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Critical Moments of Clients of Coaching: Towards a 'Client Model' of Executive Coaching

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Abstract

Sixty-seven past and present clients of executive coaching wrote to us about the *critical moments* they experienced, and we interviewed 8 of these individuals. Our analysis of their critical moments indicates that for clients, critical moments are not obviously a part of all good coaching. When critical moments do occur they are generally positive and described as part of the internal process of the client, unless clients were provoked by concrete actions by coaches which the clients regarded as unhelpful or insensitive. Finally, critical moments are often linked to sudden new realisations, evidenced both by explicit reference and by the metaphors used.

We conclude from this third result that clients often relate their positive outcomes to an increase in insight and realisation. This is not a trivial conclusion as many approaches in executive coaching are geared towards other outcomes (such as problem-solving, strengthening of existing solutions, remedial help or active support). In contrast, this study suggests that what clients report as most helpful from their experience of coaching is new realisations and insights.

We also base a new coaching model on these findings. To our knowledge this is the first model that is explicitly based on the clients' perspective, through their experience of critical moments in coaching.

Critical Moments of Clients of Coaching: Towards a 'Client Model' of Executive Coaching

Executive coaching – the professional development of executives through one-to-one conversations with a professional coach – is a growing discipline within the broader field of organisation development (OD) consulting. All indicators tell us that executive coaching business and education are on the increase, as well as professional bodies, codes of conduct, and research publications in the field (Grant, 2006; De Haan, 2008a).

The growing interest in executive coaching, exemplified by a wealth of publications, has provided us with a plethora of coaching *models*, describing e.g.

- Basic ways of approaching the conversations (see, e.g., Kilburg, 2000, or Downey, 1999);
- Basic ways of structuring the conversations (see, e.g., Whitmore, 1992, De Haan & Burger, 2005);
- Basic ways of intervening within the conversations (see, e.g., Heron, 1975, or Clutterbuck, 1985).

All these helpful frameworks, categories and taxonomies, and many more, give us insight into how professional *coaches* (may) think about their work. However, even if we know a great deal about what coaches do and how coaches conceptualise, what do these models actually tell us about how *clients* of coaching experience and view the coaching work?

We are also beginning to know something about the effectiveness or outcome of coaching (for overviews of outcome research articles see Kampa-Kokesch & Anderson, 2001; Feldman & Lankau, 2005; De Haan, Culpin & Curd, 2008). Coaching seems to be generally a highly effective undertaking, and perhaps this is partly what is attracting so

many professional managers and consultants to this form of OD consulting. However, even if we know a great deal about general outcome, what does this type of research actually tell us about how effectiveness is (can be) achieved, or about outcomes *at each moment* of a coaching conversation? For this we would have to look at something technically called *suboutcome* (Rice & Greenberg, 1984): outcome at the level of particular client-coach interactions or sessions of coaching.

This article sets out to find some preliminary answers to these three open questions in the executive coaching profession:

1. How do *clients* experience executive coaching interventions?
2. What outcomes are generated for clients *in the real time* of coaching?
3. What *model(s)* do coaching clients therefore operate on?

We realise that we can only undertake a first exploration of this relatively uncharted territory, so our answers will have to be preliminary and tentative. We do believe that this is important territory for broader research programmes. After all, the whole coaching journey is undertaken for the benefit of the client so it is certainly worthwhile to understand the perspective of the client as deeply as possible. From our own personal experience, we know that our outlook is completely different depending on whether we are in the coach's or the client's position, whether we are the learner or the facilitator of learning. As to the third open question above, we believe that *all* outcome is rooted in suboutcome, so that it is highly relevant to achieve some understanding of suboutcome, of what happens in the moment, in order to begin to understand how (the various) outcomes of the whole journey are achieved. Moreover, we believe that it is probably easier to describe suboutcome than it is outcome, because there are likely to be fewer variables involved.

Although to the best of our knowledge of the literature of executive coaching, this study into the client's experience of coaching moves into new and uncharted territory, it is not

without important precursors. We have been inspired by thorough investigations that have taken place in the fields of psychotherapy and narrative psychology, which we briefly summarise here.

It is interesting to note that the study of ‘moments’ or ‘events’ of effectiveness (suboutcomes) started relatively late in all professions that focus on change through helping conversations. The first important contribution to this study in the general field of professional helping conversations, took place in group psychotherapy, where Irvin Yalom (1970) started the systematic study of the nature of helpful events for clients, asking clients to classify these events with the help of a preconceived classification. Later, Bloch, Reibstein, Crouch, Holroyd & Themen (1979) abandoned the preconceived classification; so that they could inquire more deeply into the clients’ experience of ‘most important events’ in psychotherapy. Llewelyn (1988) undertook a major research project in individual psychotherapy, interviewing 40 patient-therapist pairs and collecting 1076 critical events (both helpful and unhelpful) from 399 sessions. She found highly significant differences between the selection and description of the events by therapists and by patients. These differences turned out to be greater when the outcome of the psychotherapy was relatively less helpful. Llewelyn used Elliott’s (1985) taxonomy to classify the events, and found that

- Patients valued ‘reassurance/relief’ and ‘problem solutions’ more highly, whilst
- Therapists valued ‘gaining of cognitive / affective insight’ highest, whilst
- Both patients and therapists valued ‘personal contact’ highly.

Llewelyn (1988) concludes that patients seem to be more concerned with solutions to their problems, and that they value advice and solutions more, provided they feel free to reject them. Therapists, on the other hand, seem more concerned with the aetiology of the problems and potential transformation through the patient’s insight.

