*, therefore, by choosing this order and these headings. The selection of the 51 moments took place by keeping up to the first three moments per heading, and deleting the others to trim the article to a standard size. This makes it straightforward for the reader to check how many reported moments there were under each heading. Also, the full dataset can be obtained from the author.

In the overview, the moments under headings 1, 5, 8, 15, 16 and 17 were in Dutch only and those under heading 12 in English only. The moments are therefore reasonably well mixed

and different national cultures contribute to most of the headings. Interestingly, the Dutch have much more to say about counter-transference (headings 15, 16 and 17). This might be due to the more direct and candid nature of Dutch culture. After all, counter-transference is something very personal and intimate, which perhaps not everyone writes about easily. I should add that it was a Dutch person (myself) who chose the headings.

There are in fact only three chapters in the following overview of critical moments:

- (1) Managing key conditions (headings 1 - 3),
- (2) Deepening the coaching conversation and the coaching relationship (headings 4 - 11) and
- (3) Handling what happens in the coaching conversation and the coaching relationship (headings 12 - 18).

1. Managing key conditions: context of the coaching conversation

(i) I have three meetings in a row with people from the same organization. At my house, not at the company. I'm overrunning a bit, so the fifteen-minute break between appointments is always used up. So they see each other when they arrive and leave. They are very friendly and cheerful towards each other but I feel uncomfortable and think I'm not handling this right.

(ii) I meet with a coachee at work. The room has thin walls and is much too warm. I don't get much out of the coachee. I want to leave, feel very out of sorts. After a while I decide to say so and suggest that we take a walk outside and hold a coaching conversation there. As we walk, we have a useful conversation about how he can start to make his work more interesting.

(iii) At the start of a team coaching programme, very early on in the proceedings, you often get members putting demands on the table or quibbling over basic conditions. I find this annoying: you don't know the team yet, you barely know the team members, haven't yet formulated a common objective, either for the team or for the coaching, but you have to intervene immediately. You set the tone; you lay down your key conditions in a non-negotiable way: you can get off to a flying start or you can pack up and clear off. A tense moment.

2. Managing key conditions: triangular contracts

(iv) It's exciting to see if the other person will let you connect with him, if trust will develop, particularly when someone feels coerced.

(v) A manager asks me to coach one of his employees. I comply, but it remains unclear to me what the issue is. I ring the manager after the first session, with the employee's consent, to get a clearer idea of the manager's issue. In the course of the conversation I begin to suspect that he's doing a spot of file-padding: I think this employee is not to be given a second chance, his file must say that every option has been tried. The second appointment with the employee has already been made.

(vi) Someone I coached very satisfactorily a long time ago and whom I meet regularly both as a friend and professionally comes to me urgently for help: will I coach his teenage son, because things can't go on this way, family crisis. I am keen to help him and suggest doing it privately, a personal meeting, nothing to do with the office, free of charge, as a favour to a friend. I do it, all goes well and the outcome is good but I don't feel very professional. Plus a fellow coach says it was stupid of me.

3. Managing key conditions: 'reading' the coachee

(xi) A moment that is always difficult for me is at the start of the first conversation, when asking questions following the coachee's initial account. I can't yet tell how tense the other person is and find

it 'a difficult situation' to judge what pace to set. I can't 'read' the other person very well yet. Later, when more has been said and exchanged, when there has been some movement, I find it much easier. 'You can't see something that's standing still'.

(xii) In my early days as a coach, about ten years ago, I was supervising a number of female professionals in a major accountancy firm. The problem was usually to do with career development, sabbaticals, etc. My client was young, around 25, blonde, wearing a suit and gold jewellery: at first glance the kind you might describe as a dumb blonde if you were to be sexist about it. She later turned out to be far from dumb and very entrepreneurial but was often put in the position of departmental ornament by her bosses because she was attractive, sweet-natured and unassuming. I also misjudged her initially, until our third meeting, when I found myself being a bit too controlling and asked her: are we on the right track here? "Yes of course", she said, "but we should also take a look at my previous job. I talked about it a bit at the start but you didn't pick up on it and then I decided to wait for my chance to bring it up again at an appropriate time. And this is it". I felt strangely ashamed and pleased at the same time: about being corrected on the one hand and bearing joint responsibility on the other. I wished I had more clients like her. I often look for ways to create joint responsibility and am very satisfied when I manage to get someone other than myself to take responsibility for the coaching process.

(xiii) Feeling disillusioned after five years with her present employer my client has handed in her notice and has found a new job. It's our first meeting; we have been working together for an hour. She's charming to work with, we have covered a lot of ground - yet it is tiring - energy-sapping even. I suggest a break and a cup of tea in a different location. Suddenly she has lots of energy and is talking about what she really wants to do. This is totally different. We return to the coaching room and I am puzzled by something I can't put my finger on, so I observe how her energy has risen and fallen away again. Something shifts. We agree that we need to hold onto the positive state of mind for thinking about her new job, rather than falling into the trap of feeling overwhelmed that characterized her last job. I also sense there is a risk of me putting too much into this relationship, and I do not want to disempower her. Instead, I suggest we agree some ground rules for working together which include us explicitly taking joint responsibility for monitoring energy levels and intervening when we feel them slipping.

4. Deepening by exploring

(xv) I was the change and HR consultant, working with staff of a global Financial Services company on the implications of a potential sale of a global subsidiary - I was involved in all the negotiations. The sale was aborted twice - slightly complex in that it also had a third party involved. I had positioned myself with the MD of the subsidiary as his informal coach - so there was no explicit contract but we had regular one to one sessions. On one such occasion, we were talking about the second 'abort' and I managed to start helping him to explore how he was feeling towards the whole situation. He opened up to me, was very open about what he wanted but then talked about his relationship with his boss. It became clear that he didn't know what was going to happen to himself after the sale so he was inadvertently putting 'spanners in the works' in the negotiations. As a result of this session, he went to his boss and asked him explicitly about his own future - another buyer came along and the MD was very upfront from the start that he was not part of the sale - the whole thing then went through smoothly.

(xvi) This was a telephone coaching moment, working with a Belgian lady (in English) who takes her job and responsibilities very seriously but is not very communicative or assertive. We had spent two hours working face-to-face and had had one hour-long telephone coaching session during the preceding three months which had been dominated by a problem she had with a team member, X, "Who will do literally what he is asked to do but will not take ownership of the job, use any initiative or prioritize tasks. He has no professional objectives or goals." In our previous session she had decided that she would have a face-to-face session with X to explore the reasons for his behaviour and with her boss to discover the options for training or replacing X. We discussed her findings - she had gained some insights into X's motivation and his abilities and had clarified the situation with her boss about hiring and firing - but the crux of the matter was that deep down she believed that she had to solve X's problem, partly because her boss was not supporting her: "It's difficult to know what he's thinking and he doesn't do what he says". I was searching for something that would throw a different light on the situation to help my coachee to move forward. The moment happened as she talked more freely and openly about her own feelings about the individuals involved: X, her boss and the other members of the team. It became apparent that the situation was much more serious than she had described and that X's method of working was regressive, creating problems for colleagues and salesmen who fed into the

department. By describing this, she was able to acknowledge that the situation had to be resolved and she needed the support of her boss to do so. To gain his support she needed to challenge him by offering two courses of action, both of which he had been avoiding. She appeared much encouraged by this and decided she would confront him the following week.

