

Erik de Haan discusses his research into how critical experiences can shape and positively affect the way that coaches work

What can coaches learn from their own critical moments? How can they relate to their own dilemmas and doubts, and possibly even make productive use of them? Do these critical moments help or hinder the coach in their work?

My research over the past three years suggests that doubts and tensions, provided that they are used properly, can form a starting point for breakthroughs and better coaching. It suggests that coaches should seek rather than overcome such tensions.

My study examined critical moments experienced by coaches, and how they handle them. It took place at the Sioo business school in Utrecht, among 49 mainly inexperienced coaches. They are organisation consultants who, on the back of a one-year programme in consultancy, take up this specific module about executive coaching.

Participants were asked to describe one critical moment (an exciting, tense or significant moment) with one of their clients, or a moment when they did not quite know what to do, and to describe how they handled these.

Analysis of 56 real-life critical moments (see *Learning points*, p53) shows that it is primarily the doubts of the coach that come to the foreground in moments of tension, such as: What is going to happen? What is going on in my client? What is really going on? How do

I bring that in to the conversation? How can I help my client?

Doubts and critical moments, and the attendant uncertainty and feeling of not knowing, appear to be not the obstructive by-products of coaching, but the starting point for more essential coaching, with a decisive influence on the quality of the outcome. It is therefore crucial for the coach to be receptive to signals of tension and to explore how they can be used productively.

Insights from the research

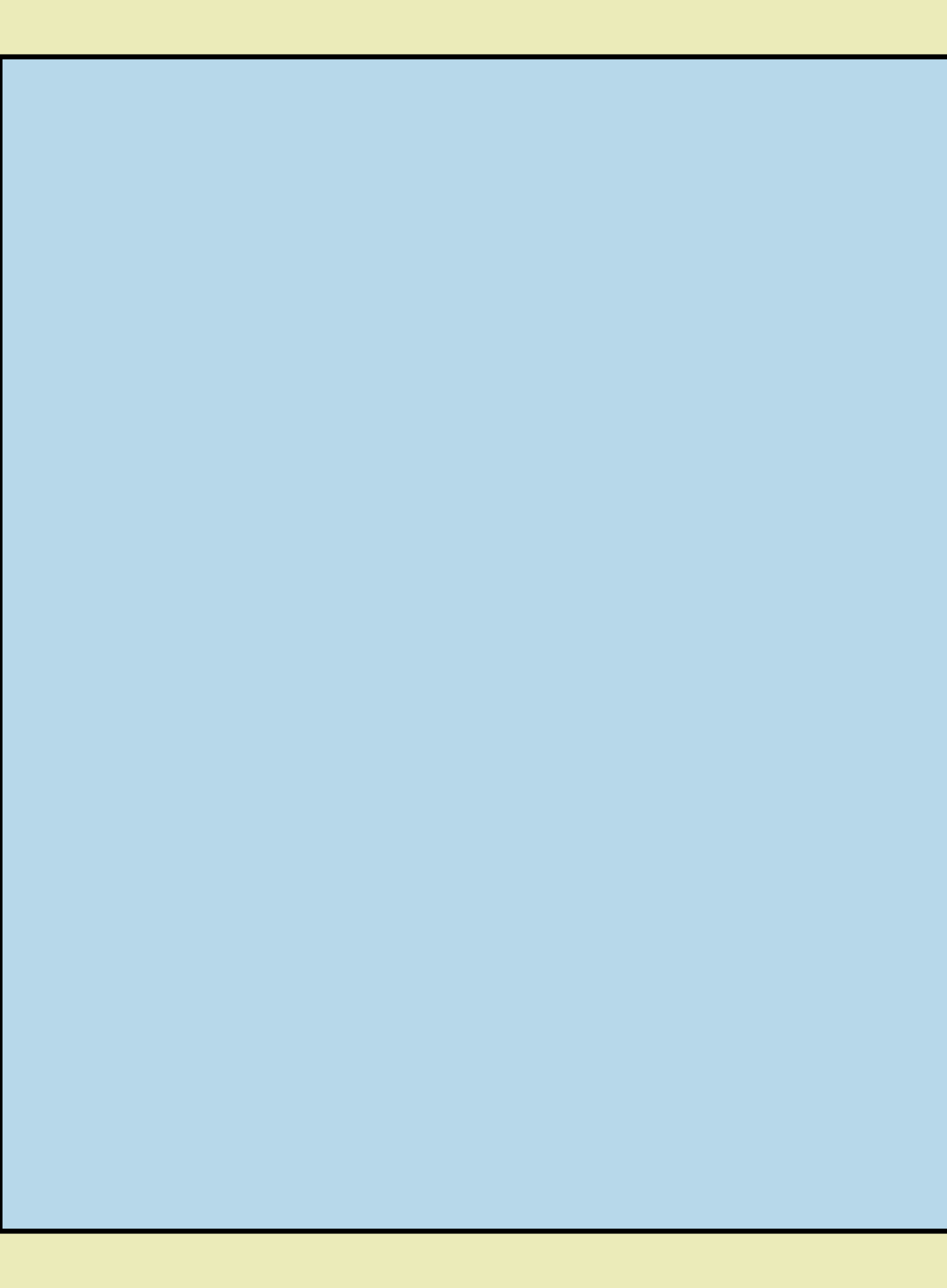
1. The critical moment says something about the coach, and about the coaching relationship