Later research into significant, helpful, and non-helpful events in individual psychotherapy, can be found in Elliott (1985); Elliott, James, Reimschuessel, Cislo, & Sack (1985), Llewelyn, Elliott, Shapiro, Hardy, & Firth-Cozens (1988) and Mahrer & Nadler (1986). The Mahrer & Nadler (1986) is a review article giving an overview of ‘good moments in psychotherapy’ found by various researchers. The Elliott et al. (1985 and 1988) articles looked at the nature of therapist/counsellor interventions which client rated as being more and less helpful. Their design is able to make a comparison between helpfulness of specific events and outcome, so they provide links between ‘suboutcomes’ and ‘overall outcomes’. The discrepancy between therapist and patient perspectives is replicated in this research. One clearly positive finding was that coding of clients’ accounts can be rated reliably by therapists/researchers, something we also found in this research.

Another discipline where critical moments in individual change processes have been studied, is that of *biographical studies*, where e.g. significant events in the lifetime of a famous person have been examined or where sociological field research into critical moments of groups of individuals that are known to be in transition, such as adolescents, has been undertaken (see, e.g., Thomson, Bell, Holland, Henderson, McGrellis and Sharpe, 2002, or Mandelbaum, 1973). Interestingly, the retrospective definition of critical moments can here be established more objectively: in terms of the importance the moment demonstratively has on the ensuing biography. In other words, a moment often becomes ‘critical’ as we see in retrospect that it ‘proved to be’, as it worked itself out, significant. Critical moments have been elucidated theoretically in a variety of ways, e.g. as ‘turning points’ (Mandelbaum, 1973), ‘epiphanies’ (Denzin, 1989), ‘fateful moments’ (Giddens, 1991) or ‘social career breaks’ (Humphrey, 1993) in narrative sociology, and as ‘turning points’ (Carlberg, 1997) or ‘moments of meeting’ (Stern, 1984) in psychotherapy.

Our own earlier research focused on the coach's experience of critical moments (De Haan, 2008b and De Haan, 2008c; Day, De Haan, Blass, Sills and Bertie, 2008). By 'critical moment' we mean a sudden shift or interruption to a coaching journey: one that feels significant and urgent, exciting or disturbing. It seems that coaches frequently find these critical moments to be turning points in their work with clients; either they are generative or they lead to a deterioration in the coaching relationship (Day et al., 2008).

Our first investigations with executive coaches (De Haan, 2008b and De Haan, 2008c) have shown that critical moments are usually:

- Unexpected and unforeseen by the coach;
- Associated by the coach with heightened emotions for the client and the coach.
- Experienced as tension-provoking in the relationship between coach and client.
- Associated by the coach with feeling doubt or anxiety about how to proceed or respond in the moment.

Coaches often reported that frequently their clients were experiencing insight and learning during or after these moments, although in a minority of cases they led to the breakdown of the relationship and even the termination of the coaching. When comparing moments that resulted in learning and insight to moments that resulted in the breakdown of the coaching relationship (Day et al., 2008), we observed that the key difference seemed to be presence or absence of shared reflection at the point of tension. When coach and client were both able to reflect on what was happening in the moment or on what had just happened, learning and insight was often the result. When, however, either the coach or the client allowed their anxiety to result in e.g. aggression or withdrawal, a breakdown in the relationship often resulted.

From a theoretical perspective the research demonstrates the importance of the dynamics of the co-created relationship between coach and client and the importance of what is called

reflexivity in coaching: the ability to experience and reflect on one's own inner world at points of heightened emotion.

This fourth research study on critical moments in coaching took as its purpose to investigate whether coaching clients are aware of critical moments and, if they are, what are their experiences of these moments. The research question of the underlying research is therefore: *what critical moments do clients of coaching experience and what descriptors do they use in their reports of those moments?*

We hypothesised that, similar to what is known about critical events in psychotherapy (see, e.g., Llewelyn, 1988), the perspectives of clients and coaches could be significantly different. To begin the enquiry, we set out to explore the basic *language* of the client who engages in coaching conversations. So we were interested in how clients would describe their experiences of coaching, and the attitudes, thinking or sense-making that their words refer to. Clients could employ a language that closely matches what we have found from the inexperienced or experienced coach's perspective (see, e.g., Heron, 1975, Kilburg, 2000, De Haan & Burger, 2005). But equally, if the clients' perspective and/or frame of reference proves to be radically different, it would emerge in a different way of describing events and so a different model of the coaching experience may be called for to describe their experiences.

Method

We embarked on two different inquiries in order to get first-hand accounts of clients' experience of critical moments in coaching relationships. The first stage was a short survey asking participants whether they had experienced a critical moment as a coachee and, if they had, to provide a short description of it. The second stage consisted of interviews with

selected individuals that had described a critical moment and some who had indicated they had not experienced a critical moment at all.

We opted for a ‘fresh’ set of clients that did not form part of any of our previous research on critical moments, and that we ourselves have not had anything to do with as a coach. For this reason, we offered our short survey first to all members of the Ashridge alumni network. The Ashridge alumni are all ex-participants of educational programmes of the Ashridge Business School (14% from one of our MBAs and 86% from one of our other open enrolment leadership programmes). We do not teach on the Ashridge MBA or leadership programmes, so we do not know these participants. There were 3015 alumni on the Ashridge Alumni Register, mostly leaders and managers working in the fullest range of industries, with largest subsets from Financial Services (16%), Consulting, Professional & Business Services (13%) and Pharmaceuticals, Chemical and Biotech (9%). 25% were female and 75% were male. We asked these alumni the following research question, once as an advert in the Alumni monthly bulletin, and once in the form of a more personalised email: “Our earlier research into coaches’ perspectives focused on the frequent experience during the coaching process of what we are calling ‘*critical moments*’. These moments often turned out to be important times in the coaching journey, so we are very interested to know if clients also have these experiences. Our definition of a ‘critical moment’ is “an exciting, tense or significant moment” and it could be either an actual moment or a period of time. Our questions to you are:

1. Have you ever experienced something that felt like a ‘critical moment’ (an exciting, tense or significant moment) during your coaching? [Yes/No]
2. If so, please describe briefly one (or more) critical moment. What was it about this moment that made it critical for you?