(xvii) One of my clients, a Finance director of a medium-sized company, had heard, just after his intake meeting with me, for a coaching programme, that the company was to be investigated. The operation of the management board was a central focus of the investigation. He was the last one in and knew that he had to change his communication style. Very soon, however, the Supervisory Board had reason to conduct an investigation into whether the composition of the board was correct. The coachee was well aware that his position was under discussion. Within a week, we went over his communication style, when it was appropriate and when not, and what he considered a suitable position in the investigation. It became clear during these sessions that he had to become much more conscious of the effect of his words. The combination of his strong drive in an environment where changes were viewed with a great deal of anxiety made his position very risky. In the end his interview with the consultancy firm took place the following week. It went very well. When it was over the firm rang him in the evening to say that, before the interview, they had been of the opinion that his position was no longer tenable. The good impression he made during the interview had caused them to change their minds. The meeting felt almost like an exam for the coachee. The fact that it went well meant he had “passed”. This was the springboard for a successful coaching programme in which he was able to broaden his repertoire of behaviour permanently.

5. Deepening by continuing to ask questions

(xviii) One critical moment occurred during conflict coaching of two people in an escalated conflict, where the failure of the coaching would result in one of them being dismissed. The conflict coaching of the pair was the springboard for team coaching of the entire team in order to create responsibility for results among the team as a whole. Distrust played a major role and at one point I heard myself asking the (awful) coach's question: “What do you need to restore trust?”. “Not possible!”, they both shouted. The thought crossed my mind: end of story, assignment failed, until I feverishly managed to dredge up the term 'healthy distrust' from somewhere deep in my memory. I then asked them: with what level of distrust can you still work together? This was the turning point in the conflict and now, a year and a half later, the whole team is still working together.

(xix) A female director of a welfare institution wonders why she can't deal appropriately with a fellow member of the management team who is not functioning properly due to a depressive illness. The coachee is experienced and competent enough but, in this case, she prefers to avoid confrontation even though her colleague is underperforming. At one point I asked her, have you ever had to deal with people with depression before? She went quiet and started to twist around in her chair. I held my breath, curious to find out what was coming. After a while (you could see her literally sinking with her mood) she said, “yes, my younger brother was depressive and kept threatening suicide from the age of 11, and I tried to stop him”. Ah, no wonder she felt uncomfortable having to deal with depressive people again. When this literally ‘came to the surface’, it was a great relief to her, and to me. We didn't go into it too deeply, there was no need. After this conversation she took the time to process things herself. Then she was able to talk to her colleague, because the confusion was gone. This was a memorable moment for me, literally watching someone delving into her ‘subconscious’. It did cost me the armrest of the chair, but that was a price I was willing to pay.

6. Deepening by summarizing and mirroring

(xx) During the early part of the coaching session, I asked Jane to “take some time to reflect with me on the leadership programme she is currently undertaking” and to “talk me through her main learning points”. In doing so, I noticed that the story she was telling did not sound as healthy or rosy from my own detached position. I sensed potential elements of “groupthink” within her story, but did not display any reaction. Keeping my own perceptions within me, I stayed neutral and simply repeated some of her words about what had happened, then added “and how did you feel about that?” I was acutely aware not to impose any judgement about the story Jane was telling me. My aim was to find a way to get her to think more thoroughly about her experience. In reflecting back what I heard, I used many of her own words, but I spoke these in a more neutral tone (compared to her quite excited, positive tone) – as if I was indicating “did I hear you right, you said that...”, and then I asked her how she felt about this.

This stance seemed to work in that Jane did begin to think again and more deeply about her experience. Through this iterative process, she discovered some valuable insights for herself and about herself which seemed to have had been buried within her for some time.

(xxi) My coaching client was a rather young man (early 30s) who had been recently promoted to a Sales Director role, for a small, but rapidly growing high tech company. He'd gone through a 360 feedback process and his agreed coaching agenda (with me) was to learn to develop a 'more facilitative/coaching' and, ultimately, a 'more empowering, leadership style'. The critical moment for me, was when we'd reached the end of our coaching contract and were reviewing progress made against his original coaching objectives. I was expecting him to highlight changes he'd made, in the areas above - where he had, in fact, made some very positive progress. What he said surprised me, and reminded me, that it is often internal shifts of attitude or perception that bring about the most significant change for people, rather than specific behaviours to be learned or honed. His response to this 'review' type question, 'What did you appreciate most about the coaching?', prompted the following response: "It was actually an observation you shared with me. I remember saying that the people I know outside work (friends & family) wouldn't recognize me in this [360] feedback...that outside of work, I'm much more easy going... enjoy having a laugh... and people know me as being an 'outgoing', 'fun loving', and 'friendly kind of guy'! So when you said, 'that I seemed to leave the person that I am at the 'factory gate'!...I thought 'that's it!'... Why don't I bring more of who I am to work, rather than trying to be some sort of 'caricature', of what I think a manager should be? When I started doing that I felt much more at ease – more myself – and the improved work relationships, just seemed to follow." So, the critical moment (and learning) for me, was to: review with my clients, more frequently, what's having an impact (sometimes not what I would anticipate), to allow that more expression, and to be more mindful of the fact, that the most significant shifts that happen, are internal ones.

(xxii) The laid-off client who had held upper management roles with large Fortune 500s, travelled for them internationally, written speeches for senior VPs, who could only see herself as moving on to an editing or admin job until I held a verbal mirror for her, repeating back her own accomplishments to her in her own words.

7. Deepening by giving feedback

(xxvi) I am coaching a highly articulate person who acts very convinced of his own abilities. What he is saying sounds logical but I suspect it is not entirely true. I don't take to him much, although I do believe he has the best intentions in his approach to his work and is quite personable. The critical issue for me is how to confront him in such a way that I touch a chord in him that will make him open up rather than clam up. I don't experience such critical moments with people who are very senior in the organization, but they do sometimes occur with people at lower levels.

(xxvii) Sometimes in coaching you come across a situation where you don't know if you're broaching a topic that the coachee is willing or able to do something with. In career coaching I have confronted people with impediments that they can do relatively little about. One coachee had a pronounced droop to the corners of his mouth. As a result his facial expression was always sad and offputting. A clear handicap in communication and an obstacle in his career. In my view it was absolutely a subject for conversation. However, I always find it tricky to touch on topics like these, to give some practical examples: "Sir, you stink, you have to do something about it."; "Madam, your facial expression almost always creates distance; I can't do anything about it, neither can you, but it's holding you back enormously."; "True, you want to become a director, but I don't think you'll ever be considered for it, any more than I am likely to make prima ballerina. In my view, you lack the basic skills."

(xxviii) In an intake meeting a member of the board of a large organization gives an account which leads me to conclude that he is on the verge of burn-out. At the same time, the newspapers have reported that his chairman is in the running for another job. He should really ease off the gas and make some structural changes to his situation, but at the same time the organization will be making heavy demands on him to give his chairman more leeway. I decide to confront him head-on with the consequences of carrying on the way he is, point out that medication is not enough and experience shows that there are a lot of victims in his age group. My fear is that if I am too hard on him, I will lose him. Paradoxically, as he told me later, he had confidence in me because I didn't beat about the bush and he himself felt that he couldn't go on with things as they were. In the coaching sessions we continued to work on broadening his perspective on what was important in his life, making better use of sources of help, delegating more effectively in general and bringing about a major shift in his duties.