The amount and type of tension that the coach experiences at any point in the coaching process says something about how difficult and/or significant he or she finds that particular moment and about sensitive points that may occur in the developing relationship with the client. So the tension says something about the coach and at the same time something about the coaching relationship.

Tensions arise partly due to a certain sensitivity or suspicion on the part of the coach, partly due to what the client does in the conversations with the coach. A good coach tries to distinguish carefully between the transference brought in by the client and the transference that the coach contributes to the coaching situation. By asking themselves, over and over again, "What comes from whom?", the coach can use his or her own counter-transference as an antenna alerting them to what the client triggers in herself (see Heimann, 1950; De Haan & Burger, 2005).

We found the same ambivalence time and again: on the one hand, a critical moment is a difficult, awkward moment that hinders the coach and puts them off balance, on the other hand it is precisely in and as a result of such moments that the coach can learn something

MAGIC MOMENTS



about themselves, about the coaching relationship and ultimately about the client.

2. Critical moments are potential breakthrough moments

More than half of the moments studied coincided with a significant change in the coaching, such as:

- external factors such as the first meeting, an intervention by management in the coaching or the ending
- times when there was an important new breakthrough in understanding, where coaches report explicitly that ‘the penny dropped’ or a breakthrough was achieved.

Reading the other half of the moments, one begins to suspect that they could also have been breakthrough moments if the tension had been made explicit in an acceptable manner. Consider, for example, the extroverted coach struggling with an introverted client, or the coach who doesn’t really have confidence that the client wants to, or is able to, change. These coaches kept their critical moments to themselves, and reported that the coaching remained difficult and unproductive.

In other words, we realised that coaches themselves often describe their critical moments in retrospect as ‘breakthrough moments’, or as ‘missed opportunities’. This would mean that critical moments are more a blessing for the coaching process than a distraction, disruption or deterioration.

They are moments when the coach discovers deeper layers and new ways of looking at things. Take, for example, the moment when an awkward silence occurs because the coach is still pondering what to do, or the moment when the client suddenly comes out with something sensitive that they didn’t dare to mention before.

The more critical moments, the better the coaching. Although critical moments are potential breakthrough moments, this does not mean that all the coach needs to do is create as many critical moments as possible in order to generate an equal number of breakthroughs. My provisional conclusion is that the more critical moments the better, but only if they can come from the client. Coaching is about getting the client to share and (re)experience his or her own critical moments.