NB In our research report we will take away all identifying elements from the descriptions, so we can promise *complete anonymity*. Please let us know if you'd like to receive our report before publication. We will be more than happy to share our findings.”

This short written inquiry was sent out to all 3015 members of the Ashridge alumni network. When response rates turned out to be a little low for analysis, we topped up the dataset by sending the same email to 166 graduates of the Ashridge Coaching-for-Organisation-Consultants programme (another group with whom we hadn't ourselves done any individual coaching) and to 20 present coaching clients of Ashridge Consulting (with permission from their coaches). The response rates were 51 from Ashridge alumni (1.7%), 10 from coaching programme participants (6%) and 6 from present coaching clients (30%). So the full dataset consisted of 67 completed responses. This set comprised 20 'no-moments' (participants reporting they had not had any critical moments during their coaching) and 59 critical moment descriptions from the remaining 47 participants.

From this dataset our enquiry proceeded as follows:

1. Using grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) we came up with 40 short codes describing critical aspects in the critical moment descriptions.
2. All in the research team (the authors) coded the dataset using as many of these codes as they wanted per critical moment. Following Elliott (1985), we thought a sort method would have oversimplified the actual complexity by imposing mutually exclusive classification. The four codings were correlated for inter-rater consistency and first conclusions were drawn from the frequencies of codes.
3. We held in-depth interviews with five participants that had described a critical moment and with three participants that had indicated they had not experienced a critical moment at all.

4. From the initial critical-moment descriptions and the interview transcripts we analysed the *use of metaphor* by extracting a grand total of 252 metaphors from this extended dataset.
5. The full set of metaphors was categorised by two of the authors (AD and CB), into 15 categories.
6. On the basis of the patterns that emerged in the content-analysis and in the metaphor-analysis, we devised a simple model of the language that these clients most often employ to describe their critical moments.
7. Finally, we tested this model by having two of the authors (EH and CB) categorise all metaphors afresh, on the basis of the dimensions opened up by the model.

Results

Overview of the 59 real life critical moments. The following shows half of the full dataset. It is a random selection of 28 of the 59 critical moment descriptions, with only minor changes made by us, in terms of style and spelling. We have left out the longest descriptions, which in some cases went up to 500 words, or a page of typed text. Other than the critical moment descriptions, we also show six of the (longer) ‘no’ responses. The full dataset can be obtained from the authors.

Examples of critical moments:

1. “Realisation that my future career progression was in my own hands, and that I have the ability to influence its direction and also the ability to say ‘no’ if my aspirations don't match those of the company.”
2. “The realisation at the beginning of my coaching that I was more than capable of writing plans and strategies which in turn helped me realise I was very capable of

being successful in the new position I had been promoted to. It was critical because it gave me the confidence and belief in myself and my strategies, which in turn made the presentation of the strategies to my team very powerful.”

3. “I had a tense moment which was both significant and exciting when after a lengthy communication with my coach I came to the realisation I had to make a significant change to the structure of my team, which would entail having to make a very difficult decision which would negatively affect one person but positively effect the rest of my team and the company as a whole.”
4. “A telephone coaching session close to a bereavement in which the coach took me into a visualisation to look into the future as to how I saw myself in say 5-10 years time. It was a tense and distressing experience as all I could see was coloured by the powerful experience of sitting in the home of the person who had just died and seeing myself in the same position – living and dying alone. Now there is nothing bad about either as the individual led a creative, independent life, but the session brought me to tears such that it was difficult to continue. The coach was unsure where to take this and soon after I decided not to pursue further sessions with the coach. This was a critical moment because it brought into question the experience of the coach and clearly my emotional readiness for that type of exercise.”
5. “It was related to my confronting a very challenging issue and both being very concerned about my ability to deal with it and also the sense of liberation I felt to be able to navigate my way to a resolution. It was very charged and quite emotional as I had to face up to an issue that in the past I have chosen to avoid, but the process of expressing it verbally helped enormously, coupled with the positive and supportive environment created by my coach.”

6. “Something that had been holding me back suddenly seemed such an easy thing to overcome. My fear, of several things, was stopping me.”
7. “The moment was the realisation that there is a point that a person will not step or move beyond. My particular case centred on the lack of support of my line manager taking specific action to report inappropriate behaviour of a project partner. From then on I realised the limits to my line manager.”
8. “I would describe the critical moment as 'significant' in that it was a moment that really enabled me to clearly visualise the situation I was in (by relating it to disembarking from a small rowing boat!), and through the visualisation, to understand the issue I was creating by not focusing 100% on my goal (but instead hesitating between two options).”
9. “Very briefly there was a glimpse into how other people view me as a business person – and of course they see a quite different view that one sees of oneself. Knowing what they see allows a very different interaction with them, of course, and it made me behave (in certain circumstances) in a completely different way.”
10. “Simply the recognition (realisation) that I had successfully evolved to a competent (not necessarily expert) manager. It was at a time when I had been asking quite challenging questions of myself in terms of career and life decisions and my coach (a retired business director) encouraged me to look at what I had achieved and what that meant in terms of potential for the future. Through the conversation it became clear that while I might not have recognized it consciously, I had accrued a significant amount of management experience and competence through quite varied and broad activities and could therefore justifiably call myself (generically) a manager.”
11. “When asked by my coach to consider what would happen to my newly created unit if key people left and what effect that would have on me. It had never occurred to me

before that this team I had spent time putting together would want to do anything other than stay! The same day one of my staff told me they have been approached by someone else about a job. I have now started to look at the current unit structure as less of a 'sacred cow' and to think about options for different, more flexible models and about how I would fill short term gaps.”