A precondition was that he should make it very clear within his organization what his needs and abilities were at that moment.

8. Deepening by contributing something oneself

(xxx) If my coachee is not very forthcoming, I start talking about an experience of my own. It's exciting to see if my story will prompt the other person to step in and explore his own situation.
(xxxi) If I offer an insight, such as the suggestion: "Would it help to look at it this way?", and the other person doesn't pick it up, I sometimes have to suppress the inclination to offer it again instead of waiting or exploring where the other person is at. That is difficult because I am pretty convinced that it will help: if I just try it one more time.

9. Deepening by means of transposition (homework, role-play, psychodrama, etc.)

(xxxii) 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 timeline 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 materializes. 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.

(xxxiii) This client was in a highly dysfunctional work situation. She was struggling to keep her sense of herself and her vision, when the men around her – both peers and bosses – were putting political and psychological pressure (intentional or not) on her to conform to their conservative views. This client had a vibrant, eclectic, powerful vision for how her organization could team with other local organizations from the local community to create a new and much-needed approach to long-standing issues around housing, land development, and growth – a vision that was being drowned by the resistance and lack of vision of these men. At one of our sessions she and I both were at a bit of a loss for how to get her head above water so she could breathe on her own again when I had an inspiration. I had her take a chair for each person with whom she was struggling, and set them in a semi-circle. I then had her conduct a meeting with them, saying exactly what she needed and wanted to say to each, without restraint. That simple (and I'm sure not unique) bit of role-play helped her take back her sense of herself and her goals. She referred back to it a number of times in our subsequent work together. She has since left the organization for a much higher-level role with a significant pay increase (obtained in part through our working together).

(xxxiv) I was working with a coachee who was asked to develop his emotional expressiveness by the board member he reports to. I worked through an exercise with him to remember a moment when he had not been expressive, and then to switch into a memory of a highly expressive moment, and then back into the non-expressive experience. The moment felt tense because here is this big man, we are well into our coaching session, where he defended a lot by rationalizing why he needed the coaching (he needed 40 minutes only for that stage!). He turned to the exercise like "let's see what this can do for me", not cynical, but not believing either. We worked through it; we had a moment of silence during the switch to the non-expressive moment. I held the silence which was one of the hardest ones for me ever. And suddenly he burst out "oh my god, I can see it, I can see what I do wrong. It is so easy! I cannot believe that this realization has only taken 3 minutes and yet it is critical for my future success and promotion to the board!"

10. Deepening by bringing up the transference here and now

(xl) The coachee uses long sentences and lots of words to describe the problem that he wants to work on in the coaching conversation. I summarize his issue: so, if I understand correctly, your issue for today is “No”, says the coachee, “that’s not what I mean”. I am surprised because I believe I have summarized his issue well, in his own words. He explains it again. Using identical sentences, and the same words. This time I interrupt with short questions intended to clarify and occasional mini-summaries. He is constantly confused by my questions, he “didn’t mean” that, and the same with my summaries, “no, you misunderstand me”. I suspect I *am* on the right track but his real issue is something else, even though the coachee keeps telling me I’m on the wrong track. We try again, with the help of keywords on a sheet of paper. I intervene: “I don’t believe I can help you today, because I am obviously not able to understand what your issue is. I’ve spent the last fifteen minutes trying to clarify in various ways, but I’m getting nowhere. And I strongly suspect that you actually want to talk about a different issue today, but perhaps don’t dare to put it into words.” This is greeted with silence. The coachee goes pale and moist-eyed and, hesitatingly, comes out with a completely different story. This often happens in conversations, coachees have to gather the courage ‘to pop the real question’ and first spend some time ‘beating about the bush’. But I always find these moments very exciting.

(xli) I am asked to coach a secretary whose boss I have known for 20 years, as a friend and client. The secretary was transferred to him from another colleague, something she sees as a personal rejection. During the sessions that follow I am worn out by the torrent of words, critical, perfectionist, that flows from her. I start to discuss alternatives with her, but she doesn’t take me up on them, neither does RET work, nor conversational techniques, etc. I decide to confront her: spell out the effect of her constant blaming on me and so perhaps on her surroundings as well, offer alternatives, demonstrate, suggest she watch herself on video. I work and work and work, and nothing happens. Later, I ring her boss and tell him I want to stop the coaching if he doesn’t tell her that he has a problem with her performance. The next time, it doesn’t appear that he’s done it.

(xlii) I was coaching a Controller. We had a contract for a year's work during which he wanted to become more participative, change the culture of his organization through changing his leadership style which he recognized was quite directive and controlling. During one session he was musing about why his staff found him controlling and rather intimidating. He said, “I think I am a very good listener; I am skilled at handling appraisals and similar meetings and I don't understand how I create this effect”. In that moment I said: “Yes, I think you listen with great skill, but even when you are listening to me I feel controlled by you.” He replies, “What do you mean?” I go on, “It is as if you have two modes, one when you are persuading me of your view, and you are very persuasive and articulate, but even when you are in listening mode, reflecting back, paraphrasing and so on, I feel as if I cannot tell you anything you don't already know. It is as if you anticipate everything I am going to say. I can't take you by surprise, and therefore I feel I cannot influence you, so I think I understand how your staff experiences you. The trouble is that you are just so damned skilful that you do always seem to be in control.” This felt a moment when I put myself at risk. I felt vulnerable and he was confused and needed to try and understand what I was saying to him, and it may have been a turning point.

11. Deepening by bringing up the coaching relationship

(xliv) I am coaching a three-person team. I know the three people involved from projects, having worked for the organization three or four times a year in previous years. The nature of the projects carried out by the organization is such that the team members are used to operating alone under difficult conditions (Kyrgyzstan, Moldavia, Azerbaijan, etc.). Due to a new type of activity with different stakeholders, a different method (teamwork with integral mutual interchangeability) and a different culture are required. During the first meeting, while identifying obstacles, one of them says about another: “Yes, T is great on content, but is completely unreliable and lacks any integrity.” The third person, the director, responds with “Fight it out between yourselves.” I have known T the longest. I find him straightforward, rough but very honest. The dropping of this bombshell made me feel tense. I was at a loss for words. I ended the meeting early, rang up and suggested a team therapist and suspended the coaching until after the team therapy.

(xlv) The client dragging her feet about getting herself out of the dysfunctional work situation she was in (which had already lead to one breakdown) who finally made the choice to move on when I told her, with firm compassion, that I’d have to move on as her coach if she didn’t.

(xlvi) On a number of occasions I've felt that I hadn't really made much progress with a client after several intensive sessions. In my view, the problem was deeper-seated and I couldn't help him enough. However, the client himself said he was satisfied with the progress made. Nevertheless, I wanted to recommend finding a therapist. In such situations I find it difficult to find a balance between (or to reconcile) following his perception and needs and expressing my opinion. It was a choice between: he has had enough for now and has gained a new perspective (and let's not undermine that) and if he steps up a notch he can really take a step forward (so let's be honest in my observations). I brought up both options, but suspect that it has a demotivating effect when you notice that a therapist is a bridge too far.