For the coach, this means being available, asking questions, listening, exploring, and building a relationship in which critical things can be expressed and critical transitions can be felt. Most of all, it means not avoiding or repressing critical moments when they occur. Clients do enough of that themselves. The art is to use those moments in the coaching process itself, by contemplating them and asking questions about them, together with the client. To this end, coaches need a unique combination of warmth and daring, sensitivity and an awareness of boundaries.

3. Coaches can only continue to learn thanks to their critical moments

It is an all too human, and ultimately biological, reaction to want initially to eliminate tension, doubt and ambivalence by fighting or fleeing. We cannot deny that such ‘flight’ impulses – often called defences – exist in ourselves as well as our clients when confronted with tensions. Before we know it, we are skirting around or ignoring our tensions, or pinning them down with a firm interpretation. And the more we coach, the more we ourselves build up long-term defences against our tensions and existential doubts without realising it.

This is perhaps the main reason why inexperienced therapists often appear to perform better than experienced ones (see Dumont, 1991). They have fewer long-term defences and can therefore set to work with more enthusiasm, involvement, vulnerability and naivety.

4. There’s an ambivalence surrounding coaches’ own development

The question of how to become stronger and more sensitive appears to recur in the coaching process itself, in the offering of challenge and warmth, readiness and containment. That ambivalence is also felt when it comes to experience: is the experienced coach stronger and more sensitive, or has he or she had to pay a price for strength in terms of loss of sensitivity? It is an ambivalence, therefore, that

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Learning points

- Critical moments appear to happen when something special happens or the coach is put to the test more than usual. Some coaches report that all moments in coaching are critical. Tensions appear to go hand in hand with doubts
- Those doubts usually come down to 'What is going on?' and 'Do I have an answer to it?'
- Doubts and critical moments, if handled well, can form a starting point for significant learning experiences ('breakthroughs') on the part of clients
- In many critical moments, coaches do well to maintain a healthy dose of doubt and suspicion, and it is probably better if they do not generate their critical moments themselves
- Being receptive to critical moments implies coaching with warmth and an awareness of boundaries

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What the participants said...

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

(ii) "The first conversation with my client was my most critical moment. How do you prepare for it? How will he react to your approach? Will it all be over inside of half an hour?"

(iii) "A critical moment was when my client had received blunt criticism from a colleague and sought my opinion about it. I agreed with the colleague's comments in essence, but was nervous about telling him this. I was tense because I was afraid he'd hold it against me."

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

(v) "Sometimes I'm afraid I have communicated too much of my own doubts, for example about a situation raised in a conversation."

(vi) "At a particular moment the client opted for a strategy that I personally did not support. I found it very difficult to remain objective. I saw the solution in front of me but the client clearly couldn't see it, or not yet."

(vii) "When my client let off steam over a situation we both found very annoying. I was at risk of falling into the trap of joining in and having a good grumble."

(viii) "Critical moments are when someone's awareness is raised as the 'penny drops'."

(ix) "I am fairly extrovert myself. My client, on the other hand, is fairly introverted. Time and again, I find it exciting to be able to see during conversations whether or not my comments are hitting home, or whether or not he agrees with them. Usually I don't find out until later, when he comes back to it. I ask about it directly on a regular basis, but I still have the feeling that I don't know exactly what is going on in him and whether or not I am helping him."

(x) "I find it a challenge to learn how a coach can best handle the 'professional distance' between coach and client. My most critical moment was when the client confessed that he had feelings for me. I didn't quite know how to handle that situation."

makes its presence felt in a single moment of coaching, just as it does in years of experience.

It seems that the quality of coaches is determined primarily by their ability to use that ambivalence, their ability to doubt, to not know what is coming next, and to greet what comes next with wonder.

Like Descartes in his famous *Meditations*, coaches experience a significant turning point when they shift their attention away from the many doubts and uncertainties assailing them, towards the activity of doubting itself, which can be regarded as

the starting point and the *raison d'être* of their professional activity. Descartes' renowned saying can be paraphrased for coaches as 'I doubt, therefore I coach', and I would encourage coaches to coach with that permanent and deliberately maintained doubt as their only certainty. ■

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