12. “In solving a problem that was causing some doubt in my ability. A breakthrough in understanding that my approach to this situation was based on previous experience and that an alternative was out there which could stretch me as an individual and achieve better long term results. This gave greater confidence in tackling other issues without a preset agenda.”
13. “When working with a ‘new ventures development’ organisation I worked closely with a very experienced businessman who had been assigned as a mentor. In putting together a business plan for a new product my Company wished to launch I would spend some time reviewing objectives and progress with him. In this particular case the ‘critical moment’ was the understanding of what would work as a business venture. What works is an idea; a service or an offering which has value must be simple to communicate if it is going to succeed. If it cannot be simply expressed, if the venture takes a lot of time and thought to write down in an executive summary, then it is likely to fail. In this case my particular idea was just taking me too long to express in the business plan and therefore was doomed to failure unless there was another way of packaging the product or bundling it with other services.”
14. “A critical moment for me was in my second coaching relationship. My coach had done a note of our discussions including some things which I did not want shared with a third party. He sent the notes of the discussions to me and copied in his own coach.

He did not know I rather had that issue not shared, so did not ask my permission ahead of time. I considered ending the relationship after this, but later relented.”

15. “Through an awareness exercise looking at plusses and minuses of my current role I became aware of critical factors that I had taken for granted about my role. Once I became aware of them and discussed their importance I realised that the decision I was just about to take was the wrong one.”
16. “The most recent of these was this week. It was like a kind of 'chiropractic click'. I had been struggling with having meaningful 'value' conversations with my clients. Through the coaching I had realised that I had been 'unhelpfully' focusing on getting the business rather than helping the client. The 'click' came about when I was really challenged on my primary intention when I said it was to help the client. Bringing this into my consciousness allowed my rational brain to see that this will build trust with the client and business will more naturally flow as a strong relationship develops. Also, if it doesn't, it is more likely to be because they do not need my help rather than my not being able to help if things were different. That's fine with me too as I only want to work on work that needs to be done. This insight is foundational to many aspects of my work at present and I have a sense of relief now.”
17. “Sorting why I was finding it hard to think about and plan for an event in a positive way, even though it was one I would normally look forward to. What made the moment significant was that through the use of metaphor I was able to recognise an unhelpful pattern to my experience which was connected to previous events and people in my life. As a consequence I was able to go on and 'de-couple' these for the future. And the event was great!”
18. “Following a discussion on my response to an individual that I was having extreme difficulties managing, it became clear to me that my response was one that I had been

repeating throughout my career. Changing that one response has changed my entire management style over time. The results have been very tangible.”

19. “Whenever the coach asked questions which touched issues, which were critical, unpleasant or pleasant to me and were relative near to the core of my personality.”
20. “It was when my coach directly challenged me to be bolder and give more of myself as a management team member. ‘I’m sure you have more to give to xxx’. I had been reflecting on this for a while and his challenge was what was needed. The timing was right.”
21. “Another one was when I was wrestling with how to end a relationship, and my coach asked a very pertinent question that I had not thought to ask myself, and it made me go deep into myself and reflect. She asked ‘what do endings mean to you?’. I may have been hiding it through my recent bereavement.”
22. “Facing up to moments of truth, realisation that I could have handled situations differently. One time I was being badly treated (verging on bullying?) by a senior peer and it was exciting to be able to explore with an impartial and trusted ‘other’ options available. I executed the planned course of action and gained help to mastermind each of the next steps – an exhilarating opportunity to ‘not feel alone’ and have guidance to step outside of this situation (unemotionally) to consider the risk/options. Being able to speak with my coach over the phone for 10 minutes just to gather my thoughts and gain perspective has been a critical aspect of my development.”
23. “Years later another coach really ‘gave me a piece of her mind’. I was close to a heavy burn-out and had not realised it myself then, but still identified with being very busy and important. After trying many things and ways of getting to the point with me she spoke more than frankly and engaged. During that session we also made a list

covering 7 areas of (my) life which indicated the focus and attention that went (or did not go) into the special areas. This list underlined her words quite impressively and the results of our session kind of shocked me. After the session I really changed many things in my life and until today several findings of this session have become part of my everyday life. Still the 'critical' thing about it was not the list or visualisation, but her very clear words and her absolutely unvarnished opinion."

24. "I listened to myself describe a reason why I hadn't done something and realised that there was no factual basis for it at all and in fact it was a deeply flawed way of thinking. It was critical because it made me understand that in fact I can be very good at making excuses for inaction and that in turn made me realise that that has always been the case for me. I suppose though that it will only be truly critical if I use it to make changes to my approach. It felt strange and almost as though time had slowed down while I thought this through, although actually it probably was just a moment!"
25. "Yes, I have had that 'critical moment' as described above, although I referred to it as the moment 'I saw the path clear'. It was so profound; I wanted to end the session immediately so I could take action. I specifically remember that the issue I wanted to deal with appeared not to have any solution, and even to the point of me being unable to imagine a beginning to resolve the issue. When questioned about advice I might offer to someone in a similar situation, or what advice I would give to a colleague who had posed a similar question to me, it was after a moment or two completely obvious, and according to my coach I then spoke freely for 20 minutes, offering up multiple suggestions. This moment was critical, as from then onwards I was able to put a plan together which I later used to resolve the issue."
26. "I can recall two such moments. One involved making a connection between an aspect of my professional behaviour as a manager and my personal emotional profile,

i.e. recognising how a cause of my personal anxiety was prompting a specific (unhelpful) approach to people I managed.”

27. “The second was recognising the significance of a simple analysis of how I spent my time which helped me understand why I was making limited progress on important objectives.”

28. “Probably the moment of naming my constant conflict with my boss and the realisation of my repetitive nature of dealing with it by reinforcement and substantiating my opinion rather than finding a way to deal with it.”

Examples of ‘no’ responses:

29. “No, more of a feeling of being generally comfortable with the concepts, and an understanding of the position at the time. Not a *eureka* moment but a steady gradual realisation.”

30. “No, that is why I stopped the process after four sessions. I felt that through the coaching (and the little ‘tasks’ I was given by the coach) the pressure was rather increasing than decreasing...”

31. “No, I have never felt exhilarated by anything that happened in a coaching session, it was more a sense of support. I certainly haven’t crossed any critical barriers in such sessions, although I have only had a few.”