12. Handling surprises as a result of exploring

(xlix) I was coaching someone around her career and we had used MBTI as a way of thinking about preferences etc. We'd chosen this as she wasn't sure which way to go. We were just into looking at the E/I preference (she had shown a slight E preference in her profile), when she got quite emotional and upset. The conversation ensued that she felt she more of an introvert but all her life she's been encouraged to be more extraverted and scolded for being more reflective and introverted as a child. It was quite a release for her to realize it was fine to be an introvert, and as we worked on this we were able to go on and explore career options with greater confidence. So I guess for me it's often the unexpected turns in the conversation which create the 'critical moment'. They aren't always comfortable and I don't know if I handle them as well as I should, but I think my strategy is to listen intently, allow silence, be with the individual and let them take the direction in the conversation and take it where they want to go. I also have a belief that things will work through to a positive conclusion which helps me if I'm feeling a bit stuck or unsure.

(l) Around contracting and getting started. Client senior manager in a college, he had had three accusations for harassment against him which I understood were being handled in an internal process. The Human Resources director had arranged with him and me for coaching, as these incidents seemed unusual and they thought this would help him. We arranged the first meeting by email. I thought very carefully about the implications of these accusations and that our discussions were not part of this. The accusations were from women and I am a female coach, so how would this be for him and me? What boundaries might come into our conversation? The first meeting was exciting! We started by discussing what the intentions of coaching were as we understood them and how we had both got to this meeting. He said he thought I was part of the system out to get him as these accusations had been levelled at him in a special meeting to which he was summoned by his boss. A variety of kangaroo court. Coaching came from a similar direction. The nature of the accusations was surprising to me as they seemed to be about stress reactions, which could be bullying or heavy-handed. I realized I had been imagining sexual or racial harassment with a significant history. We both had to hear our individual surprise about the real and imagined context we found ourselves in and brought to the discussion. Then we were able to decide what would be helpful to him as the focus for coaching in a way that we could both trust each other.

(li) The client was involved in a coaching programme designed to deliver promotion. A number of areas of behaviour were holding her back relating to influencing skills and her profile in meetings, but she had identified and worked on these progressively but no real breakthrough point had been achieved. She had always attended coaching meetings, but on one particular day had been asked to attend an all day critical business meeting, and so needed to cancel the coaching sessions to attend. This was not known to me as a coach. However she decided to attend the coaching session and negotiated that she could attend the meeting but miss part of it to attend the coaching sessions. This was a high risk behaviour requiring use of influencing skills in a very visible way. She brought this issue to the coaching session having already negotiated her opt out. She was able to reflect on what she had achieved and the skills she used. This represented a critical moment in the coaching when several elements we had been working on came together. She has dared to try, was able to apply and reflect upon her skills. She had identified her own needs and those of the business and found a way to align them.

13. Handling surprising transference phenomena

(lii) 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.

(liii) I was working with a senior civil servant. We had a contract for four two-hour sessions. The fourth session came to an early conclusion. I was concerned that as we were not using the full time allocated, I was not meeting the needs of this individual. To my utter surprise, at the end of the session he commented on how valuable the sessions had been and asked if we could continue to work together. We have now been working together for two further years. All of our sessions are very focused and relatively short as this meets his needs.

(liv) It was a first coaching conversation with a male client, who spent half of the allotted time (2 hours!) crying. Every difficult point in his life reduced him to tears, and I suspected that this would keep happening. It put me in a strange sort of dilemma: on the one hand, I could sense him crying out to be held and cherished. On the other hand, everything in his story made it clear that physical intimacy was absolutely forbidden, especially with men. I kept wondering if I was experiencing transference and how responsible it is to give a client a hug during a session. As I thought about this it became clear in any case that I myself had no need to hug this man, rather he was causing resistance. My suspicion grew that I was experiencing his own internal cry, which he himself did not want to acknowledge, but was indeed there. In view of the necessary professional distance on the one hand and the idea that it nevertheless had to be brought up on the other hand, I decided to share my thoughts and feelings towards the end of the session. I knew I was taking an enormous risk, but I also knew it had to be said. I was very anxious about doing this, and it did of course cause enormous resistance in him, which I was able to see for what it was. Then I started to list with him how he could physically 'set to work' more: doing sport, emotional exercises, etc. That touched a chord in him, because he was so keen to break out of his loneliness. At the same time, I knew I had messed things up with him by speaking openly about his still-concealed inner desires. A week after the session he rang to say that he would prefer a different coach. When I inquired further, it became clear that he was looking more for a father figure and that I did not fit the bill. I accepted that and matched him up with a father-figure coach, who continued the sessions successfully. He also went off to do more physical activities.

14. Handling counter-transference phenomena: 'can I actually help the coachee?'

(lvii) I sometimes get anxious when I'm with someone who is unusually intelligent, when I wonder at first if I can keep up with this person intellectually. Fortunately, so far I have always been able to enter into the conversation with the other person from a perspective of inner peace and not one of competition.

(lviii) I was working with a client who was extremely successful in his career at a relative young age. He had it all, basically. Asking him the "miracle question" he realized 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 realizing his true values about life and how 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 organization. Recently he turned down a top job in his organization 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.

15. Handling counter-transference phenomena: ‘I feel responsible for the coaching’

(lix) Very intelligent client, but I wasn't finding it exciting enough, asked about process here and now, results of each conversation and application. All were positive, and the contact very open. This man invariably had a very rational learning style and, time after time, appeared to have gained a lot from the sessions and put it to effective use and was good at comparing work situations with private experiences. The main problem was in fact my own anxiety (“We should be discussing feelings, it should be more exciting!”).

(lx) I sometimes get anxious when I notice that I'm approaching the other person with a lot of optimism and concern, while noticing internally that I am busy playing the role of rescuer.

(lxi) It is tough when both parties are absolutely willing to make something of it, but I myself see little reaction or learning effect. In that case I think: I just don't know how it should be with this person. I assume I'm not making the correct diagnosis, probably because I do not have that specific diagnostic framework. But it may also be that, on closer inspection, I'm doing it 'right', but it takes longer for the person to internalize his or her new insights and put them into words. I know one such person who doesn't display 'rewarding' behaviour very easily. She never says: “Oh yes, that's helpful”, or: “Now I understand it better”, or: “That feels better already”, or anything like that, and isn't really able to express what she is getting out of it, even if she wants to and I cautiously offer her some words to use. But a year later, other people were saying that that she had changed and grown.

16. Handling counter-transference phenomena: ‘I want to drop out myself’

(lxiv) Because of all those different people and conversations, I can't remember what exactly I discussed with a coachee the previous time. It's difficult for him to understand, I think, to my distress!

(lxv) “Am I going on too long?”, asked my client. I sincerely didn't think so, but my attention was diverted by something odd outside. I was able – after making my excuses – to turn things around in a positive sense: “You are more sensitive/perceptive than you described yourself before this first session!”

(lxvi) A client – after the first exploratory meeting – rang up a day later, after waiting for me in vain for over half an hour in his freezing cold car. I was unable to pacify him, despite having the excuse that my car had broken down.

17. Handling counter-transference phenomena: the coach's own emotions

(lxvii) Moments that can be better described as flow: when you are working with the coachee on solutions to his or her problems and the cooperation between you is excellent.

