



Coaching in the Netherlands may be less inhibited than in the UK, but a lack of boundaries brings its own challenges

## DOUBLE DUTCH

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Entering Regus' rented offices on Amsterdam's *Herengracht* for a coaching conversation always disorients me. Am I still in the Netherlands, or back in the UK? The BBC World Service is on in reception and most of the newspapers are in English, as is the receptionist's greeting. But my next client is Dutch so I will be speaking Dutch – the language I used to call my own.

His "presenting issue" is pretty Dutch too. He was offered an internal promotion, which was reviewed by the organisation's works council. The council judged his management experience too scant for the job, so they put a condition on the promotion: he would have to attend an assessment centre. He refused as he had gone to three assessments in his career and could not recall learning anything useful.

After some negotiation he was offered executive coaching. He spoke with one coach, who immediately contacted his HR department with strong views on the person and on how the coaching should be handled. My future client – rightly – considered this a huge breach of confidence. As a result I was presented with a sceptical, under-motivated client.

The only way out was for me to call this first conversation "the coaching journey" and convince him that we had therefore already ticked the works council's boxes. By inquiring deeper into his new leadership role and its potential risks, we drew up a contract which later became very productive.

This is a typically Dutch story. Where else do works councils have such powers, and where else would it be possible for an executive coach to call HR and spontaneously comment on a new client?

I am wondering about differences between my work in the Netherlands and the UK. How come I am still so aware – and wary – of being an

outsider, in the UK but increasingly also in the Netherlands? This sense is particularly acute when I am groping around in my mind for words that match what I feel or mean.

When I moved to London in 2002, a Dutch colleague who had been practising in Brixton for more than 20 years told me that it took her at least three-quarters of that time to understand what colleagues thought of her and her work.

In terms of Freud's original defence theory, in the Netherlands you will find less "suppression" but more "acting out" than in the UK. For example, there was another client I could only have encountered in London. He came from the American Midwest, and grew up in a cow-raising community bound by a strong Christian faith. He worked for a giant multinational transforming the way we link up with our environment and each other. In the coaching we battled with the constant barrage of veiled criticisms of his contribution to the team, slowly uncovering hidden envy for the energy, spontaneity and vigour he brought to his role. The assignment had a strong flavour of surviving the capital's organisational *Serengeti*.

The approaches to suppression and acting out are also apparent when you look at executive coaches. Looking at the latest issue of *Tijdschrift voor Coaching*, the Dutch equivalent of *Coaching at Work*, I am struck by the lack of boundaries around the profession in the Netherlands. Next to serious articles about executive coaching, I find several that are at the flaky end of the spectrum, dealing with progressive mental reminders, energy rebalancing techniques and provocative coaching.

There are no boundaries to executive coaching, it seems, here in the Netherlands.

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