32. “Ah, how I was looking for those critical moments! If they did happen, they have alas now escaped my consciousness. On reflection, for all my coaching, I think any benefits stemmed from the amalgamation of the various talks, discussions and training I undertook.”

33. “I cannot say that I have had a critical moment. There have been occasions when there is a gradual realisation which when further observed, has contributed to making

a change. These can be inside or outside of a coaching experience, or through mentoring, peer mentoring or timely, clear, appropriate feedback.”

34. “No, all my coaching experiences have been vague and not very fulfilling.”

The phone conversations gave more background detail for some of the critical moments, and more understanding for the absence of critical moments in other submissions. Each of the three individuals interviewed, who had experienced no critical moments, reported positive experiences of coaching. They all felt that their coaching had been useful in helping them tackle issues and problems in their work roles. They did *not* experience an ‘abrupt’ or ‘sudden’ moment of insight or learning. Instead, they each reported that they experienced a gradual process of insight relating to their issues during the coaching process. They each felt that upon reflection they had learnt something about themselves as a result of the coaching experience. Compare the examples 29, 31 and 33, above.

Content-analysis of the critical moments. We coded each critical moment to identify themes and significant participant comments. The whole team took part in the creation of the codes as well as (each individually) in the coding itself in order to be able to check for consistency. We arrived at 40 codes that described for us the whole dataset (see Table 1). The four observers (the authors) together used combinations of these 40 codes a total of 788 times to code the 59 moments, which amounts to an average of 3.3 codes per critical moment description. All codes were used at least once. Table 1 shows the frequency of use of the codes, for all four observers.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

We computed Cohen's Kappa to look at inter-rater reliabilities (Cohen, 1960). The scores are in Table 2, and they show a very good degree of reliability, particularly if one takes into account the large number of codes. Normally Kappa is computed when there are only 2 or 3 classes that events can fall into, and we have 40, so a Kappa of 0.45 here can be compared with a Kappa of 0.67 in the case of 3 classes and a Kappa of 0.88 with 2 classes. Another way of looking at this is that the average Kappa from Table 2 is 0.44 and therefore the average improvement over chance was 45-fold. We can therefore conclude that our codes have been most reliably used by the four observers to categorise the critical moments. A high reliability between raters of 'helpful events' was also reported in psychotherapeutic research (Llewelyn, 1988; Elliott et al., 1985).

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Reading through the critical moments, and looking at the result of our coding, our first conclusions were as follows. Across the 59 reported critical moments, respondents were most likely to assert that the critical moment contained an instance of increasing awareness, whether relating to themselves, their pattern of behaviour or the consequences of their behaviour in their organisations. Many participants referred to a 'realisation' or 'revelation' (16 of the 40 codes, taking an amazing total of 43% of our coding – see Table 1). Elliott (1985) reports something very similar in his collection of 'helpful events' from psychotherapy: by far the largest of his clusters is the one he calls 'new perspective', which is defined very similarly to our 'personal realisation'. One of our participants says "Yes, I have

had that ‘critical moment’ as described above, although I referred to it as the moment ‘I saw the path clear’ ” (example 25, above).

We noticed two major areas of personal realisation:

1. Personal realisations about issues (18% of assigned codes). This includes new knowledge, understanding, or insight into a situation, understanding of others, or ideas about strategies. See, e.g., critical moments 5 and 12, above.
2. Personal realisations into and about self (20% of assigned codes). This includes recognising unhelpful patterns of relating, personal ‘hang-ups’, or impact on others. See, e.g., critical moments 6 and 18, above.

These realisations or insights were often accompanied by strong emotions, including ‘painful awareness’, ‘elation’, ‘liberation’, ‘relief’ and ‘boost in confidence’. Similar to our earlier findings with coaches (Day et al., 2008), the realisations often emerged suddenly or abruptly in the process.

We were surprised that very few of the respondents who described ‘positive’ critical moments referred to anything the coach had done around this time. This is in marked contrast to the earlier research with coaches (see, e.g., De Haan, 2008b and 2008c), where the participants nearly always described their own actions and their clients’ responses before, during and after the critical moment. At the same time it was interesting that in the case of ‘negative’ critical moments, all participants did mention the coach, specifically the unhelpful or insensitive actions by the coach that damaged the trust in the relationship and led to the negative outcome. Therefore, in the negative critical moment the coach was mentioned incomparably more often (see, e.g., descriptions 4 and 14, above).

The use of metaphor. We became intrigued by the way participants used *metaphors* to describe their experience of critical moments. Frequently, they used images or ideas from

one area of life or ‘conceptual domain’ to help them to describe their emerging experience during or after coaching (Lakoff, 1993). In total we found 252 metaphors in (across) both the 59 critical-moment descriptions and in the transcripts from the 8 in-depth interviews.

We clustered all the metaphors used by participants into fourteen different clusters each representing a common conceptual domain. Fourteen clusters were enough to capture all metaphors except for one singular one which had been used 10 times by a single participant (the word ‘gremlin’). Here are the 14 clusters of metaphors, in order of decreasing occurrence (the full dataset of metaphors can be obtained from the authors):

1. Journey (e.g. “Sort of *avenues* that were open to me”): 36 occurrences.
2. Physical Space (e.g. “*Point* in time”): 35 occurrences.
3. Revelation (e.g. “*Light bulb* moments”): 26 occurrences.
4. Visual (e.g. “the pathetic *façade* I thought I was projecting to the world was completely *see-through*”): 25 occurrences.
5. Agency (e.g. “In *charge* of your own destiny”): 20 occurrences.
6. Release (e.g. “the sense of *liberation* I felt”): 18 occurrences.
7. Resources (e.g. ““*Toolkit*’ to explore options”): 15 occurrences.
8. Frame (e.g. “A Different *framework*”): 14 occurrences.
9. Challenged (e.g. “*Stretch* me”): 13 occurrences.
10. Connecting (e.g. “*Decouple* events”): 13 occurrences.
11. Tackle (e.g. “*Take the trucks across the bridge*”): 10 occurrences.
12. Fight (e.g. “Your *platoon* is just a single unit in a larger group”): 9 occurrences.
13. Hearing (e.g. “*Listen* to myself”): 4 occurrences.
14. Money (e.g. “*Value* offering”): 4 occurrences.