(lxviii) I work with homework assignments, and ask the coachee to email me a report every day on the application of new approaches. The coachee doesn't reply regularly. I send compliments back when I do receive an email, and ignore it when I don't. Am I just after an easy life?

(lxix) My most exciting client was a Nietzschean philosopher who surpassed my own frame of thinking and ability to put things into perspective by regarding objectives as moving panels.

18. Handling questions and suggestions from the coachee

(lxxv) Someone else, a fast-rising manager with a lot of vision, once said after several sessions: “Oh, so I can ask something too!”, although I always start openly and invite the other person just to start somewhere. But he evidently saw that as the umpteenth task in his pretty hard life, instead of feeling free to ask something. I learned from this: with melancholic people I now start by saying, would you like to say something or ask something? Anything is possible, it's your time. It can even be something very small, a tiny question, anything will do. When I said that to the manager in question he 'warmed up' and proceedings suddenly moved along much faster and more smoothly.

(lxxvi) If you limit coaching to one on one, I haven't experienced any critical moments, which probably says a lot about my style. I *have* experienced critical moments in team coaching sessions, which has to do with groups who don't want to take the path that I think is the right one or let fly at each other in an unsavoury fashion.

(lxxvii) At the start of my career as a coach I found myself coaching a manager of a new service, whom I will call Peter. The role was a promotion for Peter, and although he had been managing the project developing the service, I, together with many others in our organization (I was an internal consultant), had some doubts about his ability to actually run the service. We'd had about three coaching meetings in which we had concentrated on exploring the role, issues arising, learning needs etc. In our fourth meeting Peter announced he had been troubled by something he wanted to share with me, because he had come to the conclusion he could trust me. He then explained that he was privy to some seriously compromising information about the senior manager who had appointed him in his new role. In fact, he had been asked by that manager to collude with a practice that was clearly in breach with the code of conduct of the organization and was aimed at securing an even more senior role for the manager in question. Peter had done what had been asked of him. Although the game didn't pay off, he felt his promotion had been partly at least a result of collusion. Although he felt he was the right person for the job, his conscience didn't feel clear and he had been desperate to talk to someone. I found myself with the monkey on my shoulders and was at a loss as to what to do. In the end I kept his confidence but terminated our coaching relationship. The episode left a bad feeling. It undermined my confidence greatly and brought home to me quite how important supervision is – or at least access to a supervisor, which I didn't have at the time. As a result I contracted with my organization to have access to an external supervisor.

Summary in the form of a 'critical' story

As the next step in listening to these coaches and interpreting their critical moments, I have summarized the main themes of all 78 critical moments as follows.

Experienced coaches appear to have much fewer doubts than coaches who are just starting out (De Haan, 2007). They approach their field of work, the coaching conversation and the coaching relationship, with more confidence than the relatively new coach, usually with an attitude of “I struggle and emerge”. They are aware that they will have to monitor a lot of things closely if they are to achieve a genuine coaching conversation, and that they will have to keep connecting and deepening during every coaching conversation in order to safeguard the coaching from moment to moment. They also realize that there will be surprises, unsought discoveries¹, unintended learning effects and unforeseen setbacks. They know that they may meet strong emotions, in both their client and themselves, and that it is worth their while – however difficult that may be – to grasp hold of those surprises and emotions and to exploit the opportunity presented by the surprises to deepen the contact.

More generally, these coaches 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

¹ Unsought discoveries that are reminiscent of the old Sri Lankan story of the three Princes of Serendip (Merton & Barber, 2003).

the coach's control, may sometimes have to be abandoned or on other occasions may bear exceptional fruits. Coaching is therefore a constant struggle, but one that can be faced with confidence, because, in one way or another, it does usually end in some positive benefits for the client, and hence also for the coach. The struggle begins right at the start of the coaching relationship, and the accompanying psychological contract, when all of the potential environmental factors, uncertainties and emotions already play a role. It continues later, during the coaching conversations, when the coach feels he owes it to his profession to embark upon a 'risky' intervention, for example when

- directing or otherwise influencing the process and the method of working;
- making explicit and reacting to what is happening here and now;
- extending the conversation to other, similar experiences of the client;
- making connections with the same behaviours displayed elsewhere by the client (transference);
- identifying or making use of counter-transference.

How to handle these critical moments?

Analysis

The following contains a transcription of all 78 critical moments in just under ninety concisely worded anxieties. The original critical moments can often be reduced to one or more anxieties. I am taking the interpretation a step further, by proposing distilled essences that I see recurring in various critical moments. As in real coaching conversations, I reformulate the critical moments contribute' above and give them summarizing headings. To each of the resulting groups of similar anxieties, I also give a brief response. Unlike the critical moments of less experienced coaches, not all of the anxieties and anxiety signals that coaches experience here can be reworded in the form of doubts or dilemmas: they are often *facts*, facts of which the coach is absolutely certain but which pose an obstacle or cause positive anxieties.

In this list I have, as far as possible, resisted the temptation to discuss all anxieties in terms of the client (with attributions as defenses, projections, resistance, difficult behaviour, progress, relapse, etc.). It would have been easy to give in to that temptation. Equally, it would be entirely feasible to view the anxieties from the coach's perspective only. However, since they always arise in a *relationship* between coach and client, with other people and organizations more in the background, I consider the best description to be that where the relationship remains as central as possible.

1. Anxiety about the boundaries of coaching (contracting, triangulation, etc.)

1. Key conditions are not right for coaching (ii)
2. Conversation unhealthy for both parties (lv)
3. Trust comes under pressure (l, lxxii, lxxviii)
4. The coach's options are limited by confidentiality agreements (viii, ix, x, lxxvii)
5. Pre-conditions (iii)
6. What will fellow coaches think about me and my methods? (vi, xxxvi)
7. Awkwardness because coachees meet in the waiting room (i)
8. Different expectations or needs within the triangular contract (v, vi, vii, viii, ix, x, xli)

It is clear that, for experienced coaches, coaching – and hence critical moments – begins before the conversations themselves, even before the first meeting. Many anxieties were highlighted on the fringes of coaching: before the start, between sessions, *vis-à-vis* other interested parties, and after the coaching under the scrutiny of fellow coaches or supervisors. Coaches learn how important it is to manage such key conditions and boundaries properly, and have them under control first, before embarking on the coaching *per se*. Many anxieties about the boundaries of coaching occur at the start, when those boundaries are being laid down jointly, during both formal and informal contracting. However, it is noticeable that these boundaries also cause anxiety later on, at the start and end of every meeting for example, and in relation to other parties not actually present during the coaching conversations.