Metaphors have a richness that our earlier coding could not convey. At the same time, we were struck by the overlap in the results of these two very different ways of

analysing the data. ‘Realisations’ dominate the coding categories, and very similar ‘revelations’ (including ‘visual’ and ‘hearing’ insights) are prominent in the collection of metaphors. It seems worthwhile to explore the possibility of a coaching model that covers a substantial part of these codes and metaphors.

Discussion

In summary, the data contributed by clients of coaching suggests to us the following:

- *Clients report very different phenomena from their coaches* in response to literally the same question about critical moments in coaching. For one thing, clients seemed to be less interested in discussing the interpersonal challenges of coaching as were the coaches in our earlier samples. Coaches also spoke to us about their doubts and their anxieties (De Haan 2008b and 2008c; Day et al., 2008), whilst clients mostly speak about their personal realisations and (self-)understanding. In other words, the relative focus of coaches on emotions and anxieties contrasts with the relative focus of their clients on outcomes and insight. The contrasting focus is similar to what Llewellyn (1988) finds in her psychotherapeutic research. However, we cannot here replicate her finding that clients were “more concerned with solution to their problems” in (helpful) critical moments, whilst therapists “more concerned with the aetiology of the problems and its transformation through insight”.
- *Clients report a lot fewer critical moments* than coaches: 30% of the participants in this research had not experienced critical moments. One participant summed this up by “Only once did I experience a critical moment, which considering I have had many hours of coaching, seems that this may be a bit over estimated”. Lower prevalence of critical moments can be (partly) explained by the fact that coaches generally spend more hours in

coaching than their clients. Experienced coaches build up over time a 'portfolio' of the types of experience that clients subsequently identify as critical.

- *Clients' critical moment descriptions are more diverse* than those of coaches, e.g. many of the descriptions relate to the outcome or 'harvest' of the moment and not to the moment itself. Clients seem less interested in making sense of what was happening in the relationship and more focused on what was happening for them and for their issues. This relates to the next point as well.
- *Clients mention much less often the coaching process and their counterparts in the relationship*, whilst realisation, insight and awareness come much more to the fore. In other words, clients are not recognising explicitly that their coach played a direct role in this process. In a strong coaching relationship the coachee may find it very difficult to identify specific interventions or behaviours of the coach leading up to or during a critical moment. Also, clients will be focusing so much on their own issues that the process or the coach's contributions may not be as figural as are their own reflections, realisations and breakthroughs. In this we confirm another conclusion of Llewelyn (1988): "it is clear that clients were more concerned with the results of the procedure than with the process by which it occurred". Indeed, one definition of 'good coaching' is that it should facilitate the client to find his or her own solutions and that the coaching process should therefore stay in the background of the client's perceptions, and perhaps that is partly what emerges from our data.

A tentative model of the language of the client. A number of models that are used in the coaching profession introduce distinctions that may guide the coach in approach and intervention – frequent examples are:

- The distinction between *directiveness* and *non-directiveness*, alternatively presented as a distinction between ‘push’ and ‘pull’, or between ‘exploring’ and ‘advocating’, or ‘question’ and ‘advice’.
- The distinction between *challenge* and *support*, alternatively presented as a distinction between ‘confrontation’ and ‘invitation’, or between ‘overcoming weaknesses’ and ‘building on strengths’.
- The distinction between *content* and *process*, i.e., between the topic matter of the conversation and the conversation itself; alternatively, between expert contributions and open exploration.
- Distinctions between *past* and *future*, between *closeness* and *distance*, and between *accepting* or *changing* (and many others).

Some of these distinctions or polarities may speak to the client as well, but our contention is that all of these are less relevant for the client than for the coach. On some of these dimensions a client may not feel as if (s)he has equal freedom of choice as a coach does (take, e.g., push/pull or content/process), on others the client simply has or wants both (take, e.g., past/future or challenge/support). From our (albeit limited) data it seems that the main distinction or polarity for the client is bound to be between *issue/problem* and *issue/problem resolution*. The agenda of the client is in most cases none other than that: to find new answers to old queries.

Data on critical moments for coaches invite many of the above distinctions (see De Haan, 2008c), but these data on critical moments for clients call for quite new and different distinctions. It is time that those client distinctions are put forward, studied and understood.

For the interpretation of our data, we put forward two distinctions or polarities, both having to do with personal change, and both having been studied before in other contexts.

Change that is Alteration versus Change that is Generation/Destruction

We were reminded of Aristotle's (4th Century BC) distinction between two fundamentally different forms of change. He argued that change can consist of:

1. A change in attributes, such as movement from A to B or acquisitions (whether quantitative or qualitative), sometimes called 'progress' or 'journey'. This form of change is basically an alteration and is often referred to as 'accidental change' or 'incremental change'.
2. A change in nature or substance, sometimes called 'transformation'. This form of change is basically generative or destructive and is often referred to as 'substantial change' or 'transformational change'.

Internal processing versus external processing. We were reminded also of Jung's (1920) distinction between introversion and extraversion, taken up by Kolb (1984) in his model of experiential learning. This distinction also relates to two types of personal change:

1. *Internal processing* (introversion, intention) means moving inward to generate a different perspective, by concentration and reflection.
2. *External processing* (extraversion, extension) means moving outward to generate a different perspective, by experimenting and acting.

The two-by-two matrix spanned by these two polarities has been drawn up in Figure 1. If this is compared with the codes in Table 1, some clear overlap is noticeable, particularly relating to the personal realisations and the tools / solutions.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

For us the diagonals in the model are also clear polarities:

1. (left-top to right-bottom) Tools and ways of being can be seen as complementary ways of defining oneself: an ontological dimension distinguishing between ‘appearing’ and ‘being’ (*phenomenon* versus *noumenon*).
2. (left-bottom to right-top) Insight and action can be seen as theory and practice in behaviour: a hermeneutic dimension distinguishing between *theory-in-use* and *espoused theory* (Argyris, 1991).

Using the tentative model as a taxonomy of client metaphor. In reviewing the clusters of metaphors we observed that they often related to these two dimensions: only two metaphors were not quickly placed on the map in Figure 1 (“Summer Umbrella” and “Critical Factors”). In Table 3 we show how many metaphors were linked with each of the 8 dimensions in Figure 1, and what specific themes within each dimensions were thrown up by the collection of metaphors in that dimension. In Figure 2, these results are plotted to show the spread of metaphors that emerged in the research. As can be seen, the vast majority fall in the area of agency, followed by tools; in other words in the realm of incremental change. However, it is interesting to note that the metaphors on the ‘transformational’ side were more used by clients who had experienced critical moments. Another way of looking at this would be that a lot of the interest of the participants when they make use of metaphor seems to be focused on the ‘hermeneutic’ diagonal between personal realisations and actions. In such cases, they would have used metaphor to *interpret* what is going on for them in the coaching relationship. It is also noteworthy that the participants seem to comment most on the

combined dimensions: the fields of ‘Tools’, ‘Actions’, ‘Personal realisations’ and ‘Ways of being’ have the highest occurrence of metaphors, only the ‘incremental change’ dimension captures a similar amount of metaphors.

INSERT TABLE 3 HERE

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Conclusion

Many clients do experience moments that they would describe as ‘critical’, although many do not. When clients do report a critical moment, their description is often essentially about a new personal realisation, whether this is issue-related or self-related. They describe how these realisations are often accompanied by emotions such as elation or relief, or the sensation of a confidence boost. In this regard they are close to the epiphanies that Denzin (1989) surmised.

Our impression is that when we took the time to ask clients to tell their full stories in detail, we also found out about the occasions where coaching did *not* work, occasions that are so often obscured by the many apparently successful assignments, and by the good overall numbers on effectiveness of coaching. We have found several participants reporting negative coaching experiences, both linked to critical moments and to the absence of critical

moments (4 negative experiences in the descriptions, and 2 explicitly negative experiences in the ‘no’ responses).

It is not so very surprising to us that coaches’ and clients’ answers to the same question about a ‘critical moment’ in coaching, differ greatly. One has only to consider the essentially complementary nature of the coach-coachee pair, a pair that can be compared to, on the one hand, a ‘container’ or ‘vehicle’ (the literal meaning of coach!) and, on the other, the ‘contained’ or ‘passenger’ (De Haan & Burger, 2005). Coach and coaching client perform very different roles during the coaching. Clients concentrate on themselves and their issues or queries, and coaches are focused on the other and on being helpful with those issues and queries. The point in asking for critical-moment descriptions from both, and in studying the vocabulary and ‘models’ that are implied by their descriptions, is that coaching has a clear intention to work for one of the parties, the client or coachee. For this reason critical-moment analysis can yield:

1. Insight into the state of mind of the coach in action (see De Haan, 2008b and 2008c).
This can (dis-)confirm certain coaching models, and produce data that can be used when training coaches.
2. Insight into the state of mind of the client whilst undertaking the coaching. This is by far the most useful information, as it will tell us something about ‘what the client wants’ or ‘what moves the client’, which will be of keen interest to the coach.

From the point of view of education and professional development for coaches, the following recommendations can be drawn from this research:

- Critical moments, breakthroughs or epiphanies are not necessarily what is needed. Sometimes creating a sense of support and reflection is adequate.

- Through critical moments, clients primarily (hope to) find personal realisations, such as new perspectives on their issues, new self-understanding, or understanding of others (see Table 1).
- Coaching is both about incremental change, at the level of new skills and behaviour and about transformative change, which is achieved through personal realisations. Perhaps it is true more than we sometimes realise, that clients “value advice and solutions, when free to reject them”, to quote Llewelyn (1988).
- Clients often relate their positive outcomes to an increase in insight and realisation, which is not a trivial conclusion as many approaches in executive coaching are geared towards other outcomes (such as problem-solving, strengthening of existing solutions, remedial help or active support). Contrary to Llewelyn’s (1988) findings in psychotherapy, here it seems that the *insight-focused* approach to coaching (see De Haan & Burger, 2005, or Brunning, 2006), would be the one, which (when applied well) is most favoured by clients of coaching.
- When teaching outcome research, e.g. the so-called *common factors* that in psychotherapy have so often been shown to be significantly related to outcome (Rosenzweig, 1936; Wampold 2001), it may be worthwhile also to mention suboutcome (Rice & Greenberg, 1984) and the dimensions that here have been found to be related to suboutcome during critical moments.

These are some of the conclusions we are drawing from the research to date. However, it also throws up many intriguing questions for further research. For example why do clients seem less interested in critical moments than their coaches? Why do clients mention the person of the coach and the relationship so little if things are going well, even if other research (summarised in Wampold, 2001) shows these ‘common factors’ are highly relevant and also they do seem of prime importance in clients’ accounts when things are not going

well? How would coach and client impressions of critical moments of coaching compare more directly, i.e. when taken from the same session and as close as possible to the session they have had together?