2. Anxiety around satisfying outcomes

9. Relief, enthusiasm, or relaxation as the result of cooperation (xii, xvi, xix, xxi, xxix, liii, lvi, lviii, lxxvii, lxxviii)
10. Breakthroughs and turning points (xv, xvii, xviii, xxii, xxxiii, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxix, xlii, li)
11. Confident expectation that things will turn out well (xiv, xlix)
12. Considerable vulnerability achieved in the conversation (xix, lv)
13. Different elements come together and are expressed in the way the coachee handles the session itself (li)
14. Pleasantly surprised: the coachee corrects me (xii)
15. Pleasantly surprised: the coachee wants to continue (lvi)

Many reported anxieties are connected with satisfaction and success, with a welcome initiative from the coachee, a breakthrough, or a deeper level of collaboration. These are very positive anxieties in a sense, therefore, even though they are also anxieties in a more worrying sense for many experienced coaches, because they are aware of the pitfalls of success: loss of concentration, being seduced, being 'taken in' by the coachee's positive feedback, loss of sense of reality in attributing the coachee's successes to oneself, later un-doings or reversals – to name but a few. Some coaches are therefore cautious in claiming a successful change (see, for example, xlii), although others ascribe a lot to themselves (see, for example, xxix, xxxiii). The phrase 'turning point' was mentioned three times in the critical moments, and there were also three occurrences of 'breakthrough' or 'shift'. Critical moments are often associated with

periods of radical change in the coaching. Coachees appear to come back often to such moments, which run like a sort of thread through the coaching process (see, for example, xxxiii, xxxix).

3. Anxiety about the coach's own role

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| <p>16. Anxiety related to the coach's own uncertainty about what to do (ix, xi, xxxviii, xliii, xlvii, lii, lxxvii)</p> <p>17. In conjunction with the coachee, not knowing what to do... (viii, xxxiii, lii)</p> <p>18. Uncertainty about what will enter the coachee's consciousness (xxxii)</p> <p>19. Uncertainty about what I am getting into (xix)</p> <p>20. Uncertainty: am I being inviting enough? (lxxv)</p> <p>21. Uncertainty: what now? Are we going quickly enough? Is it exciting enough? (xliii, lix, lxi)</p> <p>22. Uncertainty: what will best serve the coachee? (vii, xlix, lxxiv)</p> <p>23. Uncertainty: can I keep up with the coachee and understand what his issue is about? (lvii, lxi)</p> <p>24. Uncertainty: can I help the other person, am I failing him, am I doing enough? (xviii, xxiii, xliii, liii, lviii)</p> <p>25. Uncertainty: does the coachee need me? (xlix, lviii)</p> <p>26. Uncertainty: is this in fact (professional) coaching, am I the right coach? (vi, x, xxv, xlvii, liv)</p> <p>27. Anxiety about my own motives in coaching (lx)</p> <p>28. Worry about failing to fill the allotted time with coaching (liii)</p> <p>29. Anxiety about the coach's view of his role: knowing better than or 'rescuing' the coachee (lii, lx)</p> <p>30. Sense of responsibility in being taken into someone's confidence or into important life events (lxii, lxvii)</p> <p>31. Sense of responsibility in a tragedy (lii, lxxiv)</p> |
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Even experienced coaches are sometimes very uncertain. They may be uncertain about what is happening in this conversation (anxieties 16 – 21), what this coachee needs (anxieties 22 – 25), or what is and is not part of their own role and contribution as a coach (anxieties 26 – 29). It is touching to note that even experienced colleagues have doubts, ranging from doubts about what they should do or whether they are doing it well, to major doubts about themselves. Perhaps this uncertainty typifies the experienced coach who has managed to avoid becoming jaded despite repeating situation and events. Research has shown that there is a risk of coaches, or at least psychotherapists, becoming less effective as they gain in experience (Dumont, 1991).

A feeling of being responsible can increase the uncertainty even further – for example, when the coachee takes you into his confidence or shares something improper with you, when he is affected by a major and traumatic event, or when he takes important, irreversible decisions as a result of the coaching (anxieties 30 and 31).

4. Anxiety about the coach's own intuition

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| <p>32. At the outset: difficult to assess a new coachee (xi, xii)</p> <p>33. At the outset: can I make a connection? Have we established trust? (iv)</p> <p>34. Can I trust my feeling, inspiration or intuition? (xiii, xx, xxvi, xxxiii, xl, xlix)</p> <p>35. There is more going on here, and do I dare to take a guess at it? (xix, xlvi)</p> <p>36. Searching for something new that will shed new light (xvi)</p> |
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37. Can I have confidence that ‘internal’ changes are sometimes the most important result of coaching? (xxi, lviii)

The coach’s own intuition is mentioned so frequently by the participants in this study that it merits separate examination. What we are talking about here are hunches or thoughts (compare Freud’s *freie Einfälle* or free associations) relating to the material contributed by the coachee, but also to suggestions or methods that may help the coachee, i.e. interventions which may benefit the coachee. In fact, all of the critical moments demonstrate that coaches work very intuitively, because they rarely if ever give a rationale for the great diversity of ways in which they coach, and if they refer to a foundation in specific types of approach (such as solution-focused coaching in xxxix and xlvi and person-centred counselling in lvi), this appears to be more a reference to the coach’s toolkit than to an approach specifically tailored to this coachee or this conversation. In short, coaching will remain a largely intuitive area of work until it can be demonstrated conclusively what works in what circumstances.

5. Anxiety about what the coach contributes, or does not contribute, himself

38. Gathering courage to help the coachee to gather courage (xxxii, xl)
39. Can I refrain from judging despite having opinions? (xx)
40. Anxiety about really facilitating decision-making and not taking part in it (lxiii)
41. Having the nerve to explore further, by listening or by asking a personal question (xviii, xx, xxi, xl, lxxi)
42. Am I being too controlling, am I not disempowering the coachee? (xii, xiii, xxxviii, lxviii)
43. Is this a step too far? (xxxii)
44. Does it help if I start to talk about myself? (lxxiv, xxx)
45. The anxiety of stagnation, impasse, emptiness, silence, breathless anticipation (vii, xiv, xxxii, xxxiv, xxxviii, xlix, lii)
46. Anxiety (including uncertainty, anticipation) about making a suggestion (ii, xxxii, xxxiii, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xxxviii, xxxix)
47. Anxiety about saying what I think and feel about the coachee (or his story) (xxiv, xxvi, xxix, liv)
48. Anxiety about reflecting back what the coachee has said (xx, xxii)
49. Anxiety about challenging the coachee by stating her merits (xxii)
50. Anxiety about bringing up patterns displayed by the coachee, here and now with me (xxiii, xxv, xli, xlii, xliii)
51. Anxiety about asking about a parallel between this conversation and other situations the coachee has experienced (xxv, xliii)
52. Anxiety about laying down the coach’s own conditions in a non-negotiable way (iii)
53. Anxiety about placing my coachee and the coaching relationship itself under pressure (iii, xxviii, xl, xlv)
54. Anxiety about referring (or taking the decision to refer) a coachee (iii, xxv, xlvi, xlvii, xlvi, liv, lxxiv)

Many specific coaching interventions are described as causing anxiety. In the same order as the anxieties identified above, these are: withholding opinions or control, exploring, talking about yourself, doing nothing (tolerating the silence), making a suggestion or proposing a way of working, practicing directness and openness (including supportive feedback, patterns here and now with the coach, parallels with other situations experienced by the coachee), laying

down key conditions, placing the coachee and the coaching relationship under pressure, and referring – more or less the entire spectrum of coaching skills.

6. Anxiety due to specific behaviour of the coachee

55. What to do if the coachee has already achieved everything? (lviii)
56. Difficult to establish and maintain contact (iii, xxvi, xxviii, xlvi)
57. Flogging a dead horse (vii, xli)
58. Torrent of words and rationalizations from the coachee (xxv, xxxiv, xxxix, xl, xli, xlvi)
59. Standing by speechless while the coachee drops a bombshell in team coaching (xliv, lxxvi)
60. The feeling of being manipulated (lxxvii)
61. Team coaching: coachees don't want to take the path that I think is the right one (lxxvi)
62. It is suddenly about me, the tables are turned (lxx, lxxi)
63. Unsettled by sexual advances from the coachee (lxx)
64. Feeling guilty because the coachee criticizes me or makes a special effort for the meeting (xliii, lv)
65. My advice is not taken up (xxx)
66. The coachee asks for something I am unable to offer (lxxvii, lxxviii)
67. Anxiety due to a coachee who starts to control proceedings (xii, xxxvii)
68. Intense emotions and surprises (xxi, xlix, li)
69. Intense emotion, distress or a cry for help and comfort (xlix, liv, lvi)
70. The coachee is angry or critical (xviii, xl, xliii, l, lv, lxxi)
71. Being corrected by the coachee (xii)

Here we are entering the territory of transference²: all behaviour displayed by the coachee during the coaching for which it is worthwhile at least investigating the hypothesis that it comes from elsewhere or also occurs elsewhere, i.e. outside this situation with this coach. The participants in this study report a wide variety of transference phenomena, ranging from the entirely innocent (such as 65) to the hugely unsettling (for example, 63). I myself would in any case typify anxieties 55 – 64 as resistance, i.e. as largely unconscious defenses against the coaching itself, but I realize that this holds the coachee entirely responsible for that behaviour, even though it occurred in the relationship with the coach, and that I am being very quick to voice an opinion about what is going on in the coachee.

7. Anxiety stemming mainly from the coach

72. My ability to put things into perspective appears to be deficient (lxix)
73. My opinion, my ethics are an obstacle (lxxii)
74. I am bewitched by my own suggestion (xxx)
75. Doubts about the qualities of my coachee (xxvii, lxxvii)
76. Mistrust of the coachee (l)
77. Mistrust of the coachee's manager (v)
78. I am bewitched by the pressure on the coachee (xvii)
79. My own anxiety is an obstacle (xxxvii)
80. My own emotions are influencing the coaching situation, e.g. because they chime with what the coachee is saying (lxxiii, lxxiv)
81. My own subconscious is sending out the wrong signal (lxxiv)
82. I need positive feedback (lxi)
83. The situation is not exciting enough for me (lix)

² Transference is the phenomenon whereby relationship patterns from outside the coaching relationship influence that relationship itself, where something can be learned from those patterns. The concept was introduced by Freud.

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| 84. I observe too little response or signs of a learning effect (lxi)
85. My discomfort is an obstacle (lix)
86. My distractedness is an obstacle (lxiv, lxv)
87. My inability to comply with the contract is an obstacle (lxvi)
88. My possible competition with my coachee is an obstacle (lvii) |
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Virtually all anxieties rooted in counter-transference are unique and individual, specific to this coach and to this situation. They are not easily generalized, even though the phenomenon whereby the coach's own agenda or emotions play a role in the coaching is a relatively universal one. It is fascinatingly to note that, precisely when factors inherent to the coach are truly an obstacle, when there is a good chance that relevant information will emerge in the counter-transference (see Heimann, 1950), we have often lost the ability to practise the necessary openness about our own observations. This is reminiscent of Bion's prescription to work 'without memories or desires' (Bion, 1970). Reading through the critical moments, many of them how difficult that is in practice. In the light of Bion's pronouncement one might say that the coach's own memories (own opinions and doubts, and own emotions resulting from what has happened to the coach) play a role in some way in anxieties 72 – 81, and his own desires play a role in anxieties 82 – 88. In fact, as one coach writes, each of these cases concerns the failure of the coach's own ability to put things into perspective, the loss of the 'evenly hovering attention' (Freud, 1912) which is so essential to effective coaching.

Synthesis

What insight can we derive from this study of critical moments? What are the mechanisms that lead to such moments, and what are their consequences? What can these moments teach us about the processes of change through coaching? And how can coaches better handle tensions of this kind and so make better use of critical moments in their practice? We have certainly not heard the last word on this but, in the meanwhile, we *can* present a number of suggestions and ideas on the basis of the above analysis. Each of the four paragraphs below opens with a quote from one of the experienced coaches in this study. Since these are recurring challenges that experienced coaches cannot avoid but need to handle as well as possible, time after time, I refer to them here as 'struggles'.

1. The struggle to stay 'fresh and receptive'

"I also have a belief that things will work through to a positive conclusion which helps me if I'm feeling a bit stuck or unsure." (xliv)

Developing and using their own intuition is certainly an important theme for experienced coaches. Can we perceive, feel, sense something we are not yet aware of, perhaps even something that the coachee is not yet aware of, something that summarizes the coachee's issues at a deeper level?

The participants in this study often associate intuition with trust, the trust that allows them to bide their time until something presents itself or until something sheds new light on the issue. They describe how they can increase their trust by being quiet, creating a safe situation and approaching the coachee with an open mind. They contrast that situation, imbued with trust, where intuition can thrive, with moments of stagnation and uncertainty. There is a clear association between trust and flexibility, having options and self-confidence, and between lack of trust and rigidity, stagnation and uncertainty.

I believe that, for experienced coaches, trust primarily means staying fresh and receptive, with the same keen anticipation and unbiased outlook they had when they started their coaching career. It means not following fixed patterns and certainly not holding preconceptions believed to have been ‘acquired’ in earlier coaching assignments. This applies to their attitude to every coachee and every conversation, but equally to every moment of coaching: if they can remain attentive, fresh and receptive, trust will automatically follow.

2. The struggle to retain and increase the coach’s ability to put things into perspective

“Surpassing my own frame of thinking and ability to put things into perspective” (lxix)

Tensions can permeate the coaching conversations by many different routes: they may stem from the material contributed by the coachee, the coachee’s presentation, the moment itself, or from ‘memories and desires’ of the coach. All of these tensions form both a basis or opening for new insight, and an obstacle to or diversion from the gaining of that insight. Tensions can point to the right emotion and the elusive insight, but they may also inhibit intuition and the ability to think clearly. One problem with this study is that it only provides evidence of the tensions of which coaches were aware, not of those that went unrecorded by the coach. It is likely that many more tensions arise during coaching, tensions that coaches are simply not aware of – or are only partly aware of, due to vague irritations, fatigue, and distractions. The earlier study (De Haan, 2007) also showed how important it is to be sensitive to these half-perceived tensions, in order then to use them in a way that will benefit the coaching.

In my view, *external* tensions (stemming from the coachee’s material and presentation) obstruct the coach only if they give rise to *internal* tensions, i.e. if they influence the coach’s ability to put things into perspective, his detachment and his patience. It is therefore vitally important for the coach to learn how to handle his own internal tensions – to allow those internal tensions to exist, to note their presence but at the same time to reserve some attention for perceptions, hunches, making connections and other coaching interventions. This enables us to broaden our frame of thinking and our ability to put things into perspective, which is vital because coachees are more different from ourselves as coaches than we think. Our powers of logic have a strong tendency to lead us to regard everyone as similar, and to

assume that others are similar to ourselves, that they feel and react just as we do. However, we are often wrong about that, not to mention the (many) situations in which we coach someone from a different culture or a completely different background and profession than ourselves, where the differences in outlook are even more prominent.