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Table 1

Codes for Clients' Critical Moments

Codes	Experiences related by coachees (clients):	Freq. (%)
	1. Personal realisations	
	(about issues) New knowledge / understanding / insight	
1	Content / facts	4.6
2	New action/behaviour that can be used	4.8
3	New strategy/approach to adopt	4.4
4	Working with others / their behaviour / work roles	4.6
5	About others and their personalities	0.8
	(about self)	
6	Revelations / blind spots	10.4
7	How others view me	1.3
8	Own defensiveness / excuses	0.9
9	Consequences of own behaviour	2.5
10	Hidden motivators	0.9
11	Influence of old patterns / past experience	3.9
	(about this coaching)	
12	The coach / coaching not being supportive	0.5
13	The coach / coaching leaving me to my own devices	0.9
14	The coach / coaching not being good enough	1.1

15	The coach / coaching breaking confidentiality	0.5
16	The coach / coaching being unsure	0.4
	2. Experiencing personal changes	
17	Acceptance	1.5
18	Change of style / behaviour	9.4
	Decisions	
19	Reaffirming current decision / position	1.0
20	Making a new decision	3.6
21	Revoking a decision	0.5
	3. Other experiences through the coaching	
22	Relief	1.6
23	Growing confidence / self-belief	5.3
24	Overcoming fear	1.0
25	Just speaking / talking during the coaching	1.3
26	Just partaking in the experience of it	0.6
27	'Elation'	1.6
28	Sensation of time slowing down	0.6
29	Working through challenges or 'training in' new behaviour	1.5
30	Painful awareness / realisation	5.8
	4. Actions by coach, who offers	
31	Tools / experiences	5.3
32	Pertinent or insightful questions	3.8
33	Quality of listening	0.1
34	Personal feedback	1.3
35	Advice	2.5

36	Suspension of advice / judgement	1.1
37	Metaphor	1.3
38	Direct confrontation / challenge	3.4
39	Tangible support	1.4
40	Space / freedom	1.6

Table 2

Cohen Kappa's for Inter-Rater Reliability in the Coding of the Critical Moments

	Rater CB	Rater CS	Rater EH
Rater CS	0.46		
Rater EH	0.48	0.49	
Rater AD	0.32	0.40	0.47

Table 3

Occurrence of Metaphors in the 8 Dimensions of our 'Model of the Ways a Client may Experience Executive Coaching'

No.	Description of dimension	Total number of metaphors assigned	Patterns in / examples from metaphor data
1	The acquisition of new <i>action</i> (Agency)	72	Fighting, Revisiting/ Evaluating, Constrained, Controlling, Choosing/Altering Facing up to/Owning, (Dis)Connecting/(De)Constructing
2	<i>Incremental change</i> (Journey)	34	Start◇ Route ◇ End, Quest(ing), Nautical passage (gentle), Travelling companion Sudden easing of the way
3	The acquisition of solutions and <i>tools</i>	25	Framing / structuring Making sense, Conceptual domain /context, Foundations/base. Reality/Truth/Authenticity, Measurables, Tools, Experience
4	<i>Internal processing</i> (focusing	4	Pattern, Structure, Organisation

	inwards)		
5	<i>Personal Realisation</i> (Enhancing insight)	61	Revelation, Realising, Perspectives/ Context, Visualising/ Focusing, Thinking patterns/styles, Building conceptual resources
6	<i>Generative Change</i> (Transformation)	4	Sudden 'coming together', Expansive thinking
7	<i>Way of being</i> in the world (Becoming a different person)	47	Reviewing one's foundations and personal context Adapting to what comes along Striving and enduring against challenges Making sense and clarifying meaning in interaction
8	<i>External processing</i> (focusing outwards)	3	Creating, shaping, offering (packaging and bundling product)

Figure Captions

Figure 1.

Figure 2. A graph showing the amount of metaphors that can convincingly be attributed to the ways in which clients experience executive coaching of
Figure 1.

Figure 1

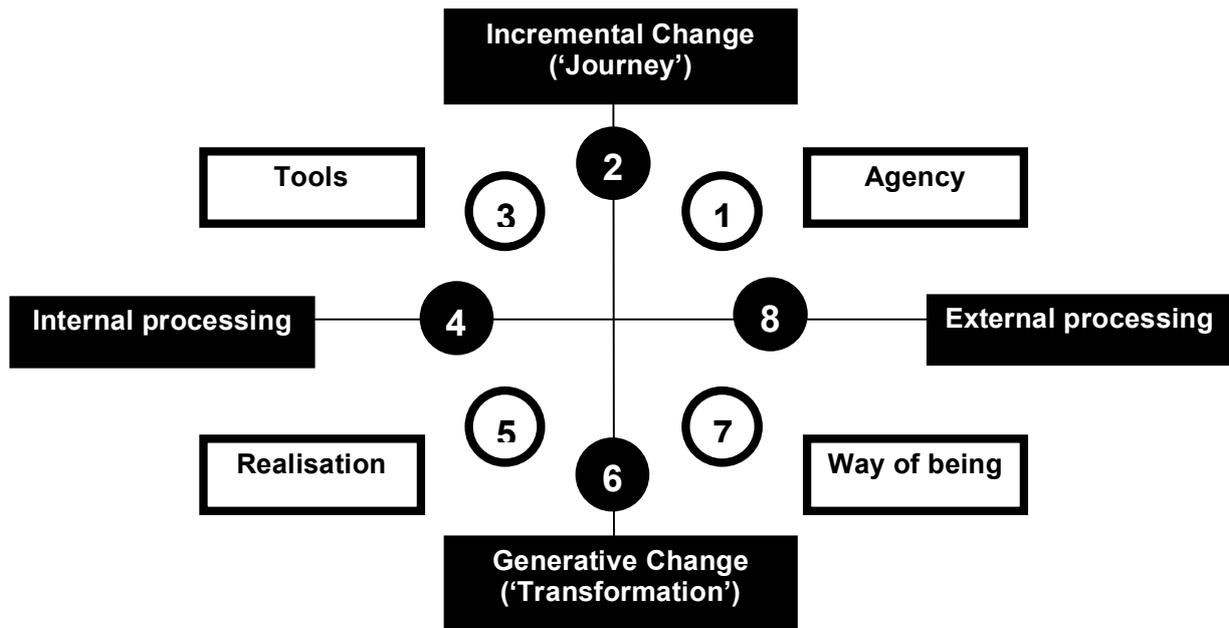


Figure 2