3. The struggle to contribute ‘containment’ to the relationship

“You set the tone, you lay down your key conditions in a non-negotiable way: you can get off to a flying start or you can pack up and clear off” (iii)

Many participants in this study write about managing the relationship that they offer their coachees, about managing the boundaries of the relationship through contracting and the continuing ‘psychological contract’: the unanimity and trust that coach and coachee share, in other words the ‘alliance’ that coach and coachee attempt to forge with each other. They write about the tensions that arise when this working alliance is tested, such as when the basic conditions are disputed, their mutual trust comes under stress, or the coaching begins to resemble a game of chess with arguments and rationalizations.

I believe that the term ‘containment’ is a good summary of what is needed for a confident working alliance. Bion (1963) employed this term to signify remaining calm, receptive and authentic even in a situation of tense, even existential tensions and doubts, which is in keeping with what participants in this study seem to be striving to achieve. Participants describe

- on the one hand, the need to invite, to remain sympathetic and to give unconditional support, even in the case of problematic issues and strong emotions;
- on the other hand, the need to define a stable context, to have firm boundaries and to persevere with their openness, even if the coachee would prefer not to hear certain things.

This is precisely the dual meaning of ‘containment’: setting boundaries on the one hand but, on the other hand, within those boundaries, creating space for development and change.

4. The struggle to contribute the coach’s own observations

‘Touching a chord that makes the coachee open up rather than clam up.’ (xxvi)

The need for fresh observations and intuitions has already been mentioned, but perceiving and identifying does not seem to be the hardest part: actually *saying*, i.e. expressing observations appears to be much more difficult for experienced coaches. Indeed, it is often the simplest and most striking things, such as the predominant emotion in a story, a lack of eye contact or a downturn to the mouth, or the quality of the rapport between coach and coachee, that are the riskiest things to mention. Clearly, the coaches who write about this find that as many as possible of their own observations need to be communicated, but in such a way that the

coachee can listen to and consider them. As many of the critical moments illustrate, with some coachees this is a tall order.

I believe this is where the boundary lies between real coaching and an ‘ordinary’ good conversation: it is so much easier not to mention some things we have observed, and instead just to keep to friendly and welcoming words. A professional coach does not shy away from actually creating critical moments in the coaching process, and tries to bring tensions to light as far as possible if they remain implicit. Moreover, I believe that this is an outstanding example of an area where experience helps, because once we have successfully attempted to communicate observations to coachees, we strengthen our nerve to keep doing it in future.

Conclusion

My analysis of 78 critical moments of experienced coaches appears to indicate that positive changes occur through coaching mainly when:

- There is sufficient trust to allow intuition to do its work.
- The coaches' intuition can come up with fresh observations.
- The coaches develop their ability to put things into perspective.
- The coaches (have the courage to) reflect their observations back in such a way that the coachee can hear them.
- The coaches can develop a relationship with the coachee that is well-defined yet allows both parties room to move.
- Which results in more trust to allow intuition to do its work (*da capo*).

A self-fulfilling, iterative process of increasingly sensitive and in-depth coaching.

Most of us – whether we are coaches or not – have a personal relationship with ‘moments of change’ or ‘turning points’: moments when our lives and/or careers changed course and we learned how to function on a new level. 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. Carlberg reports how he has identified two common threads in all of the turning points that he has studied:

1. Experienced therapists appear to relate turning points to unpredictable and unusual incidents in an otherwise fairly predictable therapeutic relationship. After these incidents they need to step outside the system to review the situation.

2. Experienced therapists always experience a deeper ‘emotional meeting’ at these moments, an ‘intersubjective phenomenon between two subjects, each influencing the other, which prepares the way for change to take place’.

Carlberg here follows Daniel Stern’s ‘process of change study group’ (see for example Stern, Sander, Nahum, Harrison, Lyons-Ruth, Morgan, Bruschwiler-Stern & Tronick, 1998; Stern, 2004) which calls such moments ‘now-moments’, ‘weird moments’ and ‘moments of meeting’. Although I am not able to investigate Carlberg’s suggestion directly here, it *is* possible to go back to the critical moments and compare. Among the 78 critical moments I can identify 26 major and minor breakthroughs, 20 of which (77 %) display explicit evidence of both unpredictability and a deeper emotional meeting, either positive or negative. This appears to support Carlberg’s conclusions, especially because ‘unpredictability’ and ‘deeper emotional meetings’ always go hand in hand. However, the other six breakthroughs (vi, xx, xl, xliii, xlv and lxi) contain neither demonstrable unpredictability nor a demonstrably deeper emotional meeting. In addition, I actually found one example of a critical moment that did not contain a breakthrough but did contain both unpredictability and a deeper emotional meeting (lxxviii).

This brings us to an interesting paradox that often occurs in coaching practice: on the one hand, experienced coaches want to provide clients with critical moments or turning point moments, or to handle turning point moments professionally when they occur. However, they are operating in a context where they themselves are keen to remain the same experienced (sensitive, creative, supportive, insightful, etc.) coach. As is often the case in the management of change, we the coaches are conservative, while we expect our clients to be progressive – and we even want to do this in a ‘congruent’ way, because we are convinced that that is what works best. A total impossibility and a paradox!

Let us compare the two groups studied once again: 49 coaches in their first year (De Haan, 2007) and 47 coaches with more than eight years’ experience (this article). Differences that emerge straight away from a reading of all 125 collected ‘critical moments’ are as follows.

- Less experienced coaches appear to have more doubts during coaching, some of them about their own suitability for the role of coach.
- More experienced coaches still struggle with their critical moments, but do so with more self-confidence, sometimes giving the impression that some major drama is required before the experienced coach in question perceives a true critical moment.

- More experienced coaches appear to have a different sort of self-awareness that seems more linked to a desire to show that they are doing things right. While the critical moments of the less experienced coaches were more often ‘egodocuments’, some of those of experienced coaches appear to be more a case of ‘demonstrating accountability’. This may of course be partly due to the context of the study, which was different for each group.
- At the end of De Haan (2007) I predicted that experienced coaches would write more about the seduction of the coach by flattery, working hard for the coach, competition with the coach or ‘using’ the coach for non-learning purposes or ‘flights into health’ during the coaching – and this material does indeed show that experienced coaches more often mention such forms of more subtle transference.

Two of the moments reported here by experienced coaches come explicitly from the start of their coaching careers (xii, lxii) and a third participant writes that, in his view, critical moments occur primarily in a coach’s first few years.

There remains much to discover about change through coaching in the moment itself, though this list of critical moments gives an indication of the type of moments that coaches experience as critical. It would seem that the quality of coaches is determined primarily by their ability to tolerate tension and to tackle the ongoing struggle with new tensions and uncertainties. Like the Zeeland resistance fighters in their battle against the elements and the Spaniards, the coach experiences a significant turning point moment when he shifts his own attention from the many struggles that occupy him during the coaching, to the struggle itself, which can be viewed as the starting point and *raison d’être* of his own professional activity. On behalf of coaches, therefore, I adopt the well-known motto of the province of Zeeland, “I struggle and emerge” (*luctor et emergo*), and encourage coaches to coach with devoted attention to that ongoing and deliberately maintained struggle